



A Union of Professionals

A 'Big Bet' on Educator-Led Collaborations and Solutions



THE AFT INNOVATION FUND (2009–16)





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OUR MISSION

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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Foreword



RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT PRESIDENT

When the AFT started the Innovation Fund in 2009, we wanted to put our vision of AFT members having a meaningful say and hand in crafting ways to provide a high-quality public education—to the children, families and communities we serve—and create a plan of action. Initially, innovation was the focus; as we evolved, sustainability and scalability through capacity building, engagement and collaboration have driven our efforts. The AFT Innovation Fund may be small, but it has provided educators the opportunity and the means both to use their creativity to develop new ways to solve some of the greatest challenges facing schools today and to see these ideas spring to life.

The AFT Innovation Fund has made more than 45 investments in groundbreaking work across the country. Funding for these investments has come from the AFT and from education funders that share our belief in the value of educator-led change. As this report shows, for a small fund, we have been punching well above our weight.

Our AFT Innovation Fund grantees have tackled important work across the nation: from designing new systems for

teacher development and evaluation, to combating inequity head-on by creating community schools with wraparound services for students, to making that critical link between school and career for students through career and technical education, to developing model contract language for charter school teachers.

We are focused on achieving sustainable results and sharing them with other educators and thought leaders across the country. We do all of this, tenaciously, against the backdrop of intense polarization in our country. Even as I write this, Americans are losing confidence in many of the forces that shape the workings of daily life—elected leaders, the media and financial institutions, and the list goes on. Confidence in public education is essential to the long-term strength of our democracy, and we know that teachers and their unions play a big role in that.

The goal of the Innovation Fund has always been to find ways to help all children, particularly low-income and minority children, have access and the opportunity for a great public education. We want all public schools to be places where parents want to send their children, educators want to work and children are engaged. We believe that we can achieve these goals if we focus on and invest in the four pillars of

effective public schools: promoting children's well-being, supporting powerful learning, building teacher capacity and fostering cultures of collaboration.

These four pillars are integral to the work of the Innovation Fund, and to other successful AFT initiatives such as Share My Lesson—our online platform for free lesson plans, educator resources and classroom activities created by teachers, for teachers; Reconnecting McDowell, a public-private partnership led by the AFT to revitalize a struggling community in West Virginia through improved public education, healthcare, training and economic development; collaborations with First Book to provide children with what often are the only books they own, and with PBS Station WETA to address the needs of children who are English language learners; and, perhaps most important, through the work our members do in classrooms and other workplaces every day.

The AFT has fought hard for the resources students and their public schools need, particularly for our most vulnerable and at-risk kids. We have also worked to safeguard public education, and to shift the focus from testing to teaching, to push school decision-making back to communities, schools, educators and parents.

Ask parents what they want, and most often you will hear they want things like a school that is safe, with well-prepared teachers and class sizes that are small enough to ensure their children are known and supported; a school that meets all children where they are and helps them thrive. Those are the choices parents want—not deep cuts to public schools and not privatization schemes with a long trail of failure.

We believe in public education. Whether one wants a less polarized environment, or a skilled workforce and more middle-class jobs, or pluralism and democracy, or diversity and tolerance, or just for children to thrive and be joyful, the answer always starts with a powerful, purposeful public education.

The “bet” AFT’s leaders made with the Innovation Fund has proven to be a wise one. We must trust and support the professionals closest to our students to identify the greatest unmet needs and unaddressed

issues in our schools, and to help them find and test solutions to these challenges. That can’t be done without collaboration on all levels, from school staff, to labor-management collaboration, to engaging with community, to partnering with other funders. That is the focus of our work, our AFT Innovation Fund, and this report.

We want to thank the Vaid Group and Carla Sutherland, in particular, for their enduring efforts researching and writing this report. Their thoughtful and dedicated approach, along with their insights and care throughout this process, has enabled us to take stock of where we have been and chart a course for where we want to go.

We invite you to join us in this important work.



Introduction



Over the past decade, the dominant frame in education reform has focused on rating schools and teachers against pre-established benchmarks.¹ State and federal policymakers have used a variety of tools to promote competition, including incentives for achieving, and disincentives for not complying with, these pre-established benchmarks. Sometimes these benchmarks included new learning standards for students, but too often the standards set were divorced from how teachers actually teach and students actually learn (Anrig, 2013-2014).

Republican and Democratic administrations alike have bought into this competitiveness frame. It is an approach driven by the belief that using the threat/incentive of financial withdrawal/reward is an effective and efficient tool to get school administrators, teachers and students to perform better. This approach was a central feature of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and essentially continued under the Obama administration through Race to the Top incentives linked to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Underpinning these punitive approaches to education reform has been concern over declining global competitiveness, a persistent achievement gap between low-income children and their more affluent peers, and a



mismatch between the skills and qualifications of students leaving school and the changing job market (Schneider, 2016).

In 2009, the American Federation of Teachers made a big bet to create an Innovation Fund to show that educators are key to the solutions for students and school systems. This report documents that effort.

The AFT Innovation Fund anticipated the strong responsibility educators feel for every student to realize his or her full potential. This includes ensuring students are broadly educated to become engaged citizens, a concept foundational to our American brand of democracy enshrined in every state's constitution. By including educators early and often, the Innovation Fund leverages the potential for innovation by bringing together all the people who know students and their needs as well as a great deal about what

¹ For a fuller discussion of the issues raised here, see special focus issue of *American Educator*, Winter 2013-2014, particularly Anrig 2013-2014, and Rubinstein 2013-2014.

is and isn't working and why. It is only in this way, through *collaboration* among and between stakeholders that we improve.

Despite growing interest in this approach, and evidence that it works (see sidebar “The Science Behind Thriving Labor-Management Partnerships” on page 4), it has been largely ignored by mainstream media. It challenges the notion that teachers unions, education officials and administrators at the school, district or state level are inevitably in an adversarial relationship. Rather, this approach centers on the power of strong collaborative partnerships among teachers, administrators and education officials (and oftentimes parents and the broader community) as the critical driving force to achieve effective reform (Rubinstein, 2013-2014). It takes as its starting point that the critical principle underpinning a collaborative and inclusive approach is the need to work in ways that are both “good for children, and fair for teachers” (Weingarten, 2008).

A hallmark of the current era of education reform is the deep polarization around the role of market forces, competition and privatization in the public education system. A particularly pernicious feature of widespread public debate has been the characterization of teachers and their unions as central to the problems facing public education, and not integral to any solutions (Burke, 2010). These trends have been accelerated and amplified following the appointment of Betsy DeVos as education secretary. DeVos has made it clear that she intends to aggressively pursue a privatization agenda. Her belief in the commodification of education, including for-profit charter schools and school

vouchers, under the rubric of school choice is well supported by the Trump administration's initial budget recommendations. Most worrying is that she appears to favor free-market strategies delinked from educational standards and oversight of any sort (Strauss, 2016). DeVos seems intent on pursuing this agenda, despite a growing body of evidence that shows that recent reform efforts toward privatization have failed to have much impact on improving test score results (Green, 2017). In fact, a wave of new research suggests that private school vouchers may harm students who receive them in three of the largest programs in Indiana, Louisiana and Ohio (Carey, 2017).

The data gathered in this report contradict this approach. They show, instead, the value and validity of public education strategies that have students, teachers and collaboration at their center.

Structure of the Report

The report is divided into two parts. The first part outlines the establishment of the AFT Innovation Fund and details its grant-making activities. The second section consists of a series of case studies that explore the relationship between these activities and the purpose of the Fund. It highlights initial evidence that suggests the work of the Fund is having an impact on the goal of improved education outcomes especially for low-income and marginalized children. A companion report, “Investing in Frontline-Driven Change for Powerful and Purposeful Public Education,” looks to the future of the Fund, highlighting some of its priorities moving forward.



The Science Behind Thriving Labor-Management Relationships

In recent years, rigorous studies have shown that effective public schools are built on strong collaborative relationships between administrators and teachers. Those findings have helped to accelerate a movement in some districts across the United States focused on constructing such partnerships in public schools. Both the promising research and the percolating innovations aimed at nurturing collaboration have largely been neglected by the mainstream media, which remains preoccupied with the “education wars” between teachers unions and their detractors.

What Makes Successful Schools Tick?

For several decades, education researchers have attempted to identify successful public schools, particularly in low-income settings, and then determine the characteristics that enabled those schools to thrive. Over time, studies using more advanced statistical methods and drawing from much more reliable testing and demographic data have produced more rigorous findings. As a result, researchers have uncovered valuable insights about what makes schools successful.

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research has conducted the most rigorous of these studies. Published in 2010, *Organizing Schools for Improvement* was based on demographic and testing data from 1990 through 2005 from more than 400 Chicago elementary schools. The consortium’s central finding was that the most effective schools, based on test score improvement over time after taking into account demographic factors, had developed an unusually high degree of “relational trust” among their stakeholders.

The consortium’s research is especially valuable because it focused on an unusually large and natural experiment launched when the city of Chicago delegated significant authority and resources to local school councils. The data accumulated over time enabled the consortium to capture the ways in which school personnel worked together and how those relationships affected

students’ progress. That provided researchers with a rare opportunity to examine organizational change as it played out across many different school and community conditions. Its results are not from a small, possibly atypical sample of schools that volunteered to participate in a structured experiment, but rather from a whole system of schools attempting to improve under local control. That combination—the diversity of the school community under study and the willingness of the schools to change without externally imposed incentives—added considerably to the overall generalizability of the consortium’s findings.

