

WHERE WE STAND:
REDESIGNING SCHOOLS
TO RAISE ACHIEVEMENT





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AFT CONVENTION RESOLUTION

Redesigning Low-Performing Schools

Adopted July 1998

It is as much the duty of the union to preserve public education as it is to negotiate a good contract.

—ALBERT SHANKER

I. Why We Are Concerned

America's public school system has always been one of its most important institutions—charged with preparing all students for responsible citizenship and productive adult lives. To fulfill this mission and defend universal public education, the AFT has dedicated itself to raising the standards of academic achievement and student conduct in all schools. We believe that our students and teachers are as capable as any in the world. Given the standards-based reforms we advocate—including clear grade-by-grade standards for student achievement; professional development, curricula and assessments aligned to the standards; and promotion policies and other incentives that reward students for working hard and meeting the standards—our schools can match or surpass the accomplishments of the highest-achieving nations. We also recognize, however, that some schools and some students will need more attention than others. Urgent action must be taken to improve the nation's lowest-performing schools, and we believe that it is the union's responsibility to participate in the development of workable solutions—including, where necessary, starting all over again.

All children need and deserve good schools—especially those children who are most vulnerable and who, without a good education,

are doomed to a continuous and vicious cycle of poverty and failure. While this is not an easy undertaking, the price of continued inaction is intolerable—for the students, many of whom emerge from high school unprepared for further education or a skilled trade; for parents, who want the best for their children; for the school staff, many of whom struggle heroically to compensate for the larger failures of the school system; and for the nation, which must bear the burden of lower economic productivity, increased social service funding, higher crime rates, and a less informed citizenry.

In recent years, the very existence of low-performing schools has served to bring the entire system of public education into question. News stories feature schools where few students graduate, and too many of those who do are barely literate—schools with chronically low test scores and conditions that are so dirty and dangerous that staff and students alike are afraid to walk the halls. In this context, school vouchers and other privatization schemes have begun to gain favor, despite the fact that the abandonment of common public schools would leave the nation more divided, and unequal, than ever. The politically expedient, but educationally bankrupt, policy of “school reconstitution”—stigmatizing and replacing staff, regardless of competence or quality, and without any specific plans to improve teaching or learning—is being implemented or advocated by some courts and some federal, state, and district officials. The new faculty in “reconstituted” schools, however, are likely to have the same inadequate resources, poor professional development, and lack of access to research-tested programs that their predecessors had, while having even less classroom experience to fall back upon.

We cannot afford any more political quick-fixes that will inflict additional injury on students, as well as staff. We need educationally sound solutions to the problems of failing schools, and we need them now.

II. What Should Be Done

As the union representing teachers, classroom paraprofessionals, and other school-related personnel in many of the areas plagued by chronic school failure, it is incumbent upon us to advocate and, where possible, negotiate, for improvement—always insisting that the actions taken are educationally sound and effective. We must take an active role, from the outset, to ensure that teachers and other school staff are treated professionally, are involved in decision making, and are part of

the solution. While social and economic inequities can be obstacles to the delivery of equal educational opportunity, there are schools around the country where “at-risk” students meet high academic standards. We can and must learn from these schools. The challenge before us is to take the research on programs and pedagogical approaches that have been proven to work, and use it to ensure that children and schools succeed.

As educators, we are eager to embrace this challenge and willing to shoulder a full share of the work that meeting it will require. We have also, however, lived through too many educational fads and ill conceived improvement ideas to accept all reform proposals on faith. We cannot support yet another round of quick-fix gimmicks or ask our members and students to suffer the consequences of painful remedies that have little chance of improving matters. Instead, we seek to help shape and implement effective intervention policies that:

Are grounded in high academic standards

The first essential step in improving low-performing schools—and the U.S. education system as a whole—is to establish clear standards for what students are expected to know and be able to do. This would ensure that all students are held to the same high standards and exposed to the same rich curriculum, regardless of social class or neighborhood, and help put an end to the unequal, uninspiring course of study that many disadvantaged students get locked into from an early age. Without clear standards, substandard work is almost impossible to define, making it that much harder for teachers to spot problems early, demand that students get the extra help they might need, and hold students accountable. Pending the implementation of serious standards-based reform at the district, state, and national level, schools should select improvement programs in which clear and challenging student achievement standards are embedded.

Enforce high standards of behavior

Without clear standards of conduct, a small number of unruly students can disrupt an entire school and impede the learning of all students. The consequences for misbehavior must be fairly and consistently enforced. Students who cannot or will not abide by these guidelines should be placed in an appropriate alternative setting until they demonstrate that they can meet the expected standards of behavior.

