

# Reclaiming Our Profession

## The AFT's Task Force on Professionalism



BY MARY CATHRYN RICKER

IN OCTOBER 2014, the AFT formed a task force on professionalism, which AFT President Randi Weingarten asked me to lead. Representing all five divisions of our union, the task force was formed to combat the regular assault on the professions the AFT represents. Our efforts will culminate in a resolution to be presented to the AFT's executive council, leading into the AFT biennial convention in July. If the resolution passes, task force members will help move forward the work called for in the resolution.

The most common attack on our members' professions centers on attempts to automate human work. In education, this often includes preferences for prefabricated programming and shrink-wrapped curriculum, which undermine the knowledge and expertise of educators and leave them with little to no control to construct the kind of rich curriculum, full of art and music, world languages, and physical education, that our students need. In every AFT division, such attacks can lead to privatizing our

work and devaluing the expertise we bring to public service, higher education, and healthcare.

In forming this task force, we pulled together a group of our members from across all five AFT divisions to determine how our union could counter these attacks and define what it means to be a professional. To jumpstart our work, we conducted listening sessions with hundreds of AFT members, who told us that being treated as a professional means they feel respected and responsible for their work and have some autonomy to carry it out. They also noted that it includes having access to appropriate and relevant professional development and a respected voice on the job.

I was proud to learn of some empowering examples of how our affiliates are responding to the attacks on our professions—by running campaigns highlighting their work as professionals, enhancing their building steward programs, and advocating for new contract language.

We recognized very quickly that the work of the task force has much in common with the battles for economic justice currently being fought throughout our country: the fight for fair wages, dignity in the workplace, and profes-

sional recognition. As educators, we must confront such challenges head on.

One AFT initiative that empowers educators to do this is the Teacher Leaders Program (see the box on page 17). To me, this program exemplifies advocacy in action because it trains leaders and members to cultivate their own voices so they can offer solutions to educational problems instead of waiting for others with less knowledge of education to solve them.

The two articles that follow also tap into themes the task force seeks to highlight: the importance of collective autonomy, site-based decision making, and professional expertise. Barnett Berry and Kim Farris-Berg discuss the power behind teacher-led schools, while Bryan Mascio examines the weaving together of theory and practice so that educators can make the best decisions possible for their individual students.

As teachers, paraprofessionals and school-related personnel, healthcare professionals, higher education faculty, and public employees, our jobs depend on knowledge and relationships. The more our work is automated and deprofessionalized, the more that knowledge and relationship building are diminished—which diminishes us all.

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# Leadership for Teaching and Learning

## How Teacher-Powered Schools Work and Why They Matter



BY BARNETT BERRY AND KIM FARRIS-BERG

Since 1996, teaching quality has dominated school reform conversations. That year, the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future called for a comprehensive approach to teacher development.<sup>1</sup> The commission advanced five major recommendations to overhaul the profession, which, taken together, reflected the need to design schools that could escalate the spread of teaching expertise.

But over the past 20 years, federal and state reforms have drawn on heavy-handed attempts to close the achievement gap through

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top-down management of teachers.\* Such approaches have often included high-stakes accountability systems that mandate what to teach and how to teach it and that evaluate teachers on the basis of annual standardized test scores.<sup>2</sup> In short, policymakers have focused on fixing teachers more than on maximizing their expertise and leadership potential.

No wonder classroom teachers across the nation are frustrated. In a 2013 poll by Scholastic, nearly all participating teachers responded that they teach in order to “make a difference in the world,” yet more than 80 percent reported that the number one challenge they face is the “constantly changing demands on teachers and students,” surely reflecting the onslaught of teacher-fixing initiatives.<sup>3</sup>

One of teachers' greatest sources of frustration is their lack of authority to determine how to meet those demands in ways that

\*For more on the intersection between top-down policy and teacher professionalism, see “Escaping the Shadow” in the Summer 2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/summer2015/mehta](http://www.aft.org/ae/summer2015/mehta).

will benefit students. A 2015 report from the U.S. Department of Education found that between the 2003–2004 and 2011–2012 school years, the proportion of teachers who believed they had low autonomy increased from 18 percent to 26 percent. The perceptions of low autonomy were particularly pronounced among teachers who work in cities and with low-income populations.<sup>4</sup>

In a 2015 survey conducted jointly by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Badass Teachers Association, 73 percent of the 30,000 teachers surveyed reported that they “often” experience stress at work. These respondents, the survey found, are unlikely to have the authority to make decisions on their own or to be able to count on their managers for support, and they are likely to leave work physically and emotionally exhausted.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, a 2014 Gallup poll revealed that only 31 percent of U.S. teachers are actively “engaged” in their jobs, scoring “dead last” among 14 occupational groups in agreeing with the statement that their opinions count at work.<sup>6</sup>

But there is a growing movement to transform the profession with teachers serving as the *agents* of change—rather than being the *targets* of it. Simultaneously, growing numbers of policymakers are becoming aware that deeper learning outcomes for all students will only be achieved with their teachers leading the transformation of schooling.<sup>7</sup>

A convergence of research also supports the benefits to students when teachers can make significant schoolwide decisions. In this article, we present teacher-powered schools as one notable school governance model that supports student learning and enhances the leadership, engagement, and professionalism of educators.

### The History of Teacher-Powered Schools

Early efforts to advance professional communities of educators and site-based management of schools suggested that teachers ought to have more substantial roles—but stopped short of pro-

posing that teachers design and run schools. In the 1980s, Ted Kolderie, founder of Public School Incentives, and Ruth Anne Olson, a consultant to the organization, developed the idea of teacher ownership of professional practices, much like those that doctors, attorneys, and architects have created.

