

The Union's Role in School Transformation

The National Education Association (NEA) is committed to transforming the nation's persistently low-performing, priority schools into great public schools for all students.

Through our six-year Priority Schools Campaign—our title for these schools which we consider a national priority—we will partner with our state and local affiliates to assist priority schools identified by the U.S. Department of Education. The Campaign began in fall 2009 and will run through 2015-16.

Increasing Student Achievement

NEA's Priority Schools Campaign rests on an evidence-based set of measures that increase student achievement—performance and attainment (e.g., high school graduation):¹

- A strong partnership between the school and students' families;
- An investment in increasing the skills and effectiveness of the school staff; and
- Community-provided social and health services for students and their families.

In addition our experience tells us that another important measure is:

- District/union collaboration

By working with our state and local affiliates to create these partnerships, secure additional investment in educators' professional development, and engage community agencies and organizations, we are confident that the NEA will help raise student achievement in priority schools. Here are examples of NEA affiliate-supported initiatives which have done just that.

Hamilton County, Tennessee: Support in part by a grant from the NEA Foundation, this union-involved, multi-year project has cut achievement

gaps in reading between white and ethnic-minority middle school students by more than half (from 23.9 percent in 2004 to 10.7 percent in 2004). These results were due in part to:

- A partnership with Center for Teaching Quality to increase the number of teachers in the district who are certified by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards;
- Ongoing professional development designed and delivered by educators who are familiar with the needs of the district's diverse students; and
- Strong connections between teachers' planning/instruction and students' learning, based on careful evaluation of students' classroom work and test performance.

Compadres in Education, Putnam City Schools, Oklahoma: Beginning with community conversations organized by the local union, this largely Hispanic community has improved student achievement (as measured by state test scores and college entry), increased family involvement in their children's education, and provided learning opportunities in the community for students who were likely to drop out. This union-initiated, community-based effort:

- Raises the educational aspirations and achievement of Hispanic students from immigrant and low-income families with limited knowledge of English;
- Uses private sector and other community resources to enhance learning opportunities for both parents and students at school and in the community.

Say Yes to Education, Syracuse, New York: Inspired by the Say Yes to Education Foundation, a coalition of community partners (including the local union) decided to dramatically alter the life course of 26,000 students in this urban school

district. The result is a city-wide model that removes one of the most significant financial obstacle for low-income, inner-city children and their families—the high cost of a quality post-secondary education. Syracuse Say Yes to Education:

- Fully funds the cost of high-quality post-secondary education;
- Provides students with individual growth plans, tutoring; diagnostic testing and monitoring; after-school and summer school enrichment; mentoring; internships, and social, emotional, health support for themselves and their families; and
- Creates a network of accredited post-secondary institutions committed to accepting, retaining and graduating qualified Say Yes students.

“Transforming” Schools

As the federal Race to the Top competition illustrates, there is increasing acknowledgement that unions have a serious and legitimate role in school transformation.

As a practical matter, school districts implementing any of four federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) models (“restart,” “closure,” “turnaround,” and “transformation”) will be required to comply with state and local laws, including state teacher tenure and public sector bargaining laws, as well as collective bargaining agreements.

The fundamental question for us remains: What should unions bring to efforts to “transform” priority schools?

Our answer: Flexibility, problem-solving, and commitment that emanate from a strong, collaborative relationship between school districts and local unions. We believe collaboration is the cornerstone of the unions’ productive role in school transformation. Here are examples of such collaboration:

CommPACT Schools Program, Connecticut: NEA’s state affiliate is a co-founder of this five-year transformation effort in eight schools in the

state’s poorest cities. CommPACT schools have documented improvements in achievement, greater family involvement, and enhanced school ownership in their communities. Each CommPACT school:

- Creates committed partners in—community members, parents, administrators, children, and teachers;
- Attracts and retains excellent teachers because they participate fully in school-level decisions that affect their students; and
- Uses research-based, effective practices that are appropriate for each school.

Empowerment Schools, Clark County, Nevada: The local union is one of three employee organizations that supported, and agreed to contract waivers, to create the Clark County School District Empowerment Schools.

Since 2006-07, 17 schools have become empowerment schools; 11 additional schools will join the network in 2010-11. Student achievement has increased more than in comparison schools, according to an independent evaluation. Each empowerment school:

- Creates a team of teachers, administrators, educational support staff, students, parents, and community members that establishes school priorities and decides how the school operates;
- Selects the instructional programs and materials, assessment practices, and daily schedule best suited to their students’ needs, within the parameters provided by the state and district; and
- Hires, retains and rewards educators with up to a two percent raise for meeting school-wide student achievement and school environment targets by the end of the academic year.

For More Information

Visit <http://neaprioritieschools.org>

ⁱ Berliner, D.C. (Nov. 6, 2006). Our impoverished view of educational reform. *Teachers College Record*, 108(6), 949-995; Rothstein, R. (2004). *Class and schools*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.