

Examples of union-led reform

Evansville, IN

Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation and the Evansville Teachers Association jointly developed a plan called Equity Schools, targeting two elementary schools and a middle school where scores on the state test were low and falling. The plan includes increased professional development designed jointly by teachers and the district, and compensated longer school days and a longer year. The district and union bargained the changes, including a requirement that, beginning in the 2010 school year, teachers wanting to work in the three schools were required to pass through a rigorous Equity Academy program designed by the district and the union. More teachers applied than there were positions available.

Hamilton County, TN

The county initiative was formed around five inner-city middle schools that tended to perform less well than the other middle schools. The district and union together formed networks to share and implement best practices throughout the district. Since the program was expanded to every one of Hamilton's middle schools in 2005, the percentage of middle school students passing the state's reading exam increased from 84 percent in 2005 to 90 percent in 2009. The percentage of middle school students passing the state's mathematics exam increased from 86 percent in 2005 to 89 percent in 2009.

Las Vegas, NV

Based on the idea that teams of educators can make the best decisions for their students, the Clark County Education Association initiated the Empowerment School Project. Under collaborative management teams, teachers were able to choose textbooks, organize the day around a block of focused reading in ability-level groups, and initiate small-group tutoring after school. When Paul Culley Elementary joined the empowerment school project in 2005, fewer than a quarter of its students read on grade level. By 2008, 57 percent did.

Merced, CA

Just five years ago, John Muir was the lowest-performing elementary school in California's Merced City School District. Now, thanks to a new focus on professional development and collaboration – and a seven-year grant from a union-backed program – John Muir is now one of Merced's top-performing elementary schools. The school uses California's Quality Education Investment Act funds to focus on professional development, reducing class size, and a boot camp where kids who are falling behind can receive additional instruction.

Denver, CO

The teacher-led Math and Science Leadership Academy is a product of collaboration among teachers, their union, the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, and Denver Public Schools. MLSA has 14 teachers and 180 students in K-3, and eventually the school will be serve K-5 students. About 60 percent of the students are English Language Learners, and some 90 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The school aims to attract and retain the most accomplished educators — 30 people apply for each position. MLSA teachers meet with peers, analyze data, and design instruction that meets students' needs in a collaborative approach that includes observations and feedback. The curriculum is standards based. Students engage in hands-on learning and service-learning projects, where they use knowledge gained in the classroom to conduct real-world, community-based projects.