



HUMAN CAPITAL

Unions and School Districts
Collaborating To Close
Achievement Gaps

Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative

www.neafoundation.org

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Forward

Dear Colleagues:

We are confronted today, more urgently than ever before, with the need for creating a sustainable system for developing the highest quality teaching in our nation's public schools. And multiple sectors—from business to school districts and communities to education labor unions and the philanthropic sector—all have roles to play.

The present publication, *Human Capital: Unions and School Districts Collaborating to Close Achievement Gaps*, lays out human capital development as a robust conceptual and operational framework for generating just such a system.

We believe that human capital systems will most likely be effective if they are designed with—and not just for—the key human capital asset of public education, namely educators. Education unions can, and do, play a vital role in bringing to bear educators' collective energy, voice, and expertise on needed educational improvement.

It is my sincere hope that you will find this publication useful for spurring new ways of thinking and collaborating in your communities, and ultimately, for increasing the academic achievement of all students.

Best regards,

Harriet Sanford

President and CEO

The NEA Foundation

The NEA Foundation is an independent, nonprofit, public charity created in 1969 and sustained by contributions from educators, corporate sponsors and others. The NEA Foundation offers grants and programs that support educators' efforts to close the gaps in student achievement, increase classroom innovations, salute excellence in education and provide professional development. For more information, visit neafoundation.org.

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Introduction

Human capital development is quickly rising on the national policy agenda. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is investing \$500 million in a human capital project, and numerous policy organizations have developed papers on the topic (see Appendix).

What is human capital? It represents the total knowledge, skills and talents of the individuals within an organization. In traditional economic terms, human capital, like financial capital, adds value to an organization, and organizations that succeed invest in human capital and work to maximize its value. Total human capital in an organization includes what individuals bring to an organization and what they, collectively, contribute to it. In education, this means that human capital represents the knowledge and skills of teachers and school leaders, ways that they make use of their talents and abilities and ways that they continue to grow in order to contribute to student learning.

Human capital development is critical in education. Teachers represent the most important school-related factor in student achievement, and leadership is second only to teaching in determining how much students learn. Without addressing the knowledge and skills of teachers and school leaders, school systems and teachers' unions cannot hope to close achievement gaps.

The issue is a natural one for teachers' unions. As the organizers and representatives of the largest group of individuals in education, unions play a vital role in ensuring that school systems develop and maintain the highest-quality workforce. What's good for unions—providing support and opportunities for members—is good for schools and, most importantly, good for students.

The NEA Foundation has begun to address human capital development through its Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative. The initiative was created in 2003 to accelerate the achievement rate for poor and minority student groups, thereby closing the gap between these students and their higher achieving, more affluent peers. The pilot phase of the initiative is being implemented in three urban districts: Hamilton County (Chattanooga), Tennessee;

Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Seattle,

Washington. The Foundation will expand the scope and impact of this groundbreaking work as a major programmatic focus of its 2008–2013 strategic plan, and to this end will select new sites to participate in a five-year implementation phase.

The Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative was designed around the NEA Foundation's Theory of Change, which can be stated succinctly as follows: Significant and sustainable improvement in rates of achievement for poor and minority students can be achieved by concurrently implementing these steps:

- Increasing local association and school district capacity and collaboration;
 - Increasing teaching capacity through teacher-driven and supported curricular and instructional improvement; and
 - Aligning and increasing community and parent input to and support of improvement efforts.
- The pivotal feature of the Foundation's Theory of Change is that the likelihood of lasting and profound transformation can be increased with strong collaboration between the local association and the school district.
- The three pilot sites have tackled the issue in different ways, depending on their own cultures and needs.
 - In Hamilton County, the focus of the initiative is five inner-city middle schools. These schools tended to perform less well than the other county middle schools, and the district and union sought to improve their performance and close the achievement gap. To accomplish the goal, the district, the union and the education fund formed several cross-school networks to bring together teachers and school leaders to share best practices and implement them throughout the district. The strategy is designed to help change spread more quickly and to build teaching capacity throughout the district.