Public School Incentives published two major reports advancing this idea,<sup>8</sup> and Olson spent a few years gauging interest among teachers and school districts. At the time, she found very little. However, in 1986, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (published by the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy) foresaw that schools with teacher autonomy would be in operation by the 21st century and would become increasingly common over time.<sup>9</sup>

A handful of public schools where teachers informally shared collective autonomy appeared in the 1970s and 1980s. Momentum picked up after the Minnesota legislature passed the nation’s first charter school law in 1991, which required that teachers make up a majority of each charter school’s board. A group of entrepreneurial individuals from the Le Sueur and Henderson, Minnesota, area developed and proposed Minnesota New Country School, a charter school with a self-directed, project-based learning model for students in grades 6–12.

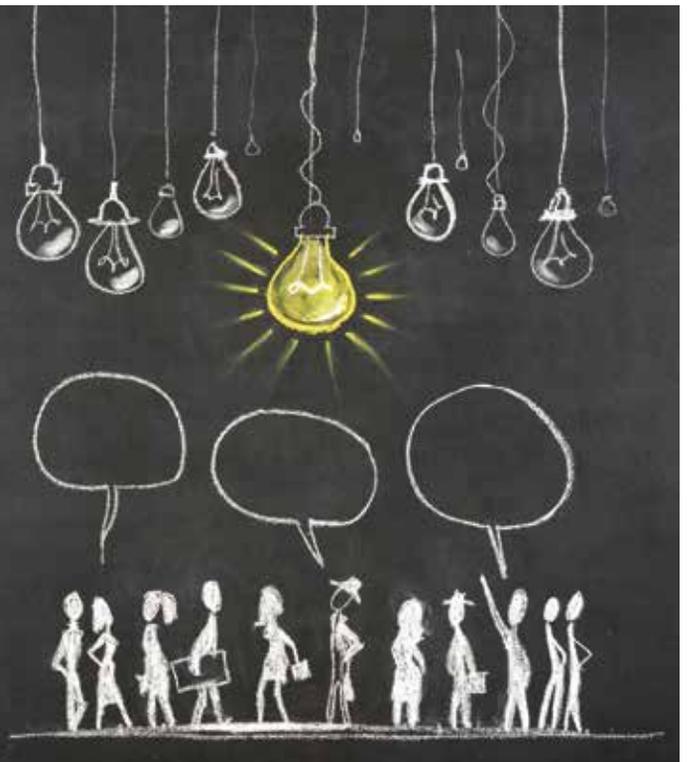
At the suggestion of Kolderie and attorney Dan Mott, they also formed a workers’ cooperative called EdVisions. Members of the cooperative—teachers—would have both responsibility and accountability for running the school. In winter 1993, the Le Sueur-Henderson school board voted to authorize the school, enabling the charter school’s board to contract with EdVisions to run it. Today, Minnesota has 16 schools where teachers have collective autonomy, mostly in the charter sector though not part of large charter school chains.

In 1994, partially in response to the Massachusetts legislature passing a charter school law the year before, the Boston Teachers

## Resources for Designing Teacher-Powered Schools

Learn from pioneering teams via the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative ([www.teacherpowered.org](http://www.teacherpowered.org)), a partnership between the Center for Teaching Quality and Education Evolving:

- “Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School” ([www.teacherpowered.org/guide](http://www.teacherpowered.org/guide)) is an online do-it-yourself guide to transforming your school into a teacher-led school (or reconfiguring an existing one). It covers the big steps—and major decisions—involved in getting your school off the ground. Hundreds of hyperlinked resources identify questions to discuss, relevant research to explore, and sample governance documents to review.
- An inventory of teacher-powered schools ([www.teacherpowered.org/inventory](http://www.teacherpowered.org/inventory)) offers information about more than 90 schools implementing the model.
- And a virtual community ([www.teacherpowered.org/community](http://www.teacherpowered.org/community)) welcomes you to ask questions, share resources, and find mentors.



Union and Boston Public Schools negotiated a formal memorandum of understanding that today gives authority to the governing boards of Boston's 30 pilot schools to try unconventional models of teaching and learning with at-risk students. In some of these schools, the governing boards have decided to delegate their authority to teachers, who collaboratively make the decisions influencing their schools' success. This agreement between the union and the school district gave rise to pilot schools like the Boston Teachers Union School and the democratically run Mission Hill K-8 School, which teacher, author, and public advocate Deborah Meier founded with colleagues.

When the Los Angeles Unified School District and United Teachers Los Angeles replicated Boston's pilot school arrangement in 2007, a number of school governing councils embraced collective autonomy for teachers.

## Policymakers have focused on fixing teachers more than on enhancing their expertise and leadership potential.

In the years between the initiation of Boston's and Los Angeles's pilot school programs, more teachers unions and school districts across the nation arranged ways for teachers to call the shots. Today, more than half of the schools with collective teacher autonomy are district schools.

In 2008, researchers Edward J. Dirkswager and Kim Farris-Berg (one of the authors of this article) worked with Kolderie and his colleagues to observe the growing number of public schools where teachers had collective autonomy. The two sought to learn how teacher teams were getting—and then using—this autonomy. Ultimately, they wrote a book about their positive findings: *Trusting Teachers with School Success: What Happens When Teachers Call the Shots* (2012). At about the same time, Barnett Berry (also an author of this article), with Ann Byrd and Alan Wieder, wrote *Teacherpreneurs: Innovative Teachers Who Lead but Don't Leave*, highlighting the promising work of Lori Nazareno and her colleagues who designed and run the Mathematics and Science Leadership Academy in Denver Public Schools.

