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# Reforming Public School Systems through Sustained Union-Management Collaboration

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Saul A. Rubinstein, Ph.D. and John E. McCarthy July 2011



Center for American Progress



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# Introduction and summary

For most of the past decade the policy debate over improving U.S. public education has centered on teacher quality. In this debate, teachers and their unions have often been seen as the problem, not part of the solution. Further, current discourse often assumes that conflicting interests between teacher unions and administration is inevitable. What is missing in the discussion, however, is a systems perspective on the problem of public school reform that looks at the way schools are organized, and the way decisions are made. Most public schools today continue to follow an organizational design better suited for 20th century mass production than educating students in the 21st century.

This paper offers an alternate path in this debate—a counterstory that looks at schools as systems. It focuses on examples of collaboration among stakeholders through the creation of labor-management partnerships among teachers' unions, school administrators, and school boards. These partnerships improve and restructure public schools from the inside to enhance planning, decision-making, problem solving, and the ways teachers interact and schools are organized.

We base our findings on the analysis of six excellent examples of how teachers and their unions have been critical to improving public education systems in collaboration with administration. The six case studies included in this report were not selected randomly and are not intended to be a representative sample of all school districts nationally. Rather, the American Federation of Teachers, or AFT, recognized these districts as having a lengthy track record of innovation, and because they appear to have institutionalized a long-term collaborative partnership between administration and the local teachers' union centered around school improvement, student achievement, and teacher quality.

This report is an effort to analyze and improve understanding of how these innovative districts have fostered collaborative approaches to curriculum development, scheduling, budgeting, strategic planning, hiring, subject articulation, interdisciplinary integration, mentoring, professional development, and evaluation, among others.

Specifically, we studied how these efforts were created and sustained over the past two decades, and what they can teach us about the impact of significant involvement of faculty and their local union leadership, working closely with district administration, to share in meaningful decision making and restructure school systems. The report shows that collaboration between teachers, their unions, administrators, and school boards is both possible and necessary for any meaningful and lasting public school reform.

This report is an intermediate-level study looking at common patterns across a set of cases rather than looking in great depth within any particular district. While this study is limited in scope to this group of six districts that have long-term experience in creating a collaborative approach to school improvement, this approach allows us to draw comparisons across a highly diverse group of local unions and school districts, and find those patterns that are common.

These districts—ABC Unified School District, Cerritos, California; Hillsborough, Florida; Norfolk, Virginia; Plattsburgh, New York; St. Francis, Minnesota; and Toledo, Ohio—come from across the country, are both urban and rural, large and small. Our research team visited all six districts and conducted interviews that included six union presidents, seven current and former superintendents, 19 central office administrators and principals, 15 union representatives and executive board members, 13 teachers and support staff, six board members, and six members of the business community. In addition, we reviewed archival data including contracts, memorandums of understanding, student performance data, and internal reports. Interviews were recorded, coded, and categorized to establish the common themes, patterns, and experiences. This methodology provides greater generalizability than do individual case studies alone, and deeper understanding of the dynamics of union-management collaborative partnerships than do surveys.

Once common themes and patterns are established, they can be tested through larger samples and surveys. We hope these findings and models will be helpful to other school districts and local unions that want to pursue a strategy of collaborative school reform. We also hope it will encourage policymakers to design incentives for greater collaboration among teachers' unions, administrations and boards of education.

The experiences of these six districts demonstrate how collaboration between teacher's unions and administration can be created and sustained over time to improve teaching quality and student performance. Based on the results of this study we offer

the following conclusions and recommendations for local unions and districts seeking to engage in collaborative approaches to school reform and improvement:

- **Systems.** Education reform and improvement must be seen as a systems problem.
- **Formal structures.** Shared decision-making in school improvement must take place at both the district-level as well in the schools themselves.
- **Quality.** Successful union-management collaboration in public school reform must focus on substantive areas affecting the quality of teaching or student achievement.
- **Networks.** The development of peer-to-peer networks for improving teaching provides teachers with better skills, but also with a social network that can continue to support them and the ongoing exchange of ideas and techniques necessary to increase instructional quality.
- **Culture.** In addition to formal structures at the district and school level, districts must develop strong cultures of collaboration that inform approaches to planning and decision-making, as well as hiring decisions by school boards and superintendents.
- **Learning organizations.** Shared learning opportunities are critical to building and sustaining long-term collaboration.
- **Stability.** The longevity of all of these cases has benefited from the long-term tenure of union leaders, superintendents, or both.
- **Board of education.** Collaborative systems and management styles require the full support of school boards.
- **National union.** Districts and local unions can benefit greatly from the technical assistance, support, training, and resources available from their unions at both the national and state levels.
- **Community.** Community support is critical to institutionalizing collaboration.

# Case studies of sustained union-management collaboration in school reform and improvement

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## ABC Unified School District and ABC Federation of Teachers

### Background

Located approximately 25 miles south-east of Los Angeles, ABC Unified School District (ABCUSD) employs 927 teachers and serves 20,801 ethnically and linguistically diverse students throughout 30 schools, including 14 Title I schools. Twenty-five percent of students are English Language Learners. Approximately 46 percent are on free or reduced lunch.

Over the past five years ABCUSD's performance on the California's Academic Performance Index, or API, has been consistently at least 7 percent above the state average, and for the past two years has exceeded the API targets set by the state. The district estimates that approximately 85 percent of high school graduates move on to higher education.

### Initiating collaboration

The Partnership between labor and management in the ABCUSD emerged in the aftermath of a tumultuous eight-day strike in 1993 over mounting budget concerns, and the district's plan to slash teachers' health benefits and pay, while increasing class size. The strike was taxing for union president Laura Rico and also for teachers and administrators in the district. The bitterness that resulted motivated the union to become more involved in school board elections, recruiting and campaigning for candidates open to developing a more positive and collaborative relationship with the teachers' union.

When union-backed candidates won, and finally took a majority on the board, the superintendent changed, as did the climate in ABCUSD starting in 1995. The hiring of Dr. Ron Barnes in 1999 as superintendent marked an important step

forward in the Partnership between the union and administrators. Ron Barnes and Laura Rico recognized that the district's primary goal of educating students and making teachers successful was compromised when union-management relationships were adversarial, and that a more collaborative relationship was the most effective way of improving teaching quality and student performance. In working together to solve substantive problems for students and teachers, they built a relationship grounded in mutual respect and trust.

### Strategic priorities

Superintendent Ron Barnes was able to align the district, including the board of education and administration, around a set of goals and a strategic plan both for the district and each school. Together with Laura Rico, they developed a "Partnership," both individually in the way they worked together, and institutionally between the district administration and the union. This meant solving problems related to student performance and the teaching environment.

One of the first efforts at collaborative problem solving took place in 1999 at six schools on the southern side of the district, where a much higher percentage of students were on reduced or free lunch. A majority of students at these "South Side Schools" (four elementary, one middle school, and one high school) were English Language Learners and had low proficiency in reading and math. This created new opportunities to collaborate on recruiting, hiring, compensating, and retaining high quality teachers, as well as to improve curriculum and instructional practices and expand research-based professional development. In support of these efforts the union even increased its membership dues to pay for substitute teachers so South Side faculty could be released to take the professional development training. The program became known as the South Side Schools Reading Collaborative, and teaching improved as did student performance. This experience demonstrated to everyone the benefit of union-management collaboration. All parties agreed that it required a joint problem-solving approach to meet this challenge.

