



Charting the Course

The AFT's Education Agenda To Reach All Children





A Union of Professionals

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As the pressure grows for American children to learn and know more, so grows the demand on schools to raise achievement. It's a huge challenge for our country—and for the schools in which we work. The public appetite for dramatic solutions is substantial. And that appetite is being fed by a stream of unproven reform proposals that will do tremendous damage to our children, our schools and our profession. We have better solutions.

We can improve student achievement by enhancing the knowledge, professional status and effectiveness of teachers, who are the most important school factor in children's educational success. We can improve student achievement by beginning with a system of high, clear, public academic standards that clarify what we expect children to learn in each subject in each year, backed by a transparent, fair accountability system. We can do it through targeted, intensive, early intervention to aid children who are falling behind, which is almost always the least costly and most effective educational strategy. We can do it by using collective bargaining and collaboration with school districts to cultivate smart solutions to difficult problems. We can

do it by focusing on what research tells us works, not on unproven and unworkable new schemes. We will promote these approaches through a **positive education agenda to improve all public schools for all children.**

Our education agenda focuses on five areas that are fundamental to student success, of great concern to parents and the public, and for which solid, demonstrated solutions are available.

- Teaching Quality
- Safe and Orderly Schools
- Early Reading Instruction and Intervention
- Common, Knowledge-Rich Curriculum
- Intensive Assistance to High-Poverty Schools

We will pursue improvements in these areas at the bargaining table, through legislation and through professional development. We know that moving this agenda forward requires reaching out to parents, community leaders and other organizations that are working to improve the lives of children. Focusing intensely on the needs of all children is the right thing to do, and it is essential for strengthening our communities and our nation.



Teaching Quality

Teaching quality is the most important school factor in improving student achievement, and teachers should play a central role in building and ensuring that quality. Given attrition rates among new teachers of nearly 50 percent in some districts, the most efficient way to strengthen teaching quality over time is to focus like a laser on recruiting and retaining well-qualified new teachers. At the same time, we must work hard to create the professional conditions and competitive salary structure that will encourage both new teachers and accomplished veterans to remain in teaching. We will focus especially in two areas:

- **A good induction system with lots of assistance for new teachers through peer assistance and review.** Teaching is a hard job, and new entrants need enormous support. When it's not provided, teachers leave—and our kids are shortchanged. As strapped districts waste money on an endless cycle of recruitment and hiring, children's education suffers from teacher turnover. With peer assistance and review

programs, new teachers benefit from intensive assistance and training from skilled colleagues, and the teaching profession benefits as each new teacher meets the standards of a rigorous pre-tenure review by knowledgeable peers.

- **Incentives and improved working conditions in “hard to staff” schools.** Recruiting and retaining well-qualified teachers in troubled schools is an especially difficult challenge. Survey data shows that teachers are more likely to come to such a school—and stay—if it has an effective principal, safe and clean facilities, opportunities for professional development and collaboration, supportive conditions that include teacher voice in decision-making, and the resources to help struggling students. Along with these improved working conditions, pay incentives bargained at the local level can help these schools attract and keep well-qualified teachers.

Safe and Orderly Schools

Parents, teachers and school staff say school safety and order are among their highest priorities. Schools can reduce the level of aggression in students just by improving the orderliness of their classrooms. Working closely with teachers in the early grades on students' behavior-management skills can yield substantial future benefits, including reducing dropout rates and the incidence of crime.

To continue good behavior developed in the earliest grades, schools must maintain a safe and secure environment. Teachers and school staff, through their unions, can play a key role in establishing effective discipline and safety policies, and can advocate for building facilities that are safe and conducive to learning. We know that timely interventions for students, including alternative placements for chronically disruptive and violent students, coupled with professional development for school staff in classroom and behavior management, are necessary to improve school safety and order.



Early Reading Instruction and Intervention

Research shows that children who are poor readers at the end of first grade are never likely to acquire the reading skills they need to successfully complete elementary school, unless these students are identified early in their school career and given intensive, systematic intervention. Thanks to new scientific research, and a long-awaited scientific and political consensus around this research, the knowledge exists to teach all but a handful of severely disabled children to read well. It is estimated that over 90 percent of students—including many now classified as learning disabled—could increase their reading skills to average levels with intensive, early instruction delivered by skilled teachers.

To help ensure this level of success, critical elements in grades preK-3 include a strong reading curriculum consistent with the research consensus; core instructional materials aligned with this research; and appropriate use of reading assessment tools to catch problems early, diag-

nose students' specific weaknesses and monitor their progress.

It is more effective to intervene early with struggling readers than to try to catch them after they've experienced long-term reading failure. Therefore, schools must provide timely, intensive, systematic intervention for students who need it.





Common, Knowledge-Rich Curriculum

The AFT has long been an advocate for a common, core curriculum framework that ensures that all children, regardless of neighborhood, are exposed to a rich, well-sequenced curriculum starting in kindergarten or before. We know that an overly broad curriculum, one that forces teachers to move through too many topics without time to go into any depth, has no place in our schools. On the other hand, we recognize that increased assessment requirements have narrowed the curriculum unacceptably, squeezing music, the arts, history and other nontested subjects out of the curriculum. Research tells us that, as students advance through the grades, reading comprehension depends more and more on their “background knowledge.” That knowledge can propel students past the notorious fourth-grade slump, when students’ reading scores tend to decline. In light of this, the need for a common, rich curriculum has become more essential than ever before.

