



*A Union of Professionals*

## **AFT Innovation Fund**

The AFT Innovation Fund is a groundbreaking plan to seek and share successful local educator- and union-led reform efforts in public schools across the United States. This initiative is based on the AFT's extensive experience with successful reform ideas developed and nurtured in classrooms—by the educators who work with students every day. Simply put, the AFT is leveraging “top-down” support for “bottom-up” reforms by harnessing the strengths, experience and know-how of our teachers and the unions that support them.

### **Why Now?**

Our members clearly understand, better than most, that America's ability to continue as a world leader hinges on our country's willingness to provide a world-class public education to every child. Nationwide, successful efforts have shown that when teachers unions are engaged as partners in reform, there is greater ability to take risks, scale initiatives, and generate and sustain real results that help children.

Our members across the country are weary of years of “market-based” education reforms—more noteworthy for their negative tenor than for real student achievement. As educators, we will not sit back and watch these misguided education “reforms” continue without seizing responsibility for improving and strengthening our schools.

We understand it is our members who are the on-the-ground experts who understand what works and what does not. We know that educators have an unmatched expertise and insight into what happens in the classroom—and they have long shared those experiences with colleagues, be it in a teachers' lounge or a union hall. These educators know that what works is collaboration, not division; results rather than rhetoric. What our locals need is a mechanism to harness the power of collaborative, union-supported innovation; a vehicle to create a voice for good ideas and then share those ideas with other educators across the nation; and a laser-like focus on how to sustain those reforms and gains. What we bring to the table with this initiative is built-in voice and built-in buy-in.

The Innovation Fund will give our AFT local and state affiliates a historic opportunity to lead collaborative and sustainable education reform.

### **What Does the Innovation Fund Hope To Accomplish?**

The Fund will support local and state efforts that improve public education in three major areas. First, funded programs will build the capacity of educators to provide consistently high-quality instruction, which members know is the single most important in-school factor in determining student achievement. These programs will add to teachers' skills and knowledge, increase their access to new ideas, and provide the physical and mental environment that supports teaching and learning.

Second, the Fund recognizes closing the achievement gap depends on more than just effective teaching. Funded proposals will address how out-of-school factors directly affect student achievement by supporting such efforts as community schools and after-school, summer and early childhood programs.

Last, the Fund will support collaborative relationships among educators, their unions, management, parents and communities to create agreements that allow for establishing and implementing policies that address the first two areas.

### **Why the AFT?**

With more than 1.4 million members, many working in challenging urban districts, the AFT is uniquely poised to enhance and expand on the ideas of our members and local leaders by supporting educator- and union-led reform efforts.

The AFT believes a successful vision of reform is one that works *with* schools and the people who work in them, rather than one that imposes changes *on* them from the top down. Great schools can thrive when reformers

learn *from* their teachers rather than compelling policy prescriptions *for* teachers.

In the tradition of Al Shanker, the AFT and our leadership have a long and storied history of risk-taking in support of innovation, based on practical experience and reliable evidence compiled by our members in the field regardless of conventional wisdom. Again, the Innovation Fund continues in this tradition, leveraging “top-down” support for “bottom-up” reforms, as aptly stated by AFT vice president Adam Urbanski of Rochester, N.Y.

## **How Will the Innovation Fund Work?**

The Innovation Fund will make serious and ongoing financial and organizational resources available to your local or state federation. Proposals will be funded based on criteria derived from union expertise, from the lessons of the best research, and from the judgment of a tough-minded set of independent expert advisors.

Grants will vary in amount, depending on the size, scope and strategic importance of the proposed innovation. The Fund will work to strike a balance between advancing programs with a successful track record, and encouraging the implementation of new or innovative programs that hold great promise. It will seek out talented educators who recognize, respect and are ready to use the union as the vehicle to contribute to the success of students and schools.

Grantees will receive the resources and expert support needed to plan and launch successful new initiatives, as well as to monitor their progress. The Fund also will have an unmatched ability to coordinate technical assistance to its grantees by engaging the help of world-class educators working throughout the union’s ranks.

Measures will be developed collaboratively with you at the local level, and the outcomes will be evaluated to determine their effectiveness using independent evaluators. The Fund also will bridge the world of research and real classroom practice using plenty of reliable academic research. Our members can share their successes and innovations by capitalizing on the AFT’s nationwide network of local affiliates. The Fund will be uniquely situated to disseminate ideas and information throughout the nation’s teaching corps and deliver ideas to where it counts—the classroom.

## **What Specific Types of Proposals Will the Innovation Fund Support?**

The Innovation Fund will stimulate the development and dissemination of *proven reforms* and also support educators and local leaders to take on *new ventures*.

Some of the proven reforms, representing the kinds of initiatives that the Fund may support, include: *improvement zones*, such as the former Chancellor’s District in New York City and the School Improvement Zone currently in place in Miami-Dade County; *peer review*, such as Toledo’s nationally

recognized program for teacher mentoring and evaluation; *teacher centers*, such as those in Chicago and New York City, which provide high-quality, job-embedded professional development; and other *collaborative best practices*, such as those in the ABC Unified School District in California, with its strong labor-management partnership.

New ventures supported by the Fund may include: *community schools*, which take a holistic approach to students’ academic, personal and social development; *union-partnered charter schools*, such as the UFT’s charter schools in New York and other charter schools across the country where teachers have chosen to join the AFT; *differentiated pay*, such as the plans in Douglas County, Colo., New York City and elsewhere, where union involvement established fair measures and incentivized cooperation; and *school-based teacher contracts*, in which teachers have flexibility to meet their students’ needs, and professionalism is enhanced through fair pay, respectful treatment and workplace voice.

## **Who Will Govern the Innovation Fund?**

The AFT’s Educational Foundation (AFTEF) will serve as the “home” for the Innovation Fund. Broadly constituted to study *educational systems and disseminate findings for school improvement*, the AFTEF is governed by the AFT president, and AFT state and local leaders.

An advisory board (currently in formation)—composed of educators, policy experts and national political, community, union and business leaders—also will inform the Fund’s strategic goals and grant-making.

## **When Will the Innovation Fund Be Launched?**

After a planning period to develop a sustainable and accountable program, the Innovation Fund will support its first set of proposals by September 2009. The first-wave of innovations will benefit schools starting in the 2010-11 school year.

## **How Can Locals or My State Federation Apply?**

Applications should be available on the AFT Innovation Fund’s Web site sometime in early 2009. Please check the Web site, [www.aft.org/innovate](http://www.aft.org/innovate), for more details and the latest news about this rapidly evolving and exciting AFT effort.