Over time this Partnership approach to improving the district expanded to other schools, and encompassed other issues related to teaching quality and student achievement. For example, the district increased use of AFT's research-based ER&D professional development program. As the Partnership expanded, the union and administration collaborated on textbook adoption; interviewing prospective administrators and teachers; curriculum; a new peer assistance,

mentoring, support, and evaluation program known as PASS (Peer Assistance and Support System); new teacher orientation; and processes for data-based decision-making regarding student performance. The union also appointed representatives to the district-wide Insurance Committee, Finance and Audit Committee, Strategic Planning Committee, Legislative/Policy Committee, Closing the Achievement Gap Committee, and Special Education Committee.

In 2005 Dr. Gary Smuts replaced Ron Barnes as superintendent, and the Partnership deepened further. To guide their collaborative efforts, the parties developed the following six principles emphasizing the importance of student achievement, teaching excellence, and mutual support:

- 1. All students can succeed and we will not accept any excuse that prevents that from happening at ABC. We will work together to promote student success.*
- 2. All needed support will be made available to schools to ensure every student succeeds. We will work together to ensure that happens.*
- 3. The top 5 percent of teachers in our profession should teach our students. We will work together to hire, train, and retain these professionals.*
- 4. All employees contribute to student success.*
- 5. All negotiations support conditions that sustain successful teaching and student learning.*
- 6. We won't let each other fail.*

### Supportive system infrastructure

Over the past decade, the culture of the ABC Unified School District has become one of shared planning, decision-making, and responsibility. It is built on respect, commitment, and trust at the highest levels of leadership in both the union and administration.

In addition to a collaborative leadership style, the Partnership is also supported by both formal and informal structures. For example, the superintendent and the union president meet on a weekly basis to discuss issues and keep the lines of

communication open. Other leaders from the union and management also speak frequently to each other about their joint work.

Leaders from both the administrative cabinet and the union executive board sit together on a District Leadership Team several times a year. This team and other union representatives and building principals attend an annual retreat where they assess progress, build their team, and plan the next steps in their Partnership. This full-day session, called “Partnership with Administration and Labor,” or P.A.L. has occurred every year since 1999, and the union and district split the cost.

While support at the top has been strong and visible, the parties recognized that an effective and lasting Partnership could not be sustained unless it also involved those who were most strongly connected to students—the teachers and principals. At the school level, principals and union building representatives meet weekly on collaborative leadership teams to discuss school issues, solve problems, and engage in site-based decision-making including textbook adoption, school schedules, and the hiring process for each school.

Further, last year the district received a grant from AFT’s Innovation Fund to support the development of 10 ABC school-based teams in Partnership efforts. These schools will take site-level collaboration, joint governance, and decision-making to an even deeper level. Leaders at these schools have received additional training and are working on specific projects to enhance teaching quality and student performance.

In addition to these site-based collaborative governance structures at the school level, union members also serve as department chairs, mentor teachers, and building representatives. Monthly building representative meetings include updates on the partnership and union president’s meetings with the superintendent, so the business of the union is integrated with participation in managing the district through the Partnership. This extensive involvement of union members and leaders in the Partnership at the district or school level, or through mentoring and professional development, has created a dense network of teacher-and-administrator, and teacher-and-teacher collaboration that contributes to improved communication, problem solving, teaching quality, and student achievement.

An extraordinary investment in joint learning opportunities for administrators, union leaders and teachers has also helped strengthen the Partnership. This has included training by AFT’s Center for School Improvement, or CSI, in meeting

skills, problem solving, and decision making. Teams have also received training from AFT’s Union Leadership Institute. In addition, the district and union consistently send joint teams to AFT’s biannual QuEST conferences. Over 400 district teachers—more than 40 percent of the membership—have attended sessions at CSI or QuEST with their principals.

Further, the PAL Retreat itself has served as an opportunity for shared learning and skill development that also builds communication and mutual understanding. Joint training has not only improved the technical, problem-solving, and decision-making skills of both teachers and principals, it has also strengthened their relationships as colleagues.

### Sustaining factors

Strong leadership from both the administration and the union has sustained and strengthened the Partnership at the ABC United School District for over a decade. The current superintendent, Dr. Gary Smuts, spent most of his career in the district, starting out as a teacher in 1974, and serving as a negotiator for the union in the 1980s. He entered the administration in 1986, and was a principal at the time of the 1993 strike. After the strike he approached union President Laura Rico to help overturn a rule that allowed principals to be fired for having philosophical differences with their superintendents. The change encouraged debate, collaboration, and helped to build trust.

Dr. Smuts was deputy superintendent in 2005 when the school board selected him as the next superintendent. Thus, he came to this Partnership with established relationships, a long history in the district, and an understanding and appreciation of the value collaboration brings to the school system. Similarly, Laura Rico also has had a long history of leadership within the union. She spent 19 years as a child development head teacher, and just completed her ninth term as the full-time president of the ABC Federation of Teachers. The stability of leadership in both the administration and the union, and their history of working together, were critical factors in building trust and institutionalizing the culture of collaboration, and the systems of shared decision-making that operate daily in the district.

The community has also supported the Partnership, from parent involvement in the South Side Schools Reading Collaborative, to volunteers from local businesses and community members in the schools, to support by the Board of Education.

Since the strike, the union has joined with parents in campaigning for board candidates supportive of increased collaboration by the union with the administration in planning, problem solving, and decision for school improvement. While there is little contract language to memorialize the partnership, the union and board have signed off on a mission statement, guiding principles, guiding behaviors, and a charter statement for the district.

Union-administration collaboration has further been aided by technical assistance and resources from the National AFT through training programs such as ER&D, the Union Leadership Institute, the Center for School Improvement, and QuEST Conferences, as well as through support from the AFT Innovation Fund.

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## Hillsborough County Public Schools and Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association

### Background

The eighth largest school district in the United States, Hillsborough County Public Schools, or HCPS, has more than 25,000 employees, which includes over 16,000 instructional staff and administrators. The district educates an economically and ethnically diverse student population of roughly 191,860 throughout 231 schools, including 142 elementary schools, 44 middle schools, two K-8 schools, 27 high schools, 10 special centers, and four career centers. Teachers in this district are represented by the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association, or CTA. Fifty-eight percent of district students qualify for reduced or free lunch.

HCPS has the highest graduation rate for all large districts in Florida, at 82.2 percent. The district has also achieved an “A” rating by the state based on student achievement three of the past four years. Over the past six years, HCPS has doubled their Advanced Placement enrollment numbers, as well as doubled the number of AP exams it administers. The district has been on the cutting edge of school reform, as demonstrated by its selection for an “Intensive Partnership” grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to improve effective teaching. These achievements have been made possible by a strong and mutually supportive partnership among district administrators, the board of education, and the teachers’ union.

## Initiating collaboration

The emergence of the partnership between the union and administrators in HCPS has roots in a statewide strike in 1968. Rather than an outgrowth of adversarial relations between teachers and administrators within the district, the 1968 strike occurred in response to the attempt by the state government to cut public educational resources. Teachers and administrators recognized the need for additional funding for student programs, and found themselves on the same side of the issue. The district even released Hillsborough teachers so that they could attend a meeting in Orlando to plan for the walkout.

Committed professionals from the union and administration came together over this period to draft legislation for student programs. Although a more formal and widespread collaborative climate took years to solidify, many from this cohort of strong leaders moved up through the district together, and assumed high-level positions. Some of the teachers later became administrators, while others became union leaders. It is estimated that about half of the current district-level administration are former CTA members.

