

# Moving Meriden

In Connecticut, a Road Map for Union-District Relations



BY JENNIFER DUBIN

In the 1990s, the relationship between the Meriden Public Schools and the local teachers' union, the Meriden Federation of Teachers, was frosty with a lack of trust. The union spent much of its time fielding concerns from teachers who believed principals were not treating them as professionals. Teachers did not have a voice in instructional matters. Teachers and principals could not even resolve administrative issues like scheduling and lunch duty assignments.

To help teachers navigate this uncomfortable climate, the union president at the time deployed two assistants to meet with teachers in their schools. Throughout the district, the assistants were known as “Doom” and “Gloom”; their presence in schools always signaled a problem. When the duo scheduled their visits,

*Jennifer Dubin is the assistant editor of American Educator. Previously, she was a journalist with the Chronicle of Higher Education. To read more of her work, visit American Educator's authors index at [www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/author.cfm](http://www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/author.cfm).*

the teachers would instruct them not to come in through the front door. Nervous teachers feared that the principal would see them and figure there was an issue. So to avoid any confrontation, the teachers let the assistants in through the back door. Relations between teachers and principals were so strained that the pair performed their clandestine operations several times each month.

For the most part, the district's central office administrators did not visit schools to get to know teachers and did not involve themselves in building issues, says Erin Benham, the current president of the Meriden Federation of Teachers (MFT).

Benham has taught in the district for 34 years. For several of those years, she was the union assistant known as “Doom.” She laughs now when recounting this part of her career because things have so dramatically changed. No doubt she wasn't laughing back then.

In the last five years, the union and the district have built a strong labor-management partnership whose focus on supporting teachers has resulted in a steady increase in student achievement. Today, it's fair to say that Benham belongs to another dynamic

duo, a much less dour one. Her partner is Meriden's superintendent, Mark Benigni. A native of Meriden and the city's former mayor, Benigni has committed himself and his central office staff to working with the union. Benham and Benigni contact each other several times a day and meet regularly. The partnership is not only between the two leaders; members of the union's executive board and the superintendent's cabinet also are in close touch with each other.

While Meriden administrators and union officials engage in the usual personnel matters such as hiring and budgeting issues, much of their time is spent coming up with joint professional development programs to hone teacher talent. Together, the union and the district have created the Peer Coaching Program, in which educators partner with each other to improve instruction; the Leadership Academy, in which teachers learn to become stronger leaders in their buildings; Professional Learning Communities, in which teachers meet to review student achievement data; and the Meriden Teachers Sharing Success program, in which the district's most effective teachers open up their classrooms to teachers seeking to improve their craft.

The union and the district have also partnered to turn two elementary schools with high poverty rates into extended-day schools, so students can participate in a variety of enrichment activities, including art, music, and physical fitness, to which they are not usually exposed to a great extent during the regular school day. To implement this program, union representatives and district officials worked together on an application to the AFT Innovation Fund. The union was awarded a \$150,000 grant in July 2012 and received another for nearly the same amount in July of this year.

It's money that Meriden desperately needs in order to offer some of its most disadvantaged students an array of learning opportunities they otherwise would not receive. Located in south-central Connecticut, 20 miles from Hartford, Meriden is a small, picturesque city. Horseshoe-shaped cliffs known as the Hanging Hills surround the area and inspire pride in Meriden residents. They like to point out that a stone observation tower, "Castle Craig," peeks out from those hills and stands as the highest point within 25 miles from shore anywhere on the East Coast from Florida to Maine.

Though the hills have remained, the jobs have not. Once referred to as the "Silver City" for its production of silverware, Meriden used to boast a number of manufacturing jobs, but those steadily left in the 1970s. Since then, economic development has sputtered along. Many residents work in retail at Meriden's Westfield shopping mall or in healthcare positions at the city's regional hospital, MidState Medical Center.

Of the district's 9,100 students, 70 percent received free or reduced-price meals in 2012–2013, the year for which the most

recent figures are available, compared with 37 percent who received such meals statewide that year. Meriden Public Schools also enroll a much higher percentage of students who are English language learners: 12.1 percent, compared with 5.63 percent statewide for that same year.

