



Pushing Forward Together

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I HAVE SEEN LABOR-MANAGEMENT relations at their best and at their worst. In fact, I've been party to both. In my early days as president of the United Federation of Teachers in New York City, I worked closely with the then-chancellor of the city's public schools to launch one of the most successful reform initiatives in the country, the Chancellor's District. This group of several dozen struggling schools implemented many research-based strategies to raise achievement: class size reductions, a longer school day for tutoring and small-group remediation, a common curriculum aligned with high standards, common teacher planning time, and a school site labor-management collaborative governance structure. Students in these schools made rapid gains, far outpacing citywide gains in reading and math.

They continued to excel until a new chancellor took the reins of New York City schools and dismantled the Chancellor's District. His unilateral approach and an agenda that lacked evidence of effectiveness disintegrated the trust and common purpose that had fostered progress in city schools. Sadly, the relationship between the chancellor and the teachers' union often was described using terms of warfare—enemies, battles, casualties, and the like. I was drawn into the conflict and was forced to become every bit the combatant the chancellor was.

Those pitched battles might have made great headlines, but they drew time and attention away from moving the New York City school system toward the goal of helping all children.

This shift from the union and the district as allies to antagonists permeated nearly all matters affecting public education in New York. Progress in city schools stalled and even reversed.

Research, not just my own experience, makes it clear that students and educators benefit greatly from effective partnerships between teachers' unions and school districts, and they pay a heavy price when

those relationships are poor. Yet collaboration is more the exception than the norm.

Unfortunately, without partners on both sides of the labor-management equation willing to put students at the forefront of their concerns, significant progress will be impeded, if not impossible.

Frankly, collaborating is harder than confrontation. Many people are more comfortable with the us-versus-them posture. Consultation takes time. Considering the point of view on the other side of the negotiating table can require moving out of one's comfort zone. And while some see compromise as capitulation, what it does is



Randi Weingarten addresses business and labor leaders at the Association for a Better New York in New York City.

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enable the seeding of trust and good will, not the ceding of authority and responsibility. It's not easy, but it is effective.

Collaboration fosters the conditions for transformative change. It creates trust and buy-in. It allows for innovation and risk-taking. It focuses key parties on common goals. It harnesses the expertise and perspective of crucial players. It's a key characteristic in virtually every successful school and school district I have observed. It's what has moved reform forward in Lowell, Massachusetts; New Haven, Connecticut; Union City, New Jersey; and elsewhere.

Creating a positive labor-management climate has become an AFT priority. The AFT has sponsored numerous conferences that either require or encourage parties to attend in labor-management teams. The AFT Innovation Fund provides resources and

expert assistance to several school improvement efforts with collaboration at their core. We are fighting for the Common Core State Standards to be implemented with, and not imposed on, teachers, and for the needs of teachers and students to be first and foremost in the transition, not for the standards to be an obeisance to testing and data.

The AFT recently awarded our Prize for Solution-Driven Unionism to unions that, while breaking ground in very different ways, are working with their management partners.

We're never going to eliminate conflict or differing points of view in education or any

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other important enterprise. And I don't expect every superintendent and teachers' union president to declare, "We will not let each other fail," as they have in one district leading the way in labor-management collaboration. But even the most adversarial labor-management counterparts can agree on at least one thing: that district-union discord feeds into the criticism that public education is dysfunctional. If we can't repair our working relationships, how will we ever earn the necessary credibility, and the confidence of our communities, for them to invest in and maintain high-quality, equitable public schools?

The work to reclaim the promise of public education starts with creating collaborative, safe, and welcoming environments for teaching and learning. In this issue, we are delighted to highlight the examples of schools and districts that demonstrate that when adults engage, together, in the hard work of solving problems, rather than winning arguments, our children and our communities benefit.