The strike fostered solidarity of purpose, and made explicit a shared commitment to student achievement. Union-management collaboration around school improvement focused in the early 1970s around curriculum, examinations, and textbook selection. The collaborative partnership strengthened in the early 1990s under the leadership of the superintendent, Dr. Earl Lennard. Dr. Lennard came up through the district, had been politically active during the 1968 strike, and was well respected by both the union and administration. He had a pragmatic approach to leading the district, and wanted to build an environment that best served the interests of students. This meant reaching out to the union to help create a labor-management climate built on transparency, collaboration, trust and a mutual respect. This climate has grown even stronger under the current superintendent, MaryEllen Elia, and current union president, Jean Clements, with Yvonne Lyons serving as CTA Executive Director from 2000 until August 2009.

## Strategic priorities

There is clear recognition by the union and administration in Hillsborough that inclusion and collaboration in decision-making are powerful vehicles for educational reform. Both parties are committed to teacher excellence, to data-driven decision making, and to student achievement, and both parties have demonstrated

this commitment repeatedly by their willingness to innovate, change, and experiment on programs focused on improving the quality of education for all students.

Shared decision-making and collaboration has evolved over 30 years, starting with curriculum alignment, exam writing, and textbook selection, and professional development. Discussions around innovations in teacher evaluation and compensation began in the 1990s, but attempts were hindered by a lack of funding. The parties began to implement changes in these areas after 2000, and they are still evolving. Further, recognizing that teaching and managerial skills are developmental, collaboration has also given rise to an extensive range of mentoring, peer assistance, and review, and training opportunities for teachers as well as principals and other administrators.

### Supportive system infrastructure

The partnership in Hillsborough is supported by a strong culture of inclusion and mutual respect. District leaders speak frequently of widespread participation in decision-making, trust, and how the interests of students are best served when the union, administration, and Board of Education work collaboratively. The deputy superintendent in charge of human resources has monthly formal meetings with the union, and is in frequent (often daily) informal communication to discuss issues, solve problems, and head off concerns long before they reach the grievance procedure. Administrators talk about teachers as professionals, and some even actively encourage new faculty to join the union in this right-to-work state, so they can be appointed to the vast array of committees that have planning and decision-making authority in the way the schools are run.

“It is the culture of collaboration, and trust, and thoughtful consideration of practices that has made it possible for us to get this far, and we are confident will see us successfully through all the hurdles of implementation and comprehensive systemic change,” said local union president Jean Clements. This collaborative culture is supported by frequent formal and informal meetings and conversations between union leaders and administrators, by transparency, and by strong alignment around student achievement. Despite a local population of more than 1 million, the atmosphere in the district is more akin to a small town than a large city.

Shared planning, decision-making, and governance are important elements in Hillsborough’s system. Long before the popularity of curriculum and testing standards, CTA members came forward in the 1970s as volunteers to develop

rigorous middle school curricula and exams for the entire district. The district has promoted joint planning and site-based decision-making since the 1980s through extensive teams and other collaborative structures at the district and school levels.

For example, schools have School Improvement Process, or SIP, Teams that focus on student performance, and School Site Steering Committees that convene with the principal to discuss issues such as the budget, best practice instruction, class size, dress code, applicant screening, teaching assignments, among others. Statutory School Advisory Councils, or SACs, bring in other stakeholders by linking the union and administration with parents and students. Further, grade-level and department teams are led by teacher-leaders, and meet monthly to discuss exams, curriculum articulation, and student performance.

At the district level, committees comprised of union members and administrators meet regularly to discuss the curriculum, school calendar, professional development, instruction, and materials. For example, a textbook adoption committee composed of a majority of teachers selected by the union convenes to pick a handful of books that they feel best covers the subject matter in question. The selected textbooks are then sent to every school in the district for consideration by relevant faculty members. Each of these teachers receives a weighted vote based on how many of their courses rely on the material. The vote ultimately determines the textbook for the district.

Experienced, highly effective teachers serve as full-time mentors and provide observation and one-on-one feedback to new teachers for their first two years. Mentors themselves receive significant training, including three weeks over the summer and 10 hours per month over the school year. Among other forms of professional development, the union, in partnership with the district, has implemented a collaborative approach to improve teaching quality through a teacher center—The Center for Technology and Education—for technology training. All teachers new to the district are offered two orientation programs centered on lesson design, creating high classroom expectations, effective classroom management, as well as state standards and pacing guides. Training opportunities continue as professionals work their way through the school system, and opportunities for joint learning by union and administration together help to foster the culture of collaboration and shared decision-making.

The union appoints hundreds of teachers to committees, and faculty make up a substantial part of committee membership, in some cases, the majority. These committee appointments, along with faculty in other leadership roles at the school

level, including SIP, Steering Committee, and SAC; new teacher support; professional development trainers; and teacher leaders at grade or department-level, have created a dense network of teacher leadership in critical areas of the planning and decision-making activities of the Hillsborough County Public Schools.

### Sustaining factors

One of the most striking features of the collaborative partnership between the union and administration at Hillsborough County Public Schools is the extraordinary stability of leadership. The district has only seen four superintendents since 1968. Further, most administrators have been hired from within the school system. The current superintendent, MaryEllen Elia, currently in her fifth year in that position, has worked in the district for 23 years, and spent 19 years as teacher—most of that in Hillsborough.

Superintendent Elia and both deputy superintendents were union members. Both deputies are products of, and have spent their entire careers in Hillsborough County Schools. One of the deputies, Dan Valdez, started teaching in 1968, was a union building representative, and is now a deputy superintendent and director of human resources. The other deputy, Ken Otero, started teaching in 1976. Only about 4 percent of administrators employed by the district were hired from outside. Continuity was also provided by Yvonne Lyons, who served as executive director of the union from 2000 to 2009. Lyons began her teaching career in Hillsborough in 1965, joining the staff of the union in 1980. Jean Clements, became president of the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association in 2002, and is in her fourth term.

Hillsborough's commitment to professional development has created confidence over the years in the labor market within the schools, so the district is able to fill positions with talented employees who are familiar with the culture, have strong working relationships, and already have a track record of managing effectively in a system that values and actively supports inclusion and collaboration. As a result the culture of collaboration has been sustained and the system institutionalized.

To continue this tradition, the district has recently put in place a rich assortment of high-quality professional development opportunities that foster collaboration and help cultivate a strong cadre of candidates for internal promotion. Administrators receive training in effective hiring methods, as well as in manage-

rial competencies, conflict resolution, classroom monitoring, and performance evaluation. These training programs build capacity and quality within the district, and further support the internal labor markets that are important for the partnership's continuity.

The community has been involved in the partnership through its involvement on School Advisory Councils, and also through efforts by the district to develop strong ties to local businesses. Over the years of developing a more collaborative relationship, the union was actively involved in recruiting candidates for the local school board, and the board has made a priority of hiring superintendents who support a collaborative approach to managing the district.

The contract between the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association and the Hillsborough County Public Schools has also helped to sustain the partnership between teachers and administration. It is based on an assumption of collaboration in decision-making, and has called for union appointments to all district decision-making committees since 1971, starting with textbook selection and professional development. The contract sets the tone but the parties have moved beyond it. The union now becomes involved in decision-making even if the issue is not explicitly stated in the contract, because the board policy and the district culture is one of inclusion and shared governance.

