

**Remarks at the JFK School of Government, Harvard University
Executive Institute on
Labor-Management Cooperation in School Districts**

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Thank you. I'm very pleased to be here in such good company, among teams of individuals representing both labor and management who have taken time out to become involved in what I've heard is a very intensive institute on how to work together on making your school systems — and by extension, our entire public school system — second to none in the world. The people in this room are literally responsible for millions of children, and I believe strongly that the only way we'll give those children what they deserve is by working at it together. And that isn't easy, because it means compromise, and it means doing things differently in most instances.

Before getting into it, I want to extend special greetings and thanks to the AFT local leaders who are here. I know that you worked hard — and enthusiastically — to help put together teams to attend this event. (I'm particularly pleased to see that a team is attending from Detroit. I hope this institute will help to put in place the kind of working relationship and improvement plan that will insure success for the children of Detroit.)

Since I'm at one of the great academic institutions in the world, allow me for a moment to take a professorial prerogative, and quote myself! In September 1997, in my first "Where We Stand" column, I wrote something I've repeated like a mantra ever since, and I believe it with all my heart:

Those of us responsible for public education must never defend, or try to perpetuate a school to which we would not send our own children . . . No one group can achieve the necessary change. Boards of education, superintendents, the leaders of teacher unions, parents and school staff have to work together on solutions.

And so many of us are doing that — witness your participation in this institute. It isn't easy to get beyond many years of conflict, wariness, and adversarial relationships. But it is happening, more and more. At the national level, organizations representing school boards, superintendents, school administrators and unions are increasingly finding common ground, and initiating cooperative work on school improvement.

Let me cite just a few examples. The Learning First Alliance has done great work over the past year, issuing policy papers on reading and mathematics that set the standard for guidance on what it takes to teach these subjects. The AFT (and the NEA) joined together with the national superintendents' association as well as the two national

principals' associations to sponsor research which produced a consumer's guide "to effective schoolwide programs." And, building on work I'm proud to say AFT began, on Redesigning Low-Performing Schools in eight districts, a partnership of organizations representing superintendents, school boards and the unions, has gotten Ford Foundation support to conduct a two-year, joint labor-management school improvement program in five more.

Not all of this goes smoothly. If we all believe, as I do, that we have to do all we can, move heaven and earth and bureaucracy, too, to make change for the better in schools where kids are being shortchanged – that doesn't mean that we automatically agree on how to do it.

So we wrangle and wrestle and debate over it. The bottom line is – do we know how to conclude a negotiation, no matter how tough, or will the parties retreat to their corners and lose themselves in the fight... which makes everyone, especially the kids, losers.

Teachers unions, listening to their members – the teachers – are usually pretty sure about what needs to be done.

They're even more sure about what should not be done.

Superintendents got their jobs because they are supposed to know what to do – a union getting in their way can be a real pain.

Principals are usually somewhere in the middle...not an effective or comfortable place to be.

Yet, in so many instances, when the fight's been had and the dust has settled – really good stuff gets done through labor-management cooperation. For example: Toledo is one of the pioneers in the field of peer assistance and peer review (not without bumps in the road, of course). In Wichita the district and the union have taken a leading role in promoting the adoption of Core Knowledge. In Chicago, the transformation of an entire huge city system is taking place with real cooperation and consultation between the union and the superintendent. Same in Boston. In my own city of New York, there are numerous examples.

But, these examples remain too few.

So, in my remarks today, I'd like to expand a bit on the theme of "working together", so that we can move beyond its rhetoric, to its reality. Because we all know that "working together" sounds good, but often breaks down about 15 minutes after the morning newspaper comes out — with headlines describing declining – or static – districtwide test scores for the second year in a row, or some other messy problem in a school.

Then, usually everyone is scrambling to place blame: "Kid's don't work hard enough... Kids can't do the work... Parents don't care... Board policies are inconsistent... The superintendent is paying more attention to building his resume than to improving the district... Teachers only care about salaries... The tests aren't fair..."

I know that each of you in the audience can think of your own example of what has lead to breakdown.

But folks, we can't let this happen.

Because those who have already given up on public education take our finger pointing and denials of responsibility as their cue to step forward and provide a string of so-called cures that are worse, much worse than the illness they claim to address. And many, many children – especially poor ones – will get hurt. I don't need to remind this audience of the many common threats we face.

