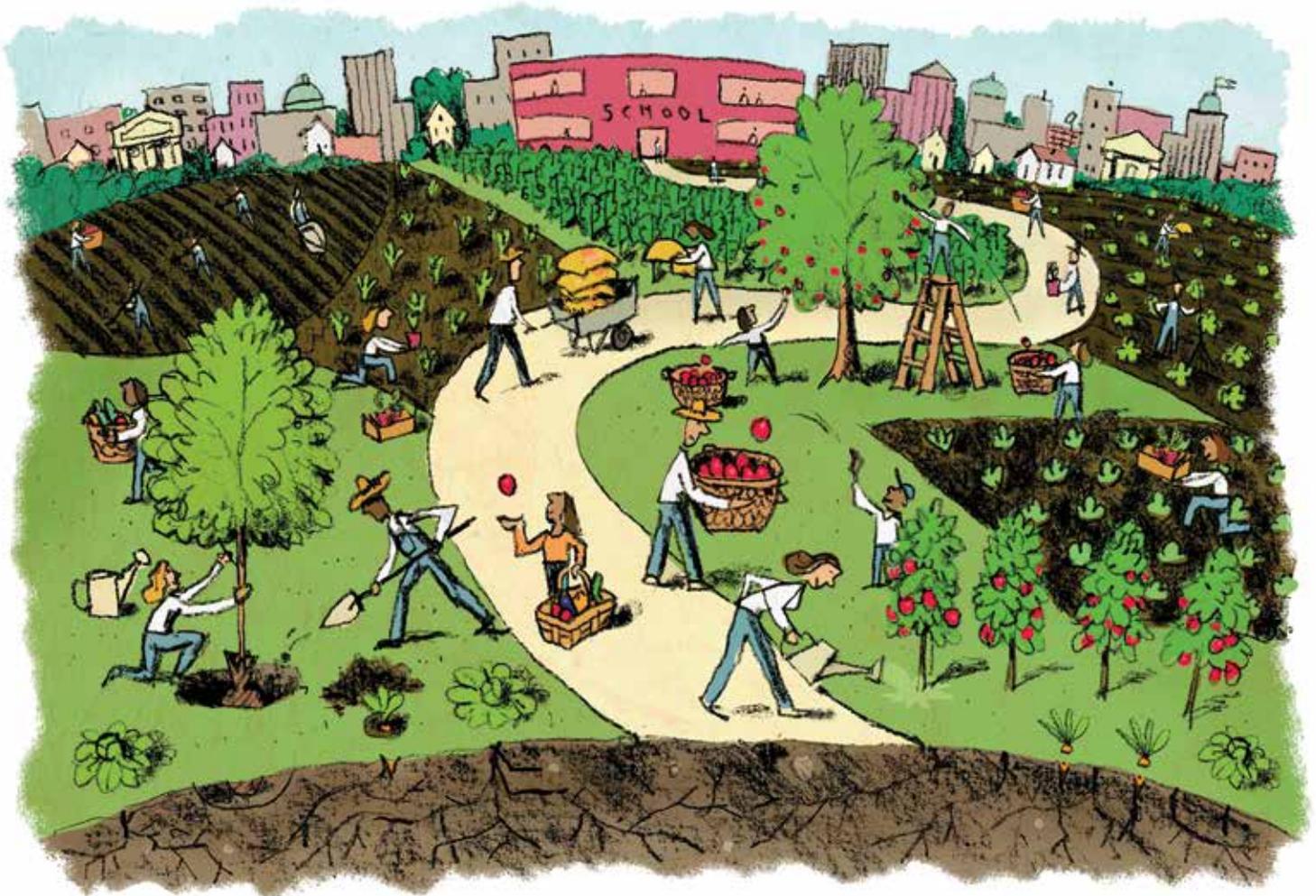


Cultivating Collaboration

The Science behind Thriving Labor-Management Relationships



BY GREG ANRIG

In recent years, rigorous studies have shown that effective public schools are built on strong collaborative relationships between administrators and teachers. Those findings have helped to accelerate a movement in some districts across the United States focused on constructing such partnerships in public schools. Both the promising research and the percolating innovations aimed at nurturing collaboration have largely been neglected by the mainstream media, which remains preoccupied with the “education wars” between teachers’ unions and their detractors. But the mediocre results arising from policies that have

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dominated national reform efforts like No Child Left Behind—efforts that rely heavily on punitive responses to unsatisfactory student outcomes—only bolster the case against coercive incentives enforced by rigid top-down hierarchies.