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## Norfolk Public Schools and the Norfolk Federation of Teachers

### Background

The Norfolk Public School District, or NPS, is located in southeastern Virginia where the Chesapeake Bay meets the Atlantic Ocean. The district has 36,000 students and more than 3,000 teachers in 35 elementary schools, nine middle schools, and five high schools. Norfolk also includes the world's largest naval station.

The district has achieved improved performance in all subgroups on benchmark tests to determine Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP. Last year 20 schools met all 29 AYP benchmarks. Norfolk Public Schools has an overall high school graduation rate of 80.4 percent. Sixty-four percent of the students are on free or reduced lunch.

## Initiating collaboration

The process of establishing a more collaborative relationship between the Norfolk Federation of Teachers, or NFT, and the Norfolk Public Schools goes back 30 years. However, the path has not been without challenges and crises. One particularly critical event occurred in 1991 as tensions between the NFT and the superintendent came to a head. In response to her public criticism of the administration over the lack of raises for her members, the superintendent denied a leave of absence to Marian Flickinger in an attempt to prevent her from continuing as NFT President.

A contentious lawsuit ensued over her First Amendment rights, and the membership voted to change the constitution so Flickinger could continue as president but not teach in the district since she could no longer take a leave from her job. The superintendent left the district for another position after the trial. Flickinger continued as NFT president, but sought to find a way to avoid destructive adversarial relations with the administration, and instead find more effective ways to solve problems so the needs of children and teachers were better served. She found like-minded partners in subsequent superintendents who recognized with her that they “agree about more than they disagree.”

## Strategic priorities

The administration and union have been aligned for more than 30 years around the priorities of student achievement and performance, and involving the union in many areas of school improvement. They sought to work together on the use of student performance data to guide goal setting for improvement, on curriculum and teaching quality, and on creating a safe learning environment in the schools. Joint analysis of student test data provided the basis for a common focus.

The union and management also shared the common vision that improving teaching quality was critical to student performance improvement, and they established common planning time for teachers so they could work together to help each other develop better teaching methods. They also were innovative in developing a common process to assess schools, teachers, professional development and each school’s Comprehensive Accountability Plan through their “Walkthrough Protocol.” This process involves teams of administrators and teachers visiting other schools to evaluate student performance, teaching methods, and instructional practice, and then giving feedback to stimulate a professional dialogue. It is designed to be a model based on nonthreatening peer-to-peer review and collaboration.

## Supportive system infrastructure

Over these years, the union and management at Norfolk have worked to establish a culture of collaborating to improve schools for students. Virginia is a right-to-work state, yet management expresses the strong sentiment that it values the union as a partner in improving student achievement and teaching quality, and the union is extensively involved in shared decision-making committees. The administration and union see relationships, trust, and open communication as the key to their success. During this time they used a regular policy of “meet and confer,” to discuss problems of mutual concern. They have expanded this to meetings at the district level around the budget, and they jointly plan and set goals for the school system.

At the school level, the union and administration have established weekly common planning time for teams to meet in each department or at grade levels. These sessions build capacity and allow teachers to work together to improve their practice with a clear focus on learning, student achievement and curriculum. Schools also have Leadership Teams, Leadership Capacity and Development Teams with teacher-leaders who provide mentoring, and student data-evaluation teams at every grade level. Every teacher in the district serves on a student-data team, and every school develops a Comprehensive Accountability Plan jointly among the teachers, administration, and parents.

The Walkthrough Protocol, established in 2001, promotes the idea of the district as a learning community within and across schools. It is a collaborative model in which administrators and teachers work together to identify strengths, weaknesses, and best practices in each school and develop joint solutions for improvement. Extensive participation by faculty in the Walkthrough Protocol, student data teams, school-based leadership teams, and initiatives to improve teaching quality and capacity, have created a dense network of teachers across the district dedicated to school improvement.

District administration, union leadership, and teachers have invested a great deal of time in joint-learning opportunities, which strengthen skills as well as relationships. Teachers have been trained extensively in techniques for analyzing student performance data to identify problems and set goals for improvement. They have also received extensive leadership training.

Additionally, the district has benefited from being part of a 10-year corporate program sponsored by Panasonic. This program provides the union leadership, administration, and school board with monthly coaching, facilitation, and training to build a leadership team, and gives them skills in strategic planning, goal setting, problem solving, communications, and working together on areas of common interest. The program also takes them out of the district three times a year for three-day retreats with 10 other districts.

### Sustaining factors

Clearly, one of the keys in sustaining this level of collaboration over 30 years has been the stability of leadership from the union. Marian Flickinger was first elected president of the Norfolk Federation of Teachers in 1982 and has continued in that role to this day. She has provided strong leadership, focus, and commitment to improving student achievement and teaching quality through a partnership with management. In doing so, she had to overcome adversarial relations in the early 1990s that threatened to derail the collaborative approach that she believes better serves both students and teachers. As a result of this approach, the union has had to use the grievance procedure fewer than 10 times in her 28 years as president.

The community has also provided support for collaborative approaches to running the district through the involvement of parents and other community leaders in the Comprehensive Accountability Plans developed for each school, and through a “Guiding Coalition” of stakeholders at the district level. The Board of Education, appointed by the City Council, has been supportive of union-management collaboration in planning and decision-making at both the district and school levels, and over the past 20 years they have hired superintendents who embrace that collaborative management style.

While the district does not have collective bargaining and therefore no contract to memorialize collaboration, the parties have established memorandums of understanding on collaborative procedures. Collaboration has been sustained largely as part of the district leadership and culture, however, and is embedded in the way the school system operates on a daily basis.

## Background

The Plattsburgh City School District is located in upstate New York on the shores of Lake Champlain, less than 25 miles from the Canadian border. The district has 1,861 students, and 288 teachers and other professional staff members. Students attend one of three elementary schools, and then merge into one central middle school, followed by one central high school. Forty-six percent of the students are on free or reduced lunch.

Ninety-nine percent of Plattsburgh's teaching faculty have been designated "Highly Qualified." Each year the Plattsburgh City School District meets AYP, and also exceeds the averages across the state of New York. For example, 81 percent of eighth graders are above proficiency in language arts, 84 percent of eighth graders are above proficiency in math, 81 percent are above proficiency in science, and there is no statistically significant difference in student performance based on socioeconomic status, gender, or race. The district has a high school graduation rate of 84 percent, and 6 percent receive a GED. Eighty-five percent of graduates continue their education in four-year colleges or universities, two-year community colleges, or technical schools.

## Initiating collaboration

Collaboration around school improvement and teaching quality began in the aftermath of a strike in October 1975. The strike was a critical event in the history of the district and the community. The Plattsburgh Teachers' Association called the strike over economics and a perceived lack of respect from the Board of Education. Both the union and the administration were upset that the strike had occurred, and while it continued for only three days, it had a lasting impact on the district.

For the union, it pulled the faculty and staff together, and it motivated the administration and the union to find a new way to work together and improve their relations. The superintendent, Dr. Gerald Carozza, who was new to the district and well respected, was open to embracing a different relationship with the Plattsburgh Teachers' Association, as was its president, Rod Sherman. So, with unity in the union, and a desire for change, the parties came together to build a stronger school district.

As part of this new approach, the union also became increasingly involved in school board elections, initially by forming a coalition in 1976 with a parent group and electing two new members. Two years later they had a supportive majority on the school board. Art Momot, a principal in the district, became superintendent in 1981 with the recommendation of the union. He served as superintendent until 1994 and is credited with solidifying the partnership.