Because of the city's economic challenges, union and district officials have joined forces to strengthen their schools in the hopes that public education will revitalize both the community and the local economy. In Meriden, educators and administrators know that a high-quality education can significantly improve a child's life chances. And they know that a district and a union cannot deliver a great education while fixated on an "us against them" mentality. "[Teachers] know in me they have

someone who's not going to accept that this nation's public school system is the cause of all our problems," says superintendent Benigni. "They know they're going to have someone who says poverty is real. It's a huge factor." As a result, he has spent much of his time making it clear to teachers that the district fully supports them in trying to mitigate poverty's effects.

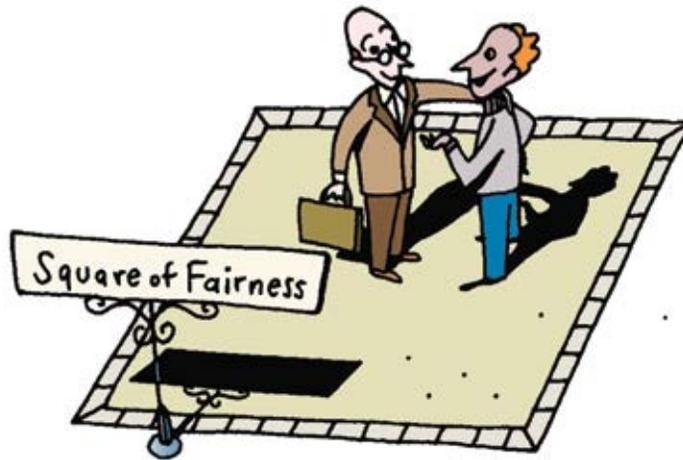
### Laying the Groundwork for Collaboration

Even before Mark Benigni became superintendent in 2010, Erin Benham had started to

explore collaborating with his predecessor. Benham became MFT president in 2007. At the time, Mary Cortright was superintendent, a position she held from 2003 to 2010. Earlier in her career, Cortright had served as vice principal at Lincoln Middle School, where Benham taught eighth-grade language arts. For the last five years, Benham has worked at Lincoln as a literacy coach.

Since Benham and Cortright had established a solid relationship at Lincoln, the two started off working well together. Benham took the relationship a step further in the spring of 2009, after she read an article on labor-management collaboration in *American Educator*. The article detailed a thriving union-district partnership in California's ABC Unified School District.\* In ABC, the article said, the superintendent and the union president meet weekly, their deputies meet monthly, and members of the union's executive board and the superintendent's cabinet routinely call each other. The open lines of communication between teachers and administrators have allowed them to devise ways to boost student achievement, especially in the district's high-poverty schools.

Intrigued, Benham shared the article with Cortright and then suggested the two of them meet monthly over lunch to catch up on union and district happenings. Cortright agreed. "We would go through personnel issues," Benham recalls. They would also share what each side was considering bringing to the table during



\*To learn more about labor-management collaboration in ABC, see "From Picket Line to Partnership: A Union, a District, and Their Thriving Schools," in the Spring 2009 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/spring2009/dubin\(2\).pdf](http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/spring2009/dubin(2).pdf).

upcoming contract negotiations in order to avoid arbitration. Benham says that after those meetings, she would report back to her executive board about what was discussed, and Cortright would do the same with her staff.

Soon after the meetings between Benham and Cortright started, the two leaders and their staffs found themselves meeting more regularly, not to promote greater collaboration but because of the downturn in the economy. “Unfortunately, during Mary’s tenure, we went through a lot of layoffs,” Benham recalls. For a couple years, more than a dozen teachers were let go, and twice that amount were reassigned to different schools. These meetings did not generate ideas for the union and district to work more closely together to support teachers and improve student achievement. The purpose was simply to keep the schools afloat during the recession.

Since then, the district has not laid off teachers. The first year Benigni became superintendent, in 2010, the district implemented a handful of furlough days but no layoffs, and no layoffs or furloughs have happened since. Benham recalls that Benigni “was pretty proud of that.”

Benigni came to the superintendency as a well-known Meriden resident. He was young, extroverted, and athletic. He graduated from Orville H. Platt High School, one of the district’s two high schools, in 1989. In college at Western Connecticut State University, he played football and was president of his class. After graduation, he taught special education for four years in Meriden, and then became an assistant principal in a neighboring town, though he still lived in Meriden. In 2001, while he was assistant principal, he ran for mayor of Meriden, a part-time position. At 29, he won the election.