Even the U.S. Department of Education, which has often supported the ideas and echoed the rhetoric of those highly critical of teachers’ unions, has begun to embrace labor-management collaboration. For example, in February 2011, the department sponsored a national conference in Denver, “Advancing Student Achievement through Labor-Management Collaboration,” which brought together 150 district teams of superintendents, union leaders, and school board presidents to share promising practices (see the box on page 6). Then, in May 2012, the department organized another national conference in Cincinnati, “Collaborating to Transform the Teaching Profession,” which added state teams to the participant mix, including chief state school officers, state union leaders, and state school board members. For the Cincinnati conference, the department published a white paper on labor-management collaboration that made this argument:¹

While real differences must be acknowledged and agreement among all stakeholders is neither a practical, nor a desirable, end goal in itself, the U.S. Department of Education believes that in the long run, the most promising path to transforming American education is student-centered labor-management collaboration. ... The most dramatic improvements will be made when those responsible for implementing reforms not only endorse them, but also work together to formulate, implement, and continuously improve them. In short, the Department proposes that tough-minded collaboration—that is collaboration built around the success of students and not the needs of adults—will lead to more effective practices and a more sustainable path to elevating education than the ups and downs of adversarial relationships that have long characterized labor-management relations.

The two largest national teachers' unions—the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—have embarked on major initiatives to promote greater collaboration, supported in some cases by large foundations. While it is still true that attacks on teachers' unions show little sign of abating, the growing recognition that labor-management collaboration is an essential condition for improving student achievement is nonetheless helping to shift the pendulum toward more cooperative efforts. Skeptics will no doubt perceive that reversal as another fad plaguing American education. After one reform strategy doesn't pan out, the pattern often has been to try the opposite approach without much basis for believing that it will be effective either.

This issue of *American Educator* is dedicated to addressing such concerns, exploring in depth why collaboration between teachers' unions and administrators has the potential to significantly improve student achievement and strengthen the nation's school systems. It synthesizes research findings; highlights districts and schools that have intensively pursued collaboration; and provides strategies to guide teachers, administrators, and public officials interested in cooperation. It also explains *why* collaboration is critical to raising student performance, drawing from research in other institutional settings as well.

A few caveats at the outset. First, while labor-management collaboration is a necessary condition for sustained improvement in school performance, it is not sufficient. The strong relations must extend beyond the bargaining table to a persistent, team-oriented focus on enabling teachers to work more effectively with students. Other, interrelated factors also are crucial, including close ties with parents and community groups, and attentiveness to assessment results to identify areas where students and teachers need more support. Second, while collaboration can promote a self-sustaining culture that outlives the tenure of any individual superintendent, principal, or teachers' union representative, it's also the case that disruptive personnel changes and political forces can torpedo progress built on collaboration. Third, because collaboration usually requires upending deeply entrenched cultural habits, it is inherently arduous and requires years of effort on the part of all parties. Collaboration is not a "silver bullet" that will eliminate whatever ails a school; rather, it is a shared mindset and an agreed-upon collection of processes that over time enables everyone connected to a school to effectively work together in educating children.

Labels often inadequately communicate the complex and varying real-world relationships that words are intended to encapsulate. Shorthand terminology like "collaboration" or "professional learning communities" can be easily misinterpreted to mean little more than civil communication among administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders in schools. Many administrators may believe they are behaving collaboratively with teachers when their actual relationships bear little resemblance to those found in highly effective schools. To shed light on what collaboration actually entails, let's unpack the relevant research.

What Makes Successful Schools Tick?

For several decades, educational researchers have attempted to identify successful public schools, particularly in low-income settings, and then determine the characteristics that enabled those schools to thrive. Much of that work began with the effective schools movement, which was launched in the late 1970s under the leadership of the late Ronald R. Edmonds; after his death in 1983, that work moved to the National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development in Okemos, Michigan. Unfortunately, much of that early work suffered from data shortcomings and mostly failed to uncover actionable conclusions beyond vague generalizations. In recent years, however, studies using more advanced statistical methods and drawing from much more reliable testing and demographic data have produced more rigorous findings. As a result, researchers have uncovered valuable insights about what makes schools successful.

There is growing recognition that labor-management collaboration is an essential condition for improving student achievement.

The most rigorous of these studies was conducted by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, which was led by Anthony S. Bryk, now the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Published in 2010, *Organizing Schools for Improvement* was based on demographic and testing data from 1990 through 2005 from more than 400 Chicago elementary schools, as well as extensive surveys of stakeholders in those schools.² Using advanced statistical methods, the consortium identified, with a high degree of reliability, the organizational traits and processes that can predict whether a school is likely to show above-average improvement in student outcomes.

The consortium's central finding was that the most effective schools, based on test score improvement over time after taking into account demographic factors, had developed an unusually

high degree of “relational trust” among their stakeholders. It identified five key organizational features to advancing student achievement:

1. A coherent instructional guidance system, in which the curriculum, study materials, and assessments are coordinated within and across grades with meaningful teacher involvement;
 2. An effective system to improve professional capacity, including making teachers’ classroom work public for examination by colleagues and external consultants, and to enable ongoing support and guidance for teachers;
 3. Strong parent-community-school ties, with an integrated support network for students;
 4. A student-centered learning climate that identifies and responds to difficulties any child may be experiencing; and
5. Leadership focused on cultivating teachers, parents, and community members so that they become invested in sharing overall responsibility for the school’s improvement.