The two books generated increased awareness of what were then known as “teacher-led schools” but also made clear that there was not yet a movement. The existing schools saw themselves as islands, unaware of teams elsewhere with similar values and modes of operation.

To connect these teams and encourage them to learn from one another, expose more teachers to the opportunity, track progress, and provide start-up and continuous improvement resources, the

Center for Teaching Quality (founded by Berry) and Education Evolving (cofounded by Kolderie and Joe Graba) jointly created the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative in 2014. Each year, the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative hosts well-attended national and regional conferences so educators can share their innovations. At present, it is a fairly informal network. As the movement grows, we envision development of formal supports and more informal networking, including increased support for teacher and administrator unions as well as school districts that are looking to open the door to teacher-powered schools.

We coined the term “teacher-powered” to refer to schools collaboratively designed and run by teachers (although the term could also apply to teachers' collective autonomy in departments within a school or in programs within a district). The initiative advances the teacher-powered movement as it has been shaped by pioneering teachers and engages those pioneers in creating resources for teachers to come.

### The Importance of Teacher Collaboration to School Success

Over the last several decades, researchers have consistently found a strong link between a lack of teacher autonomy and high rates of attrition from the teaching profession. In particular, Richard Ingersoll, drawing on 20 years of data, has shown that a primary reason teachers move from high-poverty schools to wealthier ones—as well as leave the profession altogether—is a lack of professional autonomy and faculty decision-making influence.<sup>10</sup>

While Ingersoll's research has not addressed the links between teacher autonomy and student and school success, other studies point the way. This research presents clear evidence of how teacher collaboration leads to gains in student learning.\* And providing collective autonomy to teams of teachers is one way to enable educators to put this research into practice.

For example, Matt Ronfeldt and colleagues found that teachers working in schools with better-quality collaboration—as determined by teachers' perceptions of its extent and helpfulness—improve student outcomes in math and reading. Their study, grounded in multiple measures (including test score data and 9,000 teacher observations), revealed that teachers who worked in schools with better-quality collaboration tended to be more effective at improving achievement gains regardless of their individual ability to collaborate.<sup>11</sup>

In an in-depth study of the ABC Unified School District in California, Saul Rubinstein found that stronger teacher collaboration is correlated to student achievement.<sup>12</sup> When Rubinstein and colleagues analyzed collaboration in the district, they found that those schools with the strongest partnerships also had the highest levels (what they referred to as “density”) of teacher-to-teacher communication—meaning that more teachers discussed student performance data, curriculum articulation, instructional practice, and teacher mentoring than in schools with weaker partnerships. Notably, they found that teachers in the schools with stronger partnerships had nearly two times the “communication density” as schools with weaker partnerships.<sup>13</sup> And drawing on longitudinal data, Matthew Kraft and colleagues concluded that student outcomes improve

\*For more on collaboration, see the Winter 2013–2014 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/winter2013-2014](http://www.aft.org/ae/winter2013-2014).

when “teachers feel supported by their colleagues, work together to improve their instructional practice, [and] trust one another.”<sup>14</sup>

Just as important, Dylan Wiliam discovered that teachers improve instruction the most when they have opportunities to apply what they learn. Also, they are most influenced by those who have pedagogical “credibility as a coach.” His research showed that teachers improve their teaching when instructional feedback is provided in ways that prompt *thinking* instead of triggering emotional responses, and when careful attention is given to follow-up action and support to improve teaching practices.<sup>15</sup>

Ben Jensen and his research team concluded that top-performing nations drive school improvement and student achievement by creating highly structured professional development systems. In these countries, teachers have opportunities to lead their own learning.<sup>16</sup>

## We coined the term “teacher-powered” to refer to schools collaboratively designed and run by teachers.

For example, in Japan, schools have multiple cycles of lesson study each year that are “organized and owned” by teachers themselves. As Motoko Akiba and Bryan Wilkinson noted,<sup>17</sup> teams of teachers in Japan spend two to three months for each cycle of lesson study, completing two cycles per year on average. While this form of professional development has allowed Japanese teachers to think deeply about content and student learning, and has given them the opportunity to learn from each other, most American teachers have not been prepared to reflect on their instruction and provide feedback on their colleagues’ teaching, and are not supported in such work.\*

Research shows that American educators have had more success with peer review. Like lesson study, peer review requires that educators observe their peers and provide constructive feedback. Jensen’s research reflects what scholars have found regarding the positive impact of peer review processes in the United States,<sup>18</sup> which can lead to higher teacher retention and more sustained school improvement. John Papay and Susan Moore Johnson concluded in 2012 that when fully implemented, peer assistance and review (PAR) programs† retained more novice teachers and dismissed more underperforming ones than did comparison districts.<sup>19</sup> In an in-depth study of PAR programs in two California districts (San Juan and Poway), Daniel Hum-

phrey and colleagues discovered that “peer review offers a possible solution to the lack of capacity of the current system to both provide adequate teacher support and conduct thorough performance evaluations.”<sup>20</sup>

Tony Bryk and colleagues found that social trust among teachers, parents, and school leaders improves much of the routine work of schools and is a key resource for long-term gains in student learning. Developing trust requires “mutual dependencies” among teachers who demonstrate, through collective action, their obligations to each other (as well as other reform partners).<sup>21</sup> And this kind of trust helps teachers, who are often isolated from each other in their individual classrooms, “cope with difficult situations.”<sup>22‡</sup>

