

A Teacher's Voice: Returning the Teaching Profession to the Teaching Professionals

BY ELLEN BERNSTEIN

The Fallout of the Government's NCLB Policy

Historically, the federal government has played two distinct roles in public education: supporting people to go to college or to work and supporting students who live in poverty by providing funding for additional services. Both are considered as positive and supportive.

What teachers have experienced from the federal government since NCLB was enacted has been the opposite of support. Since 2002 we have been told that we cannot use our professional judgment. We have been told that we must teach with fidelity to programs, that we are not allowed to modify these programs by using our professional knowledge and the methods and materials we have at our disposal. We have been mandated to ignore subjects that are not tested. We have been directed to take recess away from young children and electives from adolescents.

As teachers, we have suffered through the insane hypocrisy of mandates that direct us to differentiate our instruction while following the pacing guide *to-the-letter*. We have tolerated hours of sitting through collaboration time designed, not for us to learn and share but instead to get the next verbal memo about how we have to teach now or so we can compare our rigid adherence to programs we didn't choose.

We have cried with our students as we watch them take tests in a language in which they are not yet proficient. We have violated students' IEPs and our own professional integrity as we force them to take tests beyond their instructional level. We have been threatened with the revocation of our professional license to teach if we vary even slightly from the test protocols. We have seen young people cry, throw-up, and have anxiety attacks because of the pressure of taking the test.

We have sat with colleagues, mouths and eyes fixed open in disbelief in staff meeting after staff meeting, blown away by the parade of people who come into our schools telling us we're still doing it wrong, we're still failing, and our hard work is to be discounted, derailed, and undermined yet again.

We have gone home to scream and cry with our loved ones and friends about what our work has become, about what we are doing to our students and, about

how we don't think we can take it anymore. We think of giving up. Some of us have left.

We know that this emphasis on high stakes testing and micromanagement is not the appropriate role for a government to take—a government that consistently claims that our children are our future. We know this law is a hoax, a sham, and a road that is leading us in absolutely the wrong direction. We know our unions must save our profession and our schools because it is through our unions that our voices can be united and strong enough to move us past this dark time in the history of public education.

We believe if we are to save public education, and ultimately our democracy, it's time to use our collective intelligence to advocate for well thought-out alternatives. We must conceive of an appropriate role for the federal government to play. There is no political will nor is there political agreement on the massive amount of work it will take to "fix" NCLB—we must replace it with a policy that moves us forward. The education policy we promote must support our teachers to work smarter not harder, to teach more deeply not more broadly, and one that helps to create the kind of schooling essential for students in the 21st Century.

This law has driven good instruction underground. It has silenced teachers from actively participating in their profession. It has solidified a more deeply autocratic and absolutely non-democratic way of schooling our children. There is, without any doubt, a better role for the federal government to play in public education.

As progressive unionists, we can unify our members under a visionary agenda for the federal government. We must support and advocate for our members to win back their professional efficacy. We will tenaciously expose as false or destructive the test-based accountability agenda that has denied the professional status our teachers deserve and has proven to be the demise of education for our democracy.

We Are Progressive Teacher Unionists

We are progressive teacher unionists. We are classroom teachers who have made a choice to focus our work on that which we care passionately about—the profession of teaching and the preservation and promotion of public education. We believe in public education as the foundation of democracy. We believe in the creative intelligence of teachers and in the innate brilliance of our students. We are progressive teacher unionists who come from the legacy of a proud labor movement that modeled for us how to fight for all that is best and just about our public education system.

We are progressive teacher unionists who fell silent six years ago as our passions, our knowledge, and our work was turned against us in a sea of sloganism. We became helpless to fight because to fight was to defend that which had “left children behind.” We have cringed at the pragmatic political compromises made by our leaders with politicians in the false hope that we might save our public education system from imminent doom. We have stayed silent too long and thus have done a grave disservice to the teacher colleagues and the students we serve.

