



*A Union of Professionals*

## **Selecting an Improvement Program**

### **Overview**

Redesigning a failing school, although an extremely difficult task, need not be an impossible one -- especially if schools and teachers aren't forced to start from scratch. As detailed earlier in this section, the first step is to identify the school's particular strengths, weaknesses, and most pressing needs through internal and external audits. The second is to look for solutions among the replicable, research-based programs that have a record of success in similar situations. And the third is to develop a fair and effective process that allows staff to choose among the various programs.

To help ensure that research-based programs--and their achievement results--are replicated successfully, those who negotiate the selection process with the district should stress two important points:

**(1) To get the best results, all of the key elements of the program must be fully and faithfully implemented.**

According to a study of programs designed to improve the performance of disadvantaged students, "a large part of the 'effectiveness' of a particular program is determined by the willingness of the members of the schools, district and community to undertake the particular reforms."<sup>1</sup> One key reason is that it is difficult to replicate the success of an adopted program without a full and faithful implementation, i.e., replicating all factors that made the original site successful. When staff are given the time and opportunity to consider and "buy into" a reform model, they are more likely to learn the new teaching techniques, write the new lesson plans, and follow the new curricula the program may require. Thus, research finds that replications are more faithful and achievement results are more consistent.

The AFT believes that the best way to ensure that staff members support--and sustain--faithful replications is to give them a central role in the selection process, including taking a formal vote on which program to adopt. For example, Success for All, a widely and successfully replicated improvement model for elementary schools, requires that at least 80 percent of each school's faculty vote in favor of implementation. Successful replications of improvement programs are also aided by contract provisions that facilitate "transfer with dignity" for the minority of staff members who aren't willing to support their colleagues' decision.

**(2) School staff must be provided with all of the professional development, materials, and support that will help make the program work.**

One advantage of adopting a proven program is that many offer extensive implementation assistance, such as professional development, teacher's guides, curricular materials, aligned assessments, technical assistance, and support networks. This is not always the case, however. As a part of the adoption decision, staff should be encouraged to weigh each program's relative cost, ease of implementation, and availability of services. Where implementation assistance is inadequate or nonexistent, schools and districts must be willing to work with the union, universities, and outside contractors to help fill the gaps.

Planning and professional development should begin as soon as possible after the research-based school improvement model has been chosen. Adequate time must be provided for all instructional staff, including classroom paraprofessionals, to receive the necessary orientation and training.

## **Voting for Change**

In order to ensure that the improvement process is both fair and effective, the AFT recommends that school staff choose which program will be adopted, based on the following guidelines:

### **--Staff should make an informed choice.**

School staff should be satisfied that they have been provided with enough information to make the right choice--no matter what process is used to select an improvement program.

Administrators and the union should ensure that faculty members are furnished with accurate information about research results, costs, and any additional professional development, curricular materials, or other assistance that might be necessary for the faithful implementation of the various research-based program options. This should include: written descriptions and analyses of all of the programs; presentations from, and question-and-answer periods with, program representatives; and site visits to schools that are implementing the top program options under consideration. Presenters should be asked to address the specific needs of the school, to use data and examples to illustrate how the program can help raise student achievement, and to give an idea of what a faithful implementation would involve (e.g., what changes in teaching practice are required, how changes to the curriculum are supported, etc.).

Where possible, the union and the district should also provide a facilitator who is knowledgeable about the program options and can help usher staff through the selection process. In New York City, for example, union members trained by the UFT Teacher Centers are available to help guide faculty discussions about school improvement choices. Although few union locals have access to this kind of resource center, other sources for facilitators may be found in the school district or at nearby colleges or universities.

### **--Staff should vote by secret ballot.**

Faculty members should feel unconstrained by outside pressures, and be able to choose the best program option, based on their professional judgment as to what is best for the students in their school (i.e., which program shows the greatest promise of improving the school's academic performance).

### **--Programs should be adopted by a "super-majority" of the votes cast.**

Requiring a super-majority vote helps to ensure that the staff have made the necessary commitment to successfully implement the program. Indeed, some program models, such as Success for All, already require a super-majority vote by faculty.

### **--Faculty who want to "opt-out" of the program should be offered transfer opportunities.**

Individual teachers who do not want to remain at the school as it undergoes the improvement process must be given the opportunity to work elsewhere, with no onus attached to the transfer. Several AFT locals have negotiated contract language to cover similar situations.

**The following is one possible program selection process that meets all of the AFT guidelines:**

1. School staff select an "Improvement Committee," composed of staff representatives and school managers (and might also include expert advisors provided by the union and the district), which conducts a schoolwide self-study to identify the needs of the school. (See "The School Audit Process" for guidance on school self-studies.)
2. The committee uses the self-study results to identify a number of research-based, effective programs for school improvement, which address the needs of the school. To do this, the committee compares the features of the various programs, including relative cost, extent, and availability of the staff development necessary for successful implementation, and the programs' "fit" with state and district mandates.
3. The committee introduces staff to the program options, using an informational process which inspires confidence that all of the issues related to the adoption of a particular model have been thoroughly explored. This may include inviting representatives of the various reform programs to make presentations to the entire staff, and/or site visits by teams of staff members to schools where the program models are being implemented. The staff may also request that the Improvement Committee make a specific recommendation concerning which program it thinks would best serve the needs of the school.
4. Once the options, including the strengths and weaknesses of particular choices, are made clear, staff make their selection through a secret-ballot vote.

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**Footnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Stringfield, et al., 1996.