Similarly, in a study of more than 1,000 teachers in 130 New York City elementary schools, Carrie Leana found that “students showed higher gains in math achievement when their teachers reported frequent conversations with their peers that centered on math, and when there was a feeling of trust or closeness among teachers.” And students whose teachers were more effective and had stronger ties with their peers showed the highest gains in math achievement.<sup>23</sup>

These studies and more reach the same conclusion. As Kara Finnigan and Alan Daly have found, “teaching and learning are not primarily individual accomplishments but rather social endeavors that are best achieved and improved through trusting relationships and teamwork, instead of competition and a focus on individual prowess.”<sup>24</sup>

It’s almost as if researchers have now proven what educators and parents have always known. Communities have responded favorably to schools where teachers have collective autonomy to make significant decisions, welcoming the changes for students and families. A 2013 national survey conducted by Widmeyer Communications investigated the public’s opinions regarding “teacher-powered schools” where “teams of teachers collaboratively decide on the curricula, the allocation of resources, and the form of leadership,” and also “choose their colleagues, handle evaluation, determine the schedule, and set school-level policy,” all hallmarks of a true profession. More than 85 percent of respondents believe such arrangements are “a good idea.”<sup>25</sup>

The public recognizes that school reform, as we know it, isn’t working and that disruptions to teaching and learning are not paying off.<sup>26</sup> The achievement gaps between different groups of students have not closed substantially. And while more students are graduating from high school, too few have the skills necessary for success in college and career.<sup>27</sup> Parents share educators’ frustrations with the overemphasis on standardized testing.<sup>28</sup> And with so many teachers leaving the profession, school administrators are struggling to find qualified replacements.<sup>29</sup>

### Teacher-Powered Schools: Collective Autonomy as a Means to Change

Teacher-powered schools offer a powerful antidote to more than two decades of top-down school reforms. The Center for Teaching Quality and Education Evolving have created the Teacher-

\*For more on lesson study, see “Growing Together” in the Fall 2009 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/fall2009/dubin](http://www.aft.org/ae/fall2009/dubin).

†For more on peer assistance and review, see “Taking the Lead” in the Fall 2008 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/fall2008/goldstein](http://www.aft.org/ae/fall2008/goldstein).

‡For more on how the social aspects of schools shape teaching and learning, see Kara Finnigan and Alan Daly’s blog entry at [www.shankerinstitute.org/blog/all-world%E2%80%99s-stage-how-churn-undermines-change](http://www.shankerinstitute.org/blog/all-world%E2%80%99s-stage-how-churn-undermines-change).

Powered Schools Initiative to raise awareness of the opportunity for teachers to take on leadership roles and to nurture the efforts of teacher teams. More than 90 teacher-powered public schools are located in 18 states across the country, and the initiative is aware of another 30 under development. They serve students of all grade levels in urban, suburban, and rural environments, and include both district and charter schools. A growing number have been launched and supported by teacher unions, including some that are exploring taking on the role of professional guilds.

Teacher-powered schools offer compelling evidence that teachers can and do create schools that increase their engagement in teaching, inspire powerful student learning, and directly address social justice issues.<sup>30</sup> Many of the teacher teams that started teacher-powered schools took advantage of existing openings to seize authority, while others asked for and negotiated

to document whether the team of teachers at the school exercises full or partial decision-making authority in certain areas.<sup>32</sup> It then designates a school as “teacher-powered” if teachers have this authority in any area.

Through its interviews with teachers in these schools, the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative has identified at least 10 arrangements through which teachers have gone about securing autonomy to design and run teacher-powered schools, a testament to the fact that each group of teachers must determine what will work best. Some groups secure formal autonomy through site-based management arrangements with their school district, and others take advantage of state laws such as Maine’s, which allows innovation schools, and other states’ which authorize charter schools. Other arrangements are initiated by union locals, in partnership with school districts. AFT locals in Cincin-



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authority (even though it wasn’t being offered outright). These teachers are explorers and pioneers in their field. They have awakened to and taken advantage of new opportunities, despite the risks, and they are willing to accept accountability for the results of their decisions. Like all pioneers, they are doing arduous work to prepare the path and infrastructure for those who have thus far been reluctant to pursue similar possibilities.

In teacher-powered schools, teams of teachers have secured autonomy to collaboratively design and lead many aspects of teaching and learning. Keeping students at the center of their decisions, they make choices about a wide array of factors, including the design of the instructional program and professional development, colleague selection, budgeting, and whether to give (and how much to count) district assessments. In many teacher-powered schools, teachers also evaluate their colleagues through peer review processes, as is often the case in other professions. While some teams running teacher-powered schools opt to have a principal or lead teacher, these administrators are chosen by the team—and view themselves as “servant leaders” who share decision-making responsibilities.<sup>31</sup>

In developing its online inventory of schools, the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative conducts a formal interview process

nati (Ohio), Saint Paul and Minneapolis (Minnesota), and Rochester (New York), as well as the United Federation of Teachers in New York City, have contract language that supports teacher autonomy, such as allowing them to design and run schools.

### A Look at Two Boston Schools

One AFT local with members in teacher-powered schools is the Boston Teachers Union (BTU). In Boston, teacher teams in these schools have informal autonomy, meaning their autonomy depends on the goodwill of their superintendent and their school’s governing board, which has formal autonomy to make school-level decisions via a pilot school agreement. The governing board, and ultimately the superintendent, holds teachers accountable for meeting goals, but teachers can choose *how* to meet the goals in the areas in which they have autonomy. Just as important, the governing boards at these schools are partially composed of teachers.

