In recent years, there has been mounting interest in building strong collaborative relationships between labor and management as part of school improvement efforts. The U.S. Department of Education has sponsored national conferences about collaborative models of school improvement each year since 2011. Organizations such as the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, the American Association of School Administrators, the National School Boards Association, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, the Council of the Great City Schools and the Council of Chief State School Officers have been co-sponsors.

At each conference, approximately 100 school district teams that include the superintendent, local union president and the board of education president learn more about labor-management collaboration from other districts across the country. I have been asked numerous times to share at these conferences how ABC Unified School District in southeast Los Angeles County created and sustained a successful labor-management partnership for over 15 years.

The power of collective capacity

It’s encouraging to recognize that the importance of labor-management collaboration is growing. Michael Fullan, professor emeritus at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto notes: “The power of collective capacity is that it enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things – for two reasons. One is that knowledge about effective practice becomes more widely available and accessible on a daily basis. The second reason is more powerful still – working together generates commitment.”

Many of us are aware that systemic change requires collaboration, especially in imple-
menting large-scale initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards and new state assessments. Collaboration is particularly important when we are asked to rethink how we structure professional learning, curriculum and instructional materials, and family engagement activities.

In ABC Unified School District, our labor-management partnership has required more than just civil communication and cooperation. Our joint work has focused on our strategic priority of improving student achievement.

How did the ABC labor-management partnership get started and what does it look like? What structures are in place to sustain this collaborative model? In 2012, “The ABC’s of Partnership: Creating a Labor-Management Partnership Focused on Student Achievement” was published by the American Federation of Teachers and ABC Unified, and supported by the AFT Innovation Fund. Ten elements were identified to help others understand how we achieved the partnership that exists today in ABCUSD, and to encourage others to develop their own unique partnerships in the existing system.

Element 1: Developing an interest in partnership

ABC Unified School District comprises 21,000 K-12 students in 30 schools serving the cities of Artesia, Cerritos and Hawaiian Gardens as well as parts of Lakewood, Long Beach and Norwalk. More than 51 percent of the students are from low-income families, with 92 percent representing different ethnic groups.

In the case of ABCUSD, the interest in forming a partnership grew out of an eight-day teacher strike in 1993 after reaching an impasse in contract negotiations. Shortly after the strike a new superintendent was hired. The president of ABC Federation of Teachers worked with the new superintendent to move forward differently, and a new era of collaboration began to take shape. Since then, the partnership has been built upon and sustained through multiple superintendents and different union leadership.

Although I have been involved with the development of the collaboration since 1999, I am the third superintendent in ABCUSD to build on the labor-management partnership.

Element 2: Getting together and establishing guidelines

Many of the original features of the partnership remain today, including a weekly meeting between the superintendent and teacher’s union president that started 15 years ago. These meetings are largely informal and typically without an agenda. We cover a wide range of topics, but largely we keep each other informed about what is happening in the district.

Guiding principles

A set of guiding principles and behaviors were developed in 1999 that helped to communicate to the Board of Education and the district’s labor and management team how we were going to partner to improve student achievement. These principles are critical to our long-term success:

- All students can succeed and we will not accept any excuse that prevents that from happening in ABC. We will work together to promote student success.
- All needed support will be made available to schools to ensure every student succeeds. We will work together to ensure that happens.
- The top five percent of teachers in our profession should teach our students.
- All employees contribute to student success.
- All negotiations support conditions that sustain successful teaching and student learning. This is the “main thing.”
- We won’t let each other fail.

Guiding behaviors

The guiding behaviors of the partnership are as follows:

- We will work hard to understand the core of each other’s job, and respect each other.
- We will respect each other.
- We will be honest with each other.
- We will not “sugar coat” difficult issues.
- We will disagree without being disagreeable.
- We will reflect on each other’s comments, suggestions and concerns.
- We will seek clarification until we understand.
- We will maintain confidentiality.
- We will both “own the contract.”
- We will laugh at ourselves and with each other.

