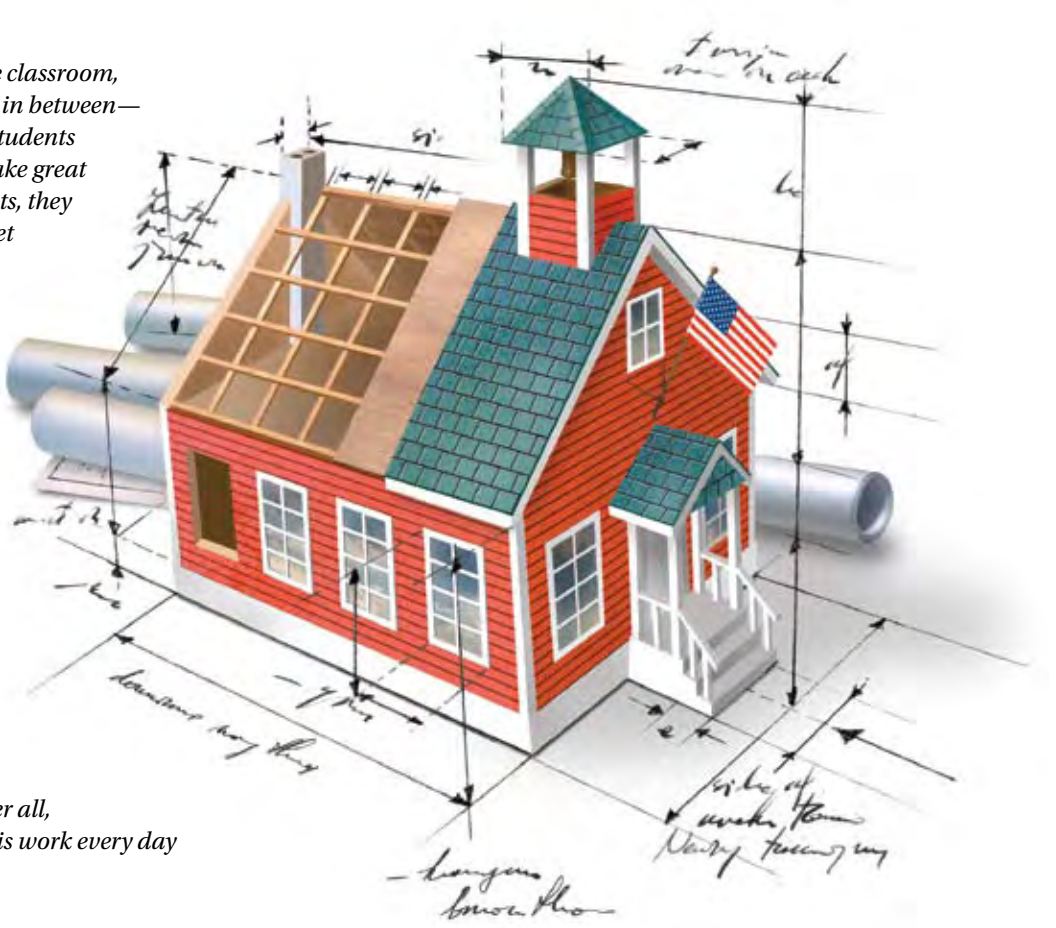
A New Path Forward

Four Approaches to Quality Teaching and Better Schools

Professional educators—whether in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: seeing all students succeed in school and life. While they take great pride in their students' accomplishments, they also lose sleep over their students' unmet needs. Professional educators routinely go above and beyond the call of duty: they meet with students before and after school, reach out to students' families in the evenings and on the weekends, and strive to increase their knowledge and skills. And yet, their efforts are rarely recognized by the society they serve.

The AFT is committed to supporting these unsung heroes. In this new column, we explore the work of professional educators—not just their accomplishments, but also their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY NENAD JAKESEVIC

By Randi Weingarten

On the West side of Philadelphia, in a plain building surrounded by graffiti-covered walls and boarded-up houses, a team of inner-city kids is hard at work building the ultimate car of the future. Among them are kids who might have fallen through the cracks someplace else. But at the auto academy at West Philadelphia High School, they're building hybrid cars that—according to *Popular Mechanics*—are among the top 10 entries in a $10 million contest to design the next generation of green cars. They're the only high school team in a competition that includes the likes of Tesla Motors, Cornell University, and even MIT—until West Philadelphia beat out MIT to move to the next round.