At Mission Hill K-8 School,<sup>§</sup> for example, the board is made up of 21 people; approximately 30 percent are teachers, 30 percent

<sup>§</sup> To learn more about Mission Hill K-8 School, watch “A Year at Mission Hill,” a 10-part video series available at [www.missionhillschool.org/a-year-at-mission-hill](http://www.missionhillschool.org/a-year-at-mission-hill).

are students, 30 percent are community members, and 10 percent are parents. Teachers in these arrangements generally feel confident that their autonomy is secure, although there have been cases where autonomy has been pulled back during leadership transitions. This sometimes causes teams to seek a more formal autonomy arrangement, so they can continue the practices they have fostered in their teacher-powered schools.

At both Mission Hill and the BTU School, the boards honor the choices of the teacher teams while providing crucial arm's-length oversight. For instance, the teacher teams establish the school vision and the instructional approach. They also allocate and manage any funds that remain after complying with the negotiated salary schedule and state and federal mandates. What's more, they select their colleagues and leaders, and have partial authority to evaluate them. They even determine other school-

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level policy, such as homework and disciplinary approaches (adhering to state law, of course) as well as allocating staff members and setting school and staff schedules.

Finally, teacher teams annually decide upon their working conditions when they create their "election-to-work agreement," which specifies teachers' responsibilities and commitments to their school for the coming school year. Each team holds a serious discussion about what it will take to ensure the success of its school, such as additional work hours or attendance at meetings.

In the end, election-to-work agreements vary from one school to another and from the negotiated work agreement for traditional schools. Local affiliate leaders are careful to negotiate individual teachers' ability to opt out of the arrangement and return to their district's hiring pool. For teacher-powered schools to succeed, it's important for educators to want—not be required—to work in such schools.

Securing teachers' collective autonomy is an important part of starting a teacher-powered school, but even more important is what teacher teams do with the opportunity—what choices they make together. Research shows that teacher teams tend to make decisions that emulate those made in high-performing organizations, including accepting ownership (autonomy *and* accountability), sharing purpose, innovating, collaborating, engaging in effective leadership practices, assessing performance, and func-

tioning as learners (as opposed to experts who believe they already know all the answers).<sup>33</sup> It's also true that teams are able to put evidence of what will improve teaching and learning into practice, often without much bureaucratic hassle.

To foster a culture of mutual dependency, as suggested by Tony Bryk's research, teams put in substantial effort to build and maintain a strong shared purpose (consisting of mission, vision, values, and goals) and then delegate specific decision-making authority to various individuals and committees on the team. These individuals and committees are expected to act according to the team's shared purpose and any decision-making rules or processes it has established. If the individuals and committees do not meet expectations, the team can revoke their decision-making authority.

In this context, teacher-powered teams engage in better quality collaboration, focused on more holistic measures of learning rather than just standardized test scores. These teacher-powered teams exemplify Matt Ronfeldt's findings that better quality collaboration among teachers jointly assessing student work improves academic achievement. At the BTU School, for example, the Literacy Leadership Committee and Math Leadership Committee take on the responsibility of examining schoolwide data to determine strengths and areas for growth. The committees also create the professional development needed for improvement, a practice that Ben Jensen found to drive school improvement in top-performing nations.

As third-grade teacher Taryn Snyder explains, "Last year, the Math Leadership Committee designed and led professional development around vertically aligning problem-solving strategies for word problems from kindergarten through eighth grade, ensuring a smooth transition in terms of scholars' mathematical strategies and language from grade to grade. We've done similar professional development focusing on particular math strands as well, for example, tracing the Operations and Algebraic Thinking and the Fractions standards from kindergarten through eighth grade. This gives all faculty members insight into how their math instruction creates a foundation for the more rigorous standards of the next several grades."

At Mission Hill, the team of teachers has established a peer review system that encourages instructional risks in a context of ongoing coaching and support from colleagues, as framed by Carrie Leana's and Dylan William's research. Each teacher works with a peer review team (including an administrator, a teacher selected by the whole team, and a teacher selected by the individual). In deep consultation with these peer reviewers, the teacher outlines exactly how she will seek to improve her work with her students and help the full team accomplish its learning goals. On several occasions during the year, this peer review team observes her, not only to determine the best ways to coach and mentor her but also to learn from her.

Mission Hill first- and second-grade teacher Jenerra Williams, who is also a lead teacher, says, "The purpose of our system is for teachers to identify places in their practice where they want to improve. Their peers have conversations with them, come in to observe, look at student work, and give feedback. We feel that evaluation should be driven by an authentic need that the teacher has, and they should be evaluated by people who are closest to the children and the teaching of the school—which is other teachers."

As teachers' professional experiences become more authentic, they can better focus their school design choices on students'

needs. Teachers at Mission Hill choose three thematic units for each school year, with each theme giving students the opportunity to learn multiple school subjects. The teachers ask individual students to choose from a set of activities selected to go with each theme. When physical science is the theme of focus for the morning, for example, students can choose from spin art, making pancakes, building and testing boats or bridges, or observing bee flight from a hive in Williams's classroom.

Mission Hill teachers have decided that students will stay with the same teacher for two years, which improves their ability to monitor student progress as well as provide necessary accommodations for varying skill levels (and student mobility). The goal is that after four years and 12 themes, Mission Hill students will have learned what they need to meet all the state and district standards for the four corresponding grade levels. Teachers set individual learning goals with each student and monitor progress with portfolio assessments and public demonstrations of learning.