### Strategic priorities

The union and administration focused their collaborative efforts around teacher quality and student performance. They jointly developed a new model for teacher evaluation, and they were early adopters of peer assistance and review, and value-added assessments. Further, the union and administration formed a joint district-level committee to plan professional development, with the chair and the majority of the committee coming from the union.

A District-Wide Educational Improvement Council, or DWEIC, was formed that included teachers, administrators, union officials, and parents to facilitate shared decision-making, and ensure that joint planning, goals setting, and implementation occurred. The DWEIC meets monthly, seeks alignment around goals and delegates implementation to the school-site level. The principle that guides the partnership is always to make decisions in the best interests of the students. As a result, the union participates fully in, or leads, committees around textbook selection, professional development, teacher evaluation, mentoring, and peer coaching, curriculum development, long-range planning for the use of computer and information technology, and analysis of student test scores and performance. Since 1977, the union has been an integral part of the search and hiring process of teachers and administrators, including the superintendent. In addition, the parties collaborate on legislative issues that affect aid for small city districts.

### Supportive system infrastructure

The Plattsburgh City School District has developed a culture of joint decision making over the past 30 years that promotes discussion around all important issues that it faces. “It’s the way they business is done in Plattsburgh.” This has become institutionalized through an infrastructure of committees and teams at the district and school level.

In addition to the districtwide decision-making and planning committee, every school has a School Improvement Plan Committee, or SIP, team that sets yearly goals, manages the budget, reviews instructional practices, and facilitates consensus decision making at the site. The SIP committees include administrators, parents, students (for the high school and middle school), noninstructional staff, and teachers, who make up the largest single group. SIP committees meet every other week.

In addition, departments and elementary grade-level teams meet monthly, and since 1976 have been led by elected chairs/ reps who remain members of the bargaining unit. Department reps are granted release time and also meet every other week to facilitate cross-department collaboration and articulation.

Thus, the Plattsburgh Teachers' Association is deeply involved in shared decision making and governance of the school system at the district and school levels through joint decision making and planning committees, chairing departments and grade-level teams, peer assistance and review, and professional development. Union leaders estimate that every teacher in the district has participated in at least one team, committee, or department/grade-level leadership role, which creates a dense network of participation within the union organization. Nonretirement yearly turnover over the past seven years has been about 2 percent.

In addition to these formal structures, the collaborative system is also supported by shared understanding—the result of investment in joint learning opportunities. Union and administrative leadership have attended training and education sessions together on topics such as shared decision-making, meeting skills, and peer assistance and review. For example, the district has regularly sent board members, and union and management leaders together to AFT's bi-annual QuEST conference since the local union president and superintendent first attended in 1985, and has also benefited from training given by New York State Union of Teachers, NYSUT, and AFT's ER&D professional development programs. These activities have strengthened skills, created common knowledge and understanding, and built more trusting relationships, all important ingredients in a collaborative approach to school improvement.

## Sustaining factors

Long-term leadership has helped institutionalize the culture and practice of shared decision-making. Rod Sherman has been the president of the Plattsburgh Teachers' Association since 1973, and Dr. James Short, who has been superintendent of the Plattsburgh City School District since 2006, is only the fourth superintendent that the district has hired since the strike in 1975. Together, they have taken the level of collaboration to a new level. The Plattsburgh City School District and the Plattsburgh Teachers Association have enjoyed stable leadership for more than a quarter century.

In the aftermath of the 1975 strike, the Plattsburgh Teachers' Association partnered with parents to change the composition of the Board of Education. Since that time, parents have been involved in a variety of committees and teams at the district and school-level, linking them with the administration and the Plattsburgh Teachers' Association in planning and decision-making. And the union and parent groups have become increasingly involved in school board elections in order to help elect candidates who valued their input in district decision-making. The entire current board was elected with the support of the union. The board is composed of members who consider the union a valuable partner in shared decision-making, and has reflected that value in recruiting and hiring superintendents. The community strongly supports the school district, and has never defeated a school budget or rejected a bond vote or referendum. Since 1987, negotiations have adopted "a problem solving approach."

Since 1987, the contract between the Plattsburgh Teachers' Association and the Board of Education built upon and institutionalized the New York State statute calling for shared decision-making in school districts. District contractual provisions call for union involvement in the District-Wide Education Improvement Committee, School Improvement Planning Committees, planning professional development, and teacher-leads/ reps at the department or grade level.

At the national-level, AFT has also played a critical role in sustaining the collaboration at the Plattsburgh City School District by providing ongoing training and technical assistance. At the state-level NYSUT Plattsburgh courses in shared decision-making and meeting skills to support their efforts. In addition, the collaborative partnership has improved the skills and relationships of its leaders by regularly sending joint union-management teams to AFT's QuEST conferences over the past 25 years.

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## St. Francis Independent School District and Education Minnesota St. Francis

### Background

The St. Francis Independent School District is located about 40 miles north of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The district has approximately 5,400 students and 360 teachers in three elementary schools, one middle school, and one central high school and three special schools. Twenty-eight percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Last year the district achieved proficiency scores in reading and math that were above the state and county averages, and exceeded those of every neighboring district except one. In 2008, students in grades 5-9 scored at least one year ahead of the national average, up from close to the national average four years earlier. Over the last four years, student test scores have increased across the district, and in 2007-2008 the district was named one of the 20 most improved by the Minnesota Department of Education. The high school graduation rate is 96 percent, and college attendance grew from 59.6 percent in 2000 to 76.4 percent in 2006.

### Initiating collaboration

In the fall of 1991 the local union, Education Minnesota St. Francis, took a strike vote and began preparing for a job action. The strike was ultimately averted but there was general dissatisfaction with both the union and the board of education. As a result, a new team took over negotiations for the union. During the next round of bargaining, the union and board began to work together to focus on teacher quality and professional development.

In 1995 the Minnesota Department of Education required that 2 percent of the general fund be earmarked for professional development, and the union and administration began to plan new and innovative ways to use these funds. By 1997 the parties had negotiated teacher teams and leaders, and a new provision that allowed teachers to bank 20 hours of professional development for their own use, with unused hours going back to a general pool. Then in 2000 Randy Keillor, chief negotiator for the union, and Mary Wherry, union vice president, attended AFT's ER&D program and developed a plan to create a Teacher Academy focused on teacher quality and professional development, which would be run collaboratively among the union, administration, and board, and funded by the 2 percent set aside.

## Strategic priorities

The collaborative partnership among the union, administration, and school board in St. Francis has focused on teacher quality, and its impact on student performance. Starting in 1995 with collaboration around professional development, progressing to the development of the Teacher Academy (with a joint union-management governing board) in 2000, the strategic priority has been hiring, supporting, developing, and retaining excellent teachers and continually improving their performance.

In 2005 Minnesota made available a fund called Quality Compensation for Teachers, or Q Comp. In order to receive funding under this program, the district had to revise its teacher evaluation system and create an alternative compensation system based in part on performance pay. Components also had to include a new career ladder and professional development. For the St. Francis Independent School District and Education Minnesota St. Francis, this was a natural evolution of the Teacher Academy, so the union, administration, and board of education created the Student Performance Improvement Program, or SPIP, which was funded through Q Comp.

SPIP integrated the professional development of the Teacher Academy with a new evaluation and peer review system, an induction program for new teachers, mentoring, and an alternative compensation system based on a new career ladder and leadership roles. The SPIP also called for school-level academic goal setting for student performance rewarded by bonuses to the school itself. For example, the improvement in math scores reported above, took place after math became a site goal for the district.