- In Milwaukee, the initiative focuses on intensive professional development for teachers in 20 low-performing schools. The schools formed Learning Teams, consisting of the principal, the literacy coach, the math teacher leader, the curriculum generalist, and other classroom teachers, who meet weekly to analyze data, develop the school's Closing the Achievement Gaps Action Plan and lead professional development within the school. The initiative is an outgrowth of the Milwaukee Partnership Academy, a school-improvement partnership that includes leaders from the district, the teachers' union, the business community and—significantly—higher education. These leaders meet monthly to plan and design the initiative and establish work groups on such topics as family literacy, teacher/principal quality, mathematics, and literacy.
- In Seattle, the initiative is known as the Flight School Initiative. It is implemented in two cohorts, or flights, each consisting of elementary, middle and high schools that form a feeder pattern.
- Altogether, 16 schools are part of the initiative. The initiative consists of three components: the alignment of curriculum and instruction, the development of professional learning communities and the engagement of families and community members.

In the next phase of the Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative, union-district collaborations in these and other sites can yield much greater improvements in raising achievement and closing achievement gaps by broadening their focus on human capital development. This paper will examine the experiences of the pilot sites to consider ways in which NEA state and local affiliates and districts can collaborate to strengthen human capital. We begin with lessons learned from the pilot sites about collaboration. We then consider what experts mean by human capital and suggest some roles that NEA state and local affiliates are uniquely suited to play in such a system. We outline a set of principles that ought to underlie a collaborative human capital system and conclude with some thoughts on what that might mean for how NEA state and local affiliates organize themselves.



LESSONS LEARNED

The experiences of the Gaps Initiative pilot sites demonstrate the benefits and challenges of union-district collaboration to improve teacher learning and close achievement gaps. Such close collaborations between districts and NEA state and local affiliates are rare, and where they have existed, they have not always been successful. The pilot sites provide some lessons learned that can help these and other sites build and strengthen partnerships so that all teachers are well supported and all children are able to learn. These include:

1. Interest-based bargaining provides a platform for collaborative problem solving.

The traditional model of union-management relations is a confrontational one. The two sides sit across from each other and bargain over a contract every few years, which sets the ground rules until the next contract. Both sides see the process as a zero-sum game: If one side “wins,” the other “loses.” About the only time they confront each other between contracts is when grievances are filed.

Two of the pilot sites, Hamilton County and Seattle, operate in a very different way. Based on agreements that predate the initiative, the unions and districts in those sites use what’s known as “interest-based bargaining.” Union and district leaders meet frequently to discuss issues in a relatively nonconfrontational fashion. The goal is to solve problems, not

2. Networks provide opportunities for cross-school learning.

As many commentators have noted, education is an isolating profession. Teachers tend to stay within their classrooms and seldom visit or work with other teachers in their buildings, much less in other schools. Principals seldom work with their peers to examine data or consider new approaches.

Such isolation impedes learning. Collaboration helps educators examine their own practices and think about new ways of working. Teams can develop new techniques, try them out and look at the data. Individual teachers and principals do not have to reinvent the wheel on their own.

As part of its initiative, Hamilton County formed cross-school networks, and they turned out to be fertile learning grounds.

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to try to win at the expense of the other side or file a grievance. The result is a high level of trust on both sides, a cooperative spirit that enables the initiative to advance and a broad sense of ownership among teacher leaders. As Rhonda Catanzaro of the Tennessee Education Association puts it, “The IBB process was the catalyst for change; it changed the way we looked at each other, and changed the way we worked together. It wasn’t just pointing the finger at the school board, and we became part of the solution.”

For example, through this collaborative process, Hamilton County developed a plan for teacher coaching in middle schools. Teachers and district administrators met during a National Education Association conference, and out of those discussions they formed a strong relationship and wrote the plan together. Teachers and district officials agree that it has transformed the schools.

