



**Our TURN:**  
Revitalizing Public Education  
and Strengthening Our Democracy  
Through the Collective Wisdom of Teachers



The Teacher Union Reform Network of AFT and NEA Locals  
With support from the Ford Foundation

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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# Our TURN: Revitalizing Public Education and Strengthening Our Democracy Through the Collective Wisdom of Teachers

As teachers and teacher unionists, we believe that teaching and learning can be transformed if we embrace a new vision of education that rests on four pillars, each of which bears equal weight:

1. If we want schools to prepare student to be career and college ready, thoughtful citizens, and reflective human beings, then schools should be safe, learner-centered and well-resourced to serve the needs of each individual student.
2. If teachers are the most important in-school determinant of student learning, then teaching must be recognized as a true profession.
3. If America needs to tap into the talents of all students, irrespective of their background, then educational excellence must be inclusive and education redesign must be accompanied by changes in other aspects of students' lives.
4. If all education policy must ultimately be about enhancing opportunities for students to learn, then collective bargaining (and other forms of collaborative decision-making) between teachers and management should always aim to advance student learning.

The Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN), a coalition of teachers and teacher union leaders from AFT and NEA union locals, was founded 20 years ago “to promote progressive reforms in education and in teacher unions.” To all who are engaged in the debate about the future of public education – whether practitioners or policymakers -- this document lays out precisely what we aspire to. We begin with our idea of what education, schools and classrooms could and should look like, then turn to the policies needed to bring about that vision.



# Our Vision

## Schools are Learner-Centered.

Students learn how to become skilled adults, enlightened and thoughtful citizens, reflective human beings, and lifelong learners. Students are excited about learning because it is hands-on, experiential and highly personalized to their needs. Students have a rich curriculum and learn in environments that are safe, orderly, joyful and exhilarating. Class sizes are based on students' needs. And student learning is evaluated by authentic assessments that demonstrate critical thinking and creativity.

## Teaching Is a Profession.

Teachers are drawn from the ranks of the brightest college graduates of diverse backgrounds because the profession is highly respected, strongly supported, and well compensated. Teachers in the classroom are highly qualified to educate students because educators are inducted and compensated like professionals in fields such as medicine and architecture. Teachers are excited to be in the classroom in part because they have a professional voice. Because they are active participants in school decision-making, teachers model for students what it is like to thrive in a democratic environment. Teachers are continually learning, have opportunities to advance professionally, and work in groups with colleagues to perfect their craft.

## Equity is Honored in Pursuing Excellence.

Students learn in racially, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse classrooms, in which children learn from the varied life experiences of classmates. In diverse classrooms, parents from all backgrounds are welcomed and teachers and administrators reflect the rich diversity of the student population. The quality of public education a child receives is no longer dependent upon the neighborhood her parents can afford to live in. Students from families of modest means receive the support they deserve. They receive free early childhood education so they can begin kindergarten on an even playing field. Students living in poverty receive the necessary support and wrap-around services to succeed, including health care, social-emotional services, nutrition and counseling. In short, in well resourced, equitable, and diverse schools, success is no longer predictable by race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

## Collective Bargaining Promotes School Quality.

In negotiations between teachers and management, every proposal, backed by each side, is supported by evidence of how it would advance student learning and enable education professionals to better meet the needs of all students. Union leaders consider as their clients not just their members, but also the students their members serve. Negotiated contracts are “living” documents in which the union and management co-develop new systems and solve complex problems.



# Policies and Practices

These are our vision and goals for public education in the United States. What policies and practices will help take us there?

## **Policies to Promote Learner-Centered Schools.**

Standards and assessments will be performance based. They will include important skills not currently measured. They will be diagnostic and integrated into learning. They will be developed with teacher input. They will be reduced in number. They will be age appropriate. And they will be public and transparent.

## **Policies that Recognize Teaching as a Profession.**

Teachers will have greater voice in the workplace. Excellence in teaching will be recognized and rewarded. Teachers will have time to collaborate. Teacher evaluations will use multiple, accurate, and job-embedded measures. Teacher pay will be differentiated for job-related knowledge, skills, and added responsibilities. And teachers' due process rights will be protected and peer assistance and review procedures will improve or remove ineffective teachers.

## **Policies to Promote Excellence with Equity.**

Policies will be adopted to combat social inequality; reduce economic and racial segregation; and draw on the strengths of communities. Policies will be adopted to increase wages and reduce poverty. Quality early childhood and full-day Kindergarten programs will be created and expanded. Greater resources will be provided to students with the greatest needs. School segregation by race and economic status will be reduced. Racial and economic-based tracking within schools will be eliminated. Teachers and parents will build stronger ties.

## **Policies to Promote Collective Bargaining For Educational Quality.**

Teacher collective bargaining will be expanded nationwide. The scope of collective bargaining will be broadened to include professional and instructional issues. All collective bargaining proposals will be judged by their effect on teaching and learning. Teachers and management will create "living" collective bargaining procedures that address issues as they arise. Teachers and management will negotiate site-specific contracts on a subset of issues. And teachers will take the lead in ensuring agreements and memoranda of understanding support creative instructional practices and innovative school structures.

## **Conclusion**

The unprecedented threat to public schooling that we face requires us to think creatively about some basic questions: How can public education, once again, become "the great equalizer" and the foundation for our democracy? And how could it be made to benefit all our students, not just some?

The moment is ripe to rejuvenate our stale education debates – to listen to the collective wisdom of teachers, to refocus on the big noble goals of public education and to embrace research-based policies that teachers know work in practice. The future of public education, of the American Dream, and of our pluralistic democracy, depend on it.