Element 3: Making student achievement a priority

The labor-management partnership in ABCUSD identified raising student achievement as our highest priority. In 1999, in our first project together, we worked toward finding more instructional support to help struggling readers in six schools (four el-
mentary schools, one middle school and one high school) in the southern end of the district.

The first jointly sponsored professional development was with these six schools that we called the Southside Schools Reading Collaborative. This collaborative allowed teachers and administrators to meet in vertical teams across grade levels to better connect the reading curriculum and assessments in the different grade spans.

Since the effort began, all the schools experienced growth in student achievement. The high school (Artesia HS) was named a California Distinguished School in 2013 and the middle school (Fedde MS) was recently selected as a 2015 Schools to Watch and National Model Middle School.

Element 4: Creating an infrastructure

Communication and collaboration meetings with labor and management teams occur at every level in the district organization. Each Cabinet member representing academic services, human resources, business services, information and technology, and school services meets regularly with a union leader from ABCFT. At the school level, principals meet regularly with the union site representatives.

Since 2001, the district holds an annual PAL (Partnership with Administration and Labor) retreat in October with all the principals and their site union representatives. The retreat also includes members of the Cabinet, district leaders, the Board of Education and our classified labor leaders. A PAL committee made up of district and ABCFT leaders creates the agenda for the PAL retreat.

Each year, the superintendent’s Cabinet also meets with the ABCFT Executive Board for a retreat. The joint retreat is designed to review upcoming changes in the district that may affect teachers, and to look for other opportunities to collaborate.

Element 5: Confronting issues together

In addition to the regular meetings held throughout the year, other structures are in place to help with solving problems together. The PROPS (Proactive Problem Solving) Committee was developed with the special education department and special education teachers to discuss emerging issues that can be solved together.

District leaders and many school teams have participated in the training provided by AFT’s Center for School Improvement to learn about best practices in team building. The district and labor leaders meet regularly each year regarding the state’s budget. We attend budget meetings together and share the latest budget information with all the executive board members representing labor and management.

This transparency and honesty has helped to build support for the partnership among all employees. Confronting the budget challenges together in the past five years has allowed us all to be problem solvers and has resulted in no layoffs.

Element 6: Building partnerships at the school level

In 2009 we were awarded an AFT Innovation Fund that expanded the partnership at the school level. Over the years, the joint district-union Innovation Fund of more than $400,000 supported creative ideas to improve student learning and the teaching environment through collaboration between school leaders and teachers.

The Innovation Funds were successful at fostering collaboration and opening new lines of communication in the schools, and provided seed money to create a special project together. Some of the programs created by the Innovation Funds became signature practices that led schools to be designated as California Distinguished Schools.

Element 7: Handling conflicts and challenges

When challenges arise with a teacher or school employee struggling on the job, the Peer Assistance and Support System is available to provide support. Members of my Cabinet are alerted by key union leaders to emerging issues that may affect the classroom. Shifts in the Common Core State Standards have provided opportunities for our Academic Services Department to disseminate joint newsletters with ABCFT regarding the changes in curriculum and instruction.

A joint “advance partnership” meeting was held with principals and the union site representatives before school started to go over all the changes coming during the school year. More than 144 teachers have been on the Common Core Study Teams for the past several years to develop and review instructional units when none were available. Teacher leaders and administrators present jointly at board meetings and parent meetings, speaking with one voice.

Having a positive labor-management partnership does not mean that we’ve eliminated conflicts or differing points of view. It
2011 and 2012. Their research concluded the student performance level of API between performance in 2012 and the difference in the relationship between the strength of student performance data. They were able to examine those data against 2011 and 2012 student quality of school partnerships and analyzed the relationship between the strength of student performance data and the differences in student performance levels. They identified different collaboration patterns that occur within schools among teachers and administrators. They also examined the communication patterns between union site representatives and principals. Communication in high partnership schools was more frequent and less formal.