Use criteria for the identification of low-performing schools that are clear and understood by all stakeholders

Just as academic standards help students understand—and meet—academic expectations, schools with clear performance standards have a better chance of catching and correcting problems before intervention becomes necessary. The use of widely accepted criteria for low school performance—valid and reliable assessments that show widespread student failure, high levels of violence and disruption, poor management, etc.—will reduce the risk that any school will be misidentified for unfair or arbitrary reasons, and will also give staff, students, and parents a framework by which to gauge the school’s progress.

Address the particular needs of the individual school

To ensure that intervention and assistance plans are targeted effectively—and that states’ and districts’ limited resources are used efficiently—school systems must not only identify which schools are failing, but also why. Thus, the initial identification of low-performing schools isn’t enough; it must be followed by comprehensive internal (staff-driven) and external (state- or district-driven) evaluations which can help pinpoint the reasons for failure. Internal factors, such as poor management, staff turnover, unfocused curriculum, or the lack of an effective discipline policy may be critical. Obstacles and challenges, such as high student mobility rates, an influx of non-English-speaking students, inadequate funding, limited access to high-quality professional development, neighborhood crime, or lack of social services in the community, also must be taken into account. Such findings do not change the imperative for corrective action, but their recognition and analysis help form the basis for the development of solutions.

Are backed by solid research

While each low-performing school will have a somewhat different set of needs and priorities, no school—especially one that is already foundering—should be expected to find success by reinventing the wheel. Instead, once the school’s most pressing problems have been identified, the improvement process should focus on enabling teachers to choose those programs and instructional practices that have a solid base of research to demonstrate their effectiveness. Facilitation is crucial to this process.

Involve staff and provide them with the professional development, time, and resources they will need to be effective

Research and common sense tell us that a committed and supportive staff is vital to the success of any school improvement plan. Therefore, to the greatest possible extent, school staff should be given an active role in diagnosing the school's weaknesses and selecting the plans for improvement. It has also been demonstrated that the successful replication of any research-based reform program is largely dependent on the faithfulness of the implementation. Thus, adequate time and resources must be committed to providing all instructional staff (i.e., teachers and classroom paraprofessionals) with the professional development, tools, and materials they need to get the best results.

III. Implementing Change

Just as each school's specific problems will vary, so will their level of severity and intractability. Therefore, we recommend that each state or district intervention policy include a continuum of intervention options.

Many low-performing schools, once offered the proper resources, support, and technical assistance, will leap to make the necessary changes. After an outside audit and a facilitated self-analysis, the principal, faculty, and support staff should have the opportunity to develop and implement their own improvement plan, based on the principles described above.

In other cases, the staff may have been subjected to so many years of poor management, inadequate resources, and futile improvement fads that the school culture—including the relationships between and among staff and students—is so dysfunctional that guided self-improvement is unworkable. For these schools, the internal and external evaluations may indicate a more aggressive intervention strategy. In such cases—or where, after a predetermined time period, it is found that guided self-improvement is not working—the district should discuss specific, additional interventions with the union(s) representing the school's staff. For example, the district might require that the administrative team be replaced and that the staff, in collaboration with the new administrators, vote to select a new academic school-improvement program from a menu of research-based options, pre-selected by a joint union(s)-district panel.

Since staff support is crucial for the effective implementation of a successful academic plan, any faculty member who prefers not to work

with the adopted model should be allowed to transfer with dignity, and a team of master teachers with training and experience in the selected model should be recruited into the school. Identification and placement of these “lead” teachers could be made by agreement between the union and the district, with negotiated incentives for such service. Since low-performing schools often suffer from extremely high rates of faculty turnover, it is unlikely that any staff would need to be displaced by this kind of intervention strategy. However, if a limited number of faculty members had to be moved for the academic model to be properly implemented, the dignified treatment of staff should be guaranteed through enhanced or existing contract language (or, in non-bargaining states, policies negotiated between the union(s) and the district) governing involuntary transfers.

If, despite such improvement and intervention efforts, student performance fails to improve within a reasonable time frame and more drastic measures are required (i.e., closing the school), then the union(s) should insist on an educationally sound approach, such as opening a new school with a proven educational program. In no case will “reconstitution”—simply replacing the adults in the building—be accepted as a remedy. If a new school is opened to replace the closed school—whether or not it is located in the same physical plant—it should be designed around a research-based academic improvement plan shaped by stakeholders, including the union(s) and a new administrative team. Staff should receive enough information to make an informed decision about whether they wish to apply. Parents and students should also receive information about the school’s new vision of teaching and learning, allowing them to decide if they want to opt out and transfer to another public school.