The political monopoly that created the potential death knell of public education has fallen from grace and any tacit support of “laudable goals” designed to cover up what has been proven to be a perversion of research for profit and the demise of public schooling for the same goal is no longer even pragmatically necessary. I write this to urge our national unions to stop trying to “fix” NCLB and to insist that they work to dismantle it. We urge them to listen to the local leaders and the highly qualified teachers we represent and help us to replace NCLB with an education policy more suitable to life, liberty, and the pursuit of thinking. We must organize the individuals and institutions ready to reclaim public education and work with the millions of teachers who are anxious to return to the critical work of educating.

I have laid out in six sections what I think the best role is for the federal government in public education as it works on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Each section supports these recommendations:

- Creating standards for any public policy that affects public education.
- Creating national standards for education.
- Enabling teachers to become the policymakers of classroom practice.
- Changing school systems into a system of schools with centralized support for teaching and learning at the heart of the system and innovation at the heart of every school. Provide Innovation Grants to groups of educators to design new school structures.
- Creating authentic assessments that are public, performance-based, and required no more than three times in the career of a public school student.
- Holding the President of the United States, along with Congress, accountable for creating social policies that support families who live in poverty.

Finally, I ask us as unionists to focus on reforming our own organizations.

The Real Purpose of Public Education

As teachers, we know that we are preparing our students to live in a world that we cannot even imagine. Twenty years ago, not one of us could image the

Internet, MySpace, or texting. Thus, the purpose of public education must be to prepare students for a life that will include skills and dispositions that we, as adults, don't currently possess and cannot predict.

Preparing students for life goes beyond preparing students for work and so far beyond preparing students for tests that we can no longer allow testing to replace teaching. We must cure our nation's political hypocrisy by connecting the means to the end. The current end is to be better test-takers when our true goal should be life-long learning. We must end the high stakes attached to testing and begin to assess real learning—the kind of learning we say we want. We can and should focus schooling on preparing thinkers.

I RECOMMEND the creation of standards for any public policy that affects public education. Including:

- All mandates, whether local, state or federal, must be fully funded.
- Policies will be written in a manner that preserves the professional autonomy of teachers.
- Policies will preserve flexibility for local applications.
- Standards will be created by educators.

With the creation of standards for policy, we will enable the citizenry to hold our policymakers accountable. We will have policy that promotes and protects not only public education as we know it now, but public education as it should be—a government institution that prepares the next generation of Americans to be thoughtfully engaged citizens of a democracy.

If we are to save and bring back to rigorous health a public education essential to a democratic society, we must provoke others to think, we must raise our voices in protest of the current structures that keep us from realizing our potential as educators and from nurturing the potential in our students. Let us begin the discussion under these broad categories:

- Curriculum and Standards
- Teaching and Teaching Methods
- The Structure of Schools and School Systems
- Testing and Accountability
- Connecting Social Policy and Public Education
- The Role of Unions

Curriculum and Standards

Teachers know that the word curriculum and the word standard mean two different things. Curriculum is what teachers creatively use to teach to the standards. We also know that textbooks and packaged programs are not

supposed to be the entire curriculum. However, the mandate to use them with “fidelity” makes them so. Good teachers understand that the curriculum we craft has multiple goals. Values, dispositions, and attitudes are purposefully included along with skills and knowledge. While the words standard and curriculum may be confusing to the general public and to politicians, teachers know that we can teach to well-crafted standards using a teacher created curriculum from a variety of sources.

Unlike curriculum, standards are the broad and descriptive conceptual ideas. Good standards—whether they are state or national—are essential when written by education professionals as the conceptual “must haves.” They are not a narrow and prescriptive list of facts and skills. Good standards guide a teacher-designed curriculum that is based on inquiry and active involvement as well as facts and skills.

Teachers must be freed from the false notion that the for-profit program and textbook industry knows best how to design a curriculum for students they will never know and for teachers who know more than they do. The curriculum designed by the teacher must begin with the teacher’s question: What’s the big idea for which I must design meaningful learning experiences? Teaching professionals know how to combine the district’s curriculum, the textbooks, and multiple other resources with their professional knowledge and expertise in order to teach toward agreed upon standards. Thus, focusing on the big idea brings teaching strategies and curriculum (means) into alignment with the standards or the educational goals (ends).

I RECOMMEND the creation of national standards for education that are judged by “standards for standards” that will ensure the demise of rote memorization of facts in the place of real learning. For example we must ask:

- Does this standard support our vision of a public education system that engages learners in critical thinking and problem solving?
- Does this standard enable teachers to teach toward higher-level thinking?

