

Foreword

After a quarter of a century of education reforms, schools today remain more like yesterday's than we'd like to admit. Many of the reforms that have been promoted are wrong-headed. They ignore the collective wisdom of teachers, are imposed on schools and teachers unilaterally, emphasize testing over teaching and learning, punish rather than support neglected schools, and divert resources from public schools to charters and privatization schemes. They discourage collaboration and even hijack the language: "reforms" are really deforms; "shared decision making" means we'll make all the decisions and then share it with you; and what sounds good is more important than what is good and sound.

Understandably, even teachers who would be inclined to collaborate are reluctant to do so because of this climate. This is a time to fight, not collaborate, they are told by some of their leaders. This is especially true for teachers in urban districts, where student "performance" is worst, starved for resources and struggling with the impediments presented by concentrated poverty. They find themselves in a dilemma: do we accept these wrong-headed reforms just to get the desperately needed funds attached to them? Or do we resist those reforms at the risk of the sanctions that often follow?

All is not lost, however, for there is a way out of this dilemma.

As a union leader for thirty-four years, I have learned that no single constituency in education can succeed by itself in making our public schools effective for all students. It's tough enough even if we all work together—impossible if we do not. That is why labor-management collaboration is indispensable to the success of reform efforts. And that is also why both unions and management must support change and seek improvement.

Ken Futernick's timely and important book makes this case. He identifies the major opportunities for collaboration; provides actual and specific examples of districts that practice it; and describes the needed policies, strategies and practices to implement it. And while Futernick elaborates on how teachers can make their unions even more responsible and more responsive to students' needs, he also informs school managers how they must change and how they can support the progressive impulses of teachers and their unions. Such a shift in relationships can lead to the kind of culture change that would result in a more hospitable environment for continuous improvement and sustained progress.

Futernick also explains why we need to build better relationships in tandem with building better systems, how to distinguish between collaboration and collusion, and how to both depolarize and contextualize reform efforts. He also takes on one of the most daunting challenges in education reform: how to make authentic collaboration the norm in education. And he provides real specifics and substance where, until now, there had been mostly rhetoric. He calls for more collaboration at all levels of the system—not just at the central office but at school sites as well as between union leaders and policy makers at the state and national level.

The time for collaboration is now. Many educators, policy makers, and others are reaching the conclusion that reforms can be effective only if they are done—to quote American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten—*with* teachers and not *to* teachers. And teachers and their unions are increasingly recognizing that they must become agents of reform, or they will surely remain the targets of reform.

There is also a growing body of evidence that when management and labor at the local level learn how to collaborate, reforms have been adopted that teachers consider fair to them and good for their students. But labor-management collaboration does not guarantee positive results in every instance. Even when they're working together, local stakeholders may not select the most effective reform strategies or, if they do, may not implement them well. Other variables, like funding and state and federal education policies, over which local labor and management have little control, also play a central role in determining success. Without better systems, better relationships will merely heighten the level of comfort among the adults; and without better relationships, it will be difficult to build and sustain better systems, and positive reforms will be unattainable. And while neither good systems nor good relationships are likely to thrive in a milieu of polarized debates and closed minds, both are achievable if we seek common ground and contextualize our initiatives within the realities that exist for students, teachers, and schools.

Teacher unions and school management across America must work together to promote the kinds of reforms that reflect the collective experience and wisdom of educators. This can best happen if teacher unionists and school managers themselves recognize not only the need for change but also that it is in their own interest to welcome the evolution of teacher unions and school management. Such collaborations as in Montgomery County, Cincinnati, and the ABC Unified district in California, highlighted in this book, serve as good examples of what is possible. But we should also be willing to learn from other countries, such as Finland and Singapore. As Futernick rightfully points out, it is disingenuous for policy makers to celebrate the achievements in these places but not to acknowledge, much less advocate for, the kinds of reforms they implemented—many of which are diametrically opposite to those being imposed here.

Here in Rochester, New York, through a collaborative relationship, we have sought to move even beyond the interest-based model of collective bargaining—one of the major strategies for collaboration described in this

book. Together, the district and the teacher union developed strategic objectives and engaged in joint problem solving. By changing the negotiations process, and by expanding the scope of collective bargaining to include educational and instructional issues, we have negotiated “living contracts” that include a shared commitment to view collective bargaining as collaboration rather than a time for positional and adversarial fights. We have adopted “what’s best for students” as the shared value, the common denominator, and the litmus test for every specific proposal advanced by either the district or the union. We now conduct ongoing negotiations as timely problem solving rather than an exercise relegated to a once-in-a-while fight. And we have incorporated standards, benchmarks, and formulae that continue to guide us beyond the life of any individual contract. Essentially, we have decided to use the collective bargaining process as a vehicle for building a more genuine profession for teachers and more effective schools for all our students.

Yet, Rochester is a good example of the reality that labor-management collaboration, while necessary, is not sufficient to substantially improve student learning, especially in America’s urban school districts. After more than three decades of commitment to labor-management collaboration, Rochester’s students still ranked last in New York State in student learning as measured by state-mandated tests. And while there’s good reason not to accept these tests as a necessarily accurate reflection of learning, other indicators such as graduation rates, attendance, and literacy and numeracy proficiency are also woefully disappointing.

We can certainly speculate as to the reasons for this. Clearly, concentration of poverty is the most important impediment to learning. Rochester ranks as the proportionately poorest school district in New York State and the fifth poorest in the nation. And while individual poverty does not have a deterministic impact on learning, concentrated poverty has a predictable impact—especially when policy makers do too little to address the effects of poverty. With half of students in America’s public schools now living at or below poverty level, it should be increasingly difficult to ignore this tragic impediment to learning.

Still, labor-management collaboration remains our best hope for addressing and resolving impediments to better student learning. Blaming each other is not the answer, since we're all in the same boat. And if we're all in the same boat, it matters little which end leaks. Only together can we access the needed resources and persuade others—the public, the politicians, and our communities—that we'll make good use of the resources we seek. And only together can we nurture collaboration at the school level, where it matters most. Besides, if the adults in the lives of children cannot get their act together, why should we expect that the students could? And if we, educators, cannot forge a compelling agenda, why would we be surprised that others would fill the void? So, our options are to reform or to be reformed.

Many years ago, with six brothers and parents whose formal education did not extend beyond elementary grades, I escaped communist Poland in search of freedom and a better life. After hiding in several countries for nearly four years, we finally reached our new homeland. And if it were not for the opportunities that I received through public schools, I would not have been able to build a better life for myself and for my family. Public schools still represent the best hope for opportunity and upward mobility for millions of children who otherwise would have none. Many of these are foreign born for whom English is not a native language—as was the case for me. Most were born here but are nevertheless strangers in their own land, and our schools have never served them well. That's the main reason why we must collaborate as equal partners to improve, not abandon, public schools for all our students.

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