For instructional positions, staffing procedures should follow the same or enhanced contract language or district regulations that govern any other school closing or the staffing of any new school or new school model (such as a magnet school). Instructional staff affected by the closing should have the right to apply, based on their certification, training, and/or experience with the new model, seniority rights and other negotiated criteria, and should be given priority consideration by agreement between the district and the union(s). Those not selected by the new school must have transfer rights to other schools, without stigma attached, and be assured of job security. Since school redesign should focus on implementing a proven instructional model,

except where justified by exceptional circumstances, school-related (non-instructional) personnel should not automatically be displaced. Instead, the new administrative team should deal with any performance problems individually, using existing evaluation and personnel policies.

Under all circumstances, the union will continue to fight for the high academic standards, rigorous curricula, quality teaching, student accountability, and appropriate supports that we believe are needed to ensure that every child succeeds.

Questions & Answers

Why does the union support the redesign, even the closing of low-performing schools?

The AFT believes that low-performing schools can and must be turned around. Their very existence diminishes public confidence in all of our schools, has negative consequences for teachers and other school staff, and above all, denies some children the type of excellent public school education others receive, and all deserve. The AFT's concern on this issue springs directly from its long-standing commitment to improving the quality of the nation's entire educational system, particularly by raising both academic and content standards. The AFT believes that urgent action must be taken to improve the nation's lowest performing schools—and that it is the union's responsibility to participate in the development of educationally sound and effective solutions. AFT supports sound improvement efforts, including those that result in “redesign,” a cooperative labor-management process through which a failing school that has not responded to other interventions might be closed and reopened as a new school with a proven educational program—through a process that assures respectful and fair treatment of school staff. “Redesign” should not be confused with “reconstitution,” which replaces and stigmatizes school staff—regardless of competence—without providing a systematic plan to improve teaching or learning.

What are some indicators that a school is low-performing?

These indicators are meant to aid in the initial identification of a school that is in need of assistance. But before any formal identification is made and before an assistance strategy is recommended, a more comprehensive investigation procedure should take place. This should include site visits by evaluation teams—whose composition must include faculty representation as well as a facilitated self-analysis by school staff.

- 1. Lack of academic standards:** Without clear standards detailing what every student is expected to know and be able to do, it is impossible for schools to determine whether student achievement is “good enough.”
- 2. Low student performance:** Schools in which a large proportion of students test near or at the bottom of the scale on valid and reliable tests of student achievement are in clear need of help.
- 3. Lack of improvement over time:** Low-performing schools don’t show a pattern of improvement in multi-year comparisons.
- 4. High levels of disruption and violence:** Failing schools often exhibit a general atmosphere of chaos and confusion: disorderly classrooms, lax discipline, and frequent fights.
- 5. High rates of student absenteeism:** Students who are unsafe or unmotivated are more likely to skip school, less likely to learn, and more likely to score poorly on tests of achievement.
- 6. High rates of staff absenteeism:** High rates of staff absenteeism may indicate a host of underlying problems—such as a lack of discipline and safety—that can lead to a low morale among staff.
- 7. High dropout rates:** High dropout rates are a sign of student disengagement and are often related to low student achievement.
- 8. High rates of staff turnover:** Low-performing schools are characterized by high rates of staff turnover and an unusually high complement of new or inexperienced teachers.
- 9. A negative school atmosphere:** Failing schools are often characterized by a school climate that indicates mismanagement, indifference, and neglect. Buildings are disorderly; there is little opportunity for staff participation in decision making; resources are mismanaged; and parents are not involved in the school.

What are the features of an effective school redesign process?

Turning around struggling schools will require the commitment and support of all those involved with the school—teachers, administrators, parents. It is also imperative that the intervention process is shaped by

policies that address the following critical areas:

- Are grounded in high academic standards;
- Enforce high standards of behavior;
- Use criteria for the identification of low-performing schools that are clear and understood by all stakeholders;
- Address the particular needs of the individual school;
- Are backed by solid research; and

Involve staff and provide them with the professional development, time, and resources they will need to be effective.

Why should low-performing schools select effective research-based programs?

Implementing effective schoolwide change is a massive undertaking because it touches upon all areas of a school's culture and practice. To achieve whole school reform and improvement, educators must tackle a comprehensive set of initiatives including appropriate professional development, high-quality curricula, and a number of organizational changes.

Some school faculties have taken on such reforms themselves, and a small few have succeeded. But no school—especially one that is struggling—should be expected to find success by reinventing the wheel.