We further recommend that if standards are to be the constant, then time must be the variable, a notion that will inevitably lead to the design of more student-friendly and rigorous institutions of learning. The current structure would never meet our standard for standards because it punishes students, communities and schools for not meeting standards at specific points in time. Time cannot be a constant for something as variable as learning.

Teachers and Teaching Methods

Teachers are smart. The teaching force in this country includes some of the best-educated people in our society. We are problem solvers, critical thinkers, and life-

long learners; we are everything that the business community (a community that often publicly negates our professional abilities) says they want in a workforce. The teaching profession embodies continual learning.

We know the subjects we teach and have a plethora of teaching strategies we can use to ensure the students in our classes learn. We are committed to a public education system that supports us to prepare our students to become compassionate engaged citizens who, because of their public school education, are able to participate in our democracy and to develop the thinking skills and dispositions that will support their full human potential. We are accountable for the quality of our work.

We know the “basics” of tomorrow are skills considered to be of a higher level today. These skills include critical thinking, problem solving, finding information from various sources, synthesis and application as well as creativity. As teachers, we know how to teach our students with this end in mind.

But we are demoralized and worn out by the unrealistic and hypocritical expectation that teachers can model active democratic citizenry and critical thinking to the next generation of Americans when we are told by politicians, bureaucrats, and lay people in chambers of commerce that, as professional educators, we are not allowed to participate democratically in our schools nor should we think critically about our work. The current decade of prescriptive policies and public school bashing is driving excellent teachers out and discouraging young, brilliant future teachers from even considering the profession.

If our society truly wants an educated citizenry then we must take the handcuffs off of our teachers and allow them to do the work they know how to do. And, we must create policies and schools systems that support this idea—not undermine it with useless rules and views of teachers as robots. Teachers need to be able to practice and model the habits of mind that we are expected to engender in our students.

It’s time to make the professionalism agenda of the eighties a reality—in the policies and practices we support, in the contract language we negotiate, and especially in our national unions. We will fight for the right of every teacher to practice with fidelity to their own professional knowledge. Professional educators should not be faithful to a publishing company and their corporate interpretation of the research. They must be faithful to their sense of what is right and appropriate based on their professional wisdom.

As we return to our unionists roots and fight against the oppression currently consuming the profession the agenda that we promote as unionists should be based on the knowledge that teaching is both an art and science. Teaching well is complex, and it is that complexity which we will fight to preserve. No policy

created by lay people and government agencies should ever be allowed to distill the complexity and beauty of teaching and learning down to a script ever again.

The profession of teaching and the whole education experience has paid a terrible price over the last six years. There is no longer room in the 21st Century for simplified solutions to complex issues—especially anything as complex as the human endeavor of teaching the next generation. We must rely on teachers to be capable and accountable.

I RECOMMEND that once we have agreed-upon national education standards, then teachers should be free to become the policymakers of classroom practice. For example:

Teachers should use their professional knowledge to make the best decisions for their students in collaboration with their school communities. When we trust professional teachers, then the focus of school shifts from the acquisition and manipulation of knowledge for its own sake to making essential connections with previously-learned concepts, solving real-world problems. As the pendulum swings away from testing and back to learning, let's trust teachers to realize that philosophies and methodologies that are the most sound lie in the gray areas between the black and the white debate of whole language versus phonics or facts versus concepts. There is no need to dichotomize the teaching of skills versus the construction of understanding. Once teachers are the policymakers of practice, we will attract and retain the best and the brightest in the profession and the result will be better teaching and more learning.

The Structure of Schools and School Systems

As teachers, we have become comfortable with the current structures of schools and school systems. Created during the Industrial Revolution, school systems modeled the mass production of students after the mass production of everything else. We went to factory-model schools when we were children, trained in this structure at our universities, and now we teach in it. The nature of our work, as well as our struggle to be considered professionals, can be traced to our place at the bottom of the hierarchical system of public schools. It's time to get away from the legacy of the factory that imprisons us as educators, as well as the students we teach. We know that "a cage for every age" is an archaic and dysfunctional way to group students. It's time for us to start questioning the sacred rituals of schools and school systems.