In 2010, the consulting firm McKinsey and Company published “How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better,” a report that analyzed 20 school systems that experienced significant, sustained, and widespread gains in student outcomes within countries as diverse as Armenia, Chile, England, Ghana, Poland and South Korea. Although the social and political context in which those schools function obviously varied, one common thread was a strong reliance on teamwork and close attentiveness to testing data: *“The power of collective capacity is that it enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things—for two reasons. One is that knowledge about effective practice becomes more widely available and accessible on a daily basis. The second reason is more powerful still—working together generates commitment.”**

Some caveats: Collaboration is not a “silver bullet” that will eliminate whatever ails a school; rather, it is a shared mindset and an agreed-upon collection of processes that over time enables everyone connected to a school to effectively work together in educating children. Because collaboration usually requires upending deeply entrenched cultural habits, it is inherently arduous and requires years of effort on the part of all parties. While labor-management collaboration is a necessary condition for sustained improvement in school performance, it is not sufficient. The strong relations must extend beyond the bargain-

ing table to a persistent, team-oriented focus on enabling teachers to work more effectively with students.

*Extracted from (Anrig, 2013-2014)
Greg Anrig is vice president of policy and programs at the Century Foundation, where he directs projects on public policy as well as the foundation’s fellows. He is the author of Beyond the Education Wars: Evidence That Collaboration Builds Effective Schools (2013).*

* Mona Mourshed, Chinezi Chijioke, and Michael Barber, “How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better” (McKinsey and Company, November 2010)



Section One:

Innovation Fund Purpose, Approach and Structure

The decision to establish the AFT Innovation Fund was announced by Randi Weingarten in July 2008, shortly after her election as president. Calling for smarter investment in public education, she urged parents, teachers, school administrators, business leaders and elected officials to work together and to confront tough, often divisive issues—including tenure, differentiated pay and teacher assessment—to improve schools for all children. The only guiding principle for collaboration, she said, was working on ideas that were “good for children and fair to teachers.” (Weingarten, 2008)

The goal of the Fund was from the start, and remains, ambitious: deep, sustainable change to strengthen public education and improve outcomes, particularly for low-income students. While the Fund was small, Weingarten was clear that it was to be bold and not about “tinkering around the edges or opting out of the system” (American Federation of Teachers, 2009). At its core, the Innovation Fund focuses on ensuring that all children have a clear path to opportunity, a goal best achieved by insisting educational systems are for the public good. The Fund sought to advance this goal with an approach that incentivized collaboration across all stakeholders in schools and school systems, and invited educator-led innovation. This approach is profoundly different from market-based approaches that regard education—not as a public good—but rather view it as a commodity, and students and parents as consumers of private opportunity and privilege. In doing so, the Fund not only has bucked a trend of reform, but also has anticipated mounting pressure for an altogether different worldview.

Operationally, the Fund is only open to AFT affiliates (at the local and state levels). This is because of its foundational belief in the power of frontline educators’ experience, knowledge and ideas about improvement and change. Exemplifying “solution-driven unionism,” a strategy foregrounded at the AFT under Weingarten’s leadership, (see sidebar “Solution-Driven Unionism” on this page), the union has invested its own resources in the Fund, by committing a small percentage of members’ annual dues.²

In many ways then, the Innovation Fund can be viewed as the AFT’s own “big bet” on its long-standing contention that collaboration and partnership, driven by teachers and supported by the union, offer the best prospects for achieving substantive, sustained and scalable change that is good for all stakeholders, but particularly students. This approach is critical to understanding the way in which the Innovation Fund was set up and functions.

Innovation Fund Established

After the initial announcement of the Fund in 2008, the AFT moved quickly. Education First, a strategy and policy consultancy company with a sole focus on improving public education, was engaged to develop the inaugural business plan for the Fund. The plan

² For a fuller discussion, see “The Bargaining Table and Beyond,” by Phil Kugler in the Winter 2013-2014 issue of *American Educator*, pages 36-40.

Solution-Driven Unionism

Solution-driven unionism is a vision of unionism that advances solutions focused on uniting members, the people they serve and the communities in which they live. In this extract from Randi Weingarten’s keynote speech at the 2014 AFT national convention, she defines “solution-driven unionism” and provides concrete examples of work being done by the AFT with this lens.

“Solution-driven unionism means being willing to solve problems, to innovate to make things better; it means finding common ground when possible, and engaging in conflict when necessary. Today, our union is not just solution-driven—we’re in overdrive.

“Remember last convention when we launched Share My Lesson? Now it’s the fastest-growing education-tech venture in America. Likewise, with First Book, our union has provided nearly 2 million books to children who otherwise might not have a single book of their own.

“And we’re fighting to fix, not close, neighborhood schools. We’re creating community schools with wraparound services, including in McDowell County, W.Va., one of the poorest counties in America, where more than 125 partners are now working with us on this effort that is literally changing lives.

“We’ve led the labor movement’s investment in America to the tune of \$10 billion, devoting a portion of our pension funds to infrastructure projects. We’re on track to create more than 150,000 good jobs, which will strengthen our country while providing a safe return and a secure retirement for our retirees.

“We did this. Not a venture capital firm or a for-profit ed-tech company. A union. This union. Our union.

“We’re solution-driven when it comes to collective bargaining. Of course, we use this vital right to fight for fair wages and decent benefits, but our locals are also using it to secure the tools you need to do your jobs and secure the things kids, families and communities need for a better life.”

provided detailed advice on management, theory of change, grant-making priorities, measurable outcomes and budgets.

A 16-member advisory board was set up to assist in the initial direction of the Fund. The board comprised a diverse group of prominent educators, civil rights advocates, venture capital executives and academics. Adam Urbanski, an AFT vice president and president of the Rochester (N.Y.) Teachers Association, was appointed as the founding executive director.

Support for the fund was immediately forthcoming from private foundations with a long history of playing a leadership role in education philanthropy. This included the Ford Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. Between 2009 and 2015, external donors contributed \$9.11 million to the Innovation Fund. This support was crucial to the work and success of the Innovation

The AFT Innovation Fund “was a message from our members that we have a lot to offer and feel a deep responsibility to help improve the systems in which we work.”³—Adam Urbanski, founding executive director of the AFT Innovation Fund

Fund, not only in terms of the funding received, but in its recognition of the importance of educator-led innovations.

Since 2009, the AFT has invested just under \$7 million of its own funds (including from teachers’ union dues), at a level of approximately \$1 million a year. Hence, since its inception through the end of 2016, the Innovation Fund has received more than \$16 million. The bulk of these resources (\$13.25 million) was expended on direct grant making. Indirect costs of the Fund, including staff salaries, technical assistance to grantees to support travel, publications, participation in conferences and workshops, totaled 17.4 percent.⁴

Grant-Making Activities

Initially the Innovation Fund was shaped around an annual open call for proposals. More than 125 submissions were received following the first call for proposals in 2009. The grant proposals

³ Interview with Adam Urbanski, reflecting on the Innovation Fund (Urbanski, 2017)
⁴ Figures provided by the Innovation Fund staff from internal documents.

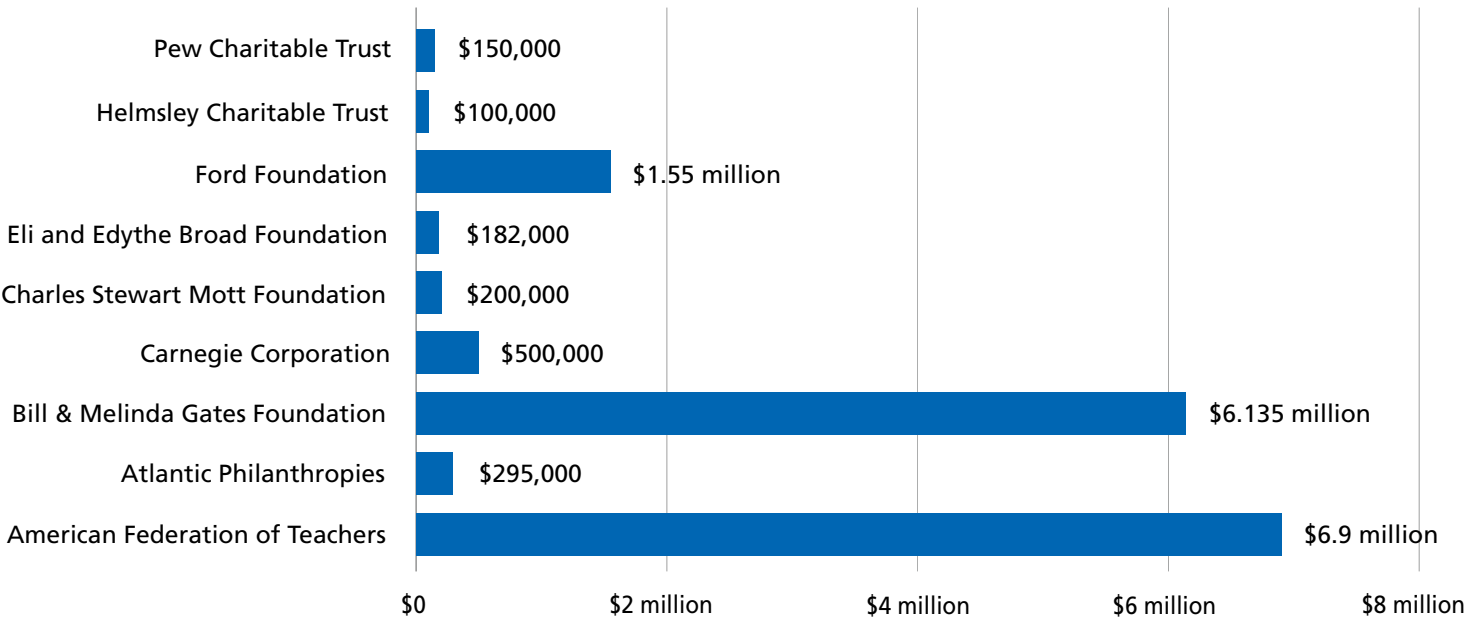


came from all parts of the country, from AFT locals of all sizes as well as several state federations. In assessing the proposals, particular attention was paid to innovation (exploring creative and untried solutions) and partnerships (particularly with the wider community, including parents and local/state educational authorities) (American Federation of Teachers, 2009).

