

Banding Together

Union City's Teachers and Administrators
Work Together to Improve Student Achievement



BY DAVID L. KIRP

The report of a blue-ribbon commission chaired by Joel Klein, former chancellor of New York City's public schools, and Condoleezza Rice, secretary of state in the administration of President George W. Bush, came as a shocker. *U.S. Education Reform and National Security*, published in the spring of 2012 and carrying the imprimatur of the prestigious Council on Foreign Relations, ominously concludes that the miseducation of America's students poses an imminent threat to our country's capacity to defend ourselves. "Educational failure puts the United States' future economic prosperity, global position, and physical safety"—physical safety!—"at risk."¹

What can be done to avert this catastrophe? Klein and Rice plump for giving parents more choice about what school their children attend, arguing that charter schools and vouchers will generate needed innovation. The old-line public schools cannot merely

be reformed, the report contends: if these institutions are going to do a decent job of educating our kids, a discipline-and-punish regimen of strict accountability is needed. Schools whose students aren't improving at a sufficiently rapid pace should be shuttered. Teachers' livelihoods should depend on how their students fare on high-stakes reading and mathematics tests, with pay raises handed to some and pink slips to others. Teachers should be recruited from among the top colleges, as Teach for America does, rather than being drawn mainly from run-of-the-mill education schools.*

For years, critics have lambasted the public schools as fossilized bureaucracies run by paper-pushers and filled with time-serving teachers preoccupied with their job security, not the lives of their students.

Washington has been delivering a similar, if less bombastic, salvo ever since the No Child Left Behind Act became law in 2002. The Obama administration's \$4.35 billion Race to the Top initiative, the crown jewel of its education reform agenda, morphed into NCLB on steroids, as the U.S. Department of Education deployed the carrot of new money to prod the states into expanding charter schools and closing low-performing public schools.²

Look dispassionately at the evidence, and you'll find little justification for the proposition that imposing perform-or-die

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*Wendy Kopp, the founder of Teach for America, served on the commission.

accountability on teachers or expanding choice for students will cure what ails public education.

NCLB, with its hyperemphasis on the three Rs and its command to close or remake “failing” public schools, was supposed to end what President George W. Bush called “the soft bigotry of low expectations.” But a decade later, scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, the nation’s report card, have improved only slightly; and poor, black, and Latino students haven’t been able to close the achievement gap. What’s more, despite the hosannas for charters, the bulk of the research shows that, overall, they don’t do a better job than traditional public schools.³

In short, there are no quick fixes, no miracle cures.

But if superstars and clean sweeps can’t deliver that, how can the typical school district, filled with ordinary teachers, most of whom grew up nearby, do it? Enter Union City, New Jersey.

Amid the hoopla over choice and charters, the public schools of this poor, densely packed community that is mainly composed of Latino immigrants—four miles and a psychological light year removed from Times Square—point the way toward a more promising and more usable strategy.

A quarter-century ago, Union City’s schools were so wretched that state officials threatened to seize control of them. But since then, the situation has been totally reversed. The district now stands as a poster child for good urban education. By bringing kids, elsewhere dismissed as no-hopers, into the mainstream, it has defied the odds.

Here’s the reason to stand up and take notice: from *third grade through high school, Union City students’ scores on the state’s achievement tests approximate the New Jersey averages. You read that right—these youngsters, despite their hard-knock lives, compete with their suburban cousins in reading, writing, and mathematics.*

This is no one-year wonder. Over the course of the past generation, these youngsters have been doing better and better. What’s more, in 2013, more than 90 percent of the students graduated—that’s nearly 15 percent higher than the national average. Moreover, three-quarters of them enroll in college, and top students are regularly winning statewide science contests and receiving full rides at Ivy League universities.

Nowadays, the reputation of a school system depends heavily on its high-stakes achievement test scores. The pressure keeps intensifying as the U.S. Department of Education and its handmaidens in the state capitals expect that, year after year, more and more students must prove their proficiency in the three Rs. New Jersey, like many other states, has made the outsized pledge that by 2020 every student will graduate from high school prepared for college or career.⁴

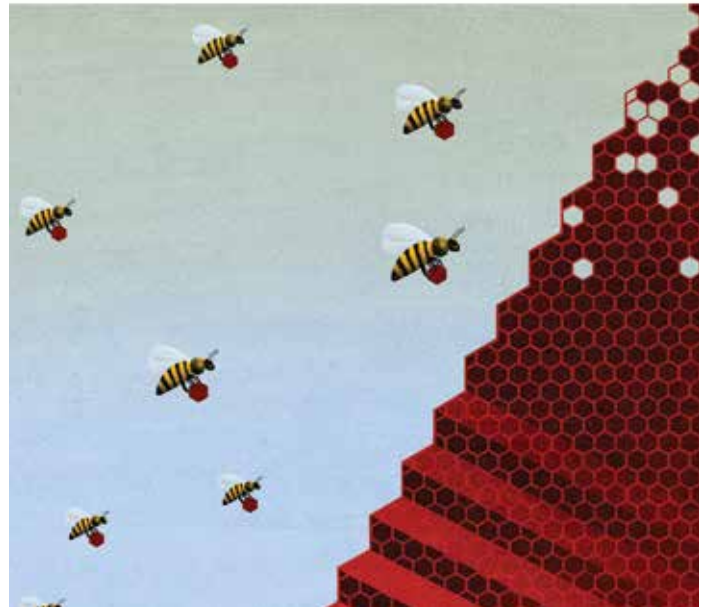
Union City’s schools are constantly struggling to balance this command against other priorities—sparking students’ creativity, responding to the health problems and emotional baggage that many of these youngsters bring with them, generating a sense of community within the schoolhouse. Sometimes these schools succeed in maintaining that balance; always they try. What’s more, those dazzling test scores don’t depend on drill-and-kill instruction—the schools aim to turn kids into thinkers, not memorizers.

