



## **AFT New Jersey, AFL-CIO**

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**Reclaiming Our Profession:  
A Professional Continuum to  
Support Effective Teaching in New Jersey**  
Remarks to New Jersey Assembly Education Committee  
Donna M. Chiera, President AFTNJ  
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There is not a profession in this modern era that is legislated, regulated and mandated as closely as that of the public school educator. While there are laws governing other professions, those laws are developed and implemented with the voices of those in the profession front and center. That cannot be said of the laws and regulations governing today's educational system. In more than 30 years teaching in Perth Amboy I found that despite the fact that I was the person who knew my students best, I had very little, and at times no, say in how my students were taught. Giving educators a voice in their profession is why AFT New Jersey supports the road map to effective teaching proposed by the Garden State Alliance for Strengthening Education.

**Teacher Prep:** In 2011 AFT national President Randi Weingarten convened a taskforce made up of higher education faculty and PK-12 teachers specifically to examine how teachers are prepared to teach. In 2013 the AFT national executive committee released a report: "Raising the Bar: Aligning and Elevating Teacher Preparation and the Teaching Profession." AFT's position is that while the first step in the journey of teacher preparation needs to be forming a strong foundation in content and pedagogy, the clinical experience to implement the theory is equally important. This is why the GSASE's recommendation to create a council of stakeholders to link the prep programs with actual classroom teachers is a powerful first step. The other recommendations include establishing criteria and standards for teacher prep faculty and cooperating teachers to work together; strengthening the relationship between institutions of higher education and cooperating districts, and valuing the professional voices of academicians and classroom practitioners.

**Induction:** There are research studies that state it takes many teachers five to seven years to truly become proficient in the classroom. Other data shows us that a majority of those leaving the teaching profession leave within the first five years. The number one reason cited is lack of support for them to succeed.

New Jersey does mandate a mentoring program for first year teachers. In a world where everything is standardized, it is amazing that our mentoring programs have no uniform standards for these programs or for the teachers who are being selected as mentors. I have seen mentorship programs ranging from a very loose buddy system to what I consider to be the level of a “mini-me or clone” system (making the new teacher an exact replica of mentor). Many districts’ professional development centers around compliance issues such as state mandates and required documentation rather than courses in working with adult learners or effectively observing curriculum or classroom management.

Most mentoring programs do not include time for teacher observation, team teaching or professional dialog, strategies we know work for not only new teachers but for all teachers. Finally, mentoring ends at the conclusion of a teacher’s first year even if that teacher still needs support.

AFT’s Summer Academy for Professional Development offers classes such as Foundations of Teaching which includes (but is not limited to) strategies for setting up a classroom, behavior management, time of task, homework and working with parents. Teachers are educated on working with adult learners and are sent back to their districts to turnkey or teach the contents of the course. Participating locals are encouraged to also educate their building reps in this training so participants have an on-site support system. In many states this program is used as a basis for mentoring/induction programs. Toledo Ohio’s Peer Review and Assistance program is designed for experienced teachers in need of support and also as a program for mentoring.

You cannot improve a system unless you know the program’s strengths and weaknesses. Districts should automatically do exit surveys or interviews. As improvements are made to these programs the voice of the teachers using the program need to be heard. The recommendations made by the GSASE will provide the framework for successful induction programs. However we cannot lose sight that the implementation of this framework is just as important as the framework itself. District teams with teachers, administrators and the bargaining unit should review and revise the district’s implementation plan.

**Professional Learning:** In this teaching journey there is not an area that could have a significant impact on education and yet is dreaded so much by teachers. Teachers yearn for quality professional development that is relevant, embedded in their classroom and is supported. Unfortunately in many cases PD is still an event, show and tell today and implement tomorrow. To make the situation worse, next year there will be a new trend or new program, it is always out with the old, in with the new. These decisions are made by State Departments of Education or local Boards of Education. Programs and curriculum change with each new state, local and building administration.

The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), reported teachers in the United States are receiving among of the highest number of hours of professional learning but these same teachers gave the majority of the programs they receive the lowest rating. To me this is not surprising. Most teachers have no say or input to the programs in their district. They know there will be little follow up to see if the programs are implemented or effective.

Professional learning for the most part is someone coming in and talking at you. In many cases it is publisher driven. This goes against the recommendations of any and all valid research. Professional development needs to be related to classroom practice. There needs to be time to implement and practice the skill or strategy taught. Professionals need time to discuss what is working and what is not. They need to trust the system enough to ask for assistance without being afraid that will be perceived as weakness. A quality professional development system needs to include peer academic coaches and colleagues working with each other through observation, team teaching and professional discussions. There also needs to be time in the schedule to do this properly. Teachers from the highest performing countries spend less time in front of students than American teachers but spend more time working in academic teams to “fine tune” their skills. Successful programs allow time for teachers to have these conversations across content, grade levels and schools.

The implementation of recommendations offered by GSASE would change professional development from being an event, a flavor of the month, a pet project to true professional learning designed to strengthen and support the education of our students. These recommendations also give the professionals in the classroom a voice to determine their own professional growth based on the needs of the students they work with on a daily basis.

**Teachers as Leaders:** All teachers are leaders. We spend all day in front of students leading them through various subjects and activities. The State of New Jersey encouraged or regulated schools to create leadership teams known as “school management teams,” “school advisory teams,” “school leadership teams” and “a team for school improvement.” In theory these teams had control, or input, to the school budget, curriculum, materials, staffing and programing. In reality, the amount of input they had was determined by either the district or school administration. How these teams were structured also varied from acronym to acronym, principal select, bargaining unit election, and lottery. You would think to be a school leader you would need to meet some kind of criteria and would have some type of training so you can make educated decision. Unfortunately you would be wrong. All too often the only requirement was attending a meeting on compliance. The only opportunity for teachers to lead is to leave the classroom and become

administrators. Creating a program for teachers to earn the knowledge to be considered a teacher leader is long overdue.

This could be one of the most powerful recommendations offered by the GSASE to retain educators in the profession. It sets out a board with teacher voice to develop criteria for an endorsement. It promotes a culture change recognizing and respecting the voice of teachers in the education system. It gives teachers a say in their profession and allows the best and brightest to work within our schools so all teachers thrive in a trusting environment where all children can reach their potential.

**Closing:** All too often we see how the United States is negatively compared to our international education partners. The PISA and TALIS data from the top performing countries confirm the recommendations of the GSASE. These countries have high standards for a candidate entering an education program. The universities work collaboratively with school districts, constantly integrating theory and practice. New teachers in many cases teach in a team situation during the first year; allowing them to observe lessons, practice their skill in a non-threatening environment all with an experienced master teacher. Professional learning and dialog are built into their daily schedule. It is during this time teachers review data and use it to plan learning. Teachers work together to plan lessons and fine tune lessons. Teachers use this time to discuss the latest research, pedagogy and materials. Teachers are respected and valued. They are supported and compensated. The system is designed so teachers succeed and students learn.

Implementing the recommendations of this report can transform our education system in New Jersey to one similar to our international partners. To be successful we need to implement changes to both our higher education system and our PK-12 system. There will need to be a culture shift from top down policies to classroom up policies. It won't be easy, it won't be quick, but it will be worth it. As an education system we have invested in many programs, curriculums, polices, mandates, companies and so on. The time has come to invest in our greatest resource – the ones in classrooms directly transforming children into adults – our classroom teachers. The Garden State Alliance for Strengthening Education has given you a roadmap for successful schools. Let's take that journey together.