The consortium determined that those five features tended to reinforce each other, and that a significant weakness in any one undermined progress in terms of student performance. Schools with strong rankings on most of those traits were 10 times more likely to improve than schools weak in the majority of those capacities.

Mounting Interest in Labor-Management Collaboration

Several notable conferences have been held recently on labor-management collaboration, engaging teams of management and union leaders. In 2010, the AFT, along with scholars from university labor-management programs, organized the first National Conference on Collaborative School Reform (see the article on page 22). District teams of union leaders and administrators from 35 districts across the country came to learn about collaborative models of school improvement under way in Toledo, Ohio; St. Francis, Minnesota; and Norfolk, Virginia, among other AFT locals, and to discuss how labor-management collaboration might help their own districts.

In 2011 and 2012, with support from the Ford Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the GE Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education sponsored two conferences focused on labor-management collaboration. More than 150 state and local school district teams, composed of the superintendent, the local union president, and the board of education president, participated in the first conference, held in Denver, which focused on the core principles of labor-management collaboration. Around 100 district teams and 15 state teams participated in the second conference, in Cincinnati, whose theme was transforming the teaching profession.

Seven national organizations—the AFT, the National Education Association, the American Association of School Administrators, the National School Boards Association, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, the Council of the Great City

Schools, and the Council of Chief State School Officers—cosponsored these conferences and signed onto a joint statement in support of labor-management collaboration, available at <http://1.usa.gov/lBa8dS>.

What makes these conferences noteworthy is not only the prominent organizations that sponsored them, but also the requirement that, in order to attend, each team had to make an explicit commitment to work together to advance student learning. These meetings also provided important opportunities for sharing what the real details of collaboration look like, by highlighting the partnerships under way in a handful of districts and states.

Recognition of the importance of labor-management collaboration is growing. School districts and their labor counterparts across the country are working to create structures in collective bargaining agreements that not only support collaboration but use collaboration as a vehicle for change. Notably, in 2010, a landmark new contract was ratified in the Baltimore City Public Schools to radically change how teachers are evaluated and compensated. Moving away from the traditional salary schedule, the contract called for the development of a career pathways system to be designed by teachers and management. This system was



phased in over time and is monitored by a Joint Oversight Committee and a Joint Governing Panel of representatives from the Baltimore Teachers Union and the Baltimore City Public Schools. The effectiveness of the career pathways system will be evaluated after a few years of implementation. When facing a similar opportunity, the union president and the superintendent in Cleveland reached out to the Baltimore team and national staff at the AFT for technical assistance prior to entering into contract negotiations. Similarly, the New Haven Public Schools in Connecticut, with leadership from AFT President Randi Weingarten, became one of the first locals to adopt a model of teacher development and support that is targeted at overall district achievement. Successful union-management partnerships also exist in the ABC Unified School District in California,* the Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida, and the Plattsburgh City School District in New York.

—EDITORS

*For more on the ABC Unified School District, see “From Picket Line to Partnership,” in the Spring 2009 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/spring2009/dubin\(2\).pdf](http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/spring2009/dubin(2).pdf).

The Chicago researchers concluded that the leadership of principals is central in initiating and sustaining the organizational changes needed to improve student learning. They found that two key ideas are essential to effective leadership: One is that a strategic focus on improving teaching and learning is necessary. The second is that improvement must be grounded in continuing efforts to build trust across the school community. The authors wrote:

Quite simply, the technical activities of school improvement rest on a social base. Effectively constructing change in teaching and learning makes demands on the social resources of a school community. In the absence of these resources, individual reform initiatives are less likely to be engaged deeply, build on one another over time, and culminate in significant improvements in a school's capacity to educate all its children. So building *relational trust* remains a central concern for leadership.

The consortium's research is especially valuable because it focused on an unusually large and natural experiment launched when the city of Chicago delegated significant authority and resources to local school councils. The data accumulated over time enabled the consortium to capture the ways in which school personnel worked together and how those relationships affected students' progress. That provided researchers with a rare opportunity to examine organizational change as it played out across many different school and community conditions. Its results are not from a small, possibly atypical sample of schools that volunteered to participate in a structured experiment, but rather from a whole system of schools attempting to improve under local control. That combination—the diversity of the school community under study and the willingness of the schools to change without externally imposed incentives—added considerably to the overall generalizability of the consortium's findings.

“It Is All About the Strength of the Team”

The same five pillars that the Chicago consortium identified as keys to progress consistently emerge in other studies as well. For example, the National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA), a division of the company that produces the ACT college-admissions exam, sent teams of researchers to 26 public schools with a high proportion of low-income students in five states where students made significant gains on math and science tests over a three-year period.³ The common practices they found in those schools included:

- A high degree of engagement between administrators and teachers in developing and selecting instructional materials, assessments, and pedagogical approaches;
- Embedded time in the workweek for teacher collaboration to improve instruction;
- An openness among teachers to being observed and advised;
- Close monitoring by administrators and teachers of testing data to identify areas where students and teachers needed additional support; and
- Personnel who dedicate time to extensive outreach to parents and coordination with community groups and social service providers.