Union City passes my personal “Golden Rule” test—I’d be happy if my own child went to school there.

What makes Union City especially headline-worthy is the very fact of its ordinariness, its lack of flash and pizzazz. The

district has not followed the herd by closing schools or giving the boot to hordes of allegedly malingering teachers or soliciting Teach for America recruits. And while religious schools educate a small minority of students in this city, not a single charter has opened there.

When boiled down to its essentials, what Union City is doing sounds so obvious, so tried-and-true, that it verges on platitude. Indeed, everything that is happening in Union City should be familiar to any educator with a pulse.



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Here’s the essence:

1. High-quality full-day preschool for all children starts at age 3.
2. Word-soaked classrooms give youngsters a rich feel for language.
3. Immigrant kids become fluent first in their native language and then in English.
4. The curriculum is challenging, consistent from school to school, and tied together from one grade to the next.
5. Close-grained analyses of students’ test scores are used to diagnose and address problems.
6. Teachers and students get hands-on help to improve their performance.
7. The schools reach out to parents, enlisting them as partners in their children’s education.
8. The school system sets high expectations for all and maintains a culture of *abrazos*—caring—which generates trust.

This is a tale of evolution, not revolution; a conscientious application of what management guru W. Edwards Deming calls “total quality management.” “Improve constantly and forever the system of production and service,” Deming preached for half a century, and many Fortune 500 companies have profited from paying attention. So has Union City.⁵

The bottom line is simple enough: running an exemplary school system doesn’t demand heroes or heroics, just hard and steady work. Stick to your knitting, as the saying goes, stay with what’s been proven to make a difference, and don’t be tempted by every trendy idea that comes along. Of course that’s much easier to say than to do—otherwise we wouldn’t be talking about an achievement gap—but you don’t have to be a genius to pull it off.

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Success stories are to be found across the country—in communities that spend frugally on their students as well as those that are lavishly funded, in big cities as well as rural communities, and in districts with black, Latino, and poor white students. In each instance, as we’ll see, the school system has taken the same playbook—the same priorities, the same underlying principles, the same commitment to hard and steady work—that Union City uses, adapting it to suit its circumstances.⁶

When Teachers Learn from Each Other

This story begins in the classroom: room 210, a third-grade class, presided over by longtime teacher Alina Bossbaly, whose students start the year speaking little if any English and, eight months later, will be taking the first high-stakes tests of their young lives. The classroom makes a logical starting point, for no matter how well-intentioned an initiative, how adroit the principal or managerially savvy the superintendent, if the teacher can’t ignite fires in the students then the rest of it doesn’t really matter.

All kids possess Holden Caulfield’s innate talent for sniffing out the fakes and phonies. The good news is that they can be galvanized by teachers who they intuit are committed to their futures. What President Barack Obama said in his 2012 State of the Union address—“every person in this chamber can point to a teacher who changed the trajectory of their lives”—fits all of us. That’s the goal of the teacher who presides in room 210—to have an enduring impact on these kids’ lives.

From the classroom to the school to the district, our story opens up. The best teachers will thrive even in the educational equivalent of the Sahara desert, but most teachers will do a lot better if they are part of a group effort and are given coaching,

shown how to use information about their students to their best advantage, and encouraged to forge a “we’re in this together” sense of rapport. That’s where George Washington Elementary School, where room 210 is located, enters the picture.

Many school districts operate as loose confederacies, with each school going its own way, and only pockets of excellence amid the underwhelming, but Union City has worked hard to make the pieces fit together. For the district’s administrators, maintaining a cohesive system is a never-ending grind, and constantly striving for improvement is harder yet. For the system builders in Union City, the 2010–2011 school year is especially rough, for a soup-to-nuts state review is looming. School systems aren’t autonomous; they operate in a world largely delineated by the politicians who oversee and fund them. In Union City, the Democratic mayor, who doubles as a state legislator, has been a godsend, and because of his clout, there’s a spanking new preschool and a \$180 million high school. With a Republican in the governor’s office, can he continue to work wonders?

Union City has done well by its children—very well indeed—but wherever you look there’s unfinished business. It would be a mistake, however, to regard that reality as evidence of failure. Rather, it’s a salutary reminder that America’s public schools cannot be quickly and easily transformed. In Union City, as in every school district, simple answers cannot be found and there’s always work that remains undone.

