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ADVANCING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH LABOR-MANAGEMENT COLLABORATION

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One of the most contentious issues unfolding in the political landscape of the United States is public education optimization and reform. While the United States represents the world's largest and most diverse economy, it ranks "average" at best when it comes to public school education as a whole, and markedly worse in the math and science disciplines. Making matters even more bleak, states such as Wisconsin, Ohio, and Indiana have mandated deep educational cuts in the face of extreme budget pressure, which has made reform and advancement even more of a tenuous suggestion.

Recently, George H. Cohen, Cornell alumnus and Director of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS), lectured on the role of the FMCS in facilitating public school reform and student achievement through effective labor-management relations. Cohen began with an overview of the state of public education in the United States and drew a specific reference to the intervention of the FMCS in a highly publicized case that took place in Rhode Island. Early in the spring of 2011, Rhode Island school officials issued termination notices to nearly 2000 teachers in the face of budget pressure and, primarily, deteriorating student achievement and test scores. Due to the national acclaim and press attention of this case, government officials intervened and called upon Cohen to enact FMCS involvement.

Cohen then facilitated a consortium that included FMCS officials, Rhode Island state school representatives, and the American Federation of Teachers union (AFT). After several weeks of integrative problem solving catalyzed by the involvement of the FMCS, the Rhode Island state school officials agreed to curtail the teacher dismissals. Instead of making broad and deep teacher cuts, the group devised a set of novel solutions to address teacher performance and student achievement. The vitality of the solution was largely contingent on a new teacher performance evaluation system that utilized fair, comprehensive, and rigorous measures to gauge teaching acumen and delivery. Teachers that were already considered among the best were directed to evaluate other teachers through classroom audits on an increased frequency; the prior evaluation model was based on infrequent and inconsistent classroom audits and was largely ineffective. Finally, several other innovative initiatives emerged from the FMCS involvement: teachers would eat in the lunchroom with students one day per week to spur student engagement, underachieving students and teachers would receive mentors aimed at improving performance, and school day length and school year duration was examined to determine fitness for optimum student achievement.

After the large scale, unprecedented FMCS intervention in Rhode Island was deemed successful, the FMCS offered to act on a state level with other schools to implement labor-management solutions to optimize student achievement. To undertake this broad initiative, Cohen embarked on a goliath planning and brainstorming endeavor that began with a survey of over 14,000 school districts to determine the schools that were “doing things right”. Cohen and the FMCS were able to funnel down the list to 150 schools that were exemplars in the instrumental use of collaborative and effective school administration policies. These schools were then invited to Denver for a conference to share best practices and take applicable methods back to their own schools to test them out. Items discussed included teacher evaluation methods, teacher career development initiatives, student learning schemes, and standard testing as a means of evaluating learning and achievement. Cohen remarked that the conference was a value added, enlightening learning experience for all in attendance. According to Cohen, the conference was a success due to the fact that it was built on two foundational principles: putting student achievement and learning above all other concerns, and discussing integrative solutions in an open manner with school, union, and FMCS officials all present.

Three months after the conference, the FMCS reviewed the results of each school’s implementation of ascertained best practice policies and administrative procedures. The aggregate data was compiled and all parties were invited back for a second conference lasting two days. This conference, built on the same foundational principles as the first, resulted in a 25 page instructional framework for public school labor-management collaboration and best practices. The framework, endorsed by all three attending parties, focuses on employing fair, comprehensive, and rigorous teacher evaluation methods; setting meaningful and impactful goals for teacher behavior modification; and utilizing essential teaching methods aimed at student achievement. According to Cohen, the successful implementation of the framework on an extensive scale will hinge upon the acceptance of school districts and, most importantly, their commitment to execute on the objectives enumerated in the framework.

Cohen drew the lecture to a close by speaking about the many challenges that lay ahead. Issues such as teacher pay, benefits and tenure, teacher and student assignments based on competencies and need, standardized testing as a means of evaluation, and teacher transfers all weigh heavy on the educational system and present monumental challenges looking onward. However, despite these obstacles, Cohen believes moving forward through the use of collaborative problem solving committees represented by all parties involved will always result in the best outcome. While the United States’ labor-management relations in public education is facing an unprecedented uphill climb, an integrative approach with the underpinning goal of advancing student achievement presents the clearest path to the top. ✎

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