When such a curriculum is neither vague nor overly broad, it is a vital professional tool that enhances teaching and learning. Such a curriculum allows teachers and parents to understand what students are expected to know and be able to do at each grade level. It helps teachers identify students who need extra help. It means that teachers can share their best practices with each other; that transient students won’t suffer from a new curriculum when they switch school; and that all children are exposed systematically to the knowledge they need, without risking unproductive repetition or lack of exposure to key topics. Further, a fair accountability system for teachers and students requires a transparent, teachable curriculum to which all students are exposed.



Intensive Assistance to High-Poverty Schools

The AFT has a long-standing track record in school improvement. We know what works: access to effective early childhood programs, starting at age 3; negotiating or collaborating with districts for incentives and supports to ensure that high-poverty schools can hire and retain well-qualified and experienced teachers; intensive special assistance to students, including more time for tutoring and enrichment; and staff development for faculty. Plus, evidence is mounting that troubled schools improve when the school district targets them for intensive assistance and holds the superintendent accountable for their success. Where school time is already used very well, and more time is needed for tutoring, enrichment or staff development, it may make sense to negotiate a longer school day and/or year in these targeted schools.

An AFT task force of local leaders will study the issues affecting schools in poverty and convene a summit on high-poverty schools. This summit will be part of a major effort by the AFT to ensure that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have a fair chance to succeed.



The AFT knows that taking up the challenge of building successful schools and stronger communities is not a light burden, and we know that we cannot do it alone. Too often, our children are subjected to unproven reform proposals that do more harm than good. They deserve better than that. That is why we are committed to engaging with parents, community and business leaders, policymakers, and others to improve education for all children. Our children deserve a bright future. Our nation cannot prosper without it.

For Further Reading

Teaching Quality

“Why New Teachers Stay,” by Susan Moore Johnson and the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, *American Educator*, Summer 2006, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/summer06/Teacher.pdf.

“Cultivate the Right Solution: It’s Attracting and Retaining Experienced Teachers,” by Lynn W. Gregory, Nancy Nevarez, and Alexandra T. Weinbaum, *American Educator*, Winter 2006-2007, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/winter06-07/Experience_gap.pdf.

Safe and Orderly Schools

“Discipline and School Safety,” AFT’s Discipline and School Safety Web page at www.aft.org/topics/discipline/index.htm.

“Heading Off Disruptive Behavior: How Early Intervention Can Reduce Defiant Behavior—and Win Back Teaching Time,” by Hill M. Walker, Elizabeth Ramsey, and Frank M. Gresham, *American Educator*, Winter 2003-2004, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/winter_03-04/early_intervention.html.

“Building Minds, Minding Buildings: Turning Crumbling Schools into Environments for Learning,” by the American Federation of Teachers, December 2006, www.aft.org/topics/building-conditions/downloads/minding-bldgs.pdf.

“Setting Strong Standards,” AFT Teachers’ Item Number 39-0175, June 2003, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/settingstrong.pdf.

Early Reading Instruction and Intervention

“The Importance of High-Quality Reading Instruction,” AFT’s Reading Web page at www.aft.org/topics/reading/index.htm.

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“Nurturing Teacher Knowledge: How and Why Union-Led

Professional Development Is Raising Reading Achievement,” by Neill S. Rosenfeld, *American Educator*, Winter 2006-2007, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/winter06-07/includes/rosenfeld.htm.

Common, Knowledge-Rich Curriculum

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“How Knowledge Helps: It Speeds and Strengthens Reading Comprehension, Learning—and Thinking,” by Daniel T. Willingham, *American Educator*, Spring 2006, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring06/willingham.htm.

“Smart Testing: Let’s Get It Right: How Assessment-Savvy Have States Become Since NCLB?” AFT Teachers’ Policy Brief Number 19, July 2006, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/Testingbrief.pdf.

“The Instructional Demands of Standards-Based Reform,” prepared for the AFT by Kate Jamentz, Director of Professional and Organizational Learning at WestEd, 2001, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/Instructional_Demands.pdf.

Intensive Assistance to High-Poverty Schools

AFT’s Center for School Improvement, www.aft.org/topics/csi/index.htm.

“Get Real: Here’s the Boost that Poor Children, Their Teachers, and Their Schools Really Need,” by Antonia Cortese, *American Educator*, Spring 2007, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring07/GetReal.htm.

“In the Zone: How a Virtual District Provides Real Help for Really Struggling Schools,” by Jennifer Jacobson, *American Educator*, Spring 2007, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring07/zone.htm.



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NEDERLANDEN

IRLAND

GERMANY

FRANKRIJK

ITALIA

SPAGNA

PORTUGAL

MOROCCO

ALGERIA

LIBYA

EGYPT

MAURITANIA

MAURITIUS

SENEGAL

GAMBIA

GUINEA

SIERRA LEONE

LIBERIA

IVORY COAST

GHANA

TOGO

GUINEA-BISSAU

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