Benigni served four terms and then stepped down when he became a high school principal in another neighboring town. The new position demanded too much of his time to continue as mayor.

When the Meriden superintendency opened up, he applied and landed the job. “We were very excited,” Benham recalls. As union president, she had sat on the interview committee, which for many years has been standard practice for administrative hires in the district. Benham recalls that during his time as mayor, both political parties at one time or another had endorsed Benigni. “That will probably tell you something about his ability to make people see things,” she says. As mayor, “he was great,” she adds, “very much like he is as superintendent, very transparent.”

Benham and Benigni had worked together in the district earlier. When Benigni was pursuing his doctorate in education, he worked as an administrative intern at Platt High School, his alma mater. Benham, her colleagues, and their eighth-grade students from Lincoln were housed at Platt for six years while a new, larger middle school was being built. As part of Benigni’s internship, he

worked with Benham and the eighth-grade team, and they enjoyed a good relationship.

As soon as Benigni became superintendent, one of the first people he wanted to meet with was the union president: Benham. He called her cell phone one day in early July 2010. He told her he had a list of topics to discuss with her right away. “I knew that we had to meet and lay out how we were going to be true partners and move this district forward together,” he says.

But Benham was in Seattle attending an AFT convention. The meeting had to wait until she returned home. “If she said she was in New Haven, I might have driven there,” Benigni jokes.

On July 13, Benham and Benigni met. They each brought a list of items to discuss; Benham even still has the piece of paper

on which hers was written. Among the 17 topics on her list were a report on class size and equity, personnel moves, and an administrators’ meeting, next to which Benham had scribbled “suggested to be included.”

Benham’s note refers to central office meetings that she now regularly attends. It was at this first meeting between Benham and Benigni that they agreed that, once a month, Benham and a member of the union’s executive board would meet with the superintendent and his

upper-level central office staff to discuss a range of issues. The purpose of the meeting “was to make sure that I knew we were on the same page on most things,” Benigni says.

That first administrative meeting with Benham and another union representative took place in the fall of 2010. Three years later, these meetings continue. They are largely informal, and there is typically no agenda. They can run as long as three hours or last an hour. It just depends on what everyone wants to discuss.

## Keeping the Partners Informed

On a recent morning in September, 13 people sit around a table in a small conference room in the district’s central office. All are district officials except for Benham and Stacy Whittington, a kindergarten teacher and a member of the union’s executive board.

Benigni begins the meeting by asking Miguel Cardona, who is in charge of Meriden’s new evaluation and development plan, to give an update. The plan is part of a teacher evaluation pilot mandated by the state. The program will rate educators as “exemplary,” “accomplished,” “developing,” or “requires action.” Those ratings are based on a mix of factors. Student scores on state standardized tests count for 22.5 percent, as do student scores on district standardized tests, while parent surveys, schoolwide performance data, and classroom observations make up the rest of the evaluation. Four of the district’s elementary schools, Thomas Hooker, Benjamin Franklin, Israel Putnam, and Roger Sherman, are piloting the program this year.

Meriden administrators and union officials spend much of their time coming up with joint professional development programs to hone teacher talent.

Cardona explains that he and some of his colleagues from the central office and the union have just returned from Texas, where they attended an AFT conference, “Connecting the Dots,” which focused on teacher evaluation. “What we heard in Houston supports what we’re doing in Meriden,” Cardona says. “If it’s a unified approach, student achievement will increase.” Cardona then shares his plan to give presentations throughout the district in the next month on how the pilot will work.

“What’s the word from the staff on the involvement in the process?” he asks Benham. She acknowledges there is some anxiety among teachers. But “I always tell the people at the four schools, you’re the lucky ones,” she says. “You get to try it this first year.” She agrees that Cardona’s presentations will help dispel any misconceptions.

