

# Supporting Labor-Management Collaboration


Far too often, news coverage of public education today focuses on its seemingly insurmountable problems. Sensational accounts of conflict and mistrust dominate headlines. Stories seem to be published daily in which outsiders seeking to completely overhaul public schools are glorified, while teachers and administrators are wrongly accused of protecting the status quo. And if an article fails to label teachers and administrators as obstacles to education reform, it is likely to portray them as

Jersey, and the other in Meriden, Connecticut—that are models of collaboration. This issue also examines the history of the AFT’s path toward supporting strong labor-management relationships.

That path has been long and hard. Working together does not always come naturally to adults who have long seen themselves on opposite sides of the fence when it comes to education priorities. AFT President Randi Weingarten has often acknowledged the difficulty of educators and administrators setting aside differences and finding

dous benefits to student achievement and teacher development, while the firsthand stories of labor-management collaboration in school districts will resonate with those wanting to do similar work.

Sustaining union-management partnerships is not easy, but nothing worth doing ever is. Such work requires that educators and administrators communicate with each other, trust each other, and respect each other as the professionals they are. “Those who are serious about improving schools recognize that conflict is a destruc-



A focus on strengthening labor-management partnerships must be part of any serious school-improvement effort.

two sides pitted against each other, unable to work together by virtue of the starkly different positions and interests they hold.

These articles usually leave out the simple fact that teachers and administrators want the same thing: a high-quality education for all children. Rarely do they highlight those teachers and administrators who *are* working together to improve student achievement. Rarely do they highlight their quiet successes: the steady gains their students make, the effective professional development programs they provide to all staff, and the culture of collaboration that filters down into individual schools and allows them to thrive.

This special issue of *American Educator* does highlight this work—the work of labor-management collaboration. It features articles on the mounting research showing that partnerships between administrators, teachers, and unions strengthen schools, and it provides an in-depth look at two school districts—one in Union City, New

Jersey, and the other in Meriden, Connecticut—that are models of collaboration. This issue also examines the history of the AFT’s path toward supporting strong labor-management relationships. That path has been long and hard. Working together does not always come naturally to adults who have long seen themselves on opposite sides of the fence when it comes to education priorities. AFT President Randi Weingarten has often acknowledged the difficulty of educators and administrators setting aside differences and finding common ground. “I suppose it should be obvious that bare-knuckles brawling is unlikely to lead to progress, but I have to admit it took me a while to see things this way,” she wrote in a *Huffington Post* article. “When I first became a union leader, I was quick to identify the enemy, fire up members, and wage war for what I believed to be right. Eventually, I learned that if you set out looking for a fight, you’ll find one—but you probably won’t find a solution.”

The articles in this issue of *American Educator* offer solutions, although we certainly do not contend that collaboration is an appropriate path in every context and situation. Working together, after all, cannot be forced. If conditions are not right, if either side is unwilling to participate, then trying to engage an obstinate partner makes little sense. As the saying goes, it takes two to tango. Our hope is that the research on collaboration will show teachers and administrators that their efforts to forge lasting partnerships can result in tremen-

ous benefits to student achievement and teacher development, while the firsthand stories of labor-management collaboration in school districts will resonate with those wanting to do similar work. Sustaining union-management partnerships is not easy, but nothing worth doing ever is. Such work requires that educators and administrators communicate with each other, trust each other, and respect each other as the professionals they are. “Those who are serious about improving schools recognize that conflict is a destruc-

So what is the formula? Besides an engaging curriculum, small class sizes, support for teachers, and wraparound services to meet children’s emotional, social, and health needs, a focus on strengthening labor-management partnerships must be part of any serious school-improvement effort. Such an effort requires time. Relationships between union and district leaders can take months and even years to build; no great partnership happens overnight. For those who wish to engage in this rewarding work, the following pages serve as a guide for how not to go it alone.

—EDITORS