In the Innovation Fund’s first year of operation, just over \$1 million (in total) was invested in seven grants selected from the more than 100 applicants. Grant recipients were required to make quarterly narrative and financial reports to the Fund.

Beyond the direct contribution of grant funding that it made (\$1 million), the AFT provided both overhead and operating costs in the form of salaries for 2.5 (full-time equivalent) staff positions, and office space. Staff at the Innovation Fund managed the entire grant-making process, provided technical support to applicants, and provided ongoing support and advice to grant recipients. Additional support was provided by tapping into the expertise of AFT staff as needed. By 2013, it was apparent that sustaining the administration

Contributors to the Innovation Fund 2009–16 (total amount in dollars)



involved in an open call for proposals was not efficient, and so the process shifted to identifying key and timely priorities for the union, and seeking proposals from a smaller range of applicants.

Priority areas for the first round of grants included:

- Designing systemwide approaches that cultivate effective teaching;
- Developing professional pathways and new compensation systems that enable educators to have new roles, responsibilities and rewards; and
- Creating strategies that address out-of-school learning factors in ways that lead to high-quality, scalable and adaptable options in urban public schools.

“Many out there will be surprised to learn these proposals come from teachers unions, which are not afraid to take risks and share the responsibility for student success. These projects are designed by teachers and their unions, and include school and community partners—a vital combination that gives these new ventures the potential to be sustainable and improve student outcomes. That’s the real promise of these exciting initiatives. (American Federation of Teachers 2009)” —Randi Weingarten, AFT president

Later priority areas included:

- Seeking solutions to challenges encountered in rolling out the Common Core standards;
- Supporting career and technical education through teaching collaborations of educators, school districts, community colleges, city governments and business groups; and
- Establishing community schools that serve the neediest children by bringing together services that they and their families need.

During the period under review (2009-16), the Innovation Fund awarded 45 grants. All grants were annual, but most were renewed for one or two additional years. Annual grants ranged from \$26,000 to \$200,000.

See the graphic on page 9 that shows where grants were made. It provides a summary overview of the grants awarded by the Innovation Fund between 2009 and 2016, by grantee, total funding received, year of grant, and includes a short description of activities. It is organized thematically across priority areas discussed below. A chronological list of grants made by the Fund is provided in the Appendix on page 18.

Grant Making: Areas of Focus

A feature of the work of the Innovation Fund has been to support projects that have at their center collaboration among stakeholders. Proposals are not considered unless applicants can show how they will be working, most often with state and/or district education officials, but sometimes with a wider range of partners such as parents, administrators, principals and the broader community. In addition, the Fund has looked to support cohorts of grantees, working on a similar challenge, but in different locales and with different approaches.



Beyond the criteria for collaboration, the Innovation Fund also identified thematic areas of focus. These focus areas have been driven by the priorities of the AFT as we have worked to advance our mission of high-quality public education. Most often, this has involved exploring ways to address concerns that are shared with other stakeholders (such as quality of teaching and learning, accountability, budget cuts) but done in way that is in keeping with the union’s commitment to working in a way that is both good for all children, and fair to all teachers.

Improving Instructional Quality

One of the most contentious aspects of Race to the Top was using a single measure of student achievement (derived from students’ performances on standardized tests) for teacher evaluations. The Innovation Fund responded by supporting groundbreaking work on teacher evaluation that included comprehensive, integrated systems with multiple measures of student learning and engagement, and a heavy emphasis on advancing student learning and teacher professional growth through continuous feedback systems. At the heart of all these grants were collaborations with state-level and district personnel, but also with a focus on school administrators and peer reviewers to ensure they were properly trained and supported to conduct valid and reliable evaluations.

Supporting Strong Standards

One finding from an AFT task force on standards in education was that there would need to be a lot of assistance in the rollout of new standards. To help ensure a fair and successful rollout of the Common Core State Standards, complete with adequate preparation and training for everyone, the Innovation Fund invested in several ways, including support from and for teachers, school administrators, and district and state education officials. The

Innovation Fund supported a number of local affiliates to ensure that teachers had an informed voice in the implementation of the Common Core, while also providing widely available teaching tools to assist at the classroom level. These teaching tools were shared widely through Share My Lesson, AFT's online community of resources for teachers, and/or through other platforms that the fund supported at the local and state levels.

Charter Schools as Laboratories for Students and Teachers

The Innovation Fund made investments in charter school projects that recognized the public good that schools provide, and the potential for charter schools to serve as laboratories for ideas to improve all public schools. The Fund invested in charter schools that experiment by promoting educator-led change and innovation. A cluster of grants was made in a range of strategies that teachers unions proposed, most successfully to support collaboration with education officials, but also to build close partnerships with parents and the surrounding community. Approaches that were supported ranged from efforts to get new charter schools off the ground, to serving as a state-approved authorizer of charter schools that emphasize teacher leadership.

Early Childhood Education

The AFT has long endorsed the importance and value of education for our youngest children and currently represents roughly 100,000 early childhood educators in every early learning setting, from public schools, Head Start programs, and child care centers to family child care programs. The AFT Innovation Fund invested in two initiatives in early childhood education, geared toward increasing professional standards in the sector, and in this way better preparing young children to learn when they enter kindergarten. This kind of work is particularly important for low-income children, especially those who are English language learners.

Community Schools

Using the neighborhood public school to weave together community partners to provide all the services and supports students and their families need has the potential to be a highly effective strategy to mitigate poverty and inequity. The Innovation Fund is supporting work that explores different ways in which community schools can be established and expanded. One promising strategy includes hiring districtwide coordinators to establish and manage partnerships, work with individual schools to inventory needs, regularly convene stakeholders, and communicate with the community at large. In every case, community school models are premised on the twin suppositions that when students' social, mental and physical health needs are provided for, and when the community shares in providing those services,



students are better able to learn and teachers are better able to help them.

Improving Outcomes for All Students

The Innovation Fund has invested in a range of innovative approaches to improving school quality and outcomes for vulnerable students. Examples of the work supported include expanded learning time for students in low-income neighborhoods in order to provide a well-rounded education and the enrichment opportunities to develop their talents; the development of specialized "coaches" to improve the graduation rate of at-risk students; and addressing major racial disparities in performance through work on restorative justice and increasing the diversity of teaching staff.

Pathways for Student Success: Career and Technical Education

The final thematic priority area during this first period of grant making focused on an ambitious process of collaboration not only with state officials, but also with the private sector and higher education institutions around career and technical education (CTE). This area of investment focused on supporting new ways of providing a vital link between the world of school and the world of work that can motivate students to continue their education, and arm them with the knowledge and flexible skills that will assist them in adapting to the jobs of the future.

As discussed previously, the overarching goal of the Fund is to improve the education outcomes for all students, but especially for marginalized students, in the public education system. Many organizations and foundations share this goal. What sets the AFT Innovation Fund apart is that it was deliberately set up around the AFT's long-standing belief that teacher-driven, union-supported reform offers the best prospects for school improvement.

Innovation Fund Grants (2009–16) by thematic area, funding and focus



Charter Schools as Laboratories

Illinois Federation of Teachers
2009-11 | \$293,147

San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel
2009-12 | \$370,000

United Teachers Los Angeles
2012-14 | \$196,351

Minneapolis Federation of Teachers
2010-13 | \$475,000
2014-16 | \$295,000

Education Austin (Texas)
2010-13 | \$427,979



Supporting Strong Standards

Boston Teachers Union
2010-13 | \$431,574
2014-16 | \$230,683

Albuquerque (N.M.) Teachers Federation
2011-13 | \$290,852

Chicago Teachers Union
2011-14 | \$528,398

Cleveland Federation of Teachers
2012-16 | \$510,710

Jefferson County (Ala.) AFT
2012-14 | \$314,960

Quincy (Ill.) Federation of Teachers
2012-15 | \$206,803

Poughkeepsie (N.Y.) Public School Teachers' Association
2013-14 | \$150,000

MEA-MFT (Montana Education Association and Montana Federation of Teachers)
2013-15 | \$259,414

Cincinnati Federation of Teachers
2013-16 | \$424,975

New York State United Teachers
2014-15 | \$30,000

AFT Connecticut
2014-15 | \$26,464



Pathways for Student Success: Career and Technical Education

Peoria (Ill.) Federation of Teachers
2015-current | \$158,483

United Teachers of Dade/United Faculty of Miami Dade College
2015-current | \$231,383

Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers
2015-current | \$296,000

United Educators of San Francisco
2015-17 | \$102,825



Improving Instructional Quality

New York State United Teachers
2009-12 | \$520,750

ABC Federation of Teachers (California)
2009-12 | \$460,632

Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals
2009-12 | \$529,000

Anchorage (Alaska) Council of Education
2010-12 | \$275,788

Volusia (Fla.) Teachers Organization
2010-13 | \$227,182

Meriden (Conn.) Federation of Teachers
2012-15 | \$438,487

Hillsborough (Fla.) Classroom Teachers Association
2010-13 | \$389,020

New Haven (Conn.) Federation of Teachers
2014-16 | \$299,400

Toledo (Ohio) Federation of Teachers
2010-13 | \$393,393

Saint Paul (Minn.) Federation of Teachers
2009-11 | \$270,000

United Faculty of Western Washington
2014-16 | \$225,718

United Educators of San Francisco
2015-15 | \$75,000



Improving Outcomes for All Students

Providence (R.I.) Teachers Union
2012-14 | \$283,847

Denver Federation for Paraprofessionals and Nutrition Service Employees
2011-14 | \$346,215

Baltimore Teachers Union
2013-14 | \$150,000



Community Schools

Philadelphia Federation of Teachers
2009-12 | \$290,488

AFT-West Virginia
2011-13 | \$158,860

Rome (N.Y.) Teachers Association
2016-current | \$135,000

Texas AFT
2016-current | \$135,000

Jefferson Elementary Federation of Teachers/Jefferson Federation of Teachers
2016-current | \$135,000



Early Childhood Education

United Federation of Teachers (New York City)
2010-13 | \$458,256

AFT St. Louis
2011-14 | \$395,003



Section Two: Impact Case Studies

This section explores the question of teacher-driven reform through case studies primarily featured in *American Educator*, the quarterly journal published by the AFT, but also from the grantees' reports submitted to the Innovation Fund. *American Educator* has a circulation of more than 800,000 and is well-regarded in the education sector. The magazine offers a lively mix of news and updates from the AFT, and also carries substantive articles on teaching and learning by pre-eminent scholars. In addition, grant holders were interviewed specifically for this report.