Their research builds a strong case for efforts to expand collaborative partnerships as a vehicle for school improvement reform that can impact student performance.

**Element 8: Collecting data on your partnership**

In 2009, a PAL Committee made up of three administrators and three teachers convened to create a new survey to be administered each year to all teachers in the district. The climate survey helps to assess the partnership efforts at the school and district level. It focuses on six areas: school-wide culture, professional development, resources, communication, data and the partnership.

In 2014, Saul Rubinstein and John McCarthy of the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University released their research regarding ABCUSD’s partnership efforts. They examined the pattern of collaboration that occurs within schools among teachers and administrators and looked to see if and how that collaboration affected student performance.

The researchers used the PAL survey results, data from the California API and social network analysis. Social network analysis explores what teachers and administrators communicate about on a regular basis, how they communicate, and what topics they discuss.

They used the 2011 survey data on the quality of school partnerships and analyzed those data against 2011 and 2012 student performance data. They were able to examine the relationship between the strength of the partnership and both the level of API performance in 2012 and the difference in student performance level of API between 2011 and 2012. Their research concluded the following:

- The quality of formal partnerships between teachers’ unions, administrators and teachers at the school level had an important and significant positive impact on student performance as well as performance improvement, even after controlling for poverty.
- High quality teacher-administrator partnerships predicted “denser” school-level collaboration and communication around student performance data; curriculum development; sharing, advising or learning about instructional practices; and giving or receiving mentoring.
- Strong partnership schools have structurally different patterns of union-management collaboration. The strength of partnerships predicted different communication patterns between union site representatives and principals. Communication in high partnership schools was more frequent and less formal.

Their research builds a strong case for efforts to expand collaborative partnerships as a vehicle for school improvement reform that can impact student performance.

**Element 9: Celebrating success and planning for the future**

Each year at the annual PAL retreat, district leaders and labor leaders not only work on serious issues confronting us, such as the Common Core State Standards, but also recognize the hard work all our educators do every day in the schools. We celebrate our successes as a district together, and have fun laughing with each other.

Since 2010, we have coordinated and hosted the West Coast Labor Management Institute, held the day before the PAL Retreat in October. The Institute provides an opportunity for other district teams from around the country to join us and network together to learn from each other. By sharing our experiences, we have been fortunate to see other districts thrive in their partnership efforts. It’s been exciting to watch and learn from the new partnerships that have been fostered around us.

In 2012, California School Employees Association leaders worked with us to create the PAL2 partnership with classified employees. CSEA leaders have participated in the PAL2 partnership every single day, they are

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**Three practical ways to partner with your local emergency responders**

By Joe Viramontez

Last August 24 at 3:20 a.m. a 6.0-magnitude earthquake struck Northern California. The region affected is well known for its wine – the Napa Valley. Now it’s also known for the largest earthquake in Northern California since the Loma Prieta Quake of 1989.

What if the quake had happened on a weekday instead of a weekend? What if the quake had happened at a time when parents were at work while kids were at school? What if the quake was so large that emergency responders were inundated with numerous events while schools had to fend for themselves? Unfortunately, this could be a very real situation.

Fortunately, there are some things that schools can do to properly prepare for the next big disaster. Following are three practical ways schools can partner with emergency responders so sustainability is not only maintained at a school site, but also thrives.

1. Preparation

You’ve heard it said many times, “A good offense is a good defense.” In this case, it’s never truer. Schools today have to prepare to defend and protect their staff and their children. One of the ways schools can do this is by developing a comprehensive safety plan that includes the Incident Command System (ICS). With the knowledge and practice of this system, a school can handle any situation that comes up.

Because fire departments use the ICS system every single day, they are
Growing research makes it clear that students and educators benefit greatly from strong partnerships between teachers and administrators. A focus on a strong labor-management partnership must be part of any serious school improvement effort.

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