Parents are fond of comparing stories about their children's development: "My first child didn't walk until he was one-and-a-half but my second kid walked by 9 months." These variations in human growth and development are commonly known and accepted until, of course, children enter school. Then, everyone is expected to develop in every area at exactly the same pace. Currently, the

federal government has given this practice—at odds with everything that both science and our experiences have told us about growth and learning—even more credence as it demands proficiency for all children in every grade at exactly the same moment in time. To reinforce this faulty notion, publishers have created teacher- and student-proof pacing guides, and lord help the kid who learns differently or develops at a different pace.

The current structures are the antithesis of everything that we want, that we know we should do, and that would really create the kind of educational change that politicians pretend to demand. We are craving the opportunity to work in truly collaborative structures. However, we are told to teach with *fidelity* to a pacing guide written by textbook companies owned by testing companies that know nothing about teaching and the students we teach. In essence, we are asked to practice in a context that defines insanity—doing what we've always done (or been told to do), but expecting different results.

It is time for us, as unionists, to point out to the politicians, the bureaucrats, and the journalists that we embrace change but *they* have to let go of the idea that change in schools is okay only as long as classrooms still look like the mind-factories they were in the 20th century. We must insist that teachers be supported to come forth with new ideas based on their experience and expertise, and aggressively assert that those innovative ideas cannot be force-fitted into the systems of yesteryear. It's time we point out the hypocrisy of the business community that hails the great spirit of entrepreneurship, and yet perpetuates the idea that we must all move children down the assembly line of a public school which is the raging antithesis of an entrepreneurial design. It's no longer acceptable for others to preach at the educational community that we are the ones protecting the status quo, while at the same time blocking all innovations.

It's time to value the amazing power of ideas that live in the minds and hearts of our members. Teachers, working in collaboration, can create the kind of innovative school structures that rise to the occasion of educating all students. Teachers can design school structures that allow them to focus on critical thinking, problem solving and higher-order thinking, while still honoring each student's developmental readiness for each task at hand. This is not an impossible balancing act—teachers have always done that. Once they are free to practice in a way that truly supports teaching and learning, they can get back to it.

We must reconfigure school systems to support teaching, rather than self-perpetuate their bureaucratic structures. The structure and purpose of the typical central office must be changed. If schools are freed up to concentrate on good teaching and innovations rather than compliance, we will no longer need all those line supervisors. Central office personnel and most of the mid-level managers in a district (the ones with credentials to teach, but who never interact with students) should be in schools making it possible to provide innovative

educational programs. Central offices should provide the centralized functions that schools don't need to worry about and focus their role on supporting schools and ensuring that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions.

I RECOMMEND that we change school systems into a system of schools with centralized support for teaching and learning at the heart of a system of schools and innovation at the heart of each school.

I further recommend that, once we free ourselves from a factory model, teachers must be encouraged to rethink such unquestioned time-honored practices as: grouping kids in grades, grading as a way to communicate learning, moving kids around based on bell schedules, and separating subjects into discrete time blocks. We must all embrace the idea that schools can no longer be expected to change and still look the same.

Testing and Accountability

Teachers know how to assess learning. We assess each of our students every minute of every day. Every time our students talk, write, compute, interact, ask a question or answer one, we are assessing what they understand, how they use their understanding, and what we as teachers need to do to move them forward. Teachers who are not completely overwhelmed with the mandated testing that has replaced this kind of assessment use these moment-to-moment assessments to make judgments. I don't mean the kind of judgments that the system is making when it judges students, teachers, schools, and whole communities as failing. I mean the kind of judgments a doctor makes when she is diagnosing a patient. These kinds of judgments rely on professional knowledge and experience, knowledge of the patients (students), their histories, and the evidence before them. The doctor then makes a judgment about what the next medical steps should be. In our case, we make judgments about the next educational steps. And, as in the medical profession, outside regulators with no knowledge of the patient should never make judgments about treatments.

The real problem with the assessments teachers create and the judgments we make is that they are not standardized. Unfortunately the public has been bamboozled into thinking that our professional judgment is not to be trusted. It's all part of the wildly popular sport called the de-professionalization of teaching.