As part of its initiative, Hamilton County formed cross-school networks, and they turned out to be fertile learning grounds. Teams of teachers and principals meet regularly to examine data, develop new approaches and learn from one another. These networks have sharpened the focus in the district on instruction. Says Rhonda Catanzaro, “The principals in the past didn’t have an opportunity to talk about teaching. They might have talked about test scores to an extent, but they weren’t trained to dig deep into test scores. And now they meet regularly.”

The networks also provide two additional benefits. First, they help bring best practices to scale by enabling good ideas to spread more easily. And second, they help to institutionalize the collaboration that the initiative fostered. Unlike other initiatives, which too often go away when the funding ends, the networks help ensure that collaboration continues in Hamilton County.



3. Community partners can strengthen and enhance collaborations.

While collaboration between teachers' unions and district administrations is critical to the development of human capital, other institutions and organizations also play important roles. By involving these institutions in the collaboration, unions and districts can expand their capacity to develop and strengthen human capital.

In Milwaukee, for example, universities are key partners in the initiative. Indeed, the Milwaukee Partnership Academy, which oversees the grant, is housed at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. That university's involvement, along with that of Cardinal Stritch University, brings additional resources and expertise to improve professional development. Faculty members and staff are deeply involved in the professional development activities, according to Cris Anderson, principal investigator for the Milwaukee Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative.

The universities' involvement might also pay additional dividends down the line. Because of their intensive involvement with teachers, the universities are rethinking their teacher-preparation programs. Working collaboratively with teachers, the University of Wisconsin–Madison is looking at ways to integrate instruction in content and pedagogy to help ensure that teachers who enter the Milwaukee Public Schools are well prepared for urban education.

Other organizations also play key roles. The involvement of a private local education fund, the Public Education Foundation (PEF), does much to advance the Hamilton County



initiative. In addition to serving on the Change Leadership Group, which designed and oversaw the initiative, PEF provides funding to support the initiative's goals and organizes a group of teacher leaders, known as Osborne Fellows, among other activities.

4. Leadership transitions pose a challenge to collaboration.

Sustainability is always a challenge to education reform; few reforms last long enough to show real effects. One of the reasons reforms fail to last is that there is rarely an anchor to keep the reforms in place when the leaders who championed them move on. Support for the reforms is not deep enough, so there are few voices calling for the reforms to remain. And there are few structures in place that will ensure that reforms outlast changes in leadership.

The challenge of sustainability is particularly acute with collaborations, because reforms are threatened by changes in leadership in both the district and the union. In Seattle, in fact, the initiative lost champions from both organizations, and its leaders had to work doubly hard to bring the new leaders up to speed and gain their support.

One way to help ensure that changes survive transitions in leadership is to institutionalize them

Human capital development has the potential to fundamentally transform schools.

and make them part of the way schools do business. The networks established in Hamilton County have helped on this score. Despite a transition in the superintendency and the union leadership, the networks continue to meet and drive changes in middle schools. "It's the institutionalization of the practices that are key to the work," says Ismahen Kangles, Director, Middle Schools for a New Society. "These new principals come into the schools and they know what it looks like."



BROADENING THE FOCUS: “HUMAN CAPITAL”

While the initiatives in the pilot sites have shown some success in improving teachers' knowledge and skills, strengthening practices and, ultimately, narrowing achievement gaps, some recent research suggests that these efforts might have limitations. Although the professional development efforts are important, many other policies and practices affect teachers' abilities to improve student learning. Collectively, these policies and practices are known as human capital development. By addressing this full range of policies and practices, future initiative sites—and other districts and unions willing to collaborate—can make more substantial gains.



Despite increased attention on human capital, there is often some confusion about what it entails. Too frequently, discussions of human capital tend to focus on a particular issue—pay, for example, or professional development.