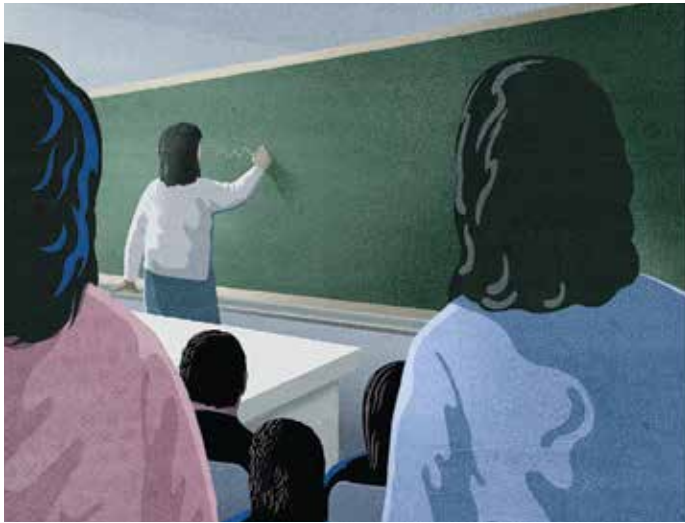
Nowhere at Washington School are the virtues of collegiality and collaboration more visible than in the third grade. The Dream Team—that’s how other teachers at Washington refer to Alina Bossbaly, Marilyn Corral, Jen Schuck, Mary Ann Hart, and Irene Stamatopolous. Although their personalities differ greatly, they mesh as smoothly as a 400-yard relay team, and this bond helps to explain why, year after year, their students have been the school’s top performers on the ASK, the state achievement test. On the May 2010 exam, 79 percent passed the reading and writing test, and an off-the-charts 93 percent were rated proficient in mathematics—the best results in the entire district.

It’s unlikely that these teachers would have been accepted by Teach for America. They all grew up within a half hour’s drive from Union City and never moved away. Only a higher education expert or someone who hails from northern New Jersey would have heard of the commuter schools—William Paterson, Jersey City, Stockton State, and the like—that they attended. Their GPAs weren’t necessarily stellar, and while some of them are more naturally gifted teachers than others, they all had a hard time at the start of their teaching careers.

The best explanation for their effectiveness is what they have learned—and keep learning—from their colleagues. Experience matters, of course, but these teachers improve—the passable ones becoming solid practitioners, and the good ones maturing into candidates for a demonstration video—in good measure because of the informal tutelage that the old hands give the newbies, the day-to-day collaboration, the modeling of good practice, and the swapping of ideas about what’s worth trying in their classrooms. “The most productive thinking,” the researchers conclude, “is continuous and simultaneous with action—that is, with teaching—as practitioners collaboratively implement, assess, and adjust instruction as it happens.”⁷

The culture of *abrazos*, of love and caring, at Washington School is rooted in close relationships of long standing between the principal, Les Hanna, and the teachers; among the teachers; and between the school and the families. These professionals know and trust one another, for they can draw on their history of working together and that eases the path to collaboration. Their ties to the kids come naturally because they have an intimate understanding of their students' lives. Many of these teachers grew up and still live close by, so when they talk about the students as *our kids*, they mean it almost literally.⁸

To be sure, there are the outliers, who stand apart from this community, as well as the grumblers, who look for slights and stir the pot, for rare indeed is an organization free from outliers and grumblers. But at Washington School, the outliers and the grumblers are decidedly in the minority. Almost everyone at this school wants to belong to their *own* Dream Team.



You won't find any Teach for America recruits here, and with good reason—they would destabilize the school. Bright they surely are, but raw intelligence does not translate into skill in the classroom. Fresh out of college and with only the briefest of training, they are at the very beginning of the learning curve, and so are less effective than experienced teachers like Alina. Washington School runs on loyalty and longevity, but 80 percent of Teach for America teachers quit after three years, many of them headed for careers in law or business. Presumably, those who sign on with Teach for America care for children, at least in the abstract, but these cosmopolitans have been parachuted into a community about which they know nothing.⁹

"We never use the Dream Team label to put ourselves above everyone else," says Alina Bossbaly. Just as she perceives her colleagues' faith in her ability to "Bossbaly-ize" her students, extracting the best from them every year, as both a compliment and an incitement, she regards the Dream Team sobriquet as both accolade and goad. "C'mon, girls, let's keep up the good work because it's expected of us," Alina cheers on the crew. "We take a lot of pride in what we do. Just like the kids want to be praised by other teachers, we want our parents and our administration to be proud of us. There's no 'I want my bulletin board to be better,' no complaining. We do it together. The attitude is contagious. It happens—you make it happen."

Traditionally, no one questioned what teachers were doing in their own classrooms, but no one came to their aid either, so they had to sort out the whats and hows of teaching on their own. Engaging in shoptalk with the teacher down the hall, pulling apart a particular lesson, or sharing ideas about how to handle a certain kind of student makes them better at their job. A wise district like Union City doesn't leave these exchanges to happenstance—it carves out time for teachers to work together.¹⁰

It's reality TV minus the camera crew on the second floor of Washington School, where the third-grade classrooms are clustered. Alina is the group's de facto leader, and from one moment to the next she may be the strategist, the influential, the calming influence, or the shoulder to cry on (occasionally she's the one doing the crying).