**T**eachers can go public with their desire to design and run schools, and continue developing their skills in leading school reform, by using online resources created by the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative. At the same time, principals can shift their efforts from serving as instructional leaders to developing teacher leaders and providing opportunities for them to organize schools in ways that maximize the spread of effective practices.

Additionally, union leaders can lead the negotiation of autonomy agreements for teacher-powered schools and can assist members in learning how to collaboratively transform curricula, assessments, schedules, and budgets. District administrators can work with teachers unions to form agreements that encourage teacher-powered schools, and they can rethink the use of professional development dollars to support teachers in learning how

to improve schools from within the system, in partnership with parents and community leaders. And the U.S. Department of Education, with a redesigned approach to school improvement, can provide incentives for teachers and unions to create and support a fund for the creation of teacher-powered schools.

The era of top-down school reform has reached a turning point and is being replaced with a focus on finding new and more-effective models of student learning. Who better than teachers—through schools powered by their teaching expertise and knowledge of students—to show us the way forward? □

### Endnotes

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## AFT Teacher Leaders Program

Since the 2011–2012 school year, the AFT Teacher Leaders Program has brought together and coached cohorts of teachers to take active leadership roles in their individual schools, school districts, local unions, and local communities. As teacher leaders, these educators have served as catalysts to build the profession and strengthen not just the union but also its connection to the community, in order to generate support for and better understanding of public schools.

Participating teachers have developed skills in several important leadership areas. Those include building a collaborative culture; accessing, using, and presenting relevant research that connects with policy and practice; becoming advocates for teachers, students, and their families, and for public education; and understanding policy issues and making recommendations

to and through their unions.

Through this program, teacher leaders have learned how to strengthen relationships with their colleagues and establish relationships with policymakers and community leaders. They have also developed an informed teacher voice, enabling them to participate in both the local and national dialogue on education, as well as to spread the word about the positive and powerful role of public schools and teacher unions.

Local presidents interested in participating need to submit an application. Once accepted into the program, the local president must select a member of the local to become a program facilitator, and both the president and the facilitator must attend a two-day orientation at the AFT national headquarters. Each facilitator is trained to

lead a cohort of approximately 15 classroom teachers, called "teacher leaders," who meet from September to May, one Saturday each month for a full day. To become a teacher leader, classroom teachers must submit an application to their local union.

Once a local union has selected its cohort of teacher leaders, the AFT provides plenty of resources. These include technical assistance and curricular materials focusing on education policy, stipends for participating teachers and facilitators, ongoing support, and access to a nationwide online community of teacher leaders from all locals currently engaged in this work.

More than 550 classroom teachers and a total of 17 locals have participated since the program's inception.

—AFT EDUCATIONAL ISSUES DEPARTMENT



# True Teaching Expertise

The Weaving Together of Theory and Practice



BY BRYAN MASCIO

**H**ow do we strengthen the teaching profession? This question weighs on many educators, researchers, politicians, and parents. Everyone seems to have his or her own solutions to offer. The public discourse around teaching often feels very negative; it doesn't clearly define teaching expertise, but it does reflect a very clear belief that many of us teachers just don't have it. I'm not sure where this narrative of incompetence comes from, but I do know that we can't fight it by simply saying, "No, we're not."

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Many educators agree that to improve the profession, classroom teachers must be consulted and involved. To that end, we need to show those outside the classroom what teaching expertise looks like and where it resides: with actual classroom teachers.

When I hear respected public figures call for a focus on the "nuts and bolts" of teaching—in contrast to an emphasis on educational philosophy and theories of development—I fear what the repercussions might be. This recommendation is a common message, promoted both by those in academic research and by fast-tracked teacher preparation programs. It implicitly sees academics and researchers as the primary generators and holders of expertise, and asks them to guide teachers and offer them insights. By mistaking—and at times even privileging—certain kinds of expertise, this view may inadvertently lay a path toward regarding teachers as technicians rather than the true professionals they are.

## Uniting Research and Practice

In medicine, the fields of biochemistry, microbiology, genetics, and bioengineering, to name a few, contribute invaluable research

used by doctors and hospitals to improve patient care. Researchers in these sciences are respected for their expertise and typically have far greater content knowledge than the average physician, but neither society nor the medical field confuses the role of medical researcher with that of doctor.

Research results in knowledge of average effects, common side effects, and how diseases typically present. Doctors use that knowledge and combine it with an understanding of clinical practice, the complex systems involved with human health, and details of their individual patient's past and present health to create a clinical expertise. This is what makes them medical experts.

Doctors don't ignore the research; they are keenly aware of what symptoms suggest pneumonia, for instance, and which antibiotics are most effective to treat it. But doctors also know that other illnesses could cause many similar symptoms; certain facts about an individual may make other illnesses more likely, so knowing an individual's medical history is just as important. And if you are allergic to an antibiotic, it doesn't matter how "effective" it is. Doctors don't treat the *average*, the *common*, or the *typical* patient—they treat *you*, and that's exactly what you want and expect them to do.