In fact, human capital development is a comprehensive enterprise that encompasses the full spectrum of practices and policies that affect teachers and school leaders, everything from recruitment and preparation through evaluation, career advancement and retirement. Without this comprehensive focus, human capital efforts could be counterproductive. A school system might develop an aggressive approach to recruiting highly skilled individuals as teachers, but if it lacks structures and opportunities for teachers to develop further and advance their careers, many individuals might find better options elsewhere and leave the district, or leave teaching altogether. The district then has to go through the recruitment process all over again at great expense. Or a district and a union might provide high-quality and engaging professional development that builds teachers' knowledge and skills, but if teachers lack opportunities to put these abilities to use, the professional development funds would go to waste.

Human capital development has the potential to fundamentally transform schools. In contrast to the traditional “egg crate” structure, in which teachers are considered interchangeable parts responsible for following the directives of the administration, human capital systems provide opportunities for teachers to develop their abilities and use their knowledge and expertise in ways that will benefit students. “Much of the structural apparatus of human capital is lacking in the United States,” says Linda Darling-Hammond, the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education at Stanford University. “The factory model that we designed did not anticipate the challenge of teaching—there was an idea that you could create a curriculum and a teacher could follow it like an assembly line. We didn't create an organization that placed human capital in a good structure to achieve the goals.”

Human capital development allows schools to rethink how teachers work together and support one another. Barnett Berry, president of the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) says, “Think about a team of seven or eight teachers, many making serious professional salaries with serious responsibilities, in charge of a variety of people, including itinerant teachers, teaching assistants, adjuncts and developing teachers.”



NEW ROLES FOR UNIONS

Just as the collaborations in the pilot sites helped ensure that the initiatives reflected teachers' experience and knowledge about what works, collaborations are essential to produce strong, effective human capital systems. At the same time, such systems open up new possibilities for NEA state and local affiliates. As district-wide representatives of teachers, unions are uniquely suited to lead a number of practices that will enhance teachers' knowledge and skills and ensure that all teachers are well supported and prepared to be effective.



In many cases, these roles would be new and would require associations to develop new capacities. But they provide opportunities for the unions to become national leaders in innovation. Following are some possible roles unions could take on:

1. Recruitment and Preparation

Each year, public schools in the United States hire about 300,000 new teachers, a number that is expected to grow over the next decade. Ensuring that all of these teachers are well qualified and prepared to enter the classroom is crucial. Although teachers develop their knowledge and skills as they gain experience, the students in teachers' first classrooms deserve teachers who are capable of educating them to high standards.

2. Supporting New Teachers

One factor that determines whether new teachers stay in the profession or leave soon after entering is the quality of the support they receive. Unfortunately, too often new teachers are left to figure things out on their own or are mentored in a superficial way. With proper mentoring, though, new teachers can work through rough periods and develop practices that will make them more effective.

Some states and national organizations, particularly the New Teacher Center at the University of California, Santa Cruz, have developed highly effective mentorship programs that provide appropriate support for new teachers. Yet these efforts are not sufficient for the hundreds of thousands of new teachers who enter classrooms each year.

Teachers need to be intimately involved in the development of standards for practice if they are to meet them.

Collaborations between unions and administrators can develop and expand recruitment and preparation programs to ensure that all teachers are capable from the start. One approach that appears promising is teacher residency. Under that approach, modeled after medical residencies, aspiring teachers spend a year working in actual classrooms under the guidance of a skilled mentor, while they earn a master's degree.

Residency programs in Boston and Chicago have already shown results. Although too new to determine whether they contribute to improvements in student learning, the programs have resulted in substantially higher rates of teacher retention, suggesting that graduates feel better prepared for the classrooms they encounter.

Unions can play important roles in the development of teacher residencies. By selecting and training mentors, they can ensure that residents have the highest-quality experiences. They also can ensure that the curriculum and design of the program is tailored to teachers' needs.

NEA state and local affiliates can play important roles in augmenting these mentorship programs by tapping the expertise that exists within their membership. By identifying skilled, experienced teachers who are willing and able to serve as mentors, they can provide vital resources for new teachers, either in their buildings or across town. They can set up virtual rooms where new teachers can express their concerns and get advice from skilled veterans. They can develop tools that can provide guidance for new teachers.