These students are developing vehicles powered by biodiesel and electric motors, and the cars go from 0 to 60 in less than four seconds. Thanks to great teachers, the West Philly kids are learning about engineering, design, and business fundamentals—concrete knowledge and skills for today's economic realities. They're developing habits of mind and learning to apply academic content to solve real-life problems and develop important skills. They're gaining confidence that will help them reach their full potential in life; they're learning values that will inspire them to make

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meaningful contributions to their communities. This is the kind of education that all our public school students deserve.

But in too many places, our public education system—which educates over 90 percent of our children—still operates on an Industrial Age model. And in too many schools, the federal education law No Child Left Behind has made it worse, creating the pedagogical equivalent of a factory by reducing the learning experience to a conveyor belt of rote prep sessions and multiple-choice tests.

In a global knowledge economy, filling in the bubbles on a standardized test isn't going to prepare our children to succeed in life. This is the time to shed the old conflicts and come together. I am suggesting a new path forward—toward a 21st-century education system, a serious and comprehensive reform plan to transform our schools, ensure great teaching, and prepare our children for productive, successful, and meaningful lives.

First, I am calling for a new template for teacher development and evaluation—a constructive, meaningful, and ongoing system that incorporates standards and best practices for the teaching profession, and yes, student outcomes. Second, I'm proposing we develop a new approach to due process. Third, I'm insisting that we finally give teachers what they need to help students succeed—the tools, time, and trust to do their jobs well. Fourth, I'm asking that we change the labor-management relationship, because collaboration is the foundation we need to make each of these other ideas work.

Constructive Evaluation

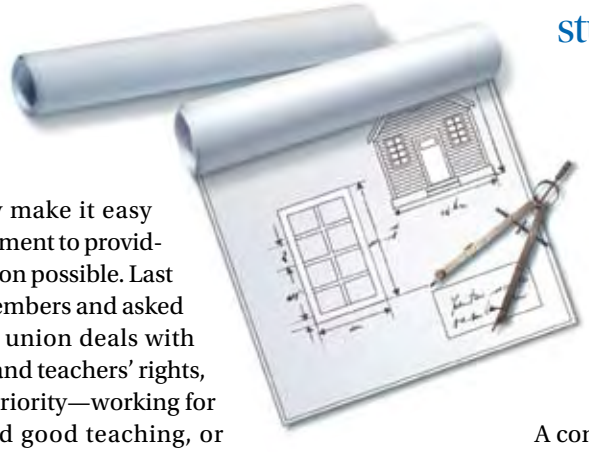
As president of a labor union, it is my job to represent my members. They make it easy because of their extraordinary commitment to providing their students with the best education possible. Last summer, the AFT polled its teacher members and asked the following question: "When your union deals with issues affecting both teaching quality and teachers' rights, which of these should be the higher priority—working for professional teaching standards and good teaching, or defending the job rights of teachers who face disciplinary action?" By a ratio of 4 to 1 (69 percent to 16 percent), AFT members chose working for professional standards and good teaching as the higher priority.

No teacher—myself included—wants ineffective teachers in the classroom. Schools are communities where we build on each other's work. When a teacher is floundering, there are not only repercussions for the students, but also for the teachers down the hall. When it comes to those teachers who shouldn't be in the classroom, it is other teachers who are the first to speak up. They want a fair, transparent, and expedient process to identify and deal with ineffective teachers. But they know we won't have that if we don't have an evaluation system that is comprehensive and robust, that really tells us who is or is not an effective teacher.

Neither an evaluation system nor a due process system works in isolation. That's why I'm proposing an evaluation system that would inform tenure, employment, and promotion decisions, and due process proceedings. America's haphazard approach to evaluating teachers has never been adequate. For too long and too often, teacher evaluation—in both design and implementation—has failed to achieve what must be our goal: continuously improving and informing teaching so as to better educate all students.

Right now, this is how teachers are commonly evaluated: An administrator sits in the back of the classroom for a few minutes, a few times in the first few years of teaching. The teacher then receives a "rating" at the end of the school year. That's like a football team watching game tape once the season is over. Let's think about that game tape for a minute. Coaches and players view it throughout the season to deconstruct and understand what's working and what isn't so that necessary changes can be made. The goal is constant improvement and, of course, winning. We need to put the same time and effort into developing and evaluating teachers. And we need to ensure that teachers are participants in every stage of the process.

A constructive, robust teacher evaluation system would include rigorous reviews by trained expert and peer evaluators and principals, based on professional teaching standards, best practices, and student achievement.



