

To Innovate, Look to Those Who Educate

Randi Weingarten

President, American Federation of Teachers

In the debate over school improvement, individuals and groups advancing agendas with little or no evidence to back them up have somehow claimed the mantle of education “reformers,” while teachers, their unions and others with actual education expertise often are portrayed as obstacles to reform—despite their desire to be involved in an improvement process that frequently shuts them out.

In this upside-down approach to school “reform,” teachers are required to implement top-down policies made without their input, often in an austerity environment, with little more than an exhortation to “just do it,” and then are blamed when the policies fail. Not surprisingly, these “strategies”—such as mayoral control, school reconstitution, misuse and overuse of standardized tests, vouchers, merit pay, or simply stripping teachers of voice and professionalism—haven’t moved the needle.

The American Federation of Teachers has promoted a better way. Shortly after I became president, we established the AFT Innovation Fund, a union-led effort to provide grants and assistance to AFT affiliates who envision and pursue educational innovation. The Innovation Fund, now in its third year, supports both promising ideas and proven programs that can be scaled up.

Most important, when teachers and other school employees work collaboratively with administrators and others on school improvement, students do better. That’s why the AFT Innovation Fund encourages this shared responsibility and promotes built-in teacher voice and buy-in—essential components of successful education reforms. It is one more way our members and leaders advocate for reforms to be implemented with us, not done to us.

The Innovation Fund, which is supported by the members of the AFT and by several generous foundation grants, distributes close to \$3 million each year to incubate teacher- and union-designed projects. This unique effort in venture philanthropy currently supports the projects of some 20 state and local AFT affiliates, which already are producing impressive results.

Two of our first grants—to the AFT state affiliates in New York and Rhode Island—

have been used to do pioneering work on teacher development and evaluation. These grantees’ leadership in this area helped the AFT win an early Investing in Education (i3) grant from the U.S. Department of Education to develop evaluation systems that support continuous school and teacher improvement.

Innovation Fund grantees also are upending conventional wisdom in the charter sector. The fund has supported the development of a model union-charter contract for a Chicago charter high school as well as efforts to open “in district” charters in Austin and San Antonio, Texas. And it has nurtured the creation of the Minnesota Guild of Public Charter Schools—the first union-affiliated charter school authorizer in the nation, which seeks to put teachers’ voice and ideas back into the charter movement just as former AFT president Albert Shanker envisioned.

Several recent investments seek to ensure

Union-led effort to incubate education reform yields promising results.

teachers have a voice and a role in the roll-out of the Common Core State Standards, so that these standards don’t sit on a shelf, as happened in the last push for common standards in the 1990s. The Chicago Teachers Union is working with classroom teachers to create model lessons aligned to the standards. The district was so impressed

that it asked the CTU to demonstrate its lesson-development process and advise on how best to prepare teachers to teach to these new, higher standards.

The Innovation Fund also has made grants to improve early childhood education. In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers has adapted the PBS show “Between the Lions” for very young children and developed a program to teach home-based child care workers best practices in early literacy development. Similarly, AFT-St. Louis has received a grant to create that district’s first-ever professional development program for early childhood teachers. Already, more young children are being enrolled in St. Louis because parents are responding to the message that public early childhood programs are of high quality.

In every location, the Innovation Fund and its grantees partner with districts, parents and community groups. Such collaboration is a core value for the AFT, and it is essential to ensure that ideas fostered by the Innovation Fund can be sustained.

Rather than work with teachers and their unions, many self-described reformers accuse them of being resistant to reform and concerned only about adults, not students. The serious, hard work of AFT members and unions to improve teaching and learning proves those accusations false. And unlike many so-called reformers who think that disruption and conflict equal reform, we are about seeding innovations, helping them take root and nurturing their growth, so that all kids can succeed.



Weingarten visiting with students at Charlotte Woods Elementary School, Providence, R.I.

Constance Brown

FOLLOW AFT PRESIDENT RANDI WEINGARTEN: twitter.com/rweingarten