3. Evaluation

Evaluations can be occasions for professional growth by providing clear expectations for performance and forward-looking discussions of professional development and improvement. But too often they turn out to be missed opportunities. Principals often conduct so-called "drive-by" evaluations using routine checklists and fail to discuss performance and development options with teachers.

The experience of districts with peer assistance and review (PAR) shows that teachers and their associations can develop strong, effective evaluation systems. Under those systems—in place in a variety of districts, including Cincinnati, Ohio; Montgomery County, Maryland; Rochester, New York; and Toledo, Ohio—teachers take the lead in developing rigorous standards of practice and measure their peers' practice against those standards. They provide support for teachers who need assistance and recommend dismissing teachers who consistently fail to meet the standards.

The experiences of these districts show that teacher leadership makes a difference. Teachers need to be intimately involved in the development of standards for practice if they are to meet them. Teachers find the reviews credible when they come from peers. And, despite the fears of administrators, teachers are rigorous in upholding high standards and intolerant of teachers who fail to do so. Teachers believe in high standards for practice and want to maintain them. At the same time, they recognize that poor performers cast a shadow over the entire profession.

4. Brokering Expertise

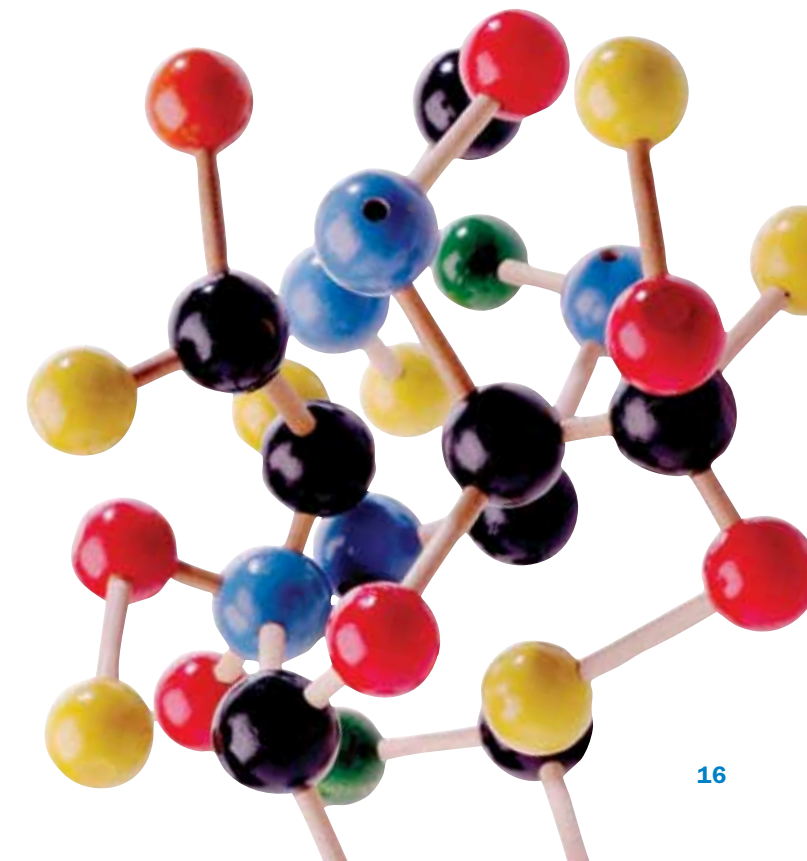
One of the most promising ways to develop teachers' abilities is to provide opportunities for them to work directly with expert peers. Systems with coaching or lead-teacher positions find that teachers can learn a great deal from teachers they respect. The positions also enable expert teachers to take on additional responsibilities without leaving the classroom altogether.