Among these teachers, only Alina has non-English speakers in her class, though other classes include students who are in an

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English-only environment for the first time. In the room around the corner from Alina, Irene Stamatopolous presides in no-nonsense, meticulously organized, and perpetually unflustered mode. "Irene is the first one done with everything," marvels Marilyn Corral, whose classroom is adjacent to Alina's. But Irene, who came to Washington School in 1990, wasn't always so sure of herself. "My first year was rough," she recalls. "The kids weren't learning, and I felt like I was teaching to the walls. I put it all on me—I thought that these children should be competing at the same level as children everywhere, and that's still my goal every year."

Some kids in Irene's room came to the United States just a couple of years earlier, and this is their first experience in a class where everything is in English. Other school districts treat students like these as if they were born speaking English, tossing them in with everyone else. In Union City, these children are assigned to a teacher like Irene, who's trained to teach English as a second language, as they ease their way from one language to another.¹¹

Marilyn Corral adds spice and drama to the mix. Instinctively, she'll fight if she feels she's been wronged, and Alina the diplomat sometimes finds herself talking Marilyn down.

Jen Schuck, one room farther down the hall, calls to mind the girl next door grown up, everyone's best friend, and she's the shyest

in the group. Mary Ann Hart, a tall, angular woman who could have sat for a Modigliani portrait, hovers slightly outside the frame. While that's partly due to the school's layout—her classroom is the farthest away—her personality doesn't lend itself to easy sociability. "I'm not really part of the social world of the other teachers," she tells me. "I'm intrapersonal—I value the quiet time."

This quintet has been together for a long time; Mary Ann, the latest addition, joined the group in 2005, a year after Marilyn.



complement each other when we get together," says Marilyn. "We plan, we share our ideas. If something works well for me or I have a cute activity, I give it to my girls—I want them to look good too."

Sometimes I go to lunch with two or three of these women for *ropa vieja* and plantains at Gran Via, the Cuban hangout a few blocks away. Typically there's some girl talk, banter about who's getting married or whose kid has gotten into college. But the conversation often loops back to their work—what their students are up to, how they reacted to the latest writing prompt, what belongs in the all-important plan book.

Walk by room 210, Alina's classroom, most Thursdays at 9 a.m. and the din that rockets off the walls sounds like a gaggle of adolescent girls careening out of control. But the voices you hear aren't those of students—these are the third-grade teachers deep into planning mode. In every Union City school, the class schedule gives teachers in each grade 45 minutes a week for brainstorming, and the Dream Team uses this time to tackle the questions that arise in the practice of their craft.¹²

On this mid-October day, I'm sitting in the back of the room, scrunched in a chair designed with an 8-year-old in mind. Alina, Marilyn, and Irene gather around a table piled high with papers, all the projects that they've devised. They are all talking at once, raising their voices so they can be heard, while Jen is taking notes. "We get so excited," says Alina, who sounds super-excited. They are preparing their plan books for November, a month away, and despite the racket, this is serious business.

Hollywood portrays great teachers, like Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society*, as great ad-libbers, but in this era of hyperaccountability a teacher must get the minutest and pickiest details exactly right. "We have to show what we're doing to the nth degree," Alina tells me.

Even though the state's achievement test is more than half a year away, it is already on their minds. On the 2010 exam for second-graders, a trial run for the New Jersey ASK, the 7-year-olds had a hard time understanding the passages they were asked to read, and those are the kids these teachers have inherited. "Their vocabulary is extremely small because many of them speak English only when they're at school," says Alina, by way of explanation. "When they're home, Spanish is what they hear, and they're watching Spanish TV."

Words, words, and more words—if these youngsters are going to prosper academically, they need to become immersed in a world of language. The more words you know, the faster you acquire new words, the research shows, and so the third-grade teachers spend lots of time honing the skills of comprehension. All their classrooms feature ever-expanding word walls, and each child is given a dictionary, something that most of them have never seen. "It's your tool, like the computer," Alina tells these computer-savvy youngsters. "You need to use it a lot."¹³

"The key is to make sure that from kindergarten on, every student, from the start, understands the gist of what is heard or read," writes literacy expert E. D. Hirsch Jr.,* and that's what these teachers are aiming for. If all goes well, their students will emerge from third grade with a bigger and more evocative vocabulary. They'll be using hundred-dollar words like "gorgeous" and "exquisite," not just

*For more on E. D. Hirsch Jr.'s work on reading comprehension, see *American Educator's* authors index at www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/authors2.cfm.

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Such familiarity can breed contempt, akin to what happens in a dysfunctional family, but these teachers genuinely like and, what's more important, respect one another. Personality and teaching style are intertwined, and if you spend some time in their classrooms, you can readily detect the variations. Alina will most likely be pirouetting among groups of students, Irene will be firmly in command, Marilyn passionate and boot-camp tough, Mary Ann nurturing, and Jen a gentle and soothing presence. Good teachers can't be shoehorned into a single mold. These are five distinct individuals, five distinct teaching styles—and five capable professionals.