## Supportive system infrastructure

### **Professional development—New Teacher Induction & Teacher Academy.**

Since the mid-1990s, the St. Francis Independent School District and Education Minnesota St. Francis have been able to work together to find innovative ways of improving teaching quality targeted around improved student performance. In doing so, they have developed a culture of involvement in joint decision-making.

In support of this culture, the union and administration have created processes and structures for collaboration throughout the district at all levels. For example, the union-led SPIP provides a process for goal alignment around student achieve-

ment and teaching quality at the school and district levels. The program enhances teacher quality through recruitment, professional development, goal setting, retention of quality faculty, and a career ladder that compensates teachers for skill development, goal achievement, and the assumption of leadership roles in the district as a teacher leader, mentor, or instructor. This voluntary system allows for customized professional development led by teachers through 12 year-long courses in the Teacher Academy, or through cross-disciplinary, teacher-led study groups that are encouraged to innovate, take risks, and actively improve their practice through a dense network of collaboration.

The Teacher Academy is based on the AFT ER&D professional development courses that have been used widely in the district since 2000. Four years after its introduction, 90 percent of St. Francis teachers have elected to participate in SPIP. New teachers receive a mentor for their first three years, and evaluations and observations take place through peer review teams of teachers with an administrator. One result is low nonretirement voluntary turnover; over the past five years faculty turnover has been less than 2 percent a year.

The union is deeply embedded in the professional development and teacher evaluation systems through its significant leadership in the Teacher Academy and the Student Performance Improvement Program. This system of mentoring, evaluation, and professional development fosters teacher-to-teacher collaboration within and across schools in the district.

**Site staff development.** Elementary school teams, departments, and specialist groups are directed by teacher leaders, and meet weekly to discuss curriculum, vertical and horizontal articulation, building management, and student achievement. Peer group meetings at each and every grade level occur twice per month involving all faculty and peer leaders analyzing student performance data.

Teachers and administrators also collaborate on Site Professional and Curriculum Development Committees at the school level. These committees have an elected teacher chair, and are composed of peer leaders, nonteaching staff, parents, and administrators, as well as a Teaching Academy Coordinator and curriculum facilitators. They oversee planning, evaluating, reporting, and budgeting for school-level professional and curriculum development. So not only do 50 percent of the faculty serve as mentors, but 20 percent of the teachers in the district are in paid leadership positions that contribute to the dense network of union members who have taken on responsibility for creating and running systems to improve teaching quality and student performance.

## Sustaining factors

From 1993 to the present, collaboration between the union and administration has benefited from a great deal of stability, particularly on the part of union leadership. Rosemary Krause was union president from 1993 until 2004, when Jim Hennesy, the current president, took over. Also, beginning in 1993, Randy Keillor led the new negotiating team in playing critical roles in establishing the professional development program, the Teacher Academy, and the SPIP program since all were the product of bargaining with the administration and board of education. Collective bargaining and collaboration are fully integrated in St. Francis.

In addition to his role as chief negotiator, Randy Keillor also served as the Student Performance Improvement Program Coordinator until his retirement in 2006. His replacement as Teacher Academy Coordinator, Jeff Fink, is also a member of the negotiating team, which has had essentially the same membership since 1993. Edward Saxton was hired as superintendent in 2003, having served in the district since 1995, first as assistant principal of the high school until 2001, and then as principal from 2001-2003. Stability of leadership from the union, as well as a superintendent with a history of collaboration within the district, have been vital factors in building a base for sustained collaboration.

The community and board of education have been very supportive of this partnership between the administration and union. This was demonstrated in their selection of Edward Saxton, the internal candidate for superintendent in 2003, and their ongoing negotiation of additional resources directed toward teacher development, quality, and alternative compensation. Several teachers from neighboring school districts have been elected as board members. The Teacher Academy, Student Performance Improvement Program including evaluation and alternative compensation system, Site Professional and Curriculum Development Committee, Assessment Curriculum and Teaching Committee, and the District Professional Development Committee are all contractual.

Finally, through its ER&D professional development program, the AFT has provided ongoing training and technical assistance to both the union and the district in its collaborative approach to improving teaching quality through the creation of the Teacher Academy.

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## Toledo City School District and the Toledo Federation of Teachers

### Background

Located on the west end of Lake Erie in Ohio, the Toledo City School District, or TCSD, employs 2,001 teachers and educates 24,345 students throughout 53 schools, including 38 elementary schools, seven middle schools, six traditional high schools and two specialty high schools. Approximately 77 percent of district students are on reduced or free lunch.

The Toledo City School District is a top performer on state performance indices for grades 3-6, and has among the highest graduation test passage rates for grades 10 and 11, compared against the seven other large urban school districts in Ohio. The district also has the highest graduation rate (83.7 percent) and the second highest attendance rate (94.9 percent) of all of these districts. One of TCSD's specialty schools, the Toledo Technology Academy, ranked second in the state of Ohio on the performance index and in the top 10 percent of U.S. high schools by *US News & World Report*. In 2001, the Toledo City School District and the Toledo Federation of Teachers were formally recognized for their innovations around teacher preparation and evaluation, earning the "Innovations in American Government" award from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

### Initiating collaboration

Union-management collaboration in Toledo began around the issue of teaching quality. Following a strike in the late 1970s, frustration mounted in the early 1980s over teacher evaluation. Principals often found themselves overwhelmed and too busy to successfully complete the requisite number of classroom visits spelled out in the union contract to oust the teachers that they deemed ineffective.

The Toledo Federation of Teachers, or TFT, meanwhile, tried to uphold due process and ensure that every teacher in the district received sufficient classroom observation. Tensions escalated, and the bitterness between labor and management over terminations carried over into the other goals the district was trying to accomplish. Dal Lawrence, then the TFT president, proposed a collaborative solution in the form of a new system of peer-to-peer review, support, mentoring, and evaluation. By dispersing evaluation responsibilities to teachers, the program would promote professional development, while screening teachers out of the

profession who were not effectively serving students. The result was a collaborative effort to initiate the innovative Toledo Plan: Peer Assistance and Review, or PAR, in 1981.

### Strategic priorities

Teaching quality and student performance have been at the core of the collaborative efforts between the Toledo Federation of Teachers and the Toledo City School District. The teacher-led Peer Assistance and Review system supports new teachers through a rigorous mentoring and evaluation process, and also helps veteran teachers to improve their practice. The process is tied to extensive professional development offered by Toledo teachers who serve as internal consultants.

In addition to coming together to fix the teacher evaluation system and improve teaching quality, the union and administration have also focused on student achievement through the use of student performance data analysis at the school level by the principal, staff, and union building representatives. The labor-management partnership in Toledo has also given rise to performance-based compensation systems, nationally ranked innovative specialty high schools, and collaboration with the local community to help provide more opportunities for children.

### Supportive system infrastructure

As the union successfully took on the challenge of improved teaching quality, the culture of the Toledo City School District became increasingly supportive of teaming, and increased union involvement in decision-making. Frequent communications and shared governance throughout all levels of the school district buttress this culture. Formal and informal conversations are common between union representatives and administrators. Leaders from both sides meet regularly around Peer Assistance and Review and professional development. Textbook selection is also a joint process. Committees comprised of the superintendent and representatives from the teachers' and administrators' unions also convene regularly to set and monitor implementation of a school improvement plan for the district, and math, reading, and attendance goals for each school.