Yet the distribution of expert teachers is uneven. Many districts and schools struggle to find skilled teachers who can work with their faculty members. Unions—with the help of technology—can take the lead to connect experts to places where they are needed. With their national networks, unions can link highly effective teachers with schools that need coaching assistance. They don't have to be physically connected; they can provide online assistance in real time.

In addition, the international market for professional development is growing—what Berry of CTQ calls the “global trade in pedagogy.” If accountants in Mumbai can prepare taxes for businesswomen in Boston, why can't the best teachers in Illinois coach teachers in Hong Kong? As with domestic networking, unions could play the lead role in connecting teachers with markets in other nations. And teachers would have greater opportunities not only to share their expertise, but also to earn additional income.

One model for such a system is CTQ's “Return on Investment” initiative. Under that effort, which began in 2008, teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards serve as “virtual coaches” for 150 novice teachers in four North Carolina districts. By working online, they can provide one-on-one professional development to teachers anywhere. And at the same time, they hone their leadership skills.

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PRINCIPLES FOR HUMAN CAPITAL SYSTEMS

While a number of school systems and unions are working together to develop and strengthen human capital systems, few have put together a complete system that works effectively to ensure that all teachers are knowledgeable, skilled and supported. As they continue in these endeavors, we believe that unions and districts ought to adhere to the following principles:



1. The goal of a human capital strategy is to improve teaching quality, rather than teacher quality.

The research that shows the critical role of teachers in improving student achievement has led some observers to conclude that educators need to shine a light on teacher quality. This emphasis has led, in many cases, to a focus on teachers and their individual attributes: get the right individuals in schools and the problem will be solved.

A closer look at the research shows that the real issue is teaching quality. That is, teaching—the interaction between teachers, students and content—is what produces student learning. Individuals matter, of course, but what matters most is what these individuals do in classrooms and what knowledge, skills and attitudes they have and develop.

practice, in conjunction with principals, against clear standards of excellent practice; to work collaboratively and with the support of expert teachers and coaches to develop their abilities; to use their expertise to develop the skills of other teachers; and to work with peers when their practice falls short of the standards.

Several districts, including Cincinnati and Minneapolis, have developed such systems. Perhaps the most extensive is the Professional Growth System in Montgomery County, Maryland. Developed jointly by the Montgomery County Education Association and the Montgomery County Public Schools, the system includes a clear and rigorous set of standards for teaching practice and an evaluation system in which teachers' work is measured against those standards. But the evaluation

Teachers have ownership over policies they helped develop and share an interest in ensuring that they work.

The Milwaukee initiative addresses this issue head on by creating Learning Teams in each of the 20 low-performing schools that are the focus of the initiative. The teams consist of the principal, the literacy coach and classroom teachers, who meet weekly to analyze data, develop the school's action plan and lead professional development within the school. Surveys suggest that the climate in the schools is improving, and there is a strong sense of teacher engagement. "I think there is a sense of community we're developing in these schools," says Superintendent William G. Andrekopolous.

In other districts, such as Minneapolis and Montgomery County, Maryland, and in the states of North Carolina and Washington, teachers' unions have taken the lead in developing teaching capacity by supporting teachers' efforts to earn National Board certification. These efforts have paid off: in North Carolina, 10,000 teachers have earned the credential.

Ultimately, developing teaching quality requires a set of policies and practices that enable teachers to examine their own

is not an up-or-down vote like evaluations in many districts. Rather, it is an occasion for teachers and principals to meet to develop a professional growth plan that will enable teachers, no matter how expert, to develop their practice even more. The system also includes PAR for teachers who do not meet standards. The PAR panel works with teachers to develop an improvement plan, and if they do not improve, they can be recommended for termination. The system also includes opportunities for excellent teachers to apply to become Lead Teachers who take on additional responsibilities, such as mentoring new teachers, coaching and developing curriculum. They can also earn additional compensation.

An initial evaluation of the program found that it brought about changes in teaching and contributed to the development of professional learning communities in schools.