Some have suggested we simply evaluate teachers based on their students' test scores. But if that is all we do, how does that improve student learning? The real value of student achievement and growth data is to show us what is working and should be replicated, as well as what isn't working and needs to be revised or abandoned.

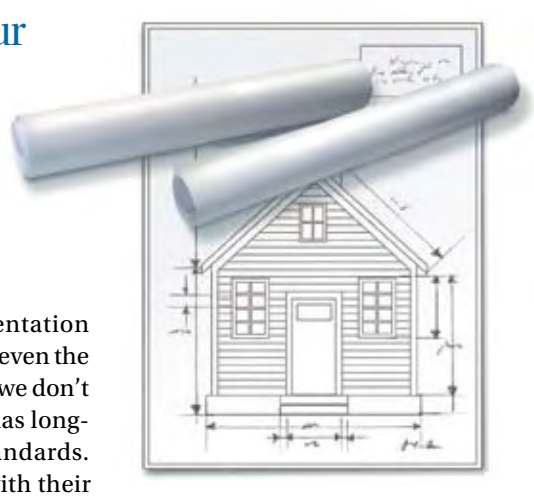
A constructive and robust teacher evaluation system would include rigorous reviews by trained expert and peer evaluators and principals, based on professional teaching standards, best practices, and student achievement. The goal is to lift whole schools and systems: to help promising teachers improve, to enable good teachers to become great, and to identify those teachers who shouldn't be in the classroom at all.

This new evaluation framework has been developed by union leaders from around the country, with input from some of America's top teacher evaluation experts—researchers like Charlotte Danielson, Susan Moore Johnson, and Thomas Kane. Our evaluation proposal includes the following four key components:

- Professional standards: Every state should adopt basic professional teaching standards that districts can augment to meet specific community needs. Standards should spell out what teachers should know and be able to do. How else can we determine whether a teacher is performing as he or she should?
- Standards for assessing teacher practice: Because teaching requires multiple skills and involves several kinds of work,

multiple means of evaluation should be used to assess how well teachers meet the professional standards. Classroom observations, self-evaluations, portfolio reviews, appraisal of lesson plans, and all the other tools we use to measure student learning—written work, performances, classroom tests, presentations, and projects—should also be considered in these evaluations. Students' scores on valid and reliable state and national assessments should also be considered—not by comparing the scores of last year's students with the scores of this year's students, but by assessing whether a teacher's students show real growth while in his or her classroom.

If our goal is to truly transform our public education system, we must make sure that teachers have what they need to do a good job: tools, time, and trust.



- Implementation benchmarks: Implementation benchmarks must be established because even the best ideas do little more than gather dust if we don't put them into action. Take California. It has long-standing but little-used professional standards. Principals and superintendents, along with their union colleagues, need to take responsibility—and be held responsible—for making this new evaluation system work.
- Systems of support: Because evaluation should help teachers improve throughout their careers, not just at the beginning, every district should have ways to support and nurture teacher growth. This includes solid induction, mentoring, ongoing professional development, and career opportunities that keep great teachers in the classroom.

A Fresh Approach to Due Process

An evaluation system built on the components I've just laid out will help improve teaching and learning. It will also lay the groundwork for a new approach to due process. Teachers have zero tolerance for people who, through their conduct, demonstrate they are unfit for our profession. And in those rare cases of serious misconduct, we agree that the teacher should be removed from the classroom immediately. But just as there is a need for due process when dealing with ineffective teaching, there is a need for due process in cases of alleged teacher misconduct. False allegations do happen, and they destroy much more than a teacher's livelihood. A false allegation can destroy a teacher's life.

We recognize, however, that too often due process can become a glacial process. We intend to change that. Kenneth R. Feinberg is spearheading the AFT's effort to develop a fair, efficient protocol for adjudicating questions of teacher discipline and, when called for, teacher removal. Mr. Feinberg is trusted as a voice of fairness and reason on some of the most consequential issues in our national life. He served as special master of the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund, and currently serves as the special master for TARP Executive Compensation.

As we flesh out our evaluation and due process systems, we are prepared to work with any district willing to work with us to take both steps: to design and implement a real teacher development and evaluation system, and to create a due process system that's aligned to it. But only if they're prepared to do both.

Tools, Time, and Trust

Creating a fair and constructive evaluation system and designing a fresh approach to due process have the potential to initiate important improvements in public education. However, if our goal is to truly transform our public education system, we can't stop there. At the very least, we must make sure that teachers have what they need to do a good job: tools, time, and trust.