So, what does "working together" really mean? What does it take to develop a good working partnership? What are some of the issues on which we can work together? I don't have all the answers, but I did – like many of you – help the process along quite a bit as a local union leader in my small hometown, New York City. So, I'll talk a bit about some of that – and try to leave plenty of time for discussion.

Well, first of all, working together means at its most basic: Ending the blame game, and replacing it with trust and mutual respect. Easier said than done. But, it must be done, and it must be based on the rock bottom commitment to doing whatever it takes to help the kids do better – and to believe that they can.

When my union adopted a leading role in the restructuring — and re-staffing — of some of our low-performing high schools, some of our members were very angry at us. They thought that they were being blamed for factors beyond their control. They felt they were being cast out of schools, as if they — not the school — were defective. It was a tough situation. I've got the scars to prove it.

I remember one particularly tough situation, at a faculty union meeting in a high school that had been deteriorating for years, where attendance was low and violence was high and it really had ceased to be an institution of learning for most kids.

The staff – many of them seasoned, capable teachers, had suffered through a succession of poor administrators following the retirement of a longtime principal, and they were angry. They were doing the best they could without leadership and without support. But now the school was "closing", and their union wasn't fighting to stop that from happening. On the contrary, we were supporting the change.

After the meeting – a livid math teacher confronted me, saying he was still teaching the kids who came to him, that kids could still learn in that school.

I looked at him, sure that he was doing what he could for a few kids, but I asked him, "Do you have children" "Yes" – startled.

"Would you send them here?"

He turned on his heel and walked away. Furious. I lost his vote, for sure.

But the following school year, he was teaching math in another school, and he was, with hindsight, much less angry.

Now, let me say this. There is no way, no matter how much I believed it, that as the responsible elected leader of those teachers I could have taken the position I took in support of the complete restaffing of that school, without having a management partner willing to work with us to develop a dignified process of transfer.

I couldn't say to our members, "Look, you have to go elsewhere," if there was nowhere else to go. (If I had, I probably would have been the one looking for a new position, not them!)

And truthfully, if they actually had nowhere else to go, I would have fought like a tiger — and won — their battle to stay at that school. Fortunately, I had a smart superintendent. Working together, we developed a plan that included a dignified process of re-staffing, not only for teachers, but also for school-level administrators. And that huge failing high school became four separate successful "theme" schools, charter type schools, within that building. And in a short period of time it was again filled with students — and had a waiting list of eager teachers and parents wanting their kids to go there.

At first, in the district, we worked on redesign in an ad hoc fashion, school by school. But over time — as we developed experience and confidence in each other — the process was built into our contract.

We also learned, the hard way, that it's not enough to hold hands and get along. We learned that the best way to fix what wasn't working was to focus on what does work.

Experimentation and innovation are important. But in those desperate situations, to turn around low-performing schools, we need to focus on proven programs.

AFT's "What Works" series used a set of rigorous criteria for selecting programs that we thought our members and leaders would want to know about. We asked simple questions like: If a program's been around for 15 years and is in 1,000 schools and has no evidence of effectiveness, do we want to encourage a local leader to recommend that staff at one of her schools adopt it?

If a program has spectacular results in one school, but has no capacity to help other schools start up the program in theirs, can we recommend it to a troubled, struggling school?

There are thousands of wonderful schools across America, many of them doing incredibly creative things. But when a school has struggled and failed for years, we should demand, "Show me the evidence."

If something hasn't worked or leaves us without confidence that it will, the union leader has to let her members know, the superintendent has to challenge the "pet idea" of one school board member, and the rest of the school board has to rally around the evidence. Sometimes it takes guts to do what works.

And it doesn't have to be top-down or forced on people. Joint sponsorship of "models fairs," where school staff are provided opportunities to learn about how to judge quality programs, and to attend presentations from the best and most appropriate research-based models have been very successful. (I know that our Los Angeles local, UTLA, has worked with its district to put on such events, as have others.)

We also have to make a joint commitment to do what works to ensure the highest attainable level of teacher quality. While there are many challenges on which we can work together — social promotion, school discipline and safety, school redesign — ensuring teacher quality is one we all need to be working on, and on which much needs to be done.

We all know we have a major problem coming: 2 million teachers retiring or leaving in the next few years. Huge numbers of teachers being brought in without proper training or certification. Too many teachers being assigned out of license, sometimes without even a minor in the subject area.

You can't teach what you don't know.

And you can't necessarily teach what you know if you don't know how.

Here too, is an area rife with potential conflict where we have to find ways to work together.

But in so many places, we already have.