Union-management teams and committees also exist within each school, to analyze student data, and to help decide issues related to curriculum and instruction

that are important to faculty and students. These formal structures are supported by financial incentives that also promote collaboration. The Toledo Review and Alternative Compensation System, or TRACS, for example, grants bonuses based on leadership, which includes helping other teachers, and accepting positions at low-performing schools. Further, the Ohio Teachers Incentive Fund, or OTIF, allocates bonuses to schools of up to \$2,000 per teacher and administrator, based on whether schools meet their goals for attendance and math and reading scores.

The Peer Assistance and Review system supports extensive collaboration as well. More than 200 internal PAR consultants have remained in the schools after serving in the program, and they “have changed the conversations,” by focusing on teaching quality. Half of the department chairs, who also remain union members, are former consultants and their relationships with one another, fostered through PAR, facilitate curricular articulation and integration. So well beyond the individual benefits of peer support, mentoring, and professional development, the PAR program also contributes to the creation of informal networks of teachers sharing information and resources within and among schools. Such exchanges, and the resultant increase in school level capacity, would be much less likely without this union-based teaching quality network.

Union-management collaboration has also resulted in the creation of the Toledo Reading Academy, which is focused on improving early literacy. The Academy includes a summer school for elementary school students, intervention programs for at-risk students, and extensive professional development for faculty. In addition, the union and administration have created a similar Math Academy.

Collaboration in Toledo has also been benefited from joint union-management training and learning opportunities, particularly AFT’s Center for School Improvement, or CSI, training on teaming and shared decision-making, and also AFT’s ER&D professional development training. These experiences bring both shared knowledge and improved relations.

### Sustaining factors

The stability of leadership, particularly from the union, is one of the key factors that has sustained union-management collaboration in the Toledo City School District. Dal Lawrence, who initiated the PAR program, served as TFT president from 1967 to 1997. He was succeeded by the current president, Francine

Lawrence who has continued the union's deep involvement in peer mentoring and evaluation, and professional development, and also extended the union's involvement in joint decision-making into other areas such as alternative compensation and performance pay plans. This partnership between labor and management has increased trust and mutual respect as the parties recognized the benefits to both students and teachers. Over time it has become core to the district's culture and mode of operating.

Involving the local community to provide additional channels for resources to benefit students and teachers has also strengthened collaboration. For example, a partnership between Toledo City Schools and The University of Toledo helped to align the curricula and the instructional materials used by the University with the district's specific needs, thereby better preparing new teachers for employment opportunities in Toledo schools. Further, one of the district's premier high schools, the Toledo Technology Academy, has garnered support from dozens of local businesses (including General Motors, Teledyne, Owens Illinois, and Toledo Mold and Die) to provide mentoring and internship opportunities for students. Executives from these companies and other community leaders sit on the school's advisory board.

The National AFT has helped to sustain collaboration through the shared decision-making training it provided to 21 schools through the Center for School Improvement. In addition, AFT's ER&D professional development program has been of great value to labor-management collaboration at the school level, and to advancing effective teacher practice, and the Peer Assistance and Review program. Continued collaboration around PAR is further supported by contractual language that embeds union participation in the process.

# Long-term collaborative partnerships: Common themes and patterns

The following common themes and patterns emerged from this study of six school districts that have developed collaborative partnerships over the past two decades to improve student performance and the quality of teaching. They fall into four broad categories:

- Contextual motivation or pivotal events
- Strategic priorities
- Supportive system infrastructure
- Sustaining factors

Following each category are sets of common themes.

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## Contextual motivation or pivotal events

**Crisis or pivotal event that motivated the change in the union-management relationship.** A strike or a vote to strike was the motivation or critical event for most of the districts to seek an alternative direction in their union-management relations. The districts recognized that the adversarial relationships that led to the strike, or vote to strike, were not productive and certainly not in the best interests of teachers, administrators, or students. The union leadership and top management in each district made a choice to change their relationship, which was the first step in establishing a collaborative approach to school improvement.

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## Strategic priorities

**Emphasis on teacher quality.** Every district focused on teacher quality as a core goal for collaborative reform and improvement. This included union-led professional development, new systems of teacher evaluation, teaching academies, peer-to-peer assistance, and mentoring programs. As a result, most of these cases

reported very low levels of voluntary teacher turnover. However, districts and their unions did make difficult decisions to not support retaining ineffective teachers.

**Focus on student performance.** All of these districts created opportunities for teachers and administrators to work together to analyze student performance in order to focus on priority areas for improvement. Teachers and administrators collaborated on developing data-based improvement plans at the district and school levels. Teachers were also organized into teams at the grade and department level to use student performance data in directing improvement efforts. Districts reported high levels of student achievement, and improved performance, over the course of the partnerships, including schools with high percentages of students on reduced or free lunch.

**Substantive problem solving, innovation, and willingness to experiment.** As a result of these collaborative efforts, all districts have engaged in substantive problem solving and innovation around areas critical to student achievement and teaching quality. These range from jointly establishing reading programs in schools with high percentages of students on reduced or free lunch, to peer assistance and review programs, to collaboratively designed systems for teacher evaluation that measure student growth, to teacher academies focused on professional development, to curriculum development, to sophisticated systems for analyzing student achievement data, to better focus intervention. The collaborative partnerships, therefore, are vehicles for system improvement, not ends in themselves.

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### Supportive system infrastructure

**An organizational culture that values and supports collaboration.** Over time most of these districts have established a culture of collaboration that promotes trust and individual integrity, and values the leadership and organization that the union brings to the district. Leaders talk of a culture of inclusion, involvement, and communication, as well as respect for teachers as professionals and for their union. Collaboration is simply embedded in the way the district is run.

**Shared governance and management of the district and strategic alignment.** All six districts have established district-level joint planning and decision-making forums that allow the union and administration to work together and develop joint understanding and alignment of the strategic priorities of the district. They have also developed a district-wide infrastructure that gives the union significant

input into planning and decision-making around curriculum, professional development, textbook selection, school calendar, and schedules. Management is seen as a set of tasks that union leaders must engage in for the benefit of members and students, rather than a separate class of employees.

**Collaborative structures at all levels in the district.** All districts have created an infrastructure that promotes and facilitates collaborative decision making in schools through building-level teams, school improvement committees, school steering committees, leadership teams, or school advisory councils that meet on a regular basis. These bodies are vehicles for site-based decision making around school planning, goal setting, budgets, policies, dress codes, discipline, and safety. The teams and committees provide for collaborative leadership at all levels of district decision-making.

**Dense internal organizing of the union as a network.** Most of these districts have data teams, grade-level teams, and department teams that are led by union members who participate in substantive decision-making about curriculum, instruction, and articulation on a regular basis. In addition, most districts have developed extensive peer-to-peer mentoring and assistance programs to support professional development that involve significant numbers of teachers as teacher-leaders, master-teachers or mentors, as well as professional development trainers.

When we consider the number of union members appointed to district or school-level committees or teams, along with individual teachers involved as mentors, teacher-leaders, master-teachers, or PD trainers, in many cases it represents more than 20 percent of the union membership. This results in the union being organized internally as a very dense network, which provides the district with the ability to quickly and effectively implement new programs or ideas. A union-led implementation network is something the administration could not create on its own. It further institutionalizes the collaborative process in the district by embedding collaboration in the way the district does business.