The NCEA's report includes numerous quotes from administrators and teachers, capturing distinctive aspects of their school's culture that they believe contribute to its success. A teacher at Shelby Middle School in Shelby, Michigan, said, “What makes Shelby Middle School good and unique is really the collegial teamwork. We allow time for colleagues to communicate, to work

The Consortium on Chicago School Research found that the most effective schools had developed an unusually high degree of “relational trust” among their stakeholders.



with and learn from each other.” A school leader at Hill Classical Middle School in Long Beach, California, observed, “The teachers here talk together and do things together a lot. Teacher collaboration is part of the reason we are as successful as we are. If they didn't do it, I don't think we would have our success.” A math teacher at the Linden School in Malden, Massachusetts, noted, “We always feel that we can ask each other for help or feedback about a particular instructional issue, or share examples of instructional practices that did or did not work well.” And a teacher at the Coolidge Elementary School in Flint, Michigan, explained, “We cling together pretty tightly as professionals. If a teacher is weak in a particular area, other teachers will step in and work with them so that they master those essential skills. It is all about the strength of the team.”

A similar study, *Beyond Islands of Excellence*, published by the Learning First Alliance, which focused on five high-performing

school districts with a significant portion of students from low-income families, reached many of the same conclusions. Particularly noteworthy was its finding that district leaders in the five systems studied determined that no single group would be expected to tackle instructional improvement alone. Instead, they redistributed leadership roles. Over time, the districts extended leadership from traditional positions, such as superintendents and principals, to include others: assistant principals, teacher leaders, central office staff, union leaders, and school board members.⁴

It is telling that such collaborative practices also characterize unusually strong schools in other countries. In 2010, the consulting firm McKinsey and Company published *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*, a report that analyzed 20 school systems that experienced significant, sustained, and widespread gains in student outcomes within coun-

descriptions of the practices that those schools have pursued.

DuFour describes his work as a “systems approach to school improvement,” which represents the antithesis of a culture based on individual isolation and independence. Concentrating on interdependent relationships, connections, and interactions, the focus is on creating powerful systems that promote the continuous improvement of the entire organization. Teachers are organized into grade-level, course-specific, or interdisciplinary collaborative teams in which educators work interdependently to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable. A process is put in place to ensure teams clarify the essential learning for each course, grade level, and unit of instruction; to establish consistent pacing; to create frequent common assessments to monitor student learning; and to agree on the criteria they will use to judge the quality of student work. Each team then

The pursuit of collaboration is inherently difficult because it entails upending top-down hierarchies that have characterized U.S. public schools for more than a century.



tries as diverse as Armenia, Chile, England, Ghana, Poland, and South Korea. Although the social and political context in which those schools function obviously varied, one common thread was a strong reliance on teamwork and close attentiveness to testing data.⁵ Michael Fullan, a Canadian educational researcher who has authored a host of books on school and organizational change and who composed the introduction to the McKinsey report, writes: “The power of collective capacity is that it enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things—for two reasons. One is that knowledge about effective practice becomes more widely available and accessible on a daily basis. The second reason is more powerful still—working together generates commitment.”⁶

The collaboratively driven practices identified by this research is reflected in the work of Richard DuFour, the former superintendent of the Lincolnshire, Illinois, public schools who is now the president of a firm that helps mostly suburban schools and districts develop professional learning communities. DuFour and his colleagues maintain a website (www.allthingsplc.info) that includes a list of about 150 schools across the United States and Canada that have followed their prescriptions, and features data about the schools’ test score performance that is uniformly impressive. The website also provides detailed

uses the evidence of student learning to identify individual students who need additional time and support, to discover problematic areas of the curriculum that require the attention of the team, and to help each member become aware of his or her instructional strengths and weaknesses.⁷

What makes the pursuit of collaborative practices so inherently difficult, as DuFour suggests, is that it entails upending traditional top-down hierarchies with teachers isolated in their own classrooms, a situation that has characterized U.S. public schools for more than a century. A 2009 survey by MetLife found that public school teachers spend an average of only 2.7 hours per week in structured collaboration with other teachers and school leaders, with just 24 percent of teachers spending more than 3 hours per week collaborating.⁸ Less than one-third of teachers reported observing each other in the classroom and providing feedback. That said, 90 percent of teachers agreed that other teachers contribute to their success in the classroom, including 51 percent who strongly agreed. Sixty-seven percent of teachers and 78 percent of principals responded that greater collaboration among teachers and school leaders would have a major impact in improving student achievement.