1. Rhode Island: Improving Teaching and Learning⁵

During the late 1990s and into the 2000s, teacher evaluation went from being a relatively ignored area of education policy to becoming one of the most prominent and contentious topics in K-12 education. A wave of new research on teacher quality, the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top, and major philanthropic interest and investment, most notably by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, have all contributed to the increased attention. The AFT has long promoted an understanding of teacher evaluation as an essential component of professional development, rather than a test-and-punish system.

This case study examines how the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals (RIFTHP) developed an effective evaluation system, grounded in professional development.

RIFTHP received one of the first Innovation Fund grants in 2009. An explicit purpose of the grant was to explore using multiple indicators—classroom observations, portfolio review, appraisal of lesson plans, students' written work and projects—as the framework for an evaluation system. This approach sharply contrasts with the use of a single measure—students' scores on standardized tests—proposed by many education reformers as a valid understanding of teacher competency. The urgency of this debate lay partly in the desire of many policymakers to link this kind of evaluation to teacher pay and tenure. Over the next four years, RIFTHP received just over \$500,000 to create a consortium of local unions and officials from six of Rhode Island's 36 school districts, representing more than 50 percent of students and teachers in the state.

It was slow going at first, as members of the consortium needed to overcome disagreements and learn to trust each other.

However, the arrival of new state education leadership, and the adoption of more rigorous statewide standards, added impetus to

the work. By the time the state mandated that all districts adopt an evaluation system—linked to those standards—the consortium had agreed to an evaluation system that was standards-based, linked to professional development, and had buy-in from the union and the district.

In 2010, the AFT won a \$4 million federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant to train evaluators and stakeholders in the evaluation system developed in Rhode Island (and separately in New York state with New York State United Teachers). Since the approval of the model by the Rhode Island Department of Education, the consortium has trained more than 1,000 principals. Between 8,000 and 10,000 teachers currently participate in the new evaluation system.

Initial indications show the system's promise. Independent qualitative studies by the nonprofit Education Development Center found that teachers reported receiving more constructive feedback, and both principals and teachers noted positive changes in classroom practice.

Kenneth Sheehan, then-superintendent of West Warwick Public Schools, one of the participating districts, reflected on the process:

“... Innovation districts have had a leg up on successful implementation of a new evaluation system because of the collaborative work we've done through the consortium. We have worked together to define our expectations of effectiveness and trained our teachers and evaluators in the new system. The relationship between educator effectiveness and student achievement is something we all agree on, and developing this system as partners ensures that we'll be able to implement it successfully. Ultimately that's a great benefit to our teachers, our system and our students.” (American Federation of Teachers, 2012)

While the Innovation Fund's investment was only 10 percent of the i3 grant, it was the seed funding needed to launch the project (American Federation of Teachers, 2015).

The AFT's resources, though, go beyond such funding. Throughout



⁵ This case study draws particularly from two reports:

American Federation of Teachers. 2012. "It's Elemental. A Quick Guide to Implementing Evaluation and Development Systems." www.aft.org/sites/default/files/tde_ie_its_elemental_2012.pdf

American Federation of Teachers. 2015. "Moving Beyond Compliance: Lessons Learned from Teacher Development and Evaluation." www.aft.org/sites/default/files/i3_moving_beyondtcompliance2015.pdf



this project, extensive use was made of the expertise on evaluation systems within the AFT's headquarters in Washington, D.C. Also, through presentations and workshops at the AFT's biennial TEACH conference as well as the publication of the AFT report "Moving Beyond Compliance: Lessons Learned from Teacher Development and Evaluation," Rhode Island's experiences were broadly shared with other districts and states. In fact, lessons learned contributed to the way in which teacher evaluation systems were developed in Illinois, Michigan and Ohio.

2. Cleveland: Common Core State Standards⁶

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) arose from a simple idea: Creating a "common" set of academic expectations for all students (no matter where they lived) would improve achievement as well as college and career readiness. The reality, however, has proven far more complicated. All but four states had adopted the standards in 2010 and 2011, but by 2015 several had reversed their adoptions, and nearly half had backed out of their initial promises to use common assessments designed to measure mastery of the standards (Center for American Progress, 2014).

Many of the controversies around the CCSS stemmed from their rollout, including the federal government spending \$350 million on two consortia to develop new high-stakes tests aligned to the standards and new state laws spurred by Race to the Top that linked student performance on these tests to teacher evaluations. As AFT President Randi Weingarten pointed out in her criticism of CCSS implementation:

"Can you even imagine doctors being expected to perform a new medical procedure without being trained in it or provided the necessary instruments—simply being told that there may be some material on a website? Of course not, but that's what's happening right now with the Common Core. The fact that the changes are being made nationwide without anything close to adequate preparation is a failure of leadership, a sign of a broken accountability system and, worse, an abdication of our moral

responsibility to kids, particularly poor kids" (Strauss, 2013).

The AFT chose not to simply critique the process but also to invest time, energy and its members own dues to improving CCSS implementation. Working with a British partner, TES Connect, the AFT created Share My Lesson, a web-based resource for teachers to share materials with one another. A digital filing cabinet of lesson plans and ideas, Share My Lesson became a crucial resource for teachers struggling to respond to the demands of the CCSS.⁷

The Innovation Fund made grants to union affiliates in Albuquerque, N.M.; Boston; Chicago; Cleveland; Jefferson County, Ala.; Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and Quincy, Ill. The grants

supported the development of CCSS-aligned lessons and units, prepared future teachers to work in Common Core classrooms, developed cadres of educators with expertise in teaching to high standards, and addressed the needs of English language learners.

This case study explores the work of the Cleveland Teachers Union to support CCSS implementation.

The Ohio state board of education adopted the CCSS at a public meeting in June 2010. Supporters included teachers unions, school and district leadership, business groups, and parent and community groups. The statewide implementation plan was based on three years of field-testing with full implementation of grades K-12 taking place in the fourth year, 2013-14 (Baumgartner, undated).

In Cleveland, both the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and the Cleveland Teachers Union (CTU) discussed the CCSS transition. These conversations led to a districtwide project, called Building Better Classrooms. The effort included the creation of a districtwide, centrally located Common Core Training Center. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the federal Race to the Top Program partly funded the initiative (Belcher, 2012).

The district and the union agreed that a grade-band strategy (rolling out the standards in one set of grades each year for grades K-2, 3-5, 6-8 and 9-12) would enable teachers and students to work with the new standards more quickly.

The CTU received a grant for Building Better Classrooms from the Innovation Fund in 2012. Each year of the four-year project, a cohort of teachers was selected to write specific lessons aligned to the standards. Sixty-four teachers from the district participated.

The lessons were reviewed by experts trained in Achieve's EQuIP (Educators Evaluating the Quality of Instructional Products), a rubric used by educators across the nation to align lessons and units to the standards. As they submitted their lessons, Cleveland teachers received individualized feedback from these reviewers.

⁶ This case study draws particularly from *Moving Beyond Compliance: Lessons Learned from Teacher Development and Evaluation* (AFT, 2015).

⁷ For a fuller understanding of Share My Lesson, visit the website at <https://sharemylesson.com>.

Then, the union and district planned targeted professional learning opportunities to help teachers understand the new standards and how to ensure their lessons met the EQuIP criteria. A total of 252 lessons were developed and made available on Share My Lesson; they have been viewed more than 300,000 times (Baumgartner, 2017).

Mark Baumgartner, a high school English teacher and director of professional issues for the CTU, says the work has been challenging but worthwhile because it has helped educators improve:

“The teachers that wrote lessons for this project were not ‘stars,’ they were average teachers who tried something new, and they really produced outstanding work.” (Baumgartner, 2017)

Against the backdrop of Common Core debates, Baumgartner’s comment reflects the essence of solution-driven unionism: Focus on what can be done, in almost any situation, to ensure that sense is made of legislative and administrative requirements, that peers are supported to deliver at the highest level, and that educational opportunities are afforded to all students.

3. Meriden, Conn.: Expanded Learning Time⁸

Research suggests that added time in school—when it amounts to at least 300 additional hours a year—is one of the two interventions that best predict improved education outcomes. But until recently, most schools that had implemented expanded learning time were charters. Could a public school district, working with its teachers union, successfully establish such a model in traditional public schools?

This case study explores what happened when the AFT Innovation Fund invested in expanded learning time (ELT) in Meriden, Conn.

According to the National Center on Time & Learning (NCTL) there is an urgent need to rethink the traditional K-12 school day. Across the U.S., children, especially from low-income communities, lack crucial resources and opportunities to reach their potential.

NCTL has shown that redesigning and expanding the school day can give students the equivalent of nearly two additional years of learning time. This has a significant impact on a variety of important education outcomes, such as ensuring that teachers have more time to collaborate and plan lessons, and ensuring that students have time for more individual instruction and are exposed to a rich curriculum that includes robotics, foreign languages, music and the arts.

In 2011, the Innovation Fund invited a team of educators from Meriden, Conn., to attend an NCTL meeting in Boston to learn



more about the benefits of expanded learning time. Inspired by what they heard, the Meriden Federation of Teachers (MFT), working closely with officials from Meriden Public Schools (MPS), applied for an Innovation Fund grant to implement expanded time in its elementary schools with the greatest needs (Benigni, 2017).