If there is a teacher left standing who doesn't think high-stakes testing has become the tail wagging the dog, then I'd be surprised. In fact, if there is anyone outside of the profit-making testing industry who hasn't come to the conclusion that we are replacing teaching with testing and real accountability with accounting, I'd be even more surprised. Teachers and parents, and most of the thinking community know that the current testing is not a true assessment of learning, and that test scores are not true accountability.

The essential question is not, “Is achievement increasing?” That is the wrong question and it has led us to measuring achievement in inadequate but easily quantifiable terms. Rather, the essential question is, “Is learning increasing?” To assess an increase in learning, we know that the teaching, the learning and the assessments we use must be engaging, relevant, applicable and interesting—just the opposite of what we are doing and quantifying now.

Teachers and students are living with the side effects of asking the wrong question. Because of the punitive pressures attached to high-stakes reading and math test scores, it has become a widespread and well-documented side effect that the curriculum has narrowed. Although we know that it is our professional and ethical responsibility to teach each child every subject at an appropriate level based on his or her needs, regardless of AYP rankings, many teachers have been directed by their principals to focus exclusively on math and reading and forgo the teaching of science, social studies, art, music and more.

The rhetoric used to justify the current standardized test crazed movement claims that state tests measure whether a student has met state standards. As teachers, we know that’s not true. These tests may measure something, but it’s not the extent to which students have mastered a standard. Summative assessments should compare the performance of students to a set of expectations or standards, but never to the performance of other students, and should never be external to the classroom. Our country has allowed standardized tests to replace authentic assessments because this kind of achievement is easily and cheaply measured, but easy and cheap does not translate into deeper learning and subsequent academic success

Replacing assessment with testing has moved public education in this decade too fast in the absolute wrong direction. Why? To hold teachers accountable. As unionists, we know that our members embrace accountability. Go into any classroom and ask any teacher to “account for” their carefully planned lessons or describe to you the extent to which their students are learning and growing. I challenge you to find a teacher who isn’t accountable for that which they have control over. We must be unwavering in our exposé of test-driven accountability, which does harm and is the antithesis of being accountable for real teaching and learning. I believe that public education will be lost in this country if we buy into the paradigm that our profession should be accountable to anything that is less than an authentic match with the work teachers do.

Authentic learning requires authentic assessments. We must use our ability to organize the professionals we represent to unite in our professional voices and assert that true accountability must include accountability at every level of the system. Federal and state policymakers have not held the testing companies, or the tests they produce, accountable for truly assessing learning. We must demand the creation of an assessment system that is authentic and

performance-based, one that teachers can truly be accountable to. Teachers can and will be accountable for creating multiple formative measures that assist students in learning higher-order skills and truly provide them with an understanding of what students know and what they can do with what they know.

We must insist that no individual or entity outside of our field of expertise has the professional knowledge that our members do, and that, once teachers design our own assessment system, we would be happy to demonstrate to the public, to whom we are accountable, the results of our work. The assessment system teachers design will be more accurate, engaging, and provide more timely feedback. Once assessments make sense for teachers and students, then, and only then, should teachers teach to the test.

I RECOMMEND the creation of national task force charged with producing authentic assessments that are public, performance-based and required no more than three times in the career of a public school student. For example:

- Authentic assessments created to connect with our agreed upon national standards that support our vision of a public education system that engages learners in critical thinking and problem solving.
- These national assessments would be fully funded by the federal government.
- The assessments would be performance-based.
- These summative assessments would never be required of children under the age of eleven, the age at which children become concrete operational.
- Teachers will be responsible for creating formative classroom-based assessments that prepare students for the authentic tasks they will be asked to perform.
- Any student who does not do well on authentic formative assessments as they develop will receive added time and support.
- Assessment tasks will be *public*. All students will know what they are preparing for.

I further recommend that the national task force charged with creating authentic assessments will be made up of no less than fifty percent practicing teachers, who will work in tandem and with the guidance of psychometricians, other educational experts and policymakers.