These teachers are often in and out of one another's rooms, swapping materials and helping out, covering if one of them arrives late or has to leave for a meeting. And while some teachers safeguard the student projects they have devised as if they were top-secret documents, everything that's generated by a member of the Dream Team is open-source. "We are all very different women who

“pretty,” and they’ll know how to extract the central themes from what they read, not just regurgitate the story line. Those skills make for good writers as well as successful test takers.¹⁴

Third-grade mathematics is just as demanding. By year’s end, these students must understand fractions; know how to convert $\frac{3}{12}$ into its simplest form; complete the pattern, $\frac{1}{3}, \frac{2}{6}, \underline{\quad}$; estimate the volume of a rectangle; and use the metric system. “Although the timetable is crushing,” says Marilyn, “we like to extend certain topics even if it takes more time.” They want their students to come away with an understanding of what they are doing, not simply memorizing formulas. That ability too will serve them well in later grades.

Although every teacher uses the same basic material, each of them can add to that core, and there are scores of books from which to select. Characteristically, the Dream Team agrees on the same stories, and today they’re in search of a good opening question for a story their classes will soon be reading—a question that will bring the tale to life. In making this kind of decision, they have character development in mind, not just on the page but among their own students. “I try to run my classroom as a community,” Jen tells me. “Of course I want them to become better readers, writers, and mathematicians, but in the long run, I really want them to become good people, respectful and responsible for themselves.”

These teachers know intuitively that efforts designed to shape children’s values can have a powerful long-term impact. They bat around several candidates for the opening gambit: “What moral lesson did you learn?” “What are the moral messages behind the story?” “What lessons did the author want to teach?” Eventually they agree that they’ll ask how the author’s moral message can be incorporated into everyday life. Each of them inserts that theme in her plan book, and each will launch a classroom dialogue with that question. But what happens next depends on their students’ reactions, and in each class the ensuing discussion will bend in distinct ways. “A lot of the time, inspiration comes from the kids,” Jen explains. “Someone will say something that will spark an idea, and then my entire lesson will take a turn.”¹⁵

A Steady Focus on Continuous Improvement

A century ago, Max Weber, an architect of modern social science, wrote about the “routinization of charisma,” and while Weber had religious leaders in mind, his analysis characterizes any enterprise that hopes to endure when an inspirational leader departs. Flashy companies have forgotten this lesson to their detriment. “The organizations that are most successful ... are the ones where the system is the star,” writes Malcolm Gladwell, contrasting the enduring success of dishwasher-dull Procter & Gamble with the multibillion-dollar debacle at Enron. “The talent myth assumes that people make organizations smart. More often than not, it’s the other way around.” This understanding of how the world works captures Union City’s approach: people come and go but the organization endures.¹⁶

Except for a handful of school chiefs who style themselves as crusaders, superintendents don’t sweep anyone off their feet. There’s no glamour to what they do, no dash and swagger either. It’s just the daily grind. In “To Be of Use,” poet Marge Piercy honors the work of such people. “I want to be with people who submerge in the task, ... who are not parlor generals and field deserters,” she writes. “The work

of the world is common as mud. ... But the thing worth doing well done has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.”

Sandy Sanger, Union City’s superintendent since 2003, typifies the breed. His Irish German family, who moved to Union City when he was a young boy, was perpetually poor—“a bit dysfunctional,” he says, skipping the details. He earned his bachelor’s degree at nearby William Paterson College, and for his entire career he has been on the Union City school payroll, as a history teacher, basketball coach, and administrator.

That’s a familiar career path for a conventional guy—you might even call him a “square”—and in Union City, being conventional counts as an asset. Sandy knows how to use bluntness—his motto is “GOYA,” legendary football coach Lou Holtz’s admonition to “get off your butt”—and when to deploy gentle suasion as well. Square-jawed and often stern-visaged, his gray hair receding, he has put on considerable weight since his college basketball-

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playing days, and the six-packs of Diet Coke in his office refrigerator vouch for his never-ending attempts to shed pounds. He spends his summer vacations on the Jersey Shore, devouring thrillers by Lawrence Sanders, not boning up at Harvard on the latest theories of leadership with high-flying colleagues. On the school district’s website, he identifies his hero as Jesus Christ, and he tells me that after he retires, he plans to spend his time “giving back to the Lord through local missions and outreaches.”

“I’m no genius,” says Sandy, “but I do have a talent for choosing good people,” and selecting Silvia Abbato to be the assistant superintendent in charge of academics illustrates this talent. Silvia arrived in Union City in 1969 in the first wave of migration from Cuba and, despite having to learn English on her own, she did well at school. As an undergrad at Jersey City College, she thought hard about becoming a doctor, but teaching was in the family’s bloodstream. Both her parents had PhDs from the University of Havana, but when they came to the United States, they had to start over. Her father drove a truck and her mother did embroidery to support their family while they learned English. They persevered, receiving their teaching certificates, and they eventually made it into the classroom. Those life stories conveyed a potent message—that teaching is not just a career but the secular equivalent of a religious vocation.

When she became the assistant superintendent in 2003, her first big assignment was to convince the high school math teach-

ers that they needed to rewrite the curriculum. At that time, fewer than 40 percent of the high school students were passing the mathematics section of the state's graduation exam, but the teachers didn't want to hear from her. "When I arrived at the high school, the teachers were angry," she remembers. "They sat with their arms crossed. The message was plain: 'What is this kid going to show me?'" "I know you are working hard," she reassured them, "and we are going to show you how to get better." By the end of that workshop, "the arms were uncrossed and teachers were volunteering to write new material. And as the math scores improved, they wanted to do more."