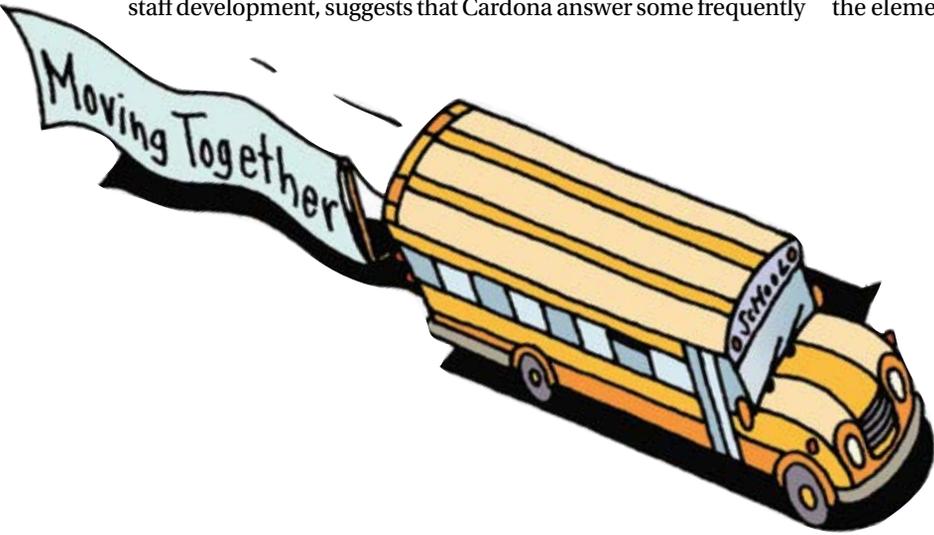
Tom Giard, the assistant superintendent for personnel and staff development, suggests that Cardona answer some frequently

The teachers have agreed to open their classrooms to fellow teachers looking to improve their instruction.

Giard says that some of the teachers are uncomfortable being singled out for great work. He says the district needs to reassure them that “it’s OK to feel different from your peers” and “it’s OK to share.” Both are topics that this week’s training will address.

Benham confirms that several teachers have said they don’t want the attention. She says that one teacher on her executive board even asked her, “Why did you put me in for this? I like to be under the radar.” Benham says she told her, “I didn’t put you in. This is where you landed.”

Later in the meeting, Alvin Larson, the district’s director of research, tells the group about the presentation on state assessments he will give to the board of education this week. He says that over the last few years, scores in reading and mathematics in the elementary grades have steadily increased (see the charts on



Thanks to a union-district initiative, teachers and building administrators stay after school one hour on Thursdays to collaborate and review student data.

asked questions and post them on the district’s website. Then Benigni reminds the group that for the pilot to work, “it has to be about development, not just evaluation.”

Since he became superintendent, Benigni has committed his administration to focusing on staff development (notice the “staff development” part of the personnel director’s title). Three years ago, the union and district created a peer coaching program where teachers volunteer to work with a peer who teaches the same grade level at a different school. The pair agree to visit each other’s classroom for at least one full day and then give feedback. Many teachers have formed lasting professional relationships from the program. Giard says that 28 pairs have signed up for it this year.

Giard then gives updates on two other programs: the Leadership Academy and Meriden Teachers Sharing Success. Twenty teachers have been accepted into the Leadership Academy (enrollment is capped each year), a joint union-district program that began three years ago. Teachers who enroll learn what it means to be an instructional leader in their buildings. They also each engage in a yearlong project focused on improving their school or the district as a whole.

Giard also announces that training for Meriden Teachers Sharing Success begins Thursday. For the program, which is taking place for the first time this year, the union and district selected 17 teachers in grades K-5 based on conversations with administrators, classroom observations, and four years of student test scores.

page 33). But results for tenth-graders have tended to fluctuate. Science results for fifth-graders are increasing slightly, though for eighth-graders they remain flat. “Testing isn’t going to change the gaps,” he says. The hope is that the programs the group has just discussed will continue to help close them.

Toward the end of the meeting, Benigni asks Benham, “Any feedback on the dashboards?” Last year, the district rolled out a computer program that annually provides each teacher data on the number of classroom referrals he or she made (how many times students were sent to the office for discipline problems), the number of sick and personal days he or she took, and the growth that teacher’s class made in test scores from the previous school year. The data, known as “dashboards,” include comparisons with the school and district averages for classroom referrals and sick and personal days. For student growth scores, the dashboards include comparisons for school, district, and state averages.