In education, psychologists, neuroscientists, economists, and sociologists are among the important contributors to our knowledge of teaching and learning, and their research has been invaluable to those of us in the classroom. It has provided numerous insights, including an understanding of how children grow and develop, how brains behave differently under different conditions, and the many facets of working memory.\* It has also shown how intelligence, once thought to be genetically determined and immutable, can be increased by interventions, such as high-quality preschool† and rigorous and supportive teaching.‡

However, like medical-related research, these studies give us statistical averages of how a typical student learns, average responses to highly controlled laboratory tests, and the likely effect of a particular intervention within a limited sample of students. And yet, like medical research, educational research requires interpretation to move from statistical averages to helping individual students.

Teaching expertise makes good use of research by integrating it with practitioner insights, the complex systems involved in human development, and a deep understanding of our individual students' needs and context. At a time when we are espousing commitment to every child, this kind of expertise is exactly what's needed.

Back in the late 1990s, when I was first taking classes to become a teacher, a professor at the University of New Hampshire said something that has become a core part of my teaching philosophy. He told us that when a student gets something wrong, our first job is not to give him the correct answer; it is to

understand why he thought his answer was correct.§ This is not to say that the student doesn't need to eventually get the right answer; it means that *teaching* him is far more complex than just relaying information.

This professor explained that, for the most part, students don't give random or purposefully incorrect answers (we also talked about the times when they do—a whole different topic). An incorrect answer represents current understanding, and that's the starting point from which a student must be taught.

The example he commonly gave is that when a student gets "1+1" wrong, it makes a big difference whether she answered "11" versus "4." If the student said  $1+1=11$ , then we know what mistake she is making; she believes that addition is literally putting the two numbers together. I can confirm this with my student by asking her what "3+5" is and seeing if she answers "35." If this is

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the case, having her simply drill her math facts won't actually solve this problem. It would simply be treating the symptom rather than the underlying cause. What I need to do is follow up with a very fundamental lesson about the nature of addition—it will probably involve manipulatives and counting. In contrast, if the student said that  $1+1=4$ , then she clearly doesn't have that same misunderstanding. I don't know what that misunderstanding is—I would need to ask her more questions to figure that out—but the lesson I would then follow up with is bound to be different.

Ultimately, what I was being equipped to do was expertly analyze my student in order to determine the proper response. This is, at its core, the same as a doctor diagnosing a patient before determining the proper treatment.

This critical approach is not only important when a student is struggling; it also allows us to offer support when he is thinking outside the box. When I taught biology, I clearly remember one tenth-grade student, Daryl, who had been struggling in all of his classes. After a unit on parts of the cell, I had given students more than a week to create their own models of either plant or animal cells.

§For more on the importance of knowing common student misconceptions, see "Understanding Misconceptions" in the Spring 2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/spring2016/sadler-and-sonnert](http://www.aft.org/ae/spring2016/sadler-and-sonnert).

\*For more on working memory and the science behind how students learn, see Daniel T. Willingham's articles for *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/author-index#quicktabs-authors=4](http://www.aft.org/ae/author-index#quicktabs-authors=4).

†For more on the value of early childhood education, see "The Economics of Inequality" in the Spring 2011 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/spring2011/heckman](http://www.aft.org/ae/spring2011/heckman).

‡For more on how IQ is not genetically determined or immutable, see "Schooling Makes You Smarter" in the Spring 2013 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/spring2013/nisbett](http://www.aft.org/ae/spring2013/nisbett).

I hoped that this assignment would appeal to Daryl, who was skilled at and enjoyed working with his hands. Different students presented cells they had made out of clay and papier-mâché and even candies. When it was Daryl's turn to present, he rummaged around in his backpack and pulled out a model car he had built. Nothing on the car indicated that anything represented parts of a cell. The students laughed, he shrugged, and it would have been very easy to assume that he hadn't really done the project.

When I asked Daryl how this represented a cell, his response of rolling the car across his desk was unconvincing. Rather than reprimand him, I asked him some additional questions: "What represents the mitochondria?" "Why?" "How is that different than the chloroplasts?" "Can you tell me more about that?" "Would it be different if ... ?"

If they are empowered to contribute to it, teachers can be much more than consumers of research.

With each of my questions, Daryl compared aspects of the combustion engine to a plant cell. Admittedly, my ignorance of mechanics meant that I had to ask even more questions, but revealing his depth of knowledge about mechanics as well as his understanding of cells was well worth it.

Daryl's answers would never have matched those on a prescribed curriculum, and I would have never been able to ascertain his learning without a complex understanding of how thinking develops, as well as a deep understanding of Daryl and a strong relationship with him. Revealing his understanding not only was beneficial for Daryl's grade, but also validated for him that what he learned and contributed to the class was in fact valuable.

### Strengthening Teacher Preparation

The ability to truly determine what a student does and does not understand, and then plot a path forward, is central to teaching expertise. As educators, we should be working toward the goal of every classroom teacher having this kind of expertise. That doesn't mean teachers must be experts before they set foot in the classroom—no profession achieves that in its preparation. It does mean that we need to create preparation that leads toward expertise and ensure that new-teacher programs help develop it.

Just as important, we must reject the implicit assumption that

teaching expertise is somehow less valuable than research conducted by professionals outside the classroom. As educators, we must use the knowledge from researchers just as doctors apply new medicines and procedures created by companies and institutions: they make decisions based on their own expertise and discretion.

This brings us to the issue of teacher preparation.\* In recent years, on-the-job training and fast-tracked preparation have been erroneously heralded as superior to university-based teacher preparation programs.

Yes, theory-based courses at universities may too commonly be taught in ways that do not help teachers once they enter the classroom and often fail to adequately prepare them with practical strategies to, for example, manage student behavior. But it is shortsighted to do away with such programs entirely in exchange



for technical training. Such a move once again misunderstands the nature of teaching expertise; it only prepares teachers to do what other experts have determined. The best college teacher-preparation programs connect content knowledge with pedagogical skills and the foundational knowledge that empowers classroom teachers to make the complex decisions that good teaching requires.