No one would describe Sandy or Silvia as a charismatic personality, but charisma is not a job requirement in Union City. "We're worker bees," says Silvia.

Ask Sandy Sanger what accomplishments he's proudest of and he'll tell you about two things—the school system's blueprint,

assessments—the second item on Sandy's checklist of major accomplishments—mimic the New Jersey ASK, and students' scores have proven to be good predictors of how they will do on the state tests. The results are supposed to focus teachers' energies on skills the students haven't picked up, such as solving word problems in mathematics or making sense of complex prose passages.

The data also pinpoint which students, as well as which teachers, most need help. They specify how the youngsters in a particular class are doing overall; how this year's results compare with last year's as well as how they compare with the scores of other fourth-grade teachers; which kinds of questions are causing trouble for students; and which students—those who take the test in Spanish, those with special needs, those who are new to the school district—are having the toughest time, and which are on the verge of passing.

These professionals know and trust one another, for they can draw on their history of working together and that eases the path to collaboration.

which lays out what it takes to run an effective school, and its homegrown assessments of student performance. There's nothing in this recital that will earn headlines or bring a president to town, but it's the sort of incrementalism that can keep a successful enterprise humming.

The "Blueprint for Sustained Academic Achievement" emerged in typical Union City fashion, as a practical way to solve a problem. In 2005, the district's reading and mathematics test scores slipped, and while the dip was slight, it prompted serious soul-searching. Sandy's message was unequivocal: "This can't happen again."

One plausible explanation for the drop-off was the uneven quality of stewardship at the schools—too many managers and too few educational leaders—and that realization prompted the drafting of the blueprint. Silvia, its primary author, looked to see what the principals in the highest-achieving schools in the district were doing and catalogued those effective practices. She describes the 73-item checklist as a how-to book—"Leadership 101"—that spells out what had worked best in the school district.

The precepts sound obvious, even platitudinous, but before the blueprint was drafted, some principals weren't following them. Take the first item on the checklist: "Analyze testing results for targeted students [those on the verge of passing] to maximize student potential." A history of counterproductive behavior underlies that dictate. (A more sound practice, of course, would be to focus on maximizing all students' potential, not just those on the cusp of passing a test.)

In recent years, Union City has invested considerable time and money to construct its own reading and mathematics tests. These



The "no excuses" camp of education reformers—those who are pushing for greater "accountability" and who believe that teachers should be judged on the basis of how much they raise students' test scores—would salivate at the opportunity these tools offer to reward and punish teachers, but this isn't how the information gets used in Union City.¹⁷ There, the emphasis is on helping teachers do a better job. Armed with this information, a principal knows where to send a coach or an experienced teacher to model what works in the classroom.

In every school, these test results are intended to launch one-on-one conversations between the principal and the teachers, and out of those meetings, a strategy for improvement is meant to emerge. But Silvia discovered during her school visits that some principals, perhaps fearful about potential confrontations or unaware of what intervention might work, were stashing the scores in a desk drawer. Hence the first precept of the blueprint: use the test scores.

Other checklist items sound similarly commonsensical: "conduct professional development with staff," "assist the administration in the development of the school's budget," "review teachers' planbooks for instructional strategies to support best teaching practices," "deploy data-driven decision-making," and "emphasize learning experiences that require all students to use higher-order thinking

skills, develop in-depth knowledge about concepts, and be able to apply what they learn to real life situations.” Each one of them responds to a failure of leadership that Silvia encountered in the field.

Principals who have been on the job for years may not want—or may not be able—to do things differently. “Change comes hard,” says Sandy. But in recent years, several principals have retired, and this has created an opening for improvement. “We can build leadership capacity,” Silvia tells me. “Mentors have been working with teachers but not administrators. We are beginning to change that.”

One thing the district can’t change is the heavy dose of oversight from state and federal officials. Local control of education was once regarded as inviolate—as sacrosanct as “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” as one superintendent put it—but on many policy matters, the state now has the final say.¹⁸

Whether the measure is the NAEP test, the nationwide metric, or the percentage of students who graduate, New Jersey ranks near the top. This accomplishment matters, especially in a state trying to shed its massive inferiority complex, its status as the butt of New York’s jokes. And naturally, it is hell-bent on remaining among the best. The baleful gaze of state education officials focuses on its weakest links, *Abbott** school districts such as Trenton, which graduates fewer than half of its students despite having received buckets of money.¹⁹

The state acts as a middleman, obliged to bring its districts in line with federal dictates. Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, the rule has been that every child must be proficient in mathematics and reading by 2014, and every year, each school district is supposed to be progressing toward that goal. The command remains on the books, but as it became blindingly obvious that no state could meet it, in 2012, the U.S. Department of Education effectively nullified the law by allowing many states, including New Jersey, to set their own benchmarks. With these waivers came new marching orders—the states had to guarantee that, by 2020, every student would graduate from high school prepared for college or career. Never mind that this new aspiration is as unachievable as the old one—Washington still passes the buck to the states, which in turn will send it along to the school systems and on down the line.

“Do better or face the consequences” is the unvarying message. That’s where the nation’s 13,500 districts, Union City among them, enter the picture.

