



A Union of Professionals

Successful State Practices for Educator Recruitment and Retention
By: Randi Weingarten
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Introduction

Good morning, Chair Trujillo. I want to thank you and the rest of this committee for having me here today. And I want to acknowledge my AFT colleagues, Stephanie Ly, Kathy Chavez and Ellen Bernstein. I can think of no better place or time to be talking about the future of the recruitment and retention of educators than in New Mexico, where the tide is turning for public education in large part because there are educators' voices represented at the table—many of whom I recognize in this room.

Gov. Lujan Grisham and the New Mexico state Legislature have shown great leadership in strengthening public education this past session. Budgets reflect priorities, and the additional \$450 million you are devoting to public education next year is a significant down payment on the right priorities.

There is increased support for at-risk students, improved teacher pay and more resources for community schools. You are moving to make evaluation and accountability policies more reflective of research than of rhetoric. And, you passed a “grow-your-own” law for paraprofessionals to pursue teaching that I talk about as a model when I speak around the country.

I have visited hundreds of schools across the nation and have seen their struggles and successes firsthand. We all are well-aware of the hallowed tradition of “local control” when it comes to public education, but we also know that policy matters—at the local and state levels. So I commend both the process and the content of this Legislative Education Study Committee. You are looking at many powerful and promising ideas, like the previous presentation on teacher residencies.

You asked me here today to address educator recruitment and retention—which are top priorities for the AFT as well. In fact, I've felt so strongly that all signs point to a crisis in the teaching profession that I gave a speech about it at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., this spring. And I invited two panels of district leaders, legislators and policymakers, and teacher union officials who are trying to turn the tide—people from New York City, Meriden, Conn., and the ABC school district in California; a state senator from Arkansas; and your lieutenant governor.

The American Federation of Teachers is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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One of the education leaders I consulted with about that speech was Ellen Bernstein, the president of the Albuquerque Teachers Federation. Many of you know that Ellen has laid out a Systemic Approach to Attract and Retain High-Quality Educators in New Mexico. It's a very thoughtful and research-based approach—I'll talk about that in more detail. There is a lot of wisdom about strengthening the teaching profession in this state and in this room.

I'm going to use the majority of my time with you to talk about recruitment, retention and the entire educator pipeline—the teaching profession itself, centered on what I call the “freedom to teach”—and the challenges we face every day not just in getting good teachers into the profession, but in making it the kind of job that enables you to pay your bills and maybe support a family.

But let's first go back for a minute to those schools I've visited, and you've visited, and maybe some of you have taught in.

Four Pillars

And let's ask ourselves: What would it take for every neighborhood to have a great public school that every child could learn and thrive in? I think it comes down to four things, **four pillars of effective public schools**. This may sound familiar, because AFT New Mexico has built these pillars into its legislative agenda.

The first pillar is promoting children's well-being. Schools must be places where kids are welcomed and wanted and safe. We all strive for that. But educators are often the first responders to the damaging effects of poverty—including hunger, toxic stress and untreated medical conditions that undermine children's well-being and ravage their ability to learn.

The second pillar is powerful learning. We expect so much of our public schools—from students' academic learning, to workforce preparation, to social behavior, to citizenship. You don't get there from rote memorization or standardized test performance. You get there by engaging students with challenging material, hands-on experiences, projects that cut across subject areas, and authentic ways to demonstrate and measure progress.

The third pillar is collaboration. This is what happens when teachers, principals and central office staff work together as partners—and also partner with parents and community organizations—to improve school climate, and promote student learning and well-being.

The last pillar is building teacher capacity. Powerful learning doesn't happen without powerful teaching by an accomplished educator. But it takes time and support to be a powerful teacher. And like all successful professionals, a teacher needs to be treated with dignity and respect. While we talk wistfully, and truthfully, about the magical relationship between individual teachers and students, the reality is that we need an entire profession full of people who are prepared and supported and compensated in ways that show how much we as a society value great neighborhood public schools and the students they serve.