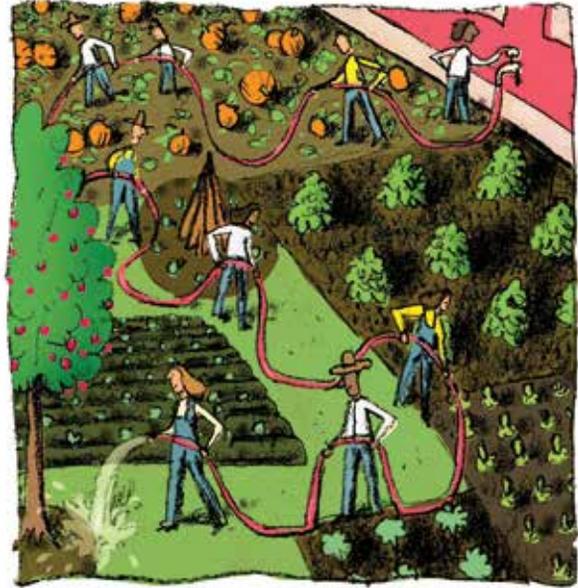
So what does the challenging path to greater collaboration look like?

Building a Collaborative Culture

Peacemaking and cultural change usually begin with courageous leadership, often involving constructive support from outsiders, including local foundations, community groups, and colleges, as well as consultants with a track record of helping public schools succeed. In the absence of federal or state policies geared toward promoting union-district cooperation—and amid the presence of many policies that promote conflict and mistrust—past instances of bridge building have occurred haphazardly. Harvard University professor Susan Moore Johnson has observed that such transformations have evolved independent of state, region, or policy climate, with the variation among collaborative partners wide and idiosyncratic.⁹ In many cases, as Rutgers University researchers Saul A. Rubinstein and John E. McCarthy have documented¹⁰ (see the article on page 22), sustained collaboration emerged only after relationships reached rock bottom, such as a strike, near-strike, or state takeover of a school district. Those crises eventually forced superintendents, school board members, and teachers' union representatives to recognize that conflict perpetuated a downward spiral, and that working together was the only way to reverse course.

In Springfield, Massachusetts, for example, a state takeover of the school system following the city's bankruptcy in 2004 became the catalyst for private meetings, facilitated by an independent think tank, between the superintendent and teachers' union president to heal wounds.¹¹ That led to the creation of a joint labor-management team, which conducted surveys of administrators and teachers about how to improve the city's schools. A long, extremely arduous, and often contentious process ensued, but over time trust began to build between administrators and teachers, who were given much greater voice in decision making. Outside community groups played a more active role in supporting the collaborative school revitalization effort, and better communication with parents was established. Union President Timothy Collins, who led Springfield's teachers throughout the entire period, said: "We are trying to create a culture that connects parents to schools. Our framework is about strengthening the ability of kids; it is about the community, parents, teachers, and kids." Student test scores have improved modestly since 2008, and the jury is out about whether the gains will continue, but no one in Springfield contends they took the wrong path. (Another strong example is that of Cincinnati; see the sidebar on page 10.)

In some cases, a particular initiative can transform school culture and spark collaboration. One example of a program that focused on building stronger cooperative relationships between administrators and teachers, as well as among teachers, is an effort in Iowa. The Authentic Intellectual Work (AIW) project began in September 2007 and entailed creating school administrator and teacher teams to follow a research-based framework focused on intellectual challenges that teachers present to students, rather than teaching techniques. The AIW approach, developed by University of Wisconsin–Madison professor Fred M. Newmann and his associates, establishes criteria for teaching that aims to maximize expectations of intellectual challenge and rigor for all students, elevate student interest in academic work, support teachers to enable them to provide an in-depth under-



The AFT has a long history of training and technical assistance for labor-management teams from school districts committed to collaborative school improvement.

standing rather than superficial coverage of material, and offer a common conception of student work that promotes a professional community among teachers of different grade levels and subjects.¹²

Schools applied voluntarily to the project and sent teams of teachers and administrators to institutes introducing them to AIW criteria and standards. During the school year, they also participated in regular on-site team meetings to critique and improve teachers' assignments, assessments, and lessons, with periodic on-site coaching provided by external advisers trained in AIW. Participants also attended midyear institutes where teams from different schools continue their professional development through subject-area workshops. The Iowa Department of Education provided financial resources (on average, just under \$5,500 per school in the program's fifth year). The program grew rapidly, expanding from nine high schools and 76 teachers in its first year to 106 K–12 schools and about 3,500 teachers by the spring of 2012.

A report for the Iowa Department of Education found that students in AIW schools across grade levels and subjects (reading, mathematics, science, and social studies) scored higher on the state's standardized test of basic skills and educational development than students in comparable non-AIW schools, and they

had higher percentages of students scoring above the state's standard for proficiency.¹³ Concern that those results may be skewed due to selection bias—more motivated teachers and administrators opting into the program could explain the favorable results—was minimized by an analysis showing similar test score trajectories in the AIW and comparison schools before the program started. Focus groups and case studies conducted as part of the state's evaluation of the program found that administrators felt they were giving teachers more relevant feedback because both administrators and teachers were part of the learning team. And by providing the framework for regular communication among teachers, those interviewed said their instruction was improving through collaboration with their colleagues. In addition, sharing the perspectives of teachers in different disciplines and grade levels also helped enrich curriculum and instruction, the report found.