The first school to extend its day was Pulaski Elementary. When the school opened its doors in fall 2012, all students arrived at 7:30 a.m. and received a free breakfast. Then they participated in 90 minutes of enrichment, including an exercise period and other rotating activities, before the standard school day began. Over the next two years, ELT was introduced at two additional schools in the district: John Barry Elementary, and Roger Sherman Elementary.

Few school districts and teachers unions have as long ranging or as strong a partnership as MFT and MPS. Their collaboration has allowed Meriden to work through challenges and setbacks inherent in implementing a program as complex as expanded learning time.

For example, monthly meetings between teachers in the participating schools, the union and the district have taken place since the initial decision to apply for the Innovation Fund grant. No complaint has been too small for this labor-management partnership to talk through and make changes where necessary.

Students in Barry, Pulaski and Sherman elementary schools now receive 40 additional days of instructional time—above and beyond the district’s traditional 180-day school year.

It is difficult to attribute gains in student performance to any one program, but Meriden officials point to the improved average daily attendance as solid evidence of the program’s success. Average daily attendance in these three schools has improved to 98 percent—up more than 10 percent at Pulaski. Twenty classrooms in the two ELT schools recorded perfect attendance. In the year following the introduction of ELT, Pulaski third- and fourth-graders achieved the greatest reading growth in the district, and outpaced district and state averages in math and reading. Since then, Pulaski

⁸ This case study draws particularly on the 2014 AFT report “It’s About Time” at www.aft.org/sites/default/files/ift_itsabouttime.pdf.

has become a state “School of Distinction,” with reading and math scores rising well above state growth targets.

While student scores have increased districtwide, growth has been particularly robust for high-needs students—with scores increasing by 12 points in English language arts and 23.9 points in math. In 2016, of the 12 traditional public schools in Meriden, all three of the schools that participated in the grant had an overall statewide index score increase of five or more points. Barry topped this achievement with an overall index score increase of 13.2 points.

The district’s ELT effort “is really about transforming schooling,” says Meriden Superintendent Mark Benigni (Benigni, 2017).⁹

4. New Haven, Conn.: Restorative Justice¹⁰

In the past two decades, many public school systems have employed zero-tolerance discipline policies, which include mandatory suspensions for various offenses. This approach, while initially prompted by fears about weapons in school, often encompassed a wider range of infractions, such as cursing, disrespecting teachers and disrupting class.

A rapid rise in suspensions resulted. During the 2011-12 school year, nearly 3.5 million public school students nationwide were suspended at least once. Despite the large numbers of suspensions, there was little evidence the zero-tolerance approach improved behavior in school.

A particularly troubling aspect of zero-tolerance policies was their impact on students with disabilities and students of color. Analyses of suspension data irrefutably demonstrated that black students were suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than white students for the same behaviors, while students with disabilities were twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension as their non-disabled peers.

As it became clear that suspension rates were closely correlated with higher dropout and delinquency rates, concerns about the economic and social costs not only for suspended students but also for wider communities, ensued (Center for Civil Rights Remedies, 2015).

This case study explores the ways in which a grant from the Innovation Fund was used to support new approaches to discipline in New Haven Public Schools.

A report by the Center for Civil Rights Remedies cited New Haven as one of many school districts with worrying trends in secondary school suspensions. In 2011-12, the district suspended nearly 700 students—a little more than one in 10 students or 10.9 percent. Some subgroups were suspended that year “at extraordinarily high rates”: About one in three Latino male students were suspended at least once, as were nearly four out of 10 black female students with disabilities (Center for Civil Rights Remedies, 2015).

⁹ Figures provided in follow up email exchange with Mark Benigni, superintendent of Meriden Public Schools.

¹⁰ This case study is extracted from “Cultivating Community Schools: Austin’s Grassroots Effort,” by J. Dubin. *American Educator*, Fall 2015: pages 12-17.

Such rates had long concerned David Cicarella, president of the New Haven Federation of Teachers (NHFT), who had been a teacher in the district for 36 years. Colleagues would call him to say they faced incredible challenges because of a handful of disruptive students and had no effective supports to help them. The issue was raised with district officials, but it wasn’t until a few years later that a citywide effort around school discipline started to take shape, driven by a number of homicides involving school-age students in 2013.

Garth Harries, the newly elected superintendent and Toni Harp, the newly elected mayor, were determined to bring about changes that would prevent losing children to poverty and crime. Their starting point was to create Youth Stat in spring 2014, a program that connected officials from the school district and the juvenile justice department, among other agencies, so they could identify and help at-risk youth.

That same year, the NHFT applied for and received an Innovation Fund grant to shift in-school discipline away from traditional punishments, such as suspension, to strategies that help students engage in positive behaviors. This approach, restorative justice, enables students to discuss problems and repair relationships with teachers and peers.

Funds were used to hire the grant’s restorative justice project director to manage the work. Contracting with the International Institute for Restorative Practices, the district trained 37 teachers in restorative justice practices. Many volunteered to be trained, and others were asked to participate based on their strong rapport with students. After the training, these teachers returned to their schools to train their colleagues. The grant to the local union covered the cost of this “train-the-trainer” model. The school district contributed by paying for substitute teachers for teachers involved in the training, as well as paying for principals and assistant principals to attend the training.

One legacy of the project is the revision to the school district’s code of conduct in September 2015, which now includes a restorative approach. For major offenses, stiffer penalties, such as suspension, are still in place.

According to the district, the number of students with disciplinary incidents (suspensions, expulsions, office referrals and detentions) has decreased by nearly 26 percent, from 466 in 2014 to 347 in 2015. Harries attributes the drop to implementing restorative practices systemically “so that this kind of practice isn’t happening at the margins, but it’s happening at the core of what we do” (Dubin, “Learning to Switch Gears,” 2015-2016).

5. Anchorage, Alaska: Graduation Coaches¹¹

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that state dropout rates fell from just over 10.9 percent in 2000, to 5.9 percent in 2015 nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics, undated). While these improvements are welcome, they signal that a staggering number of young people (currently around 1.2 million

¹¹ This case study draws extensively from the AFT report “Across the Stage: Doing What It Takes to Help Every Student Graduate from High School,” by Stephen Brown and Corinne McVee. www.aft.org/sites/default/files/if_acrossthestagegradsupportmanualace.pdf

a year) continue to leave school without a high school diploma. In today's economy, this likely means they will be unable to find a job that will allow them to support a family.

Graduation rates, similarly, have been increasing. In 2005-06, the graduation rate for public high schools was 73 percent. By 2013-14, the rate rose to an all-time high of 82 percent.

But average graduation rates differ widely across student populations; rates for low-income students are lower than those for their more affluent peers (National Center for Education Statistics, undated).

This case study looks at how paraprofessionals and school-related personnel (PSRPs), represented by the Anchorage Council of Education (ACE), undertook a joint union-district collaboration to increase graduation rates.

Alaska has one of the lowest graduation rates in the U.S., at 71.1 percent. New Mexico (68.5 percent) and Nevada (70 percent) are the only states with lower rates. Nearly one in three students in Alaska attends school in the Anchorage School District (National Center for Education Statistics, undated). In 2008, the district launched a "graduation coaching program" to increase the on-time graduation rate (within four years of starting ninth grade) of 64 percent. The effort matched struggling students with paraprofessionals, who were appointed as graduation coaches.

With the school district's support, ACE submitted a proposal to the Innovation Fund two years after this program began. It did so to ensure that graduation coaches received professional development and coordinated their efforts. In 2010, ACE received the grant, and a second year of funding was awarded in 2011.

When the project began, there were eight graduation coaches serving more than 1,500 at-risk students. Working with several national and local dropout experts, a professional development series was designed and implemented. Topics included strategies for engaging at-risk youth, effective interventions, trauma-informed educational practices, culturally responsive education, and data collection and interpretation. Graduation coaches also received National Dropout Prevention Center/Network resources, and a library of books and materials (Brown and McVee, 2017).

Ultimately, this program was formalized into a one-credit, graduate-level course for professionals who serve high-risk youth within an educational setting. The course was offered for the first time in spring 2012—after grant funding ended.

To help students graduate, the project collaborated with school district IT staff to develop an electronic data collection tool with data fields specific to the work of graduation coaches, such as attendance, GPA, student behavior and course failures. Because the tool automatically populates these fields, the time needed for data entry is minimized so coaches can maximize time spent with students.

The district's focus on supporting at-risk students saw the on-time graduation rate climb from 64 percent in 2007 to 73 percent in 2012.

While clearly not the result of the ACE project alone, there is little doubt it contributed to this improvement.

Despite such successes, graduation coach positions were slated to be cut in 2011 and in 2012 due to budget shortfalls. But the positions were reinstated each year after media coverage and advocacy efforts. In 2013, with hundreds of PSRP positions eliminated and even more drastic budget cuts on the horizon, the graduation coach program could not be saved (Brown and McVee, 2017).

Legacies of the program remain, however, including a manual for education professionals to help students graduate from high school. "Across the Stage: A Practical, Step-By-Step Guide for Coaching Students to Graduate," is a full-color, 42-page handout developed by the graduation coaches, the project co-directors, and local and national consultants. The guide has been widely distributed by the AFT (Brown and McVee, undated).

Just as important, the electronic data collection program continues to be used, and the graduate-level accredited course is still available. In 2012, the district adopted "Destination 2020," a multiyear strategic plan with a goal of 90 percent on-time graduation, 90 percent attendance and 90 percent academic proficiency by the year 2020.

Perhaps the greatest testament to the program, though, is the 2015-16 graduation rate for all students, which increased to 79.69 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, undated).

6. Austin, Texas: Community Schools¹²

Community schools serve more than 5 million students in approximately 5,000 schools across the country. Proponents of community schools, including the AFT, point to the ability of these schools to improve children's outcomes. Community schools serve as a vehicle to mitigate the effects of poverty and racism. They coordinate purposeful and results-focused partnerships, leveraging a variety of stakeholders and resources, to provide students and families with wraparound services, access to engaging instruction, and an array of opportunities and pathways to success in life.