Quality Education Agenda

Those are what I consider to be four pillars of effective public schools. Obviously, there could be others. But I firmly believe that, whatever the policy or approach, education reform should be viewed through the lens of whether it is good for kids and fair to teachers. And that is why the AFT seeks and promotes education agendas focused on **evidence** (to ensure high quality, efficiency and effectiveness), **equity** (to provide a great education to all children), **scalability** (to make success systemic, so it extends to all, not just some) and **sustainability** (so the reforms outlast changes in school, district and union leadership; don't fall prey to budget cycles; and aren't buffeted about by political shifts).

It can be easy to look at education from 30,000 feet. But consider what teachers have recently said about why they teach:

“I teach because I want to change the world, one child at a time, and to show them how to have passion and wonder in their learning.”

“I teach so the next generation will question—everything. The classroom should be a place where we set children's minds free.”

“I teach because our democracy cannot survive without citizens capable of critical analysis.”

Why I felt called to teach is best summed up by this poster I have moved from office to office since I taught in the 1990s: “Teachers inspire, encourage, empower, nurture, activate, motivate and change the world.”

The Current Crisis

That's what draws people to the teaching profession. Teaching is unlike any other profession in terms of mission, importance, complexity, impact and fulfillment. Teachers *get* the importance of their work. So

do parents and the public. But teachers know that some people *don't* get it—whether it's the empty platitudes or the just plain dissing. And this has taken a huge toll on the teaching profession.

Teachers and other public school employees are leaving the profession at the highest rate on record. There were 110,000 fewer teachers than needed in the last school year, almost doubling the shortage of 2015. All 50 states started the last school year with teacher shortages.

Last year, a state-by-state study by the Learning Policy Institute found that 9.1 percent of teachers in New Mexico plan to leave the profession, compared with 7.3 percent of teachers across the United States. In 2016, 7.2 percent of New Mexico teachers had plans to leave teaching. I highlight these data not to embarrass the state, but to commend you for addressing this crisis. You are driving policy to recruit, retain and support New Mexico teachers.

Nationwide, the crisis is getting worse. Enrollment in teacher preparation programs is plummeting—dropping 35 percent nationally between 2009 and 2015.

Teaching has become so devalued that, for the first time in 50 years, a majority of parents say they don't want their children to become teachers.

This crisis in the teaching profession has two major roots: deep disinvestment from public education, and the deprofessionalization of teaching. The power to confront both of these lies at the federal and state policy levels. There are things you can do to help stem the crisis.

Underfunding is certainly part of our inability to retain teachers: The deep and prolonged disinvestment from public education was at the heart of every one of the teacher strikes and uprisings over the last two years.

But it's not only underfunding. Teachers are frustrated and demoralized. The lack of classroom autonomy and discretion supercharge that dissatisfaction. Google "teachers' resignation letters" and you'll find anguished accounts of the many ways teachers have been stripped of their freedom to teach, leaving them feeling powerless and unable to teach their students in the ways they judge best.

In online focus groups the AFT conducted with teachers from across the country, they spoke about entering teaching excited, optimistic and determined to make a difference in their students' lives. And they spoke with equally deep emotion about the stress and disrespect they soon experienced. This deprofessionalization is killing the soul of teaching.

It's being micromanaged—told that the only decorations allowed in your classroom are the motivational posters provided by a textbook publisher. (Which really happens ...)

It's worrying about the pacing calendar, which requires teachers to follow a predetermined schedule for teaching each topic, even if students need more time to understand the content.

It's getting in trouble for allowing students to conduct a science experiment or continue a debate over two days, instead of one.

It's the systemic fixation on standardized testing that dictates virtually every decision about student promotion, graduation and school accountability, instead of authentic assessments of student learning, like research papers and project-based learning.