Both of the major teachers' unions have initiatives to promote

labor-management collaboration, supported in part by private foundations. The AFT has a long history of training and technical assistance for labor-management teams from school districts committed to collaborative school improvement. And since 2011, the AFT has convened teams of administrators and teachers from districts pursuing collaborative approaches for joint learning experiences on best practices in teacher evaluation and Common Core implementation. The most recent of these conferences, held in September 2013 in Houston, titled "Connecting the Dots 2.0: Collaboratively Moving from a Sorting System to a Learning System," attracted administrator-teacher teams from about 25 districts across the country. In 2009, the American Federation of Teachers launched the AFT Innovation Fund, which cultivates and invests in school reform ideas proposed by local and state affiliates of the AFT through an annual competitive-grant process. Many of the 30 grants awarded to date have supported collaborative undertakings in local school districts,

Community Building in Cincinnati

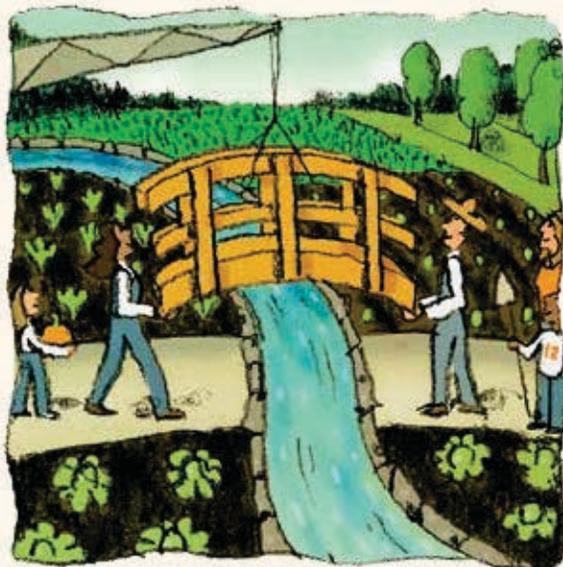
One of the largest U.S. urban school districts to experience substantial and sustained improvements in student outcomes is Cincinnati, Ohio, now recognized as a national model of collaboration between administrators and teachers, along with parents and community groups. Although there were plenty of bumps along the way, including three superintendent changes and the contested election of a new teachers' union head between 2002 and 2009, the district has experienced a much greater degree of teamwork than the norm over an extended period.

In 1985, Cincinnati was the second district in the country to adopt Peer Assistance and Review,* a program that enlists master teachers to serve as mentors for novice teachers as well as struggling veteran teachers. The district also has experimented with a variety of team-based instructional approaches and innovative teacher compensation systems embedded in collective bargaining agreements dating back to the 1980s, driven initially, to a large extent, by longtime Cincinnati Federation of Teachers President Tom Mooney, who died in 2006. The city's pioneering Community Learning Centers,[†] which provide students with access

to a wide array of health services, after-school programs, tutoring, and other social supports on school grounds, are so highly regarded that they attracted some of New York City's recent mayoral candidates to visit and study how they might be emulated.[‡]

Although there is no way to tease out the degree to which any particular program is most responsible for Cincinnati's impressive results, the common thread among all the city's distinctive initiatives has been a culture that strives to overcome the barriers between teachers, administrators, parents, and service providers that prevail in many urban districts.

Critically, collaborative practices are embedded in the district's collective bargaining agreement. Cincinnati's most recent three-year collective bargaining agreement, which took effect on January 1, 2011, builds on previous contracts with a multitude of provisions ensuring that teachers have a strong voice in decision-making processes. Those structures range from districtwide committees that focus on budgets, employee benefits, school performance oversight, peer review, and disciplinary issues, to school-based teams. Each school is governed by a local decision-making committee comprising three



teachers, three parents, and three community members along with the principal. The contract also requires the creation of instructional leadership teams, which include elected leaders of teacher groups who work together on a daily basis, as well as parents, leaders of community service providers, and the principal.

Even the contract negotiation process in Cincinnati is built on collaborative strategies to solve common problems. This process follows Harvard's Principled Negotiation guidelines, which were established in part based on approaches originally undertaken in Cincinnati. Cincinnati Federation of Teachers President Julie Sellers cautions that "it's hard work to

*For more on peer review, see "Taking the Lead," in the Fall 2008 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall2008/goldstein.pdf.

†For more on the Cincinnati Public Schools, see "From the Ground Up," in the Summer 2009 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/summer2009/fromgroundup.pdf.

such as expanded learning time for students as well as teachers; a communications campaign for parents, businesses, and local institutions about the Common Core State Standards; and the development of new teacher evaluation and development systems. In addition to the AFT itself, supporters of the Innovation Fund are the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Helmsley Charitable Trust; past funders include the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, and the Pew Charitable Trusts.

