

What Matters Most

by **Randi Weingarten**

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Building on What Works

If what you know about education comes from pundits, politicians and, these days, even movie directors, you might think that America's public schools are utterly and hopelessly broken. As a teacher, the former president of the New York City teachers union and, now, a national union president, I have spent thousands of hours in schools across the country and around the globe. I've seen, firsthand, schools and students in desperate need of help, especially during this deep economic crisis. But I also have seen countless success stories—often despite steep odds—that rarely make headlines, yet show great things are happening in many public schools and can—and must—take place in many more.

No one—certainly no one whose life's work is in education—is satisfied with the current state of the American system of public education. The promise of the American dream and equal opportunity for every child, no matter his or her background, cannot be realized without great public schools. And the prospects for renewing the strength and security of our nation are not bright without a well-educated populace.

So what have we learned—from those successful, unsung schools across America, and from the nations that consistently outperform us? How can we ensure that every child, in every public school, has access to the kind of education that prepares him or her for life, college and career in today's global knowledge economy?

In my years of looking at best practices across the United States and in high-achieving countries, it has become very clear what the foundations are for building a system of public education that provides all children with the great education they need and deserve.

Collaboration matters. The AFT regularly brings together teams—composed of administrators, teachers, union leaders and elected officials—to work together on pressing education issues and to learn from effective districts. While the focus in these successful districts varies, the characteristic they have in common is that their work is rooted in collaboration.

Great teachers can be developed. Most teachers don't hit their stride

until long after day one. The AFT has worked with experts and educators to create a framework for teacher development and evaluation that is being implemented in more than 50 school districts. Its purpose is to enable new and struggling teachers to improve, to help good teachers become great, and to identify those who should not be in the profession. Nearly half of all teachers leave teaching in their first five years, a churning that costs American school systems \$7 billion annually. Turnover has a steep educational price tag as well. The countries that consistently outperform the United States understand this, and invest in training and retaining teachers.

Teachers need tools and support. Educators can't do their jobs well without opportunities for meaningful professional development, an effective curriculum and adequate working conditions.

We must demand 360-degree accountability and responsibility. Everyone with responsibility for our children's education and well-being, including teachers, administrators, elected officials, parents and students, should be held accountable.



Randi Weingarten with a student from Lexington Elementary School, St. Louis.

Teachers can't do this alone. Public schools have an obligation to help all children learn, regardless of parental engagement, native language or family income. But teachers can't do it all, especially in this time of economic crisis. That's why it's essential that schools provide a safe and secure environment, and "wraparound services" to ensure kids have access to after-school programs, health services and tutoring.

We must keep the public in public schools. Strong schools help create vibrant communities, and engaged communities in turn help our schools thrive. Parents, faith communities, business leaders and others are crucial to a successful public school system. All must be partners in ensuring that every child gets a great education.

No one who works in education will be satisfied until all students are prepared for the challenges and opportunities of our ever-changing knowledge economy. Getting there, particularly during one of the toughest economic downturns of our times, will require that we all do more—and do it together.