

Solution-Driven Unionism

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Education wars—two words that should never be strung together—are far too common in the United States. The primary casualties of such conflicts, as well as of mounting education cuts and misguided “reforms,” are our students. The good news is that across the country, in places big and small, America’s teachers are leading a movement away from finger-pointing and polarization and toward advancing solutions that help our students and our public schools succeed and our communities thrive.

From overcoming the effects of poverty on children’s education to helping teachers master the instructional shifts required by ambitious new academic standards, some of the country’s most pressing challenges are being met with what I call “solution-driven unionism.”

Solution-driven unionism is rooted in solving problems, not winning arguments. AFT affiliates are pursuing this approach, and we are encouraging many more to follow suit. We know that this tough climate—marked by increasing poverty, continuing budget cuts, and a recession-fueled resurgence in attacks on unions and public services—can’t stop us from having a proactive quality education agenda. To the contrary—while we will continue to fight for the resources children need, we must also devise innovative, creative and new approaches to help all children succeed.

Solution-driven unionism doesn’t simply call out what doesn’t work, although we do that when required; it points to a better way, as these examples show:

- As teachers across the country prepare for the new school year, they have access to a powerful new tool—Share My Lesson, an innovative online community that provides free access to educators’ best ideas and resources, whenever and wherever teachers need them. The AFT and our partner TES Connect developed Share My Lesson to provide a platform for teachers to share with and learn from their colleagues. Many of the resources are aligned to the Common Core State Standards, the rigorous new standards most states have now adopted. They require significant instructional shifts for which many teachers feel they have not been adequately

prepared, and Share My Lesson can help bridge that gap.

- The AFT’s many partnerships are uniting our members with the people they serve and the communities where they work and live. This is the case in McDowell County, W.Va., one of the very poorest counties in the United States, which the AFT was asked to assist. McDowell’s educational challenges are inseparable from many other problems affecting the region. So the AFT has assembled 87 partners not only to improve the quality of education provided to children in the county, but to focus on jobs, transportation, recreation, housing, healthcare and social services.

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- In Cincinnati, our local affiliate and its community and district partners have created schools that put in place the conditions all students need for success, particularly at-risk and low-income students. Every public school in Cincinnati offers students and their families access to wraparound services, including health and mental health services, tutoring, counseling and after-school programs. Student mobility, which can be so

disruptive to a child’s education, is down. Discipline referrals have dropped sharply—keeping students in school, learning. And Cincinnati is the first and only urban district in the state to receive an “effective” rating—ranking 13th out of Ohio’s 609 districts on a state academic index.

- AFT affiliates are working to transform teacher evaluations from momentary snapshots into meaningful personnel systems that promote continuous growth in student achievement and teacher skill. In 2010, the AFT developed a framework to overhaul teacher development and evaluation, creating ways to align tenure and due process, so tenure would be about fairness, not an excuse for employers not to manage, and not a cloak of incompetence. Scores of state and local affiliates in Connecticut, New Jersey, New York and elsewhere have put this approach into practice, and now these and other states have changed policies to overhaul teacher evaluation and tenure laws by adopting our approach.

For all those tired of education conversations marked by finger-pointing and false starts, take hope. Despite fiscal austerity, failed so-called reforms and an often corrosive climate, there are promising signs that collaboration, shared responsibility, and a focus on quality and equity can rise above futile education wars. Solution-driven unionism in all its many forms points a way to overcoming some of the toughest challenges of the day for the benefit of our students and our communities.



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Weingarten visits Madeleine V. Leckie Elementary School in Washington, D.C.

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