The National Education Association Foundation also supports efforts promoting collaborative union-district teams. In May of 2012, the Gates Foundation provided a \$550,000 grant to the NEA Foundation to build on existing efforts to develop school-based collaboration focused on enhancing professional development. Ten school districts and unions were selected to receive support through a competitive process that included

evaluations of the extent to which labor and management had demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with each other. The new grant will also fund the development of case studies illustrating successful union-district collaborative practices, identify lessons learned, and provide operational strategies to help other communities emulate those initiatives.¹⁴

The U.S. Department of Education has also recently placed a priority in its grant-making programs on encouraging states and districts to work together with teachers and their unions to improve schools and raise achievement. The department's Teacher Incentive Fund, School Improvement Grants, Investing in Innovation Fund, and Race to the Top Fund all include a focus on transforming the teaching profession through labor-management cooperation. In February 2012, the department launched a program called RESPECT (Recognizing Educational Success, Professional Excellence, and Collaborative Teaching), aimed at directly interacting with teachers across the country to develop

be collaborative, and it's not always an easy process. It takes both sides making a commitment and concessions for it to work, and it must be built on formal structures that are recognized in contracts to be sustainable."

Another important element of Cincinnati's success has been close collaboration with community service providers, to reach those areas of a student's life that often affect academic performance but that schools generally cannot control. About a decade ago, Darlene Kamine (formerly a district consultant, now the director) led the development of Cincinnati's Community Learning Centers to bring together local social service providers on school sites to help support children and their families. During the school day, after school, on weekends, and over the summer, Community Learning Centers offer students services such as medical, dental, and vision care; tutoring and mentoring support; and sports and arts programs. Sellers says, "The teachers are thankful that the services are in the building because they know that the students' needs will be met, making them feel more secure and leading to better behavior."

In addition, beginning in 2007, more than 300 leaders of local organizations in the greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky area agreed to participate in a coordinated effort called Strive. Participating organizations are grouped into 15 different Student Success Networks by type of activity, such as early childhood educa-

tion or tutoring. Representatives of each of the 15 networks meet with coaches and facilitators for two hours every two weeks, developing shared performance indicators, discussing their progress, and learning from and supporting each other. An article in the

Stanford Social Innovation Review highlighted Strive as a model worth emulating, with its centralized infrastructure, dedicated staff, structured processes, and close relationships with school personnel and parents.²

Affirmed by student test results, improved parent involvement, stronger teacher-administrator relationships, and wraparound services provided by the community schools—which are now planned for every school in the district—Cincinnati's success clearly deserves much greater attention from struggling districts. Central to Cincinnati's success has been what stakeholders there recognize as a strong degree of trust between school

administrators and the teachers' union. It is no accident that Cincinnati Public Schools Superintendent Mary Ronan and the city's teachers respect each other. Ronan spent her entire career in Cincinnati, beginning as a middle school math and science

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teacher in 1976. Later she became an elementary school principal and climbed the administrative ladder while forming strong relationships along the way. Julie Sellers, the Cincinnati federation president, says, "[Ronan] probably knows more teachers than any superintendent. I think it has been beneficial for her to get buy-in. Teachers feel comfortable talking to her."³

—G.A.

Endnotes

1. Javier C. Hernandez, "Mayoral Candidates See Cincinnati as a Model for New York Schools," *New York Times*, August 11, 2013.
2. John Kania and Mark Kramer, "Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2011).
3. Alyson Klein, "Veteran Educator Turns Around Cincinnati Schools," *Education Week*, February 6, 2013.

ideas for transforming how teachers are recruited, credentialed, supported, compensated, promoted, and retained within the profession. Because this burst of activity has only been under way for a few short years, there is every reason to believe that it has the potential to snowball into a much broader movement—especially if participating districts experience improved student outcomes.

Collaboration in the Common Core Era

The growing body of research demonstrating connections between collaborative relationships in schools and improved student outcomes is consistent with studies in other institutional settings showing that higher levels of internal communication, teamwork, and responsiveness to data are associated with better results. Many companies have found, and research has con-

Studies in other settings show that higher levels of communication, teamwork, and responsiveness to data are associated with better results.



firmed, that they become more efficient and improve the quality of their work when they replace assembly lines with innovations like self-managed “quality circles,” flattened hierarchies, team-based problem solving, and other high-performance work practices.¹⁵ The late management expert W. Edwards Deming, who helped revolutionize U.S. manufacturing beginning in the 1980s by explaining successful Japanese innovations to domestic pro-

ducers, once wrote, “We will never transform the prevailing system of management without transforming our prevailing system of education. They are the same system.” Just as corporations could become more productive through enhanced teamwork that facilitated greater communication and problem solving, Deming and others argued, schools that promoted deeper relationships among teachers and administrators could better manage the many challenges connected to educating students.