Over the past decade, several promising educational programs have emerged. Programs like High Schools that Work, Success for All, Core Knowledge, Direct Instruction, Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline, and the Comer School Development Program are based on years of research on successful practices. When properly implemented, these programs have proven to raise achievement levels of at-risk students in low-performing schools. Simply put: These programs provide schools with practices and materials that work.

And, these programs do not leave schools to begin these reforms alone. Instead, they provide step-by-step technical assistance and support that schools need to maintain improvement.

With proven programs and practices combined with ongoing support, struggling schools are now able to sustain improvements, outlast fads, achieve at high levels, and succeed.

What should we do to ensure that identified schools effectively implement good programs?

The initial identification of low-performing schools should be made using criteria that are fair and widely accepted. School systems must not only identify which schools are in trouble, but also why. It is important to investigate to determine the origins of the school's problems—which, in turn, can help to suggest the most appropriate and effective solutions. Since it is largely up to school staff to make the great efforts necessary to turn the school around, they should have a major voice in selecting the research-based solutions to be implemented.

By guaranteeing that staff play a formal role in program selection, the school also benefits from their expertise as educators and provides them with a greater stake in making the program work.

Background Information

(This article, by Mike Rose, was printed in the December 1997/January 1998 edition of the AFT's newspaper for preK-12 members, American Teacher.)

For generations of Americans, public education has been the path to economic and personal success. It has been the source of and the force behind an educated citizenry that has made the United States the envy of nations around the world. However, public education has too often fallen short of its goal to adequately serve all of our children, particularly those most in need—the poor, the educationally disadvantaged, and the recently arrived immigrant. This failure to educate all students well has eroded support for public education and provided ammunition for those who would dismantle public education in this country. We should be doing whatever we can to help fix what is not working well in our schools and to help right what is wrong so that every American student can have the same advantage, the same opportunity, to succeed on his or her own. Making every school better is the only way we can do our part to silence the arguments of those who seek to decimate public education. The AFT and many of its affiliates are taking a leading role in developing and promoting policies and practices that show promise for raising student achievement, as the article that follows illustrates.

Turnaround Schools

What can—and must—be done to help struggling schools

Ten years ago, Manhattan's P.S. 1 was a school that was drifting. Student achievement was stuck at the lower end of the district's average, educators felt isolated, and administrative turnover was high. Things began to turn around, however, after staff undertook a comprehensive self-assessment, with the help of the district and the union, that opened

lines of communication and expanded school decision making. It also brought into focus a true school mission, centered on literacy and supported by staff, administrators and parents.

Today, there is a true sense of team work at the school. Reading scores have risen steadily, and the school is involved in an ambitious pilot project to bring internationally benchmarked academic standards to U.S. schools. Changing the school climate was “a very difficult job and it took years,” remembers Roberta Grabler, a literacy and resource teacher at P.S. 1. “The key was to keep the dialogue moving to solutions and remedies, rather than accusations and blame, and to always try to have an educational focus.”

Thousands of miles away, Morris Park elementary in Minneapolis had struggled for years with abysmal student achievement and chronic breakdowns in discipline. There was a deeply embedded climate of fear, blame and mistrust in the school community. Three-quarters of children were reading at or below the first-grade level with no coherent instruction program. In fact, the problems were so grave that closure seemed likely. Instead, the district and union cooperated on a total redesign of the school. The first order of business was to bring in a research-based reading program after which the union and district developed a plan for bringing into the school administrators and staff who supported the program and believed they could make it work. Those educators at Morris Park who chose not to work under the new design, or who were not chosen in the restaffing process, were given the opportunity and support needed to transfer with dignity to other schools.

Today, Morris Park is a school on the upswing: Reading scores are climbing, discipline referrals are down, and there is a new feeling of hope, says first-grade teacher Darlene Hultquist. “Discipline is under control and morale is high,” says the eight-year veteran at the school. “I personally enjoy coming to work every day.”

Two different schools, two different cities, two different intervention strategies based on two different situations. The differences between Morris Park and P.S. 1 are certainly there. But there are similarities between the two that are even more noteworthy.

Both worked to fashion an improvement program that allowed proven instructional models, fair treatment and buy-in at the building level to become the driving forces. They supported the process with additional resources, professional development and outside expert-

ise. In both cases, changes were made to rebuild the school community and restore a shared mission—without sacrificing the dignity and rights of existing staff at the school.

And in both cases, educators, administrators, the districts union, and the community found common ground in the belief that all schools, regardless of circumstances, must find a way to become the type of place that any parent would want to send his or her child.

It's a message that AFT president Sandra Feldman has carried early and often into the community in her first year in office. "I don't think any parents should have to send their children to failing, troubled schools," she said just moments after being elected AFT president. "I have fully supported the complete restructuring and redesign of such schools, and I have seen them improve."