Granted, I would never want to go to a doctor who doesn't know how to wrap a bandage or give an injection. But I would even less want to go to one who has primarily been trained in the nuts and bolts of medicine but relies on WebMD to make decisions.

When I was working with Daryl, I relied on my knowledge of adolescent development, motivation theory, pedagogical content knowledge for science, and cell biology itself. True teaching expertise is about applying different types of knowledge to the situation and student in front of you.

Is it possible to provide all future teachers with preparation that joins theoretical knowledge and practical skills? Yes. Around the world, others are doing exactly that. Successful education

\*For more on teacher preparation, see the AFT's 2012 report *Raising the Bar*, available at [www.aft.org/sites/default/files/news/raisingthebar2013.pdf](http://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/news/raisingthebar2013.pdf). For more on the history of teacher education, see "Bridging the 'Widest Street in the World'" in the Summer 2011 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/summer2011/mirel](http://www.aft.org/ae/summer2011/mirel).

systems such as Finland, Singapore, and Australia require that their teachers master and unite these realms. For example, the Melbourne Graduate School of Education in Australia, regarded as an international leader in teacher preparation, prepares its graduates for clinical teaching, interweaving theory and practice.<sup>†</sup> This program places its students in real classrooms from day one, but makes no compromises in learning fundamental and theoretical knowledge. Student teachers explicitly identify the connection between what happens in their fieldwork with what they are learning at the university. The result is graduates who approach teaching and learning the way doctors approach health and medicine—as true and clinical experts.

Ensuring that teacher preparation programs combine theory and practice is no quick fix, but it is far better and far more comprehensive than what many fast-tracked programs currently offer. Such programs initially attract ambitious and high-achieving individuals, the very same population that is ultimately dissatisfied with a job that requires so little training and relies on only a handful of techniques.

In contrast, by insisting that teachers complete university-based trainings focused on theory and practice, we can rightfully elevate the profession beyond the technical and mechanical. More importantly, teachers who have this clinical expertise will both be able to understand their students' needs and become genuine leaders in their field.

We need not only look abroad to see the value in this approach. I currently work alongside teachers in New Hampshire who are using their teaching expertise to create meaningful student assessments. They have been part of an initiative (the Performance Assessment of Competency Education, or PACE) that is creating common performance assessments designed to assess and support deeper learning by being integrated into their day-to-day classroom practices.<sup>\*</sup> For example, some of their students are building solar ovens instead of taking bubble tests in order to demonstrate their mastery of science content and skills. These research-based assessments were developed by teachers, piloted by teachers, and assessed by teachers.

Creating such assessments requires tremendous theoretical knowledge of science concepts, knowledge of cognitive development, and knowledge about designing assessments that are psychometrically valid and reliable. But it also requires clinical expertise on what works in a classroom to nurture individual student learning. Approaching assessment in this way does not work if pedagogical expertise and subject-matter expertise are viewed as separate and apart; true teaching expertise encompasses both.

Expert teachers can also help change the relationship between research and practice. If they are empowered to contribute to it, teachers can be much more than consumers of research. The best educators analyze their students' understanding, draw on their various types of knowledge to determine a path forward, and carefully examine the results. If many teachers do this in a coordinated

and collaborative way, and involve researchers from local colleges and universities, then we can revolutionize both educational research and teaching. After all, research hospitals have become models of cutting-edge medical practice by having doctors partner with researchers in their work.

In 2012, when I made the difficult decision to leave my classroom to begin a doctoral program in education, it was with the intention of becoming part of this change. Being a classroom teacher was the most intellectually challenging and rewarding job I will ever have, and my feeling of loss is only balanced by a hope that I can contribute in a new way. My goal is to work in teacher preparation so that I can help equip future teachers to draw on theory and research in teaching their students. I also hope to support teachers doing research in those schools where teaching interns are placed. Ultimately, I hope my work will help build



valuable research knowledge and also encourage pre-service teachers to view rigorous analysis as central to the profession.

**T**he vast number of people who call for reexamining teachers' knowledge and revamping teacher preparation are reacting to real concerns. It is understandable that those who believe the issue is too many low-achieving and ill-informed educators want teachers to gain more advanced knowledge or at least follow the direction of experts who already possess it. And it is understandable that those who believe that teacher preparation focuses too much on philosophy and theory want to just give teachers the nuts and bolts of managing classrooms and writing lesson plans. But reacting to an issue is different than thinking through a real solution.

This false dichotomy of theoretical knowledge versus practical skills leaves us with only bad choices. Other professions have rejected it, and we should too. We should not be asking educators to become either theorists or technicians. The future of all of our students—but especially our most vulnerable students—hinges on their access to true teaching expertise. So how do we strengthen the teaching profession? By preparing teachers with clinical expertise that weaves together theory and practice and empowers them to make the best professional decisions possible for their individual students. □

<sup>†</sup>For more on the Melbourne Graduate School of Education's clinical teaching program, visit [http://education.unimelb.edu.au/about\\_us/clinical\\_teaching](http://education.unimelb.edu.au/about_us/clinical_teaching).

<sup>\*</sup>For more on performance-based assessment, see "Putting the Focus on Student Engagement" in the Spring 2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/spring2016/barlowe-and-cook](http://www.aft.org/ae/spring2016/barlowe-and-cook).

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