Let me list just a few things that districts and their unions can do together:

- ✓ Set up teacher internship programs. New teachers should not be left to sink or swim – certified or not.
- ✓ Provide for master teachers, teacher centers, and real professional development— with time for teachers to work together on improving their practice. All teachers, including the best, need help from colleagues.
- ✓ Involve teachers in the hiring process at the school level, so they can ensure that new hires support the school's educational philosophy or program.
- ✓ Create peer review and intervention programs. They are much more rigorous than what presently exists in most districts.
- ✓ Streamline and professionalize dismissal proceedings. No one wants incompetents in the classroom; everyone supports due process.
- ✓ Help teachers do NBPTS certification

All of this can be done, indeed, has been done in some of our locals. Districts throughout the country are working with AFT locals, using our ER&D programs to deliver quality, research-based, peer-led professional development. And, I can tell you from personal experience, that the UFT's Teachers Center is the heart of staff development in New York.

But none of these are easy things to do. They challenge management prerogatives, and they challenge union tradition.

-- New addition -- [Another commitment we need to make is to include school support staff as partners in our efforts. They are a dedicated and important part of the school team and can make a valuable contribution to our work. As partners in our work, they need to have opportunities to participate in meaningful professional development. We in the AFT have found that these members of our union want access to training and professional development that will upgrade their skills and prepare them to take on greater responsibility in schools. They truly desire to be partners in the effort to improve schools.] – End of addition

So, working together also means, working through the fight. Because fight we inevitably will. Maybe we should all have a sign on the wall in the union office, the superintendent's office and the school board's chamber that reads: "Get over it."

There are always going to be times when we will have legitimate disagreements. These may be over budgets, or the emphasis of a particular academic program, or magnet schools, or whatever else.

I've had plenty of those rocky moments along the way. But I never refused to work with somebody because they were a "so-and-so." I've wanted to, but my better nature and judgment prevailed. Not that we didn't fight hard when we had to. The UFT is nothing if not tough.

But we never pandered to our membership by grandstanding or picking unnecessary fights with the superintendent. We didn't go to every board meeting to point out what's wrong with the administration's plan. Yes, we sometimes used our union newspaper or newsletter for attacks – but we also talked about the positive things happening. In the long run, conflict can't be ongoing. It's not good for us – and it's certainly not good for the kids we teach.

Now, I would hope that an administrator speaking at this institute will say the same kinds of things to superintendents. You know that there are some individuals out there who've made a career out of "being tough on the union." And, that is counterproductive. In fact, it usually elicits exactly the behavior I've just been saying isn't helpful. Frankly, management usually gets the union it deserves.

An effective administrator will know how to work with the union. He'll know how far a union president can go on an issue. When a union leader has taken a bold move, and maybe stepped out a bit beyond where her membership is ready to go, that union

leader is potentially at the mercy of a superintendent or school board member who can cut the ground out from under her. Aside from other things wrong with doing that, it just isn't smart politics, because if a risk-taking president loses the next election, it will likely be to someone who ran on a "get tough with the administration" platform.

So, the lesson is, when you fight, make sure it's clean and fair, and about something that really matters.

At a recent AFT event, a superintendent from a school district that has made very significant strides in raising student achievement—especially for poor kids—remarked that there wasn't a day that went by that he didn't talk to the union on some matter or other. Before announcing major policies to the public, he discusses them with the union. And it has paid off – peace in the land lets good things happen.

Whether there is a formal process of consultation established, or the union sits on advisory councils, or there is an informal commitment to discuss all important matters—before, during and after they become public—regular ongoing communication is a key.

And, don't forget the contract. Joint commitments to school reform are increasingly being embodied in contracts, thereby creating a long-term commitment to educational excellence. In particular teacher quality provisions, such as those in Toledo, Cincinnati, Poway (CA) and of other leaders in this field, should be carefully examined. In terms of school redesign and improvement, numerous contracts, including those in New York, Cleveland, and Minneapolis can serve as guides.

So, in closing I want to say, that I think we've proven in many, many districts, that we can work together. The big question is how to sustain partnership, and to help others do it.

The bottom line, the goal for all of us involved in public education, has to be the ultimate success of our kids.

If we get too caught up in adult conflict, in posturing, or a false sense of prerogatives, the kids will suffer, our goal of real and sustainable school improvement won't be met, and we run the real risk of losing the enterprise.

For the sake of our students, and for all we believe about the value of public education in a democracy, let's commit to working at a partnership, and to having the guts and the patience to stick with it.

Thank you.