

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## COMMENTARY

# Weingarten: Four Solutions to Public School Problems

By **Randi Weingarten**

If there is one thing I've learned in my three decades representing educators and being a teacher, it's this: Public education is complex. And as income inequality grows and social mobility shrinks, it's become even more complex. Public education is one of the only highways to opportunity for many kids. Yet, its promise is not always realized, particularly for those who have the least.

A quick, myopic fix won't work. Education reforms—those based in ideology, not fact—have been oversold, yet have ultimately underdelivered on their promise, leaving even ardent supporters questioning their value. Recently, Michael Petrilli, the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, **wrote**, "We need to look at our reform agenda and ask ourselves: Is it working? ...

Does it diagnose the problem correctly and offer the right cures?"

Luckily, solutions that are successful—those that center on working with teachers in a deeply professional and collaborative way—are out there. Here are four I've seen in action.

**1. Stop, collaborate, and listen.** Too often, real transformation in our schools is stifled when we stop listening to one another. A few years back, the school district in New Haven, Conn., was in turmoil, with teachers and their union at loggerheads with the district. Both sides decided that the continued acrimony wasn't helping New Haven's children. Labor and management began to build trust, and eventually agreed on two outside-the-box contracts. These back-to-back contracts reformed teacher evaluation into a system of continuous improvement and provided a decent wage-and-benefit package, a career ladder, and professional-development opportunities.

I visited New Haven at the beginning of this school year. Teachers told me that collaboration now is embedded in their schools' culture, and that trust throughout the community is at an all-time high.

**2. Fix—don't close or convert—neighborhood schools.** Closing neighborhood schools or selling them off to charter schools is one of those penny-wise, pound-foolish solutions that arise when districts are struggling, but it's not a recipe for sustaining or growing communities, or for helping kids thrive in those communities.

In Lawrence, Mass., schools were struggling, and some policymakers were turning to charter schools for help. But kids and parents wanted strong neighborhood public schools. So, together with the school district, local businesses, and community partners, the teachers' union helped open the **Oliver Partnership School**, and worked hand in hand with a new administration to

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**"A high-quality public education should include art and music, nurses and guidance counselors, sports and extracurricular activities."**

**turn around** other schools in the district. We wanted to forge a new path—one paved with professional development for teachers and increased services for students. On a recent visit to Lawrence, I saw real transformation underway in this economically depressed city. Teachers and administrators are collaborating. Parents and students are engaged. Morale is up. Test scores are on the rise.

**3. You'd better think (critically).** Kids need critical-thinking and problem-solving skills to succeed in our 21st-century economy. Yet, so much time is wasted on test preparation rather than preparing students for college, careers, and citizenship.

**The New York Performance Standards Consortium** does just the opposite. These schools have developed their own performance assessments, which grow directly from the curriculum and serve as an extension of the learning process. These assessments ask students to think deeply and show evidence.

The consortium's graduation rate and college-acceptance rates are impressive. Last year, I listened to one group of students from a consortium school discuss their education. Their joy of learning is palpable. I found the same thing at Roy Miller High School in Corpus Christi, Texas, where students are reaping the benefits of project-based learning.

**4. Meet the needs of the whole child.** A high-quality public education should include art and music, nurses and guidance counselors, sports and extracurricular activities. Yet, too often, kids are getting the bare minimum—this, when many public school children are living in poverty.

In Cincinnati, every public school is a Community Learning Center—a place where students and their families have access to wraparound services. At Roberts Academy, which I visited last month, students and families have access to health services and programs from early in the morning before school until late in the evening. The extra support is made possible through partnerships with local businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government programs.

Since adopting the Community Learning Center approach in 2001, **Cincinnati** has become the highest-performing urban school district in Ohio. High school graduation rates are up, and the achievement gap is closing.

This isn't an extensive list, but it gives a flavor of what works. With persistence and collaboration among teachers, students, parents, and administrators growing across the country, I believe we can tackle the complexities of public education head-on. The solutions are out there. The promise is within our reach.

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