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# Reforming Public School Systems through Sustained Union-Management Collaboration

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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.

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