Let's begin with tools: what teachers need to do their jobs. Every day, teachers do what they can with what they have to make a difference in their students' lives. But neither they nor their students will thrive in an environment that is not conducive to teaching and learning. So let's offer teachers and students an environment that sets everyone up for success: small classes, safe schools, solid curriculum, healthy and adequate facilities (including the most current technology), and opportunities for parental involvement. And let's hold schools and school systems accountable for providing our teachers and students the conditions they need to succeed.

Tools also mean getting standards right, once and for all. That's why we support common standards that are deeper, clearer, and fewer, and are geared toward preparing our students for college, work, and life.

Another crucial factor in fostering student growth and teacher success is time. Let's face it: Teachers have plenty on their plates just trying to get through the day. They spend hours outside of the school day grading papers, creating lesson plans, communicating with parents, and participating in school activities. Increasingly, more and more is piled onto teachers, so they often feel like they're running faster and faster just to hold their ground.

For teachers, who already work before and after school, time to share and grow and work together is as critical as any other education ingredient. Imagine a system in which teachers have time to come together to resolve student issues, share lesson plans, analyze student work, discuss successes and failures, and learn through high-quality professional development. Imagine a system in which students can't fall through the cracks because they're backed by a team of teachers, not just the one at the front of the room.

In addition to tools and time, we must also foster a climate of

trust. Teachers must be treated as partners in reform, with a real voice. Trust isn't something that you can write into a contract or lobby into law. Trust is the natural outgrowth of collaboration and communication, and it's the common denominator among schools, districts, and cities that have achieved success. A teacher in West Virginia, Melissa Armann, said it well: "I have put my heart and soul into the education of these children daily for over 20 years. I know what works. Just respect me enough to ask."

The Labor-Management Relationship

Finally, let's rethink labor and management. We have a mutual responsibility to ensure student and school success. What we need is a mutual commitment. Our relationship should be a constant conversation that begins before and continues long after we meet at the bargaining table.

Collective bargaining isn't only a vehicle to protect employee rights and ensure workplace fairness. It's a vehicle for both sides to improve teacher quality, ensure school improvement, and establish rigorous academic standards.

So much of what is bargained is an attempt to codify behavior that, in a trusting relationship, would never need to be codified. If we adhere to this vestige of the factory model, there will be no sustainable, positive change in public education. Collective bargaining should be a tool to implement this relationship, rather than what defines the relationship. Labor and management must understand our shared responsibility to our communities. Great schools, skilled teachers, and well-prepared students can only be achieved in partnership.

Collective bargaining isn't only a vehicle to protect employee rights and ensure workplace fairness. It's a vehicle for both sides to improve teacher quality, ensure school improvement, and establish rigorous academic standards. All over the country, I've seen teachers and administrators who share the same goals for kids agree to modify, waive, or create new contract provisions and district regulations that enable them to work more effectively. We've seen it in New Haven, Connecticut. It wasn't easy, at first, to establish trust. Even Mayor John DeStefano admitted that he was ready for conflict at the beginning. But as the process went on, he engaged with the union in a collaborative way. The result is a contract that achieves real reform—and makes teachers real partners in that effort. The agreement includes reforms like rigorous evaluations, more flexible hiring authority, and performance pay on a school-by-school basis, with a cost-of-living raise.

And in Detroit, where the school system faced serious budget challenges, they could have declared bankruptcy and declared war. Instead, the union and the district worked together to establish a covenant that outlined the goals for their new contract—a contract that now includes comprehensive evaluation systems and school-based performance bonuses, a contract that recognizes that the school system, the city, and its children either sink or swim together.

These successes would not have happened without fundamental changes in the relationship between labor and management. These relationships need to be nurtured and expanded—and new relationships need to be built—if we want to see more successes.

If we can work together on these four proposals, we can create a path to a stronger public education system that is defined by excellence, fairness, shared responsibility, and mutual trust; a system rooted in the realities of the 21st century, focused squarely on serving the needs of our children, and preparing them to reach their full potential as workers, citizens, and individuals.

True progress takes place in those important hours when students and teachers come together and the spark of learning can catch fire.

More than 3 million public school teachers work every day in classrooms around the country, helping young minds embrace new facts, new skills, new ways of thinking. They get up early, go to bed late, and bring patience, dedication, and energy to one of the most important jobs in the world.

Helping those kids at West Philadelphia High School build not just vehicles, but minds that will change their lives and the world; ensuring that students in Detroit can rise and bring their city with them—that's who teachers are. We need to listen to them. □

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