Benham tells the group that she’s received few concerns about the dashboards other than what exactly principals plan to do with the data. Benigni tells her to reassure teachers that “principals know that these are for teachers’ self-reflection.” He also says that if a teacher’s growth scores for four consecutive years do not meet the district’s average, then principals should offer instructional support.

Later, Benham tells me that teachers had serious concerns when the district implemented the dashboards last year. She

recalls several teachers telling her, “We should never allow this.” But Benham explained to them that superintendents in the district have had this data at their fingertips for years. Now the district is sharing the information with teachers for the first time so that teachers themselves can see whether they need to improve their practice. Like many other states, Connecticut is moving toward tying part of teacher evaluation to test scores, hence the state-mandated pilot. Benham recalls telling teachers that by showing them their scores the district is not keeping secrets. In the long run, teachers will benefit by having access to this information that eventually the state will require as part of evaluations.

### Enabling Teachers to Focus on Data

The focus on data extends to other parts of Meriden’s labor-management partnership. One of the first initiatives that Benigni and Benham discussed when he took office was the creation of Professional Learning Communities that would meet on Thursday afternoons.

Benham and Cortright, the previous superintendent, had tried to implement what are now known as “PLC Thursdays” but struggled to make it work. Their plan was that students at all grade levels in the district would be dismissed from school 30 minutes early every Thursday so that teachers could stay after school one hour to collaborate and review student data. Because of issues with busing and coordinating dismissal times, the plan stalled.

When Benigni became superintendent, he and Benham and the MFT worked to implement it. They resolved the busing issues, and showed parents and teachers who were initially skeptical that the district was not reducing instructional time for students. Teach-

ers agreed to teach five minutes more on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays during their “wraparound time,” the time the contract already required them to be at school but not have students in front of them. The plan actually increased instructional time by 15 minutes each week *and* gave teachers the vital collaboration time they needed to help boost student achievement.

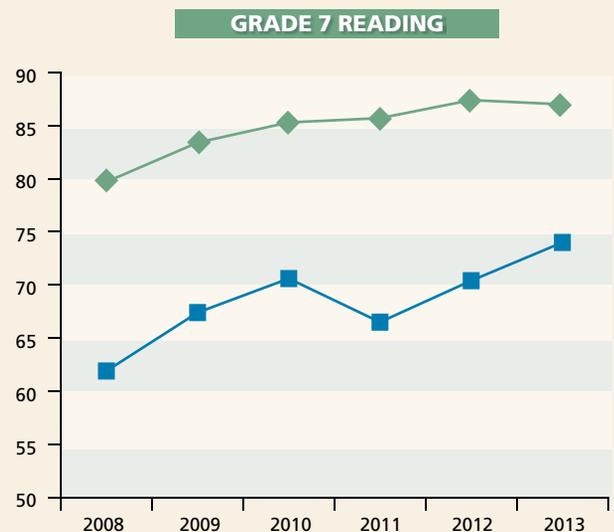
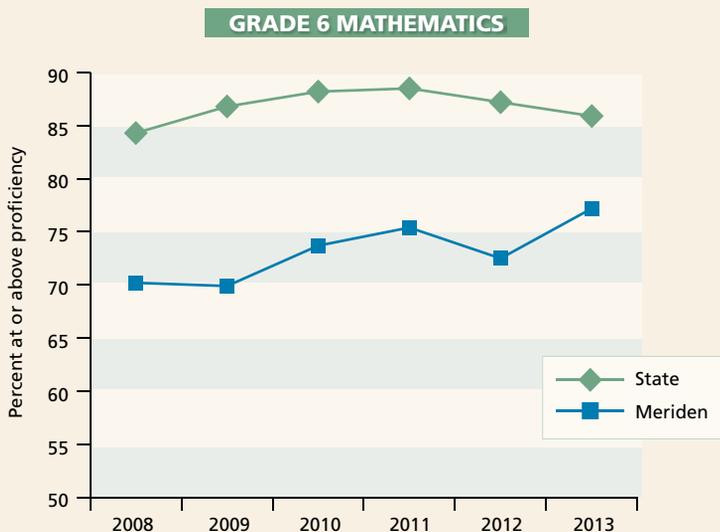
On a Thursday at 2 p.m. in the first week of October, buses full of students depart from Lincoln Middle School as teachers inside the building break into their groups to discuss student data. Schools can structure their PLC Thursdays any way they see fit, as long as teachers are working together.

