



## **More High-Quality Choices for Students: New Schools and Redesigned Low-Performing Schools**

### **The Issue**

Nationwide, only about 70 percent of students earn high school diplomas, and that percentage is lower for our nation's black and Latino students. These youth are unlikely to obtain a well-paying job, and are more likely to end up in jail, die young and depend on social welfare assistance. The Alliance for Excellent Education has estimated that the approximately 1.2 million students who should have graduated with the Class of 2007 will cost the nation nearly \$329 billion in lost income over the course of their lifetimes.

In short, the entire education system has failed these youth. The solution cannot be focused singularly on "fixing" high schools; this systemwide problem demands systemwide solutions in which many parties collaborate to develop and implement programs and get real results. For example, research demonstrates that students who have participated in high-quality early childhood education programs are more likely to graduate than those who have not. Similarly, schools that provide a range of supports and a personalized environment that engages students are also more likely to produce children who graduate.

### **The Solution**

A wide range of high-quality schooling options that effectively educate and engage 21st-century students is the solution. In order to create these schools, mayors, superintendents, civic organizations, parents, community members and local unions need to cooperate and collaborate. A few of these innovative schooling models are outlined below.

**Chancellor's District.** In the mid-1990s in New York City, the school district and the teachers union partnered to create the "Chancellor's District," a nongeographic group of persistently underperforming schools that re-

ceived intensive and comprehensive interventions, such as extended learning time; rigorous and prescribed reading and math curricula; on-site, subject-specific academic coaches; and the requisite professional development to accompany these efforts. As a result, student achievement in the Chancellor's District went up and stayed up. More than six years after the Chancellor's District initiative formally ended, the schools that participated in this initiative have been able to sustain their high academic outcomes.

**Community Schools.** There are several excellent examples of community schools in St. Paul, Minn.; Portland, Ore.; Chicago; and throughout the country. These are schools that offer the social services that families and communities need, making them accessible and integrated under the schoolhouse roof to support children's learning. They provide customized parent supports such as English language instruction, employment counseling, citizenship programs and GED programs. Community schools offer children tutoring, homework assistance and recreational activities beyond the school day and week. Medical, dental and counseling services also are available to meet the community's needs.

**Labor-Management Operated Schools.** In Boston, the school district and the teachers union have partnered to develop pilot schools. Back in the mid-1990s, New York City introduced New Visions schools, which are small, theme-based schools that have continued to thrive over the past 15 years. In Chicago, a similar partnership has produced the Fresh Start schools. Each of these locations now has a group of schools managed jointly by the teachers and the school district with considerable autonomy from the district rules. The

result of these cooperative and collaborative efforts has been a renewed focus on establishing the optimal environment for teaching and learning.

**Union-Operated Charter Schools.** Twenty years ago, Albert Shanker spoke of the promise of charter schools as teacher-led laboratories of reform. Today, we have charter schools that empower teachers, free them from bureaucratic policies, and provide them a voice in school and curriculum decision-making. The United Federation of Teachers currently operates two charter schools and partners with Green Dot, a successful charter school operator, to manage a third.

### **AFT's Role**

The common goal of each of these and similar innovative efforts is to ensure that all children are provided the education that prepares them to be engaged citizens and productive contributors to 21st-century society. This will require more high-quality choices for students, such as those outlined above, and it will require increased collaboration and consensus from mayors, school systems, community leaders, school staff and their union representatives. In many instances, the local union not only has cooperated, but has led the effort to provide high-quality schooling options for children.

At the national level, the AFT will challenge local leaders to continue to initiate pioneering reforms such as those discussed above, and we will support these kinds of efforts through the AFT Innovation Fund. Additionally, we will work with national leaders to ensure that these efforts can be sustained and broadened through financial support and recognition.

For 10 years now, the AFT has been sponsoring national institutes that bring together district and school teams of teachers, administrators, elected officials and parents to develop plans for collaborative work in their districts. These institutes are organized around five interactive sessions focused on the work of improving schools, including:

- Skills and structures for effective communication;
- Team building;
- Data analysis for comprehensive educational planning;
- Professional development to support student achievement; and
- Action planning.

In addition to the national-level meetings, the AFT also customizes training and facilitation sessions in districts in order to maximize the number of schools that can participate and to build capacity at the local level.