Connecting Social Policy and Public Education

The significant effect that growing up in poverty has on a student's education is about the only idea I know of that educators, politicians and social scientists agree upon. As well known and accepted as this is, there seems to be almost no purposeful link between social policy and public education. It's not that people

don't think there should be—it's just that politicians haven't mustered the political will to make that link profound enough to really make a difference.

Living in poverty affects the kids we teach. Researchers continue to confirm the importance of the first years of life for children's emotional and intellectual development. Poor children face a greater risk of impaired brain development due to their exposure to a number of risk factors associated with poverty and educationally-related health problems like hearing loss, vision problems, lack of dental health and increased cases of asthma can be confirmed by every school nurse and teacher in schools serving poor children.

Early childhood teachers know that the foundational skills needed for reading proficiency start with the initial literacy skills of speaking and listening. There is universal agreement that reading proficiency holds the key to future educational doorways. Scientists confirm what teachers know: kids living in poverty come to school with smaller vocabularies than kids from middle and upper class backgrounds. This word gap leads to the reading gap and teachers know that the best way to address the achievement gap is to address the opportunity gap.

When socio-economically deprived children fall behind in spoken vocabulary development during their first three years of life, they are very likely to have lifelong struggles in all their studies in school. This is why, as teachers, we know that it is ridiculous to hold schools accountable for closing the achievement gap without massive changes in social policy. It is absurd to hold us accountable for students' learning without reciprocal accountability for supportive social policies for families and kids in poverty and attention to issues such as health care.

Poor kids are more likely to attend poorly maintained and poorly equipped schools. Generations ago, when poor kids went to school, their world was more than likely expanded. School may have been the only place with running water, telephones and books. Now, the experience kids living in poverty have at school is pretty much the same as what they experience at home, if not worse—a lack of a healthy learning environment, a lack of modern technology, overcrowded conditions and peeling paint. These conditions are more prevalent in our urban school systems, where kids have no choice but to cope with the substandard physical and educational condition of their schools.

We listen to our members' justifiable complaint that they are forced to teach in deplorable physical conditions and worse, to use teacher-proof scripted programs that negate the intellectual capabilities of their students and ignore their ability as teachers. We must champion the theme that fair is not equal. We must insist that schools that are serving the kids with the least resources get the most resources, including, but not limited to: lower pupil teacher ratios, longer school days and year, more social services on site, increased staffing, the best physical plants, and the most intellectually rigorous and culturally relevant curriculum and teaching methodologies.

I recommend that the President of the United States, along with Congress, become accountable for creating social policies that support families who live in poverty and support families to get out of poverty. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Reform health and dental care for all children and fund school-based health clinics.
- Provide universal pre-school.
- Fund additional social workers, counselors and nurses in all schools serving poor communities.
- Support increases in the minimum wage.
- Ensure affordable housing for families.

I further recommend the start of ongoing public works projects focused on creating and maintaining the state-of-the-art green school buildings essential for appropriate teaching and learning environments. Teacher working conditions *are* student learning conditions, and current research strongly indicates that working conditions make a difference in teacher retention, and that teacher working conditions are important predictors of student achievement.

The Role of Unions

The driving force behind a truly democratic public education system must be questioning—questioning *everything*. We must question what others mean when they use the word “reform”. We must question power structures and motives. We must ask our members to look deeply at their practice and reflect on the questions—is this the best way to teach and if not, what might I do differently? Most importantly, if unionists are to be seriously considered during the inevitable next phase of education reform, we must be willing to ask the same probing questions of ourselves that we do others the current educational system. We must be more than willing; we must be proactively anxious and excited by the possibilities of self-initiated organizational transformation.

Unionism in the traditional sense is still, if not more, essential with the proliferation of reform schemes—such as NCLB—that are designed to destroy public education and demonize teachers and their unions. As unionists, when we protect the rights of our members or speak out against bad ideas, we are accused of protecting the status quo and blocking change. Actually, what we are doing is protecting our members *from* the status quo—the standard operating procedures of professional oppression and abuse. As long as that is needed, this will be an essential role for our unions and we will never apologize for this.