Each week, Lincoln organizes its Thursday afternoons differently. One Thursday it will hold a faculty meeting for the entire staff, and on another it will have teachers review data within their academic departments. On this Thursday, teachers and administrators have split into four groups: a school climate committee, a positive behavior support committee, a higher-order thinking skills committee, and a schoolwide data committee.

As part of this latter committee, the chairs of each department—mathematics, science, social studies, language arts, special education, physical education, and art—as well as the school’s principal, gather in a conference room in the main office. Today they review the results of different assessments. First, they discuss a district mathematics assessment that all students in grades 6, 7, and 8 took at the start of this school year. The high percentage of students who scored “below basic” concerns them. “At the beginning of the year, it’s always pretty low,” says Krista Romeo, the mathematics department chair. “They do lose a lot over the summer.”

## Reading and Mathematics Achievement Steadily Improves for Meriden’s Students

The charts below show the percentage of sixth-graders in Meriden and in Connecticut who passed the state mathematics assessment, and the percentage of seventh-graders who passed the state reading assessment. While student achievement in Meriden falls short of the state average, students in the district are making steady, incremental progress. These results are encouraging given that Meriden’s poverty rate is nearly double the state average: 70 percent of Meriden’s students, compared with just 37 percent of students statewide, are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.



NOTE: THE DATA PRESENTED HERE WERE DRAWN IN OCTOBER 2013, FROM THE CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION’S ONLINE RESULTS DATABASE FOR THE CONNECTICUT MASTERY TEST, AVAILABLE AT [HTTP://SOLUTIONS1.EMETRIC.NET/CMTPUBLIC/INDEX.ASPX](http://solutions1.emetric.net/cmtpublic/index.aspx).

“We need to have year-round school,” Dianne Vumback, the principal, says only half-jokingly. She then says that teachers must discuss the purpose of this test with the students. “We’ve got to say this is important.”

Dave Manware, the chair of the social studies department, says he doesn’t think the entire staff views these scores as “our school’s” scores, as all teachers should no matter what subject they teach. “They’re all our kids,” Vumback agrees.

The group then turns to the results of a mathematics vocabulary assessment that students took the previous week. Romeo, the mathematics chair, reminds everyone that the assessment, which featured all multiple-choice questions, asked students to identify the correct definitions of words such as “product, sum, factor, difference, composite, and area.” Sixth-graders performed better on the test than seventh- and eighth-graders, Romeo explained, because sixth-graders had just started a unit on these words. The teachers then discuss ways to reinforce student learning of these definitions. Among their suggestions is having students make flashcards.\*

Vumback wraps up the meeting with the suggestion that students should discuss what they found challenging about the assessment when they meet in their advisory groups—small groups of students who meet with a teacher who is their adviser—next Thursday.

Marie Broadway, the chair of the special education department at Lincoln, who attended the meeting, has taught in the district for 24 years. She says that before PLC Thursdays, the school only held a 45- to 60-minute staff meeting once a month, which left little time for reviewing student achievement data and deciding how to adjust instruction accordingly. Teachers appreciate that time is now set aside weekly to talk to “colleagues about how to help develop the reading skills that are lacking or the math skills that are lacking,” she says.

Vumback, the principal, says that the PLCs give everybody a voice. They “allow us to be one school.” In a sense, Thursday afternoons in Meriden represent the joint effort of the union and the district to make everyone—teachers and administrators—see that they belong to the same team and are working toward the same

goal of providing a high-quality education to all children.

## Extending the Labor-Management Effort into Schools

Perhaps the most ambitious labor-management effort to come out of Meriden so far has been its transformation of two elementary schools into extended learning time schools. Two years ago, the AFT invited Benigni and Benham and their staffs to attend a conference in Boston organized by the National Center on Time and Learning, a group that provides technical support to schools and districts looking to add hours and enrichment opportunities to the school day. At the conference, Meriden officials and union representatives liked what they heard and thought such a program