**Joint learning opportunities for union and management.** All of these districts have invested heavily in creating opportunities for union leaders and administrators to learn together through shared experiences. This allows for both knowledge acquisition (human capital) and the development of stronger relationships (social capital) between leaders. These opportunities have included sending large numbers—in some cases hundreds—of union leaders and principals to the AFT QuEST conference; the Center for School Improvement, or CSI; educational

research and dissemination, or ER&D, university-based programs for union and management leaders; corporate leadership programs; and extensive educational and planning retreats within the districts themselves. As the educational experience is shared between union and administration, leaders are comfortable that they hear the same message and get the same information at the same time. Further, they experience each other not as adversaries, but as colleagues with overlapping interests who can work together to improve teaching and learning.

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## Sustaining Factors

**Long-term leadership—both union and administrative, and recruitment from within.** All of these districts have enjoyed long-term leadership from their union presidents, some going back several decades. Most have also had long-term leadership from their superintendents as well. This has provided stability for the institutional partnership, and also allowed for an individual partnership to be formed between the union president and the superintendent that establishes the direction and expectation for the rest of the union leadership, membership, and district administration. Further, most of these superintendents have come up through the districts themselves, some serving as teachers and union members before joining the administration. This use of an internal labor market allowed the culture of collaboration to be carried on seamlessly by allowing trust to be built between leaders who knew each other and worked together for years.

**Community engagement.** Most of these districts have engaged the community through involvement of community or parent groups in school-based governance structures, or in district-level planning processes. Some have also involved the community in special programs such as reading, experimental schools, or in establishing community schools.

**Support from the Board of Education.** In most cases, after a strategic decision to move toward greater collaboration, local unions got directly involved in Board of Education elections by recruiting, supporting, and endorsing candidates, or in some cases helping to defeat board candidates who did not support a collaborative approach to school governance and management. Local unions realized that since the boards hired the superintendent, electing board members interested in promoting collaboration would improve the chances that they would find willing partners. In two cases the mayor or city council makes Board of Education appointments.

**Support from the national union.** In almost all cases the local unions and districts received support and resources from the National AFT that helped foster a collaborative approach to school improvement. In some cases this meant technical assistance in areas such as reading programs, or research-based professional development programs from AFT's ER&D department. In other cases this meant training in collaborative techniques at AFT's Center for School Improvement, leadership training at AFT's Union Leadership Institute, or educational opportunities at the AFT's biannual QuEST conference. Several of the cases also reported benefiting from the resources AFT provided through its Innovation Fund that supports initiatives for school improvement.

**Importance of supportive and enabling contract language.** Most of these districts have negotiated contract language, or memorandums of understanding, that support their collaborative efforts. In this way real change is integrated into collective bargaining, and institutionalized in concrete language. In some cases the contracts call for the assumption of collaboration in district-level decision making by requiring union representation on key committees. In other cases the enabling language in the contract has resulted in expanded opportunities for union involvement in decision-making through board policy. Examples include professional development, textbook selection, hiring, peer assistance, mentoring, and teacher academies. In some cases state regulations for shared decision-making have also become institutionalized through contract language.

## Conclusion and lessons learned

The experiences of these six districts demonstrate how collaboration between teacher's unions and administration can be created and sustained over time to improve teaching quality and student performance. Based on the results of this study we offer the following conclusions and recommendations for local unions and districts seeking to engage in collaborative approaches to school reform and improvement:

- **Systems.** Education reform and improvement must be seen as a systems problem. In all of these cases, unions and administration have worked together, tapping the knowledge and expertise of teachers and administrators within each district, to examine all aspects of their school systems: curriculum, professional development, teaching quality, evaluation, compensation, hiring and retaining quality professionals, school management, and site-based decision-making, budgeting, and student performance. No successful district has taken a piecemeal approach by narrowly looking at only one aspect of the system, such as compensation. Further, all of these districts institutionalized and supported collaboration at all levels of the system.
- **Formal structures.** Shared decision-making in school improvement must take place at both the district-level as well in the schools themselves. Formal union-management site-based teams can effectively share decision-making around budgets, curriculum, scheduling, professional development, recruitment and hiring, school safety, strategic planning, and student performance data analysis to target areas for improvement.
- **Quality.** Successful union-management collaboration in public school reform must focus on substantive areas affecting the quality of teaching or student achievement. These districts have used collaborative approaches to experiment and innovate in areas such as professional development, teacher mentoring and evaluation, curriculum development and articulation, teaching methods, instructional materials and textbooks, alternative school- and teacher-based compensation, and data-driven decision-making around student performance.

- **Networks.** The development of peer-to-peer networks for improving teaching provides teachers with better skills, but also with a social network that can continue to support them and the ongoing exchange of ideas and techniques necessary to increase instructional quality. The union is the backbone of this network through its own internal organizing, and through the density of its members who participate in this and other shared decision-making opportunities. However, this requires management partnering with the union as an institution so that it has real input into district and school-level governance. It also means changes in the strategies, structures, and capacities of local unions as they engage deeply in collaboration and take on responsibility for teaching quality and student performance.
- **Culture.** In addition to formal structures at the district and school level, districts must develop strong cultures of collaboration that inform approaches to planning and decision-making, as well as hiring decisions by school boards and superintendents.
- **Learning organizations.** Shared learning opportunities are critical to building and sustaining long-term collaboration. Districts and unions should provide training and learning experiences for labor-management teams, so that they can acquire knowledge together as well as build their relationships.
- **Stability.** The longevity of all of these cases has benefited from the long-term tenure of union leaders, superintendents, or both. School boards should consider this as they approach the recruitment and hiring of superintendents, and the use of internal labor markets.
- **Board of education.** Collaborative systems and management styles require the full support of school boards. Union support of board candidates who value collaboration will be of great value in sustaining long-term partnerships.
- **National union.** Districts and local unions can benefit greatly from the technical assistance, support, training and resources available from their unions at both the national and state levels.
- **Community.** Community support is critical to institutionalizing collaboration. Districts and unions must engage the community in supporting their collaborative processes, either as stakeholders involved directly in district or school-based planning and decision-making bodies, or through their school boards.

We conclude from this study that unions and administrators can *choose* to collaborate to find new ways to improve the performance of the district, teachers, and students. However, for collaboration to be sustained over the long-term, and to have a meaningful impact, it must be institutionalized—built into the systems of the district in both policy and practice, and protected from those who benefit from perpetuating the myth that administration and unions, by nature, want different things. Educators must be continuous learners as they share in the inquiry, wrestle together with hard questions, and redefine management from a class of employees to a set of tasks that they must engage in together, as collaboration itself is a means for improvement, not an end in itself.

We also hope policymakers see from this line of research, the value of pursuing collaborative approaches to school reform, and provide the conditions, resources, and incentives to create union-management partnerships for improvement.

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## About the authors

**Saul Avery Rubinstein** is an associate professor at the School of Management and Labor Relations, Rutgers University, and is the co-director of the Center for Organizational Learning and Transformation. His research has focused on changes in firm governance, management, and local unions that have resulted from joint labor-management efforts to transform industrial relations, work systems, and performance in a wide variety of industries. His work extends to union-management partnerships at the strategic level, and studying the changes in patterns of coordination and communication as organizations adopt team-based work structures. His current research focuses on union-management collaborative efforts to reform public education. His work has been funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and has been widely published. Rubinstein holds degrees from Harvard University (Ed.M., M.B.A.) and a Ph.D. from The Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

**John E. McCarthy** is a doctoral student at the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University. His research centers on the antecedents and performance implications of knowledge transfer and combination within and between organizations, with a particular emphasis on public schools. His work has been funded by the U. S. Department of Labor and the Bill and The Melinda Gates Foundation.

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