Reports by the carload flow from Sandy Sanger’s office to Trenton. The most onerous state intrusion is the audit conducted every few years—the Quality Single Accountability Continuum, or, less tongue-trippingly, QSAC, jargon that camouflages a world of pain.

Asking a school system to look in the mirror, as the QSAC does in requiring a detailed self-evaluation, sounds like a good idea. Trust but verify: inviting knowledgeable outsiders to look over the administration’s shoulder also makes intuitive sense. “QSAC keeps you on your toes,” Sandy says philosophically. But when bureaucrats are given free rein, good ideas can spin out of control, and what’s worth doing disappears under an Everest of paper.

*In 1998, the New Jersey Supreme Court, as a result of a school funding lawsuit known as *Abbott v. Burke*, sought to address disparities between the state’s impoverished and more affluent school districts. Through court orders and subsequent state regulations, 31 high-poverty school districts, including Union City, received increased state funding to provide a variety of mandated supports for students and teachers, most significantly full-day preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds.

Preparing for the QSAC devours thousands of hours and can turn into a travesty of bureaucratic overreaching. A few years earlier, the district lost points in the state’s arcane grading system because its Asian American students—all two of them—had “only” scored in the 98th percentile on the state’s English and mathematics tests. Even though those scores nearly topped the charts, they didn’t demonstrate the “adequate yearly progress” that the federal law requires for each racial and ethnic minority, as well as for English language learners and special needs students.

This audit not only covers the big ticket items, like the overall academic record and the safety of the schools. It also extends to the minuscule, such as the text of every pamphlet that’s sent home to parents and the minute-by-minute details of teachers’ plan books. For every meeting that involves the administration and a school principal or a parents’ group, the agenda, attendance lists, and minutes must be gathered—thousands of discrete items that fill binders fat enough to fell a small forest. This process is repeated

Engaging in shoptalk with the teacher down the hall, pulling apart a particular lesson, or sharing ideas about how to handle a certain kind of student makes these teachers better at their job.

every three years—more frequently if the schools come up short, which is typically the case with the *Abbott* districts.

For Union City, the QSAC reviewers will come calling in the spring. Sandy, who has been through this ordeal twice before, knows what must be done to satisfy the officials in Trenton. He sets the wheels in motion during the preceding summer, marshalling his troops with the precision of a military operation.

By the following summer, Union City will learn whether it has survived the QSAC inquisition. But whatever the outcome, there won’t be time or laurels on which to rest. Sandy, Silvia, and their colleagues will be scrutinizing a new batch of state test results, picking principals, revising the curriculum, addressing budgetary concerns, and the like. Theirs is a story without an ending.

Over the long term, demography poses the most profound challenge to Union City’s public schools. As more poor and uneducated youngsters from across Latin America throng the community, students whose profiles differ markedly from those who came from Cuba years earlier, the schools’ task becomes harder and harder. The administration is too smart to leap at the facile answer, too self-aware to believe in a magic bullet. It will stick with its strategy of continuous improvement—*plan, do, review*. □

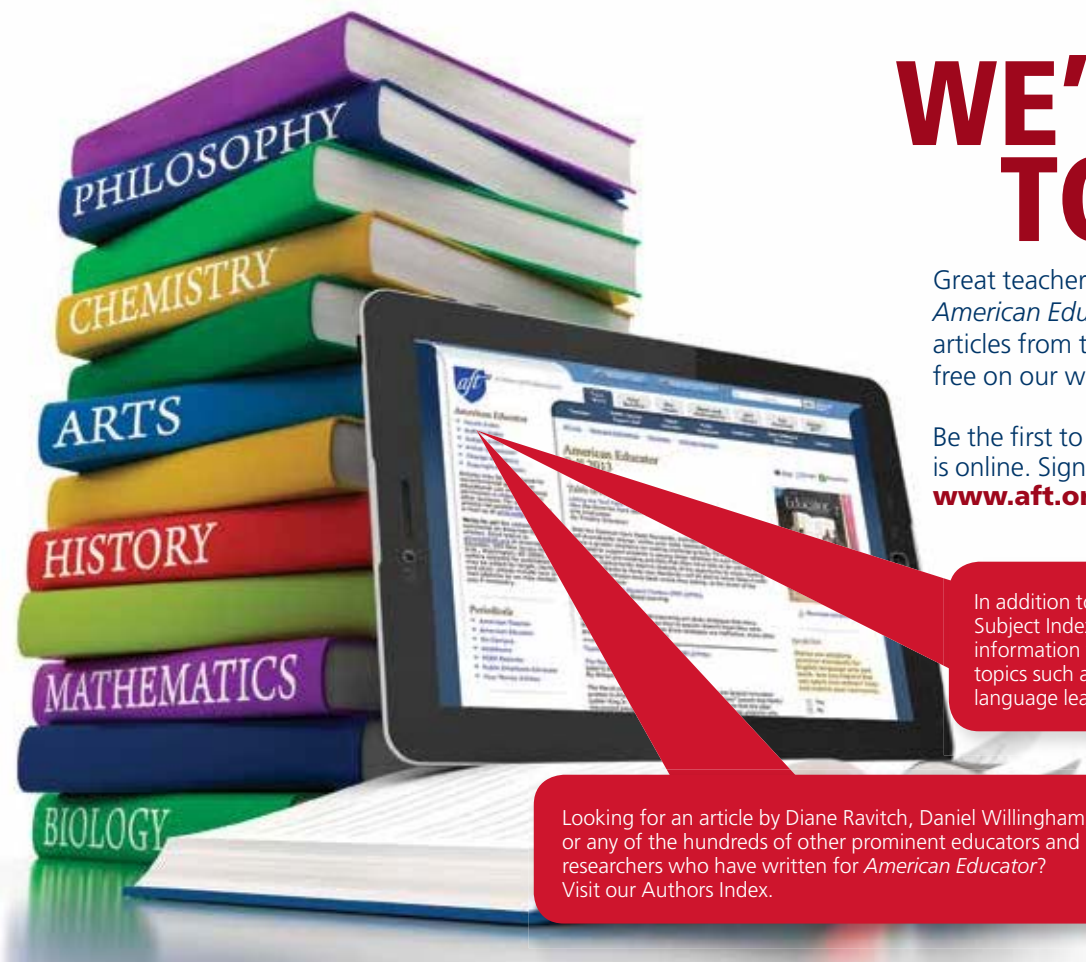
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Banding Together