The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS) is made up of national groups, including the AFT, representing more than 7 million students, community members, parents and teachers committed to public education. The group is grounded in collaboration—between the parents of children who attend struggling schools and the educators who work in them (American Federation of Teachers, 2016). AROS champions the community school model.

Among the punitive aspects of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) were limited options for underperforming schools: school closure, conversion to a charter school, and the firing of a school's full staff and administration. Such approaches often led to a massive disinvestment from schools that needed the most support, in neighborhoods least equipped to survive their loss. NCLB precipi-

¹² This case study is extracted from "Cultivating Community Schools: Austin's Grassroots Effort." by J. Dubin. *American Educator*, Fall 2015, pages 12-17. www.aft.org/sites/default/files/ae_fall2015dubin.pdf



achievement by bringing social services to the school. So they wrote a proposal calling for the creation of a family resource center where a coordinator would connect parents with housing, immigration, counseling and other resources, so that teachers could focus on teaching, and students could focus on learning.

The school board accepted the group's proposal and declared that Webb would remain open.

One year later, the superintendent invoked low-test scores as a reason to close another school, Reagan High School. But parents contacted the group that had saved Webb and, together, they crafted a plan to implement wraparound services.

tated the closing of 1,000 public schools, displacing thousands of mostly low-income students. AROS formed in response to these closures with the intent of reclaiming the promise of public education.¹³

This case study looks at the Innovation Fund's support of grass-roots organizing to promote community schools as an alternative to closure in Austin, Texas.

Since 2010, Education Austin, an AFT affiliate, has received \$607,000 to work in partnership with Austin Interfaith, and in the longer term with the Austin Independent School District (AISD), to convert "failing" schools on the brink of closure to "in-district charters" through strengthening community-school ties and engagement.

In January 2007, Walter P. Webb Middle School faced closure. Webb is located in a low-income area far removed from the affluence of downtown Austin. The superintendent at the time held a meeting at the school to inform community members that their school would close, because he anticipated that students would not do well on the end-of-year, state-mandated tests. Students would be sent to two other struggling middle schools. The hundreds of people who attended the meeting were outraged.

"It was a terrible meeting," recalls Allen Weeks, a community activist. "We were told that the kids had failed, the teachers had failed, the community had failed—everybody had failed except the school district" (Dubin, 2015).

After that night, Weeks helped organize a group to save the school. Members of the group agreed that Webb needed to support student

From 2010 to 2015, Webb went from the lowest-performing middle school in Austin, based on its test scores, to one of its best. The school's enrollment has grown 55 percent, and fewer students are leaving the school midyear. Reagan's enrollment has more than doubled, and its graduation rate has improved from 48 percent to 85 percent.

In 2014, based on the success of Webb and Reagan, Education Austin, the locally merged affiliate of the AFT and the National Education Association, applied for and received a \$180,000 Innovation Fund grant over two years to implement the community school model in 13 high-poverty schools. The grant was the local union's second Innovation Fund award. It received its first grant in 2010, to turn then-struggling Travis Heights Elementary School into an in-district charter school, answerable to the district and its personnel policies.

For decades, Texas generally has prohibited collective bargaining for state and local employees. Yet Ken Zarifis, president of Education Austin, points to his union's strong relationship with the district as the reason why these school improvement initiatives have worked. "In Austin, we have taken great efforts to keep a line of open, honest communication with school district leaders to build a trusting, productive relationship to ultimately benefit our entire school community, but especially our kids," he says. "We have an administration that wholeheartedly supports our work with community schools and is a partner in their development and success" (Dubin, 2015).

7. Peoria, Ill. : Promising Pathways (Career and Technical Education)

In the next 10 years, between one-quarter and slightly more than one-third of expected job openings will require at least a four-year degree. At the opposite end of the spectrum, between 36 percent

¹³ For a fuller discussion on AROS, its formation and its platform, visit www.reclaimourschools.org/take-action/pledge.



At the beginning of 2016, Caterpillar announced it was moving. The local government was prepared; in anticipation of the need to diversify, it had been nurturing the growth of the healthcare industry for some time.

It was against this backdrop that in 2014 Peoria joined the Pathways to Prosperity Network, as one of five participating cities from Illinois.¹⁵ The network, which includes eight states, grew out of a 2011 study by the Harvard Graduate School of Education investigating how to prepare young Americans for the 21st century. One of the recommendations was to encourage more students to seek technical certifications at community colleges.



and 59 percent of job openings will require only a high school credential. The remainder of expected openings will require some level of postsecondary education, such as a community college degree, a diploma, a certificate or another form of training (Stone III, 2014).

This part of the labor market is often referred to as “middle-skill occupations,” and many provide robust career possibilities (e.g., apprenticeships, advanced manufacturing jobs, and technicians of various kinds). For the many young people who do not envision a traditional college experience, middle-skill occupations represent viable career pathways (Stone III, 2014).

Currently, 14 million students are enrolled in career and technical education programs across 1,300 public high schools and 1,700 two-year colleges. Although the CTE programs should be putting these students on track for middle-skill occupations, a gap has emerged, with employers continuing to spend more than \$400 billion a year on employee training. This disconnect suggests a need for closer collaboration between school-based CTE programs, the community colleges their students attend, and businesses looking to employ these graduates.¹⁴

This case study explores how an Innovation Fund grant to Peoria, Ill., jump-started a program to create career pathways from local schools to the healthcare sector and other regional industries.

Like many Midwestern cities, Peoria has long relied on a single heavy-industry employer. The global headquarters of Caterpillar, the world’s leading manufacturer of construction and mining equipment, has been in Peoria for more than 90 years (Vicary, undated).

In Peoria, the network includes Peoria District 150 Public Schools, the City of Peoria, CEO Council, Illinois Central College, Peoria Area Chamber of Commerce, Illinois Student Assistance Commission, Peoria Federation of Teachers (PFT), and Focus Forward Central Illinois. The group worked for a year to develop a plan to better prepare middle and high school students

for work-based learning opportunities.

A successful application to the Innovation Fund secured the funds needed to launch the effort. The PFT paid for a full-time coordinator through the Greater Peoria Economic Development Council. Brent Baker, who was selected for the position, was responsible for:

- Establishing and expanding internship opportunities for high school students with local employers;
- Developing stronger “career pathways” in school, including making students more aware of internship opportunities; and
- Working with the local community college to enable high school students to graduate with college credits.

Since the grant, the network has achieved the full rollout of Career Cruising, an online platform for students to access internship opportunities, and the requisite supports from school counselors and career coaches to help students apply, interview and successfully secure a job. The network has increased its partnerships with employers from 11 to more than 100, with plans for 50 interns by summer 2017. And thanks to the development of “Pathways to Your Future,” a curriculum guide, arranged thematically by career interests, school counselors can outline for students a sequence of courses linked to real career opportunities in Peoria.

When Baker was asked what he regarded as the major impact of the work thus far, he said that it was less about the impact on individual teachers or students and more about looking at career pathways for students in a completely different way. This is “systemic change we are making,” he said.

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion about these issues, see Committee on the Supply Chain for Middle-Skill Jobs: Education, Training and Certification Pathways. 2017. “Building America’s Skilled Technical Workforce.” National Academies Press.

¹⁵ This case study is largely based on an interview and follow-up email exchanges with Brent Baker, Peoria Pathways coordinator, Greater Peoria Economic Development Council.

Lessons Learned

In the introduction, it was posited that the Innovation Fund is the AFT's own "big bet" on our long-standing contention that collaboration and partnership, driven by teachers and supported by the union, offer the best prospects for achieving substantive, sustained and scalable change that is good for all stakeholders, but particularly for students.

This initial impact study, primarily based on internal documents and interviews with grantees, suggests that it is a bet that is paying off. Although a more formal in-depth evaluation is likely to be conducted in the future, what the seven case studies are helpful in revealing is a model process that the Innovation Fund has developed and refined after its nine years in operation. It is a process the AFT is uniquely situated to undertake as the diagram on page 18 makes clear.

Here are some key lessons that have been extracted from the seven case studies reported on here, from which the model is derived:

• Identification of Priority Issues

Choosing short-term thematic priorities has enabled the Innovation Fund to be nimbly responsive to pressing challenges facing public education. As frontline workers, members of the AFT are able to spot problems quickly because they are directly impacted. This is especially so in relation to federal or state policy directives and programs.

• Searching for Innovative Responses

Initially through an open call for proposals, but currently using an invitation-only process due to the overwhelming number of applications, the Innovation Fund accesses a wide net of informed and qualified applicants: the 1.7 million members and nearly 3,400 affiliates that make up the AFT. Moreover, there are professional development events that are organized by the AFT, such as the biennial TEACH (Together Educating America's Children) conference, in which forward-looking education initiatives are explored. TEACH attracts more than 1,500 participants, including AFT members, state and district administrators, school board members and representatives of the higher education, business and social services communities nationwide. The TEACH conference addresses current research and policy initiatives, features overviews of innovative work in education that educators need to know about, offers exciting demonstrations of the latest educational technology, and highlights thought-provoking keynote speakers. It is in spaces like these that the Innovation Fund is able to identify great ideas and thoughtful people to work with on new projects.

• Facilitating Collaboration

An explicit requirement of Innovation Fund grants is that the funds are used on a project that is led by teachers, in collaboration or partnership with other stakeholders. This is in keeping with the AFT's commitment to solution-driven unionism and informed by a growing body of evidence which shows that building trust among stakeholders—particularly teachers, administrators and district



officials—is a crucial component of thriving schools. This requirement forces affiliates to seek out partnerships. By providing funding, particularly at a time with budget cutbacks, the Innovation Fund encourages stakeholders to be more open to working with the AFT affiliate, particularly if there is not a strong history of that approach in a particular district or state. It is also evident from the case studies discussed that the real strength of the work lies in these relationships and, when successful, promotes their sustainability.