Many unions have been the champions of reform in education for decades. Through the collective bargaining process, unions have reformed evaluation systems by creating Peer Assistance and Review programs that also include

taking on the responsibility to police the quality among our own ranks. We've taken on compensation reform promoting innovative ways to move away from the single salary schedule. We have worked to advanced teacher professionalism through the revolutionary national board certification system for teachers—a process that is now highly respected and accepted among the entire educational and lay community was first proposed by Al Shanker in 1985.

These reforms are significant, yet not sufficient. As teacher unionists we know that the purpose of public schools through the framework of NCLB does not support a democratic society and does not help all students to learn. It *does* leave children behind. It *does* leave democracy behind. It is up to us as teacher unionists to create a compelling vision of education, our profession, and of our own organizations. It's up to us as progressive teacher unions to act now and debate along the way. The essential questions for teacher unions are: how should local unions operate as education systems that evolve in the 21st century; and, how can our members lead in that evolution?

If unions are to be effective in creating teacher-led reforms, they must change in tandem with the changes they seek in public education. For quite some time there has been a strong practitioner-based commitment to the reform of both education and educational unions. In 1995, representatives of progressive teacher unions from both the AFT and the NEA formed the Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN), with the express purpose of redesigning teacher unions to be more effective partners in the effort to improve education in America's public schools. TURN is a union-led effort to restructure the nation's teacher unions to promote reforms that will ultimately lead to better schools for America's children.

If we are successful in creating policies that support teachers to create innovative structures, then their unions must develop supportive structures for them. Union members could, and should, be the readers and producers of research that provoke new ideas and the subsequent development of schools. If we are successful in creating policies that support teachers to create innovative structures, then their unions must develop supportive structures for them. Union members could, and should, be the readers and producers of research that provoke new ideas and the subsequent development of schools.

If schools are no longer standardized then neither can be our negotiated agreement. What kind of union structures would we need to develop so that school-based teacher teams can create contract language unique to their school? What is not negotiable when it comes to teacher union change: due process? democratic dynamics? self-determination? due process? Should teacher unions:

- Run districts?
- Run schools?

- Model communal practices?
- Be a community resource?
- Be organizations that learn?
- Be producers of knowledge about teaching and learning?

Responsive, responsible unionism is essential. Without those qualities, we run the risk of becoming the bureaucratic system that defines the school districts we organized against in the first place. Responsive and responsible unions change in tandem with the changing needs of our members and our students.

The question remains: how will unions committed to the idea that they must reform themselves in tandem with schools, transform their organization to better support the kinds of change they promote for public education? How will union leaders create organizations that preserve and integrate the best of professionalism and unionism?

CONCLUSION

Hope and Change

This summer both the NEA and the AFT elected new leaders. Will they be the champions teachers are hoping for? Will they go beyond “fixing” NCLB and advocate for the most radical change of all—the creation of a practitioner-led profession? Will they engender the trust in our knowledge base and professionalism that Government must have in order to allow us to direct our professional destiny and the future of public education?

“I love to teach—but I hate my job”. I hear this all the time. Teachers feel this way because of the lack of respect and trust in the teaching profession. This attitude is infused in the No Child Left Behind Act and the policies and practices that have resulted. This systematic and systemic disrespect for teachers serves only to undermine trust in public education and to dishearten those practitioners who would transform education given the chance. It’s time to stop. Educating our country’s youth is a public endeavor. I promise that I will teach my students always to question. It is the only way for our democracy to evolve. What we ask of government is to rigorously defend our abilities to transform education. This level of support must precede everything if democracy is to truly take us forward into a future that none of us can yet conceive.

Soon we will elect a new President and Congress. Many candidates are running on a campaign of hope and change. It’s time, they say, to change the failed policies of the current administration. For all of us in public education and those who care about its ability to thrive, NCLB is without a doubt one of those failed policies. It’s time for change. It time to return policy to the people. I say it’s time

we do something really radical in education. It's time to put education in the hands of educators.

ELLEN BERNSTEIN is president of the Albuquerque Teacher's Federation, the largest union in the state of New Mexico. She is a National Board certified teacher who is dual licensed in regular and special education. Ms. Bernstein holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership and is the co-director of the Teacher Union Reform Network. For the full version of this adapted article, see Manifesto of Hope Part 1 and 2 (ATF Teachers' Voice, March and April 2008) at www.atfunion.org.