Tough love

When schools don't work, the union has a responsibility to help them improve or, as a last option, negotiate their closing and redesign, she would later tell an audience at the union's 1997 QuEST conference. Such schools not only hurt students and staff at low-performing schools but also "cast a long shadow" over public education as a whole—corroding public confidence in the system, providing grist for media exposés that deflect attention away from successful schools and fueling efforts to dismantle public education through vouchers and other means. "Put very simply and most starkly, I propose that we do not defend or seek to perpetuate failing schools to which we would not send our own children," said Feldman.

That position reflects the spirit of a resolution on redesigning low-performing schools adopted this year by the AFT executive council. It was anything but easy to formulate, remembers AFT vice president Tom Mooney, chair of an AFT task force that drafted the resolution and provided assistance and advice to union leaders grappling with the problem of low-performing schools. Many task force members knew first-hand of places where the problem of low-performing schools had been spun into mindless "solutions." Some policies were focused on simply reshuffling staff, standing back and waiting for the "magic" to happen—with no attention paid to the resources and programs needed to actually improve teaching and learning. In that type of climate, shouldn't the union simply dig in its heels and never give an inch when debate turned to redesigning low-performing schools?

Task force members “understood that there were good and horrible solutions afield,” Mooney says. “The crux of the debate became: What is our responsibility as union leaders and educators? To lead or simply to react when something terrible appears?”

The first option was the only one that made sense for a professional union like the AFT, argued many task force members. Several recalled the late Albert Shanker’s comment, “It is as much the duty of the union to preserve public education as it is to negotiate a good contract.”

The task force also examined many proven educational programs such as Core Knowledge, Success for All, Direct Instruction and High Schools that Work. Ensuring that a research-based program became the centerpiece of reform was absolutely critical, most agreed, and the union has responsibility to make that happen.

An education system that accepts low-performing schools as a “given” is both immoral and short-sighted, Mooney stresses. When school failure becomes acceptable, “we risk the complete loss of public confidence in the public schools,” he warns. “It’s clear we have to be pro-active about these problems.”

Consider the alternative

Some 23 states already have laws addressing low-performing schools through a range of remedies that include restaffing, sometimes called “reconstitution,” and school shutdowns. Eight others are considering such legislation. Courts in several states also have forced the redesign of low-performing schools in an effort to restore racial and ethnic balance. In the next decade, changes to the federal Title I law will allow corrective action, including school staff changes, for participating schools not making “adequate yearly progress” in at least reading and math. Clearly the remedies are proliferating—and the evidence shows they need the involvement of teachers and their elected representatives to be fair and effective.

Just ask teachers and classified staff in El Paso, Texas. Alan Platt, formerly a teacher at Guillen Junior High, remembers the shabby treatment he and other staff members received when the district two years ago decided to restaff the school, a chronically underfunded building serving the poorest community in the city. The superintendent announced that Guillen staff would have to reapply for their positions just a few days before the end of the 1995-96 school year. When about 75 percent of staff was forced to look for employment elsewhere, “there

was tremendous stigma” attached to their previous employment. “We were treated like damaged goods,” says Platt, who later found a position teaching social studies at nearby Jefferson High School.

Teachers and staff at Bel Air High School, part of El Paso’s Isleta school district, had seen their achievement scores plummet after being saddled with what most considered a ridiculous reform strategy imposed by the superintendent. Students would be allowed to choose their entire course of study—no strings attached. It was supposed to follow the college model under the superintendent’s plan. “Most of us knew what was going to happen,” says Jerry Duke, an AP English teacher at the school for 23 years. “Harder teachers with high academic standards had no students.” There was a falloff of about 40 percent in AP classes, students who hadn’t taken math for two years and were pursuing studies in guitar, soccer and history were failing miserably on state standardized tests, and—because Bel Air was now a dismally low-performing school—the staff was overhauled.

New assignments for Bel Air were determined arbitrarily. Duke, who had seen his students go on to every major university in the nation, is now consigned to general track classes at his new school and plans to leave teaching this month. “We were treated as pariahs—those horrible Bel Air teachers,” he says. “I know I’m a good teacher. Many of my former students have written me to say thanks for the strong grounding my courses gave them. But I’ll work as a greeter at Wal-Mart before I ever set foot back in a public school.”