• A Targeted Cohort of Grantees

The Innovation Fund typically selects a small number of grantees to work on a thematic area of interest in a variety of different ways. So for instance, the Rhode Island case study highlighted the way in which they looked at using a multiple-indicator approach to teacher evaluation. Other recipients of Innovation Fund grants worked under the thematic area of Improving Teacher Practitioner Quality at a time when federal and state policy was closely focused on ramping up formal teacher evaluation, including (a) exploring teams of math teachers working collaboratively for group performance pay; (b) linking teacher evaluation to evidence of student learning that extended far beyond scores on standardized testing; and (c) more closely aligning teacher evaluation with the instructional demands of the Common Core standards. This approach ensures a deeper, multifaceted approach to both understanding the challenges faced and ways to deal with the challenges. It also increases the chances of finding successful ways to overcome problems and for each of the sites' successes and setbacks to inform the other sites—live and in real time.

• Taking Strategic Risks

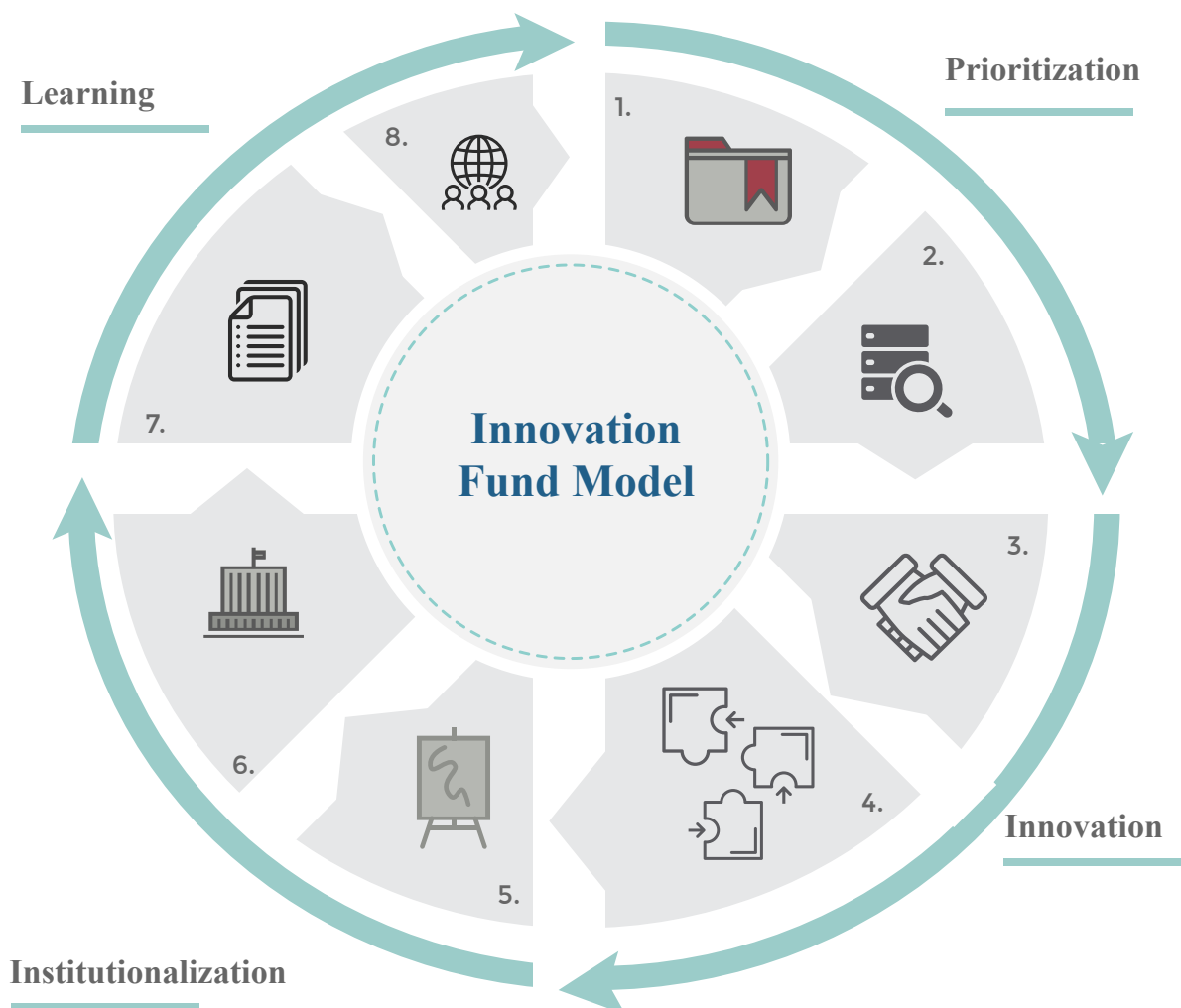
The Innovation Fund, by providing relatively small funding, is able to take strategic risks around the work that it supports. None of the individual grants is large, and each lasts for a single year (multiyear projects are renewed annually, when appropriate). This has meant that when the work has been successful, the payback has been immense; and when not, the losses have been contained. Seed funding has enabled the Innovation Fund to test ideas and explore a variety of approaches. Once they have been shown to have merit or to work—a proof-of-concept approach, so to speak—amplification and acceleration can be achieved through, for example, wider buy-in from other more skeptical stakeholders, institutionalization into school programs, policy change and new positions being established at the district level, and leveraging major investments from other sources.

• Sharing Findings

The Innovation Fund has also been able to take advantage of the

considerable information outreach and professional network that the AFT utilizes in communicating with our members. The work of the Innovation Fund is regularly featured in the *American Educator*, the AFT's highly respected quarterly magazine that covers issues related to preK-12 education. It has a circulation of around 1 million. Since the Innovation Fund's inception, many of the grantees have made presentations and run workshops at the TEACH conference, directly connecting and sharing their work with thousands of their peers from across the country. Grantees also give presentations at other national and regional conferences; write op-eds in education publications and local newspapers; and have their work covered in district, union and local news media. In addition, the AFT has developed specific platforms, like Share My Lesson, which has enabled literally hundreds of thousands to access work supported by the Innovation Fund around the development of model lessons related to the Common Core and other content. Finally, the AFT executive vice-president oversees the Innovation Fund. This high-level oversight ensures that important outcomes and relevant findings can be integrated into high-level policy discussions and advocacy.

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• Applying Lessons Learned

As would be expected from a funder that is tolerant of a degree of risk in order to encourage innovation and creativity, not all projects have been successful. In these instances, the Innovation Fund has been able to intervene and assist due to a number of safeguards. Advice, technical help, support in the development of proposals and in the implementation of projects are provided by Fund staff. All grantees have a monthly update call with the Innovation Fund team, as well as quarterly reports. Relationships with the grantees are nurtured through site visits and other points of contact throughout the AFT network. There are several examples of well-timed interventions to limit the scope of projects that are too ambitious; to redirect focus and energy on more promising opportunities that have emerged halfway through a project; or to close a project early because unanticipated factors intervened. None of these experiences is lost or dismissed as a “failure” because all of them are carefully reviewed, internalized and externalized to ensure that insights gained lead to better ways of doing things moving forward.

Next Steps

Numerous lessons have been learned during the first seven years of the Innovation Fund. Not only in terms of successful projects and outcomes, but also in terms of developing and refining a process that has proved to be highly successful in building successful partnerships, under the leadership of educators, to address many of the most pressing challenges facing public education in the U.S. These challenges are likely to be intensified under the current administration in Washington.

The companion report to this, titled “Investing in Frontline-Driven Change for Powerful and Purposeful Public Education,” outlines how the AFT intends to continue to use our members’ resources to build on the foundations established thus far by the Innovation Fund. The report outlines what the AFT has identified as priorities moving forward. However, it should be regarded as the start to a continuing conversation with key stakeholders interested in partnering with the AFT on this exciting journey of change and improvement.



1. Identifying Priority Issues:

Short-term thematic priorities allow the fund to respond to pressing challenges as they arise. Educators are ideally placed to define and address problems directly affecting them and their students.



3. Facilitating Collaboration:

All projects funded by the Innovation Fund are collaborative efforts under the leadership of AFT members. When partnerships work well, success and sustainability are more likely.



5. Building Support:

Renewable funding enables grantees to develop proof of concept and build financial and other support once progress has been made. This facilitates innovation and experimentation and allows buy-in from other stakeholders over time.



7. Sharing: The AFT has a far-reaching network within and beyond the public education sector. The work of the Innovation Fund is regularly covered in the publications of the AFT and partner organizations, and in the general and trade press, and is shared on social media, and presented at national and regional conferences.

Identify

Innovate

Institutionalize

Learn



2. Searching for Innovative Responses:

The AFT has 1.7 million members and 3,400 affiliates. These frontline workers provide a huge reservoir of expert knowledge and on-the-ground experience and are an invaluable source for creative school improvement ideas. In addition, the AFT has a wide range of national and regional professional development venues where members come together to learn, engage and share effective practices.



4. Implementation:

The fund takes strategic risks by investing in new ideas, pilot programs and explorations. By choosing a cohort of grantees to work on the same topic with different methods, we can spread and share the best ideas. Close monitoring means lessons are quickly learned and course corrections made when things don't work out as hoped.



6. Institutionalization:

An important validation of the Innovation Fund model is the extent to which programs have been institutionalized at the local and state levels through policy change, the establishment of new positions, or investments leveraged from other sources.



8. Learning: Learning is built into the Innovation Fund through an expectation that grantees will document their work for sharing with members and more broadly. This can take various forms, including manuals, brochures, lessons and instructional resources as well as more conventional reports. Projects that have not worked as planned are deconstructed with Innovation Fund staff for insights that can aid future efforts.