2. Teachers are agents of change, not objects of change.

Too often the practice in school districts is for the administration to develop and implement policies that teachers must carry out even though teachers and their associations had little opportunity to participate in the development of the policies. This situation often breeds resentment from teachers and makes it less likely that the that the policy can be implemented effectively or sustained over time.

Collaborations between district administrators and state and local NEA affiliates, on the other hand, produce more sustainable policies. Teachers have ownership over policies they helped develop and share an interest in ensuring that they work. In addition, teachers—through their associations—often have the best ideas about what will make a policy effective. Those closest to the classroom know school cultures best and will know when incentives will work. They know when a policy goal is realistic. Collaboration produces smart policies.

Denver's Professional Compensation System, or ProComp, which was developed jointly by the Denver Classroom Teachers Association and the Denver Public Schools, is an example of a policy that is more sustainable and more effective because of collaboration. Because it was developed jointly, it includes a number of features that might not exist if the administration had created it unilaterally. For example, at the union's insistence, it was started as a pilot program in a few schools, providing the opportunity for evaluation and changes before it was implemented districtwide. In addition, as the union had proposed, it rewards teachers for developing their knowledge and skills as well as for improving student achievement.



Other countries have recognized that providing teachers with support—including time out of the classroom for planning—improves student learning.

The collaboration also helped ensure widespread support. Union members adopted the system by a 59–41 percent vote, and two years later, the city's voters, by a similar margin, approved a tax increase worth \$25 million to pay for it.

The Seattle Achievement Gaps Initiative also shows the value of union engagement. The union was able to provide time and resources for the home visits that are key components of the initiative and to protect teachers in the Flight Schools from workforce reductions. Without those efforts, the initiative might not have gotten off the ground.

3. Teacher working conditions are student learning conditions.

Some critics of teacher unions try to create artificial divisions by suggesting that unions are looking after “adult” interests, rather than the interests of children. It is true that the unions’ role is to protect their members, and the members are adults. Yet the unions do so in order for their members to do their jobs more effectively. And doing their jobs more effectively means that they are better able to facilitate student learning. There is no conflict between adult and child interests.

In New York City and Minneapolis, teachers’ unions have sought to improve teachers’ working conditions by operating their own charter schools. Minneapolis’s “self-governed schools” will be created by teachers, parents and community members to create or replicate unique programs to attract families to the district.

In other districts, unions have argued for more teacher planning time. Why would teachers want to spend more time outside the classroom? The answer is simple: to improve their instruction. By working with colleagues and coaches, teachers can examine student work, conduct research on new instructional approaches and consider new ways of engaging all students.

Other countries have recognized that providing teachers with support—including time out of the classroom for planning—improves student learning. In Finland, for example, teachers spend about one afternoon a week meeting and planning curriculum, in addition to time they spend for professional development. By contrast, teachers in the United States spend a total of about three to five hours a week outside the classroom, usually on their own. The result is striking: Finland’s teachers are considered highly skilled and professional, and their students performed at the top of the international rankings on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

4. Equity is paramount.

A recent report by The New Teacher Project, called “The Widget Effect,” argues that school systems tend to treat all teachers as interchangeable parts and fail to recognize differences in their abilities and interests. But there is another way that school systems treat teachers as interchangeable, and it is at least as insidious: They fail to recognize the differences in schools and classrooms.

The Achievement Gaps Initiative is designed to focus resources and attention on low-performing schools. In Hamilton County, for example, one of the goals is to ensure that the teaching force in the focus middle schools mirrors that of the district as a whole.

In Seattle, the initiative seeks to provide teachers with tools and support to provide the understanding and learning that equity demands. As every teacher knows, each group of 25 children is unique. Even if the children all come from the same neighborhood, each comes to the classroom with his or her own cultural, intellectual and family background. As part of the initiative, teachers conduct home visits to meet with parents, receive training in cultural competence and interact with representatives of cultural organizations. An evaluation of the initiative found that these steps improved teachers’ abilities to engage with students and improved discipline in schools.