AFT affiliates throughout the state have been battling for more of a say in decisions affecting low-performing schools. In Corpus Christi, where the AFT local has won a stronger presence through an exclusive consultation agreement with the district, the process of school redesign has been difficult but better than in districts which give teachers almost no say. Roy Miller High School was restaffed in 1995-96 in connection with a court order, and Steve McGaugh, a science teacher at the school, says there was more advance notice and more teacher say in the new school design than in districts like El Paso. “We knew a year prior that it would be restaffed,” says McGaugh, “and it gave teachers an opportunity to analyze whether they would be comfortable in the new approach, which is accelerated block scheduling.” While McGaugh says he has deep concerns about the success of the school design, he emphasizes that “union participation has made a tremendous difference in giving teachers more of a voice.”

Turning it around

Good things are clearly beginning to happen in districts where educators and their unions have the opportunity to help transform low-performing schools.

At P.S. 1, the high administrative turnover, isolation and lack of focus that plagued the school in the 1980s is as obsolete as the “power tie.” Instead, teachers at this elementary school serving a high-poverty, mostly immigrant section of the Bowery now use words like “focus,” “mission,” “achievement” and “community” when they talk about the school. Today, 30 teachers regularly and voluntarily gather every Friday for early morning roundtable discussions—where education is always the first order of business. “The talk is always around children and how to improve children’s learning,” says Amy Hom, a staff development specialist at the school. “I’ve been in this school for the last five years, and there is more collaboration among teachers.” There are more opportunities to meet and confer and new teachers feel less isolated, she adds.

Reading scores have more than doubled since the early 1990s, and the school has found success as one of four New York City pilot sites participating in the New Standards Project, a national effort to bring internationally competitive academic standards to U.S. schools. Recent scores from P.S. 1 on assessments tied to the project show that almost half of students are performing at acceptable levels based on these rigorous world-class benchmarks.

What made the difference? Teacher Roberta Grabler believes it was a long process of assisted self-assessment by staff, community building within the school and goal setting—key features prescribed in the AFT’s resolution on low-performing schools for buildings that require less drastic intervention in order to improve. The union and district cooperated on a plan several years ago to bring teachers, administrators and parents together in P.S. 1 to develop a mission statement and improvement plan, with the help of facilitators from the United Federation of Teachers. The school also received a major new commitment for professional development (4 percent of school funds go to professional development today, as opposed to the customary 1 percent), and a UFT-run teacher center was added to the building.

The teachers center, located on the third floor of the building, plays a central role in the process of improvement. Teachers visit the center regularly to consult with staff and find professional materials based

on their individual needs. There are also study groups and workshops offered at the center, along with opportunities to attend professional development sessions at the central teacher learning center at UFT headquarters. Michele Schlifstein, teacher center staff member at P.S. 1, says the center also serves as an impromptu daily meeting ground for teachers and gives special consideration and direction to new teachers at the school. “Anyone at any time in the day can come in and work with me,” says Schlifstein, adding, “it’s exciting to see teachers take responsibility for their own learning. They see things going well at the school and they feel motivated.”

The motivation also appears contagious. P.S. 1 found funding to provide several weeks of reading/language arts instruction last summer—and 400 students showed up for the voluntary, half-day program. “We even had six students show up a day before school started, they were so excited,” Hom said.

A more aggressive level of intervention was called for at Morris Park elementary in Minneapolis. The school struggled for years with a reputation of being “a school run by the kids,” a school that had once posted 800 write-ups for misbehavior on buses in a single academic year. The school’s chronically low test scores showed that Morris Park was “lacking direction from a curriculum standpoint,” remembers Darlene Hultquist, a first-grade teacher for the past eight years at the school.

“The community was unhappy and taking their children out of the school, the staff was very angry and frustrated that the administration had allowed discipline to evaporate at the school,” says Minneapolis Federation of Teachers president Louise Sundin. “Things just continued to spiral down, and we agreed that this would be a good place to try to start again.”

MFT collaborated with the district on a “fresh start” program that brought in a research-based reading model, in this case Success for All, and a new building principal. Prior to the 1995-96 school year, staff was allowed to transfer out of the school or to interview for Morris Park positions in the next school year. About a third of instructional staff and all support staff continued at the school, based on interviews that showed their belief in the new instructional program and dedication to making it work. Both permanent and probationary employees were given priority standing for openings at other schools, counselors were provided to help soften the stress of the transition, and there was a

guarantee that staff that didn't return would not be laid off or fired. "We stressed that many of these teachers had been victims of the problems at Morris Park and that there must be assurances that teachers who leave wouldn't be stigmatized or on the street," Sundin said.

Angela Baxter, a kindergarten teacher at Morris Park, believes the process was hard but necessary. Before the redesign "there was no staff teamwork and there was a lack of trust. Things just weren't working. There was a general agreement that things had to change."