Appendix:

Chronological Order of Grants (2009–16)

2009

New York State United Teachers

2009-12 | \$520,750

To work with several local joint labor-management teams to establish a multidistrict approach to more rigorous and meaningful teacher evaluation, with a particular focus on developing multiple indicators of teaching success—including peer assistance and reviews.

Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals

2009-12 | \$529,000

To support joint labor-management teams from across the state to design a performance-based teacher evaluation and support system that will be aligned with the Rhode Island Professional Teaching Standards and the Rhode Island Educator Evaluation System Standards and include multiple measures of teacher effectiveness and student learning.

Illinois Federation of Teachers

2009-11 | \$293,147

To explore the potential and possibilities of establishing a unionized charter school based around a new contract-negotiating model for teachers that will support a teaching and learning environment based on collaboration and community partnerships.

San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel

2009-12 | \$370,000

To offer parents and students more high-quality education choices by increasing the number of in-district charter schools using models such as community schools or two-way bilingual schools through active outreach and engagement with school staff, parents and community groups wanting to improving student learning and student enrollment.

Philadelphia Federation of Teachers

2009-12 | \$290,488

To work in collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania to expand a successful community schools program, from a single school to a K-12 network of schools in a feeder pattern in West Philadelphia.

Saint Paul (Minn.) Federation of Teachers

2009-11 | \$270,000

To explore the establishment of multiple pathways for “career teachers,” focusing on a grow-your-own approach to teacher recruitment, particularly from under-represented groups and for hard-to-find subject areas (such as mathematics, science and special needs).

ABC Federation of Teachers (California)

2009-12 | \$460,632

To improve student achievement at schools by building on the union’s successful partnership with the district, moving decision-making for 10 high-needs schools from the central office to the

school level to meet each school’s particular needs.

2010

Toledo (Ohio) Federation of Teachers

2010-13 | \$393,393

To incentivize teacher collaboration by creating a group-based compensation program for teams of math teachers in grades 4-8 in four high-needs schools in the district.

Volusia (Fla.) Teachers Organization

2010-13 | \$227,182

To develop a model for using evidence of student learning, in particular looking at student learning objectives, in a teacher development and evaluation system.

Boston Teachers Union

2010-13 | \$431,574

To increase students’ engagement in lessons by creating prototypes of high-quality instructional units aligned with Common Core standards to be distributed online.

Minneapolis Federation of Teachers

2010-13 | \$475,000

To become a single-purpose authorizer of charter schools under Minnesota law with support from teachers desiring to create high-performing, teacher-led schools.

Anchorage (Alaska) Council of Education

2010-12 | \$275,788

To help at-risk students earn diplomas by training “graduation coaches” in high schools.

Hillsborough (Fla.) Classroom Teachers Association

2010-13 | \$389,020

To support the local union’s efforts to help members understand and navigate the changes to their evaluation, pay and career opportunities through the use of online and social networking technology.

United Federation of Teachers (New York City)

2010-13 | \$458,256

To fund “Successful Beginnings for Early Literacy Development,” including adapting the PBS show “Between the Lions” for home-based child care workers to use to build early literacy skills and to develop a cadre of literacy coaches to provide support, access to materials and developmentally appropriate assessment strategies.

Education Austin (Texas)

2010-13 | \$427,979

To partner with a faith-based organization to convert several schools to “in-district charters” through strengthening community-school ties and engagement.

2011

Chicago Teachers Union

2011-14 | \$528,398

To design instructional units and performance assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards, focusing on K-3 mathematics elementary interdisciplinary content; adolescent and young adult math, career and technical education; and English language arts.

AFT St. Louis

2011-14 | \$395,003

To develop a high-quality, districtwide professional development program for early childhood and pre-K teachers and paraprofessionals that builds on the union's previous successful advocacy for an increase in pre-K seats in the public school system.

AFT-West Virginia

2011-13 | \$158,860

To work with partner organizations to convert an elementary school and a middle school in Charleston, W.Va., into community schools that offer a range of supports and opportunities for children and their families—including health and social services.

Denver Federation for Paraprofessionals and Nutrition Service Employees

2011-14 | \$346,215

To combat obesity among schoolchildren through the development of a model food service employees' incentive pay program that reinforces the district's nutrition and wellness efforts.

Albuquerque (N.M.) Teachers Federation

2011-13 | \$290,852

To launch, in partnership with WETA/Colorín Colorado, a new teacher-led, multimedia professional development initiative with both local and national impact that is aimed at helping K-12 teachers implement the Common Core State Standards with English language learners.

2012

United Teachers Los Angeles

2012-14 | \$196,351

To assist low-performing schools to develop the internal capacity to evolve toward charter-like autonomy through the establishment of a "professional practice organizing center" that over time might become a certification center for charter schools in the district.

Meriden (Conn.) Federation of Teachers

2012-15 | \$438,487

To work in partnership with the school district to expand and enrich learning time for students and teaching time for educators at a high-needs elementary school in the areas of reading, science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and healthy living.

Providence (R.I.) Teachers Union

2012-2014 | \$283,847

To partner with the school district to turn around three high-needs schools through the establishment of an education management organization approach to expand learning time for students and collaboration time for educators.

Jefferson County (Ala.) AFT

2012-14 | \$314,960

To partner with the school district and the University of Alabama-Birmingham to align English language arts curricula with the Common Core standards using a cadre of educators in middle and high school.

Quincy (Ill.) Federation of Teachers

2012-15 | \$206,803

To create a top-to-bottom communications campaign for the larger community of parents, businesses, and local institutions about the district's new curricula aligned to the Common Core standards and how they can best support students during the transition and going forward.

Cleveland Federation of Teachers

2012-16 | \$510,710

To work collaboratively with Common Core State Standards experts to develop high-quality curricular units that are aligned to the standards and uploaded onto Share My Lesson.

2013

Cincinnati Federation of Teachers

2013-16 | \$424,975

To explore how to align teacher evaluations with the instructional demands of the Common Core, so that teachers are receiving consistent and practical feedback on their classroom practices, and to create a professional development system to implement the standards in schools.

Poughkeepsie (N.Y.) Public School Teachers' Association

2013-14 | \$150,000

To provide lessons and strategies on the Common Core State Standards to teachers who work with students who are learning English, by teaming up teachers with a national expert to write and videotape model lessons to be featured on Colorín Colorado.

MEA-MFT

(Montana Education Association and Montana Federation of Teachers)

2013-15 | \$259,414

To create the Montana Digital Professional Learning Network (MDPLN), a statewide online learning platform for educators. MDPLN was designed to give educators, no matter where they were in the state, access to professional learning opportunities at a time when new curricula and learning standards for students were being adopted. In 2015, the statewide Office of Public Instruction assumed ownership of the platform and rebranded it the Teacher Learning Hub. It currently enjoys thousands of users statewide.

Baltimore Teachers Union

2013-14 | \$150,000

To work closely with the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future to develop a program to bring project-based learning to two public schools. The project has a STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) focus.

2014

New York State United Teachers

2014-15 | \$30,000

To engage educators on developing key recommendations to address the flawed implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards in New York state.

AFT Connecticut

2014-15 | \$26,464

To provide resources for a working group of educators to research and make concrete recommendations for how teachers can apply the standards to students in grades K-4 who are receiving special education services and/or learning English.

New Haven (Conn.) Federation of Teachers

2014-16 | \$299,400

To explore the impact and effectiveness of a “restorative justice” approach to school discipline by training teachers and administrators in restorative practices, and supporting teachers to apply these practices in their classrooms.

Education Austin (Texas)

2014-16 | \$180,000

To expand on the organizing model used in the prior grant to create an in-district charter school, but this time to build successful community schools in the full-feeder pattern.

United Faculty of Western Washington

2014-16 | \$225,718

To develop a pre-service mentoring program that aligns with a standards-based assessment system, EdTPA, involving pre-service teachers, mentors, cooperating teachers and college faculty.

Boston Teachers Union

2014-16 | \$230,683

To increase students’ engagement in lessons by creating further prototypes of high-quality instructional units (particularly in middle and high school mathematics) that are aligned to the Common Core State Standards and which can be distributed online.

Minneapolis Federation of Teachers

2014-16 | \$295,000

To authorize charter schools under Minnesota law with support from teachers desiring to create high-performing schools with a strong emphasis on teacher leadership.

2015

United Educators of San Francisco (Restorative Justice)

2015 | \$75,000

To support classified staff and other educators to become trained-trainers for restorative practices to be implemented districtwide.

Peoria (Ill.) Federation of Teachers

2015-current | \$158,483

To closely align career pathways for high school students with local

job opportunities by creating a searchable online platform (Career Cruising) to connect industry partners with students for internships and other opportunities.

Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers

2015-current | \$296,000

To more closely align career pathways for high school students with local job opportunities by establishing an emergency response technology academy and a media arts academy where students earn college-level credit while preparing for their careers.

United Teachers of Dade/United Faculty of Miami Dade College

2015-current | \$231,383

To help underserved high school students enrolled in CTE programs to earn industry certifications in digital media, and gain college entry through a digital media partnership with public schools and Miami Dade College.

United Educators of San Francisco

2015-17 | \$102,825

To complement the district’s Computer Science for All initiative by developing training and support for middle school teachers and developing a recruitment campaign to encourage more computer science teachers.

2016

Rome (N.Y.) Teachers Association

2016-current | \$135,000

To convert Bellamy Elementary School into a model community school for the district with an integrated, project-based STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) curriculum.

Texas AFT

2016-current | \$135,000

To expand and promote access to community schools in Texas by hiring a full-time statewide community schools coordinator to create and manage community school partnerships in various cities throughout the state.

Jefferson Elementary Federation of Teachers/

Jefferson Federation of Teachers

2016-current | \$135,000

To create a corridor of three community schools in the two districts by hiring a full-time community schools organizer to work with teachers, administrators, parents, and community organizations and leaders to create a blueprint vision for community schools.

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