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Endnotes

1. Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force, *U.S. Education Reform and National Security* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2012). This is not the first time that militaristic rhetoric has prominently figured in an attack on public education. *A Nation at Risk*, a 1983 presidential commission report, declared that “if an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.” That report was highly influential, and the authors of the 2012 report may have hoped that the imagery would have a similar impact.
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3. Diane Ravitch, “Waiting for a School Miracle,” *New York Times*, May 31, 2011 (“turnaround” schools); Sam Dillon, “‘No Child’ Law Is Not Closing a Racial Gap,” *New York Times*, April 28, 2009 (achievement gap); and Jaekyung Lee, *Tracking Achievement Gaps and Assessing the Impact of NCLB on the Gaps* (Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2006). See generally, Richard Rothstein, *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2004). The same “no benefit” conclusion applies to voucher schemes. See chapter 9 in David L. Kirp, *Improbable Scholars: The Rebirth of a Great American School System and a Strategy for America’s Schools* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
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7. Mike Schmoker, “Tipping Point: From Feckless Reform to Substantive Instructional Improvement,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 85, no. 6 (2004): 424–432. See generally, John Seeley Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000); Peter Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard Ross, George Roth, and Bryan Smith, *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations* (New York: Doubleday, 1999); and Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, *The Knowledge-Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
8. On the importance of “chemistry” among teachers, see Donna Sabers, Katherine Cushing, and David Berliner, “Differences among Teachers in a Task Characterized by Simultaneity, Multidimensionality, and Immediacy,” *American Educational Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (1991): 63–88.
9. Paul T. Decker, Daniel P. Mayer, and Steven Glazerman, *The Effects of Teach For America on Students: Findings from a National Evaluation* (Princeton, NJ: Mathematica, 2004).
10. Cynthia Coburn and Jennifer Lin Russell, “District Policy and Teachers’ Social Networks,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 30, no. 3 (2008): 203–235; Helen Marks and Karen Louis, “Does Teacher Empowerment Affect the Classroom? The Implications of Teacher Empowerment for Instructional Practice and Student Academic Performance,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 19, no. 3 (1997): 245–275; and Karen Louis, Helen Marks, and Sharon Kruse, “Teachers’ Professional Community in Restructuring Schools,” *American Educational Research Journal* 33, no. 4 (1996): 757–798.
11. Irene Stamatopolous readily relates to these youngsters’ problems, because in some ways her early life paralleled theirs. When she was an infant, her family emigrated from Greece. As a young child, she grew up in a Greek neighborhood in the Bronx, speaking only Greek, and when her family moved to the suburbs, she had a hard time adjusting. “I never got any extra help in school because I spoke a different language,” she recalls. “And I never quite fit in those first few years.”
12. Carol Briscoe and Joseph Peters, “Teacher Collaboration across and within Schools: Supporting Individual Change in Elementary Science Teaching,” *Science Education* 81, no. 1 (1997): 51–65; Schmoker, “Tipping Point”; Roger Stewart and Jonathan Brendefur, “Fusing Lesson Study and Authentic Achievement: A Model for Teacher Collaboration,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 86, no. 9 (2005): 681–687.
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14. E. D. Hirsch Jr., “How to Stop the Drop in Verbal Scores,” *New York Times*, September 18, 2011.
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18. Compare Jerome T. Murphy, “Title 1 of ESEA: The Politics of Implementing Federal Education Reform,” in *Education Policy Implementation*, ed. Allan R. Odden (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 34, with Paul Peterson and Martin West, eds., *No Child Left Behind? The Politics and Practice of School Accountability* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2003).
19. For New Jersey graduation rates, see www.state.nj.us/education/data/grate. For an account of a perpetually failing district, see “How We Fail the Kids in Camden,” *NJ Left Behind* (blog), April 27, 2010. See also David L. Kirp, John P. Dwyer, and Larry A. Rosenthal, *Our Town: Race, Housing and the Soul of Suburbia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).



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