

# 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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