TOWARD A NEW VISION OF TEACHER UNIONS

If teacher unions are to become full partners in the development and implementation of human capital systems, they will have to operate very differently than most unions operate today. The current system places union leaders and the administration at opposite sides of the table in an often adversarial posture: the union leaders present members’ grievances, express wariness at administration initiatives they had no part in developing and protect members’ interests, benefits and working conditions.



Those functions are important, but they hardly position the union to take the lead in co-developing and implementing initiatives to improve the knowledge and skills of teachers. To be in that position, unions must take on new capacities and place a higher priority on activities they might have paid less attention to in the past.

Above all, unions need to envision their purpose as first and foremost focused on teaching and learning. Pay and benefits will remain high on the agenda, but they are means to an end, and the end is improving instruction to close achievement gaps. “Until we see that as our work, we won’t be very powerful partners in the use of teachers and redesign of human capital,” says Patrick Dolan, a scholar in residence at Ohio University.

Such a posture might be difficult for some union leaders and members to adopt. They know how much they had to struggle—and continue to struggle—for their wages and working conditions. But the issue of student learning and closing the achievement gap is too important. Unions must be at the table when these issues are being considered.

Putting teaching and learning first will require some new ways of doing business. First, union leaders must become experts in education policy. Many, of course, already are. But all union leaders need to become well versed in policy issues so that they can discuss them with administrators and understand the implications for their members. They need to be able to make innovative proposals and maintain a seat at the table in local, statewide and national policy discussions. As Mark Simon, co-coordinator of the Mooney Institute for

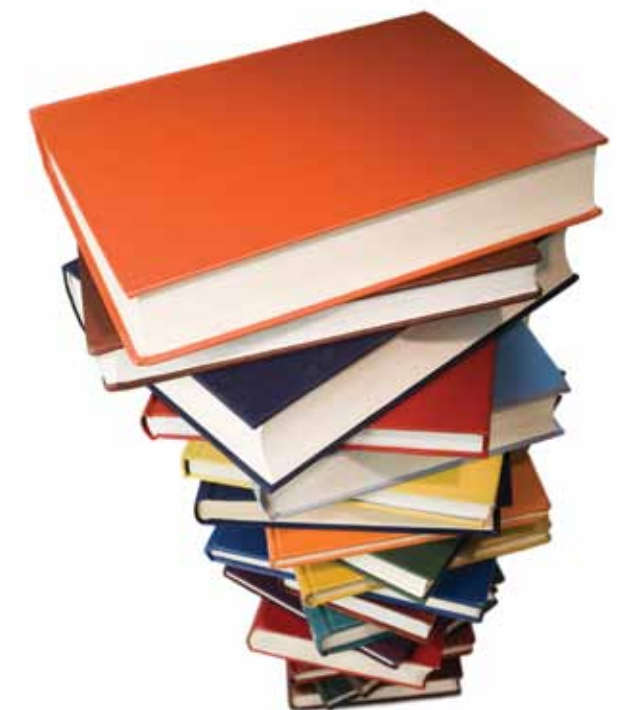


Teacher and Union Leadership, put it, the union leader must become “the smartest person in the room” when policy is discussed.

Second, union leaders must place a high priority on communications with members. They need to keep members informed about what they are thinking, what administrators are thinking, what the latest policy issues are and what legislative proposals might affect them. They need to keep members apprised of what’s happening in statewide and national policy discussions so the members can add their voices.

At the same time, union leaders need to listen to members. They need to understand what members are thinking and what they are learning from their students, their peers and their research. They need to be able to say accurately and legitimately that they are representing the voice of the membership. And members have a lot to offer in policy discussions.

All of these changes will require unions to develop new expertise and take on new capacities. Some members might consider them too much of a departure from the traditional role of unions, but the benefits to unions—and to members—are great. They will co-develop and implement systems that will improve the quality of teaching in every school. And that can only improve learning for every student. That’s what every teacher wants.



Appendix

For Further Inquiry: References and Resources

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