On the matter of standardized testing, I applaud the governor's decision to eliminate the PARCC. Should student learning be assessed? Absolutely. But it is far more authentic when students can demonstrate what they know and are able to do on performance assessments that measure growth over time. This is the perfect opportunity to get testing right for kids and the adults who teach them.

Just as the fixation on testing makes teachers' hair stand on end, so does excessive paperwork—data collection, data entry and data reporting. One focus group participant summed it up this way: "Teachers are drowning in a sea of paperwork; just let us do our jobs."

So how do we create the conditions for teachers' success? In other words, how do we keep teachers in the job?

More than 30 years ago, two powerful ideas that advance teacher professionalism came from the AFT. Al Shanker introduced the idea for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, because it is essential to hone and recognize accomplished practice. And, because teachers have always known that the freedom to teach goes hand in hand with credible teacher development, feedback and evaluation, the idea for improving practice through peer assistance and review originated in our ranks.

We have been at this work for decades, but our work has collided with a period in American education of top-down control, test-driven decision-making, disinvestment, and teachers being denied their authority to make educational decisions.

That's not the case in countries like Finland, Singapore and Canada, where teachers are rightly considered "nation builders," and their pay, time for collaboration, and involvement in decision-making reflect that.

Remember the teachers I quoted—who spoke so passionately about helping students think critically and love learning?

Solving this crisis requires treating those teachers as the professionals they are. So the question is not whether, but how, to elevate teachers' voice and judgment, and how to allow teachers to make learning rich and fulfilling for their students. We won't be able to attract and retain the educators our students need if we don't address this.

On Recruitment:

Recruiting and retaining the teachers we need is a national crisis, but the solutions most often come from the local and state levels.

The Systemic Approach to Attract and Retain High-Quality Educators in New Mexico that Ellen Bernstein and the ATF created is grounded in research and experience. The plan includes recruiting future educators through programs like Educators Rising; strong pre-service teacher preparation programs; paid teacher residencies; beginning teacher mentoring; continued support for teachers in years 2 through 5; job-embedded teacher development; competitive pay for educators; and reimagining teacher evaluation to support and retain teachers.

New Mexico's Grow Your Own Teachers Act, which originated with an AFT member, earmarks \$2.5 million to support para-educators in becoming teachers of record.

In New York City, the Success via Apprenticeship program prepares graduates of career and technical education high schools to become CTE teachers.

Pennsylvania has professional pathways programs that also offer those with a trade the opportunity to teach in a CTE program.

Oklahoma City has created a pathways program for para-educators who want to teach.

There is now a new teaching academy in Newark, N.J., with more than 100 students self-enrolled.

On Retention:

The challenge is not only attracting people to become teachers. The United States must do a much better job of keeping them.

Teacher attrition is higher than in nursing, law, engineering or architecture.

Schools serving majorities of students of color and students living in poverty experience the highest teacher turnover rates.

Losing so many educators' experience and expertise has an enormous impact on students' education.

The financial consequences are also steep—more than \$2 billion annually—and that's a conservative estimate.

It should go without saying, but teachers should earn wages befitting the importance of their profession. And they should be able to support themselves and their families on one job—the job they love and pour themselves into—teaching our children.

The Freedom to Teach:

In order to change the culture so that the teaching profession is marked by trust, respect and the freedom to teach, there are aspects we can legislate and aspects we can negotiate. Teachers unions can play a critical role, along with many of you in this room.

And that starts by focusing on three essential areas that are critical to recruiting and retaining the teachers our children need:

- 1. Developing a culture of collaboration**
- 2. Creating and maintaining proper teaching and learning conditions**
- 3. Ensuring teachers have voice and agency befitting their profession**

Let's start with collaboration. Everyone agrees collaboration is important, so why don't more schools and school systems practice it?

For the past decade, researchers John McCarthy and Saul Rubinstein have been studying collaboration in public schools. They've studied 400 schools, in 21 districts in six states. They have found loads of

benefits of collaboration—including improved student achievement and, as to our focus today, reduced voluntary teacher turnover.

