

What Matters Most

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A Formula for Success

When it comes to the problems of urban public schools, tough talk is all the rage. Our political leaders like to speak in absolutes — to label the problem and tell us like a stern father that it will no longer be tolerated. “Failing” school? Shut it down. “Bad” teachers? Fire them.

But simplistic rhetoric rarely solves complex challenges like educating our kids. If a school is indeed slipping toward failure, there has to be a reason. If the cause is academic, the remedy may lie in well-targeted professional development or in supports to bolster student preparation. If the cause is safety or overcrowding, a different solution must be pursued. The hard work necessary to identify and solve the problems that cause a school to flounder requires good faith effort from all parties — teachers, principals, students, parents and school district officials.

But in today’s high stakes, assessment-driven educational environment, once a school starts to slip and becomes tainted with failure, stakeholders often start to point fingers. Taking a deep breath and joining together to arrest the slide and reverse the trend may grab fewer headlines, but it’s the best way to turn a troubled school around.

Shortly after the start of the 2005-2006 school year, teachers, administrators and students at August Martin High School in Queens all felt it. They were slipping. Violent incidents were up. Graduation rates were down. Teachers were spending more time controlling their classrooms than instructing their students. Rumors were rampant that the once proud school was headed toward closure.

But instead of giving up or assigning blame, UFT leaders and the school’s principal proposed something innovative — working together to get their school back. They agreed that the union would step in and help struggling teachers get back on track. Meanwhile, the principal would crack down on disruptive student behavior.

Rona Freiser, a UFT representative who had taught at August Martin for many years, devised a plan that included bringing in retired teachers as one-on-one “coaches” and

working collaboratively with the UFT’s professional development arm, the Teacher Center, to provide curriculum and classroom support and training for teachers who were struggling and who wanted help. The coaches made it clear that their first job was to listen, not to blame. They observed the teachers in their classrooms and worked with them collegially to develop better instructional strategies and classroom management skills. If teachers identified conditions or resources they needed to do their job, the principal provided them while delivering on his promise to enforce reasonable rules of student conduct.

Over the course of the school year, August Martin started its turnaround. Student attendance and performance increased. Violent behavior plummeted. More teachers joined the coaching program. Students and teachers alike were more engaged. The program has been such a success that, with the

encouragement of school administrators, the union plans to expand this intervention program to other schools.

“The teachers were reborn in their profession,” said Freiser. “They felt supported not only by their union, but by their supervisors. They rediscovered why they

began to teach in the first place. We worked with a social studies teacher who had been in the system for only a few years and he was just beaten down. He turned out to be one of the best teachers I have ever seen. His enthusiasm for teaching was incredible,” Freiser said.

Success stories like August Martin don’t have to be the exception. The turnaround there emphasizes that we shouldn’t be so quick to dismiss the schools, teachers and kids struggling to stay afloat but wanting their school community to succeed, and are willing to take the collective responsibility to do so. Threats and finger-pointing don’t create school success. The more effective approach requires collaborative problem solving coupled with strong curriculum, safety programs, effective professional development and smaller classes. Applying that formula will give us many more success stories. There’s a reason we teach collaboration in the classroom. It works.



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