The redesign has helped the school make a big improvement. Testing last spring showed that 46 percent were reading at first-grade level, a big jump from years prior when, without the focus of a research-based program, 70 percent failed to meet that test, Baxter says. Also critical is the preservice and inservice training that staff has received.

"When you walk in to the building today, you feel the difference, and you see it. Students seemed to pick up on it right away, all of a sudden the behavior that had been treated one way was not tolerated. It's not the right solution for every school, but it was definitely the right solution for us."

Systemic improvement

The experience at Morris Park has been so positive that it helped the union and district reach agreement on a comprehensive school improvement strategy, including strategies for low-performing schools, in its latest contract agreement. Many sections of the strategy are taken directly from the AFT resolution on low-performing schools, emphasizes Sundin, who believes the contract is a perfect place to address such issues.

The contract also was an engine of change at P.S. 154 in Harlem, which two years ago was placed on a list of New York state schools in danger of being closed, based on low student achievement with little improvement over several years. There are more than 90 New York City schools on this state list; typically they are given up to three years to implement and demonstrate an effective new school plan.

LeRoy Barr, a math instructional specialist at the school for the past six years, said that teamwork and a coherent instructional approach had been missing for years at the school—and it was hurting performance. The union and district helped the school rediscover direction by establishing a redesign committee that included teachers and other school staff, administrators, parents and students. Barr was a member of the

team, which spent several months assessing the school's strengths and weaknesses. The team also reviewed recommendations from the district and from state audit teams and designed a comprehensive improvement plan.

The improvement plan included extended school hours, and a proven reading program, Success for All, which more than 80 percent of faculty voted to adopt, and additional staff development. The improvement plan also called for staffing changes implemented under guidelines included in the UFT contract. The contract provides that, in such instances, a "personnel committee" that includes two union representatives, administrators and parents will select new staff. Teachers who do not return are given priority transfers and first choice of available positions in the district for which they are qualified.

Interviewing for the positions at P.S. 154 focused on "understanding of the mission of the new school—did it coincide with my individual professional goals," explains Charles DeBerry, a third-grade teacher at the school who returned after the redesign. He says the process, while difficult, was fair and that teachers both returning and leaving the school felt supported. "People felt quite naturally a certain amount of tension and anxiety, and the union made sure that everyone was contacted and placed," says Barr, who is the UFT chapter leader at the school.

Last year was P.S. 154's first under the new redesign, and there are already some signs of improvement. Math and reading scores are up, and the school should come off the state list if improvement can be maintained and strengthened.

One of the best features of the redesigned school, DeBerry says, is the two days a week that teachers in each grade have reserved for common preparation. "It allows us to talk about what's working in the classroom and what isn't," he says. "That's a big change for a staff that used to isolate themselves and work in their own classroom environment."

But DeBerry also stresses there is nothing magic about the process. "This is hard work, turning a school around, and it takes time. But I feel we can prevail."

Background Reading

AFT Resources

Principles for Professional Development

The AFT prepared a set of guidelines to help its affiliate's review, evaluate, improve, and design professional development programs. Among the central themes the guidelines highlight are the need for professional development that: helps teachers gain deep knowledge of the subjects they teach; reflects current research on teaching and learning; is aligned with the curriculum and standards they use; leads teachers to be intellectually engaged with their colleagues; is job-embedded; and provides teachers sufficient time, support, and resources to master new content and pedagogy (Reprinted Feb. 2006).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/PRINCIPLES.pdf

Closing the Achievement Gap: Focus on Latino Students

This policy brief provides the data and context to support the AFT's call for increased attention to the condition of education for Latino students. It discusses the current demographic and achievement trends of Latinos, some of the specific barriers to closing the achievement gap, and for Latino children (March 2004).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/PolBrief17.pdf

Baltimore, Maryland: Labor-Management Partnership at Work

The Baltimore case study profiles efforts undertaken by labor and management to increase system capacity and the performance of the lowest performing schools in the district. By focusing on professional development for teachers, adopting successful reform models district wide, and (when reconstitution hit the district) making every effort to

keep the school within the jurisdiction of the district, Baltimore illustrates how system morale and student learning can be increased in measurable ways (July 2003).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/BALTIMOREPB.pdf

Where We Stand: Standards-Based Assessment and Accountability

This booklet contains resolutions on standards and assessments passed at the 2002 AFT convention. Also included are a question-and-answer section, background information, and background reading (June 2003).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/StandAssessRes.pdf

Setting Strong Standards

The AFT developed criteria for members and others to use in creating or reviewing student achievement standards. The criteria offer educators and policymakers a clear vision of what useful standards should look like (June 2003).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/settingstrong.pdf