In places like Austin, Texas, where they have had high teacher turnover, the teachers union and district leaders have collaborated in key areas to stem the tide. They successfully designed and implemented a new Professional Pathways for Teachers that not only increased teachers' base salary, but created the space for professional development that could lead to teacher leadership roles. And it has helped improve teacher retention.

I've seen it in Austin, in Meriden, Conn., in the ABC district in California: Collaboration fosters trust, and vice versa.

So here's another idea: Trust teachers. Develop policies—from the school board to the principal's office—WITH teachers, not impose them ON teachers.

The second essential area is to create and maintain proper teaching and learning conditions.

For teachers, creating and maintaining proper teaching and learning conditions starts with a simple question: What do I need to do my job, so that my students have what they need?

Twenty-one states still spend less on public education than they did a decade ago. In 38 states, teacher salaries are lower than they were before the Great Recession.

We know what that means—classrooms with more students than desks; labs without modern equipment; cuts to music, coding, art and enrichment. You could tell your own stories of what this disinvestment looks like.

I want to commend you, because you and your fellow legislators passed one of the better education budgets passed anywhere this year.

We need a long-term, sustainable commitment of resources to ensure the necessary teaching and learning conditions for every child in every public school regardless of demography or geography.

Third, teachers need real voice and agency—the freedom to teach. People like to say they want the “best and brightest” to become teachers. But when teachers start working, they find all too often they don't get to make consequential decisions. They're essentially told to check their ideas, imagination and initiative at the schoolhouse door.

I've heard that even in New Mexico, despite having an education-friendly governor now, some teachers have trouble shaking the days of schools as testing factories and teachers as cogs in a machine.

We should be unleashing teachers' talents, not stifling them. Educators need the benefit of the doubt—the freedom to teach.

The classroom teacher is the only person who has knowledge of the **students** she is teaching, the **content** she is teaching, and the **context** in which she is teaching. “What” gets taught is determined by district guidelines and curriculum. But “how” it gets taught is best determined by teachers using their professional expertise and judgment. Teachers meet students where they are, and teachers should have the freedom to find ways to get them to where they need to go.

The assumption should be that teachers, like other professionals, know what they are doing. Teachers should be able to be creative, take risks and let students run with an idea. When teachers are asked—or told—to do something, they should have the latitude to ask two fundamental questions: What is the purpose of what I am being told to do? And how does this contribute to teaching and learning?

These essential areas—collaboration, appropriate teaching and learning conditions, and teacher voice and agency—go a long way to retaining teachers. And, as they become more commonplace—as teaching is treated as the valuable profession that it is—they will aid in attracting new generations of teachers.

Conclusion

As you take in some of these thoughts, ideas and examples, I'd like to leave you with a few additional proposals to consider, but not before I thank you for courageously budgeting for New Mexico schools. Your budget is an important down payment on what schools and kids deserve from their elected leaders.

I offered many examples of good policy and practices happening around the country, but quite honestly, you are the good policy. Thank you for that.

So here are the few things I would ask:

1. Keep listening to teachers and school leaders. Include them from the beginning as you consider a comprehensive teacher development and evaluation system. Teachers have always said they

want to be evaluated. But they want to be evaluated fairly on measures that allow them to demonstrate growth over time within a supportive system.

2. You have the best Grow Your Own Teachers law. You could also have the best programs by ensuring the recruitment of candidates from the communities in which your schools serve. The research is clear: All students benefit from teachers of color, and students of color benefit most. The strength and longevity of these programs begins with solid funding.
3. Focus on the vision of a great neighborhood public school for every New Mexico student—a place where students are engaged, where teachers want to teach, and where parents want to send their children. Base your actions as legislators and leaders on that vision. The future of New Mexico depends on it.

Thank you for inviting me to meet with you. And thank you for your work to support teaching and learning in New Mexico. I look forward to our conversation.