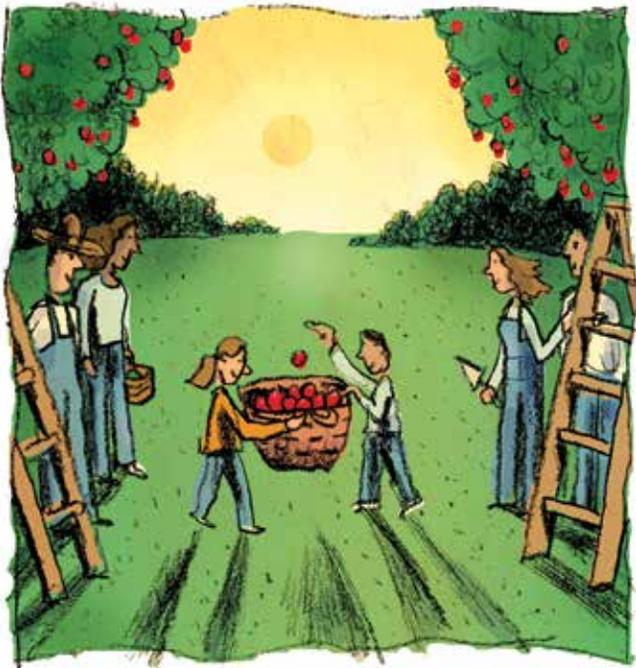
The sociologist James Coleman, famous for his seminal work documenting the strong relationships between socioeconomic status and test score results, also researched the importance of “social capital” to the success of schools and other institutions. In 1988, Coleman wrote: “A group within which there is extensive trustworthiness and extensive trust is able to accomplish much more than a comparable group without that trustworthiness and trust.”¹⁶ More recently, Carrie Leana, a professor of organizations and management at the University of Pittsburgh who has conducted numerous studies analyzing the connection between school personnel relationships and student outcomes, wrote in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*: “When the relationships among teachers in a school are characterized by high trust and frequent interaction—that is, when social capital is strong—student achievement scores improve.”¹⁷

Nonetheless, the vast majority of public schools have not even attempted to transform their organizational culture toward greater collaboration. Both Republican and Democratic elected officials continue to fixate on incentives, driven mainly by the logic of economic theory, which they believe will induce school administrators, teachers, and students to perform better. For example, the decades-long (and still ongoing) movement to strengthen standards and penalize failure to achieve specified benchmarks was a central element of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and many state reforms that preceded it. The presumption underlying the standards-based approach was that threats associated with failure to attain specified goals would push everyone involved in school systems to perform better. The Common Core State Standards, which President Obama has backed enthusiastically and which a vast majority of states and the District of Columbia have agreed to adopt, could be the latest unsuccessful example if connected to a poorly conceived, primarily punitive accountability approach.

Content standards are essential in clarifying for the entire educational community the knowledge and skills that all students are expected to attain in school. But standards alone, with or without incentives, are not enough to enable school systems to help students achieve those goals. What’s missing are strategies that empower district officials, school administrators, teachers, and parents to work together to help increasing numbers of students meet those standards. Because the standards movement has evolved without any accompanying strategies that improve the way school systems work, it has induced relatively little progress on student achievement. A 2012 report by the Brookings Institution examined state-level changes on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores from 2003 to 2009, controlling for the demographic characteristics of each state, in relation to the quality of state standards as rated by the Fordham Foundation—a strong proponent of standards.¹⁸

The Brookings study found there was no meaningful relationship between the quality of state standards as measured by the Fordham index and changes in NAEP scores. Nor did the rigor of performance levels states used to determine “proficiency,” as required by NCLB, relate to achievement on NAEP. The Brook-

Better student outcomes will emerge from concerted efforts to build school cultures on trust.



ings report also found that, within states, NAEP scores varied widely regardless of the standards employed, suggesting that setting benchmarks has failed to level out performance across districts within a state as advocates had claimed they would. The study noted, “Every state, including [top-ranked] Massachusetts and [bottom-ranked] Mississippi, has a mini-Massachusetts and Mississippi contrast within its own borders.”

In explaining why the standards movement has failed to have much of an impact on test score results, the Brookings report emphasized the enormous variation in the thousands of U.S. school districts and tens of thousands of schools. It is precisely because the U.S. system of public education is so decentralized and variable that team-based approaches to transforming the organizational culture within schools, in addition to establishing a common curriculum,* hold greater promise for addressing the

kinds of challenges Brookings identifies. In successful U.S. schools and districts, regardless of the particular standards under which they operate, teachers and administrators recognize their shared mission to work together to help struggling students learn and move to the next grade level. And because teachers in collaborative settings actively support each other, there is less variability in what they teach.

What will it take for the budding experiments in school collaboration to take hold much more broadly? The critical step is wider recognition that better student outcomes will emerge from concerted efforts to build school cultures on trust. If a few more urban districts follow Cincinnati’s example and produce comparable improvements in test scores and graduation rates, other district leaders—as well as governors and mayors—will take notice. In much the same way, within particular schools, when teachers see that students taught by a colleague consistently perform at higher levels on team-developed assessments, they become more receptive to changing their instructional practice. The positive peer pressure of the collaborative team process fosters improvement. As Richard DuFour, who has helped dozens of school districts undergo such successful transformations, says: “Nothing changes the mind like the hard cold world hitting it in the face with actual real-life data.” □

Endnotes

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*For more on the importance of establishing a common curriculum, see the Winter 2010–2011 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/winter1011/index.cfm.