Setting the Stage for Strong Standards: Elements of a Safe and Orderly School

What are the key elements of a discipline system that would provide all students with a safe and orderly learning environment, and help set the stage for high academic standards? This paper identifies six essential elements of effective school discipline: effective classroom management, clear district wide discipline codes, consistent enforcement of the codes, programs to modify low-level student misbehavior, alternative placements for disruptive students, and support for families and communities working to develop character in children (June 2003).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/settingthestage.pdf

AFT's Redesigning Schools To Raise Achievement

This brochure describes AFT's Redesigning Schools To Raise Achievement (RSRA) project. RSRA builds capacity at the state, district, school, and classroom levels to improve student achievement by providing training for school teams; information on programs that work; technical support; district and school policy models; and opportunities to build partnerships (May 2003).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/RSRA_BROCH.pdf

How to Get Foundation Grants

This brochure highlights the Foundation Center's "virtual classroom," which provides courses and tutorials on grant proposal writing, budgeting basics and more. The center also offers subscription-based directories of foundations and available grants (January 2003).

www.aft.org/teachers/downloads/howtogetfunds.pdf

Teaching English Language Learners: What Does the Research Say?

This policy brief describes the ongoing debates over the most appropriate methods for educating students, the need for stronger research into the educational attainment of English language learners (ELL), and recommendations for developing quality programs for ELL (February 2002).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/policy14.pdf

Making Standards Matter 2001

Since 1995, the AFT has tracked states' efforts to implement strong academic standards, align assessments to those standards, provide intervention for struggling students, and to hold students accountable for meeting the standards. The 2001 report examines all of these issues and reports on states' efforts to develop curriculum resources that help teachers teach the standards (November 2001).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/msm2001.pdf

Doing What Works: Improving Big City School Districts

This policy brief finds that entire districts, by doing what works—and by working in cooperation with their local AFT unions and the community—are posting significant achievement gains, many for the third to fifth year in a row (October 2000).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/policy12.pdf

Building on the Best, Learning from What Works: Five Promising Discipline and Violence Prevention Programs

This paper provides background information about research-based discipline and violence prevention programs that, when properly implemented, show promise for raising student achievement significantly—particularly for at-risk students. (June 2000).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/wwdiscipline.pdf

Professional Development: It's Union Work

Teachers unions have an integral role to play in ensuring that teachers receive meaningful, high-quality professional development. This booklet highlights examples of successful union-initiated or union-supported efforts to provide teachers what they need, and to open doors for constructive labor-management relationships (May 2000).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/pdunionwork.pdf

**Improving Low-Performing High Schools:
Ideas & Promising Programs for High Schools**

This paper provides concrete, research-based ideas for high school reform and reviews promising programs and practices for raising student achievement in high schools (July 1999).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/lphs.pdf

**Building on the Best, Learning from What Works:
Five Promising Remedial Reading Programs**

This paper provides background information about research-based remedial reading programs that, when properly implemented, show promise for raising student achievement significantly—particularly for at-risk students (June 1999).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/remedial.pdf

**Building on the Best, Learning from What Works:
Six Promising Schoolwide Reform Programs**

This paper provides background information about research-based school wide programs that, when properly implemented, show promise for raising student achievement significantly—particularly for at-risk students (July 1998).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/six.pdf

Recent Research Shows Major Benefits of Small Class Size

For years, research on class size was inconclusive. Then, in 1985, the state of Tennessee implemented a major class-size reduction initiative in grades K-3 in a way that allowed for one of the best-designed studies in the history of education. The result: Lowering class size substantially improved student achievement and was especially effective for poor children (June 1998).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/Policy3.pdf

Building on the Best, Learning from What Works: Seven Promising Reading and English Language Arts Programs

This paper provides background information about research-based reading and English language arts programs that, when properly implemented, show promise for raising student achievement significantly—particularly for at-risk students (January 1998).

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/seven.pdf

Additional Reading

Datnow, A. and Stringfield, S. “Working Together for Reliable School Reform.” *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*. Vol. 5 (1 & 2). (2000).

New American Schools. *Guidelines for Ensuing the Quality of National Design-Based Assistance Providers*. (2000).

Solomon, M. and Voles Ferguson, M. *How to Build Support for Comprehensive School Reform*. New American Schools. (1999).

Traub, J. *Better By Design? A Consumer’s Guide to Schoolwide Reform*. Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. (Dec. 1999).

Yap, K. et. Al. *Evaluating Whole-School Reform Efforts: A Guide for District and School Staff, 2nd Edition*. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. (Aug. 2000).





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