



Report...

FROM EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT ANTONIA CORTESE

Happy New Year! I hope the holidays offered time for rest and rejuvenation as we begin what is sure to be a busy new year. It's an exciting time in Washington, D.C., with the Democrats taking control of both houses of Congress. We are optimistic the new Congress will enact changes that will benefit our schools and working people across the nation.

AFT in the Field

New ER&D Thinking Math Course for Middle School

The AFT recently piloted a new ER&D Thinking Math course for middle school with two affiliates, the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) and the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals. In November, 23 UTLA teachers and staff participated in six full-day sessions to become trainers for the new course. A follow-up training for the group is scheduled for March. In Rhode Island, a group of teachers received weekly training on the new course for college credit. Participants in both of the training courses provided wonderful feedback, and we are excited to offer the new Thinking Math course for middle school at the 2007 ER&D Summer Institute.

AFT/UFT's Institute on Effective Leadership for Academic Achievement

The AFT Institute on Effective Leadership for Academic Achievement was offered through the Chicago Teachers Union Quest Center in early November. Teams from the eight Fresh Start Schools, the CTU/Chicago Public Schools collaborative school reform program, participated. The institute, which is offered through a collaboration between the AFT and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) Teacher Center, provides facilitated sessions customized for the teams on strengthening partnerships and relationships through effective communication skills. As part of the institute, CPS administrators discussed the model for school restructuring negotiated in the "Fresh Start Agreement," which is designed to maximize labor/management partnerships and meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. Guest speakers at the institute included Leslie Baldacci from the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Illinois state Rep. Monique Davis, and Rick Miller, founder of the Kids at Hope Program, which is being used at three of the Fresh Start schools.

Reports and Events

Special Education Network Conference

In November, the AFT held its first Special Education Network Conference in Baltimore, Md. Representatives from more than 35 affiliates received training and

information on special education topics, updates on the recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 and suggestions on how to mobilize members around special education issues. Carmen Alvarez, UFT vice president of special education, was a keynote speaker, presenting strategies on how to capture feedback from membership and collaborate with other stakeholders to effect change. Documents and materials from the conference can be found at <http://www.aft.org/topics/specialed/actionnetwork.htm>, including the AFT Special Education Complaint form, designed to capture members' concerns about special education and monitor flaws in IDEA implementation.

Building Minds, Minding Buildings: Turning Crumbling Schools into Environments for Learning

In November, the AFT released this report based on the responses of more than 1,000 school employees to a survey on the physical environment at their schools. Many of the responses revealed startling conditions, ranging from students who have to wear coats and gloves in class, to rats and mice entering classrooms through windows and cracks in walls. The report features compelling observations and quotes from teachers and school employees in urban areas, small towns and rural communities alike. It is available at <http://www.aft.org/topics/building-conditions/downloads/minding-bldgs.pdf>. In publicizing the report, we have tried something a bit different, encouraging teachers who write "blogs" or online diaries to talk about the building conditions in their schools and to link through to the AFT's report. This effort has been highly successful, with more than 30 bloggers linking to the AFT report.

National Model or Flawed Approach? The Post-Katrina New Orleans Public Schools

The United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO), the Louisiana Federation of Teachers (LFT) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) jointly released a report in November providing evidence that the restructured New Orleans public school system is unlikely to deliver on promises made when the state took over most of the city's 128 public schools in late 2005. The state takeover plan was promoted as a vehicle to create "world-class" schools and a "new national model" for urban schools in which "every decision focuses on the best interests of the children." But the report finds three major flaws in the system that impede effective quality education: Student access to quality neighborhood schools is inadequate; a severe teacher shortage is affecting the quality of classroom instruction; and the balkanized school system is a bureaucratic nightmare. UTNO and the LFT are calling for legislative fixes during the upcoming special or regular legislative session. Click here to read the report: http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/reports/No_report.pdf.

Tough Choices, Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce

In December, the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce unveiled sweeping recommendations for changes in the U.S. education system. The commission's proposal identifies several key steps to improving our education system, but it also includes some seriously flawed ideas that won't produce better academic results.

The commission identifies the importance of universal early childhood education, rigorous high school exams, and the need to increase teacher pay and establish career ladder systems to attract and retain teachers. It also correctly points out that programs designed to prepare young people for work have been financially squeezed in recent years. However, the commission's proposal to dismantle school districts and subcontract education to private entities is clearly wrong-headed. Voucher and charter schools haven't shown consistent evidence of enhanced performance despite being provided with greater autonomy. I recommend taking a look at all of the commission's recommendations at http://www.skillscommission.org/pdf/exec_sum/ToughChoices_EXECSUM.pdf.

Statewide Educational Accountability Under the No Child Left Behind Act

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the organization representing the officials heading state departments of education, annually releases a report tracking the changes that have been requested by states, and allowed by the U.S. Department of Education, to state accountability plans during the previous school year. These accountability plans specify how each state calculates adequate yearly progress (AYP), and any changes can have a large impact on schools in the state. The report is available at <http://www.ccsso.org/publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=339>.

Save the Date!

The AFT QuEST conference on teaching and learning will be held July 11-15, 2007, at the Hilton Washington Hotel in Washington, D.C. Come and join more than 3,000 preK-12 educators and union leaders from around the country. Check out <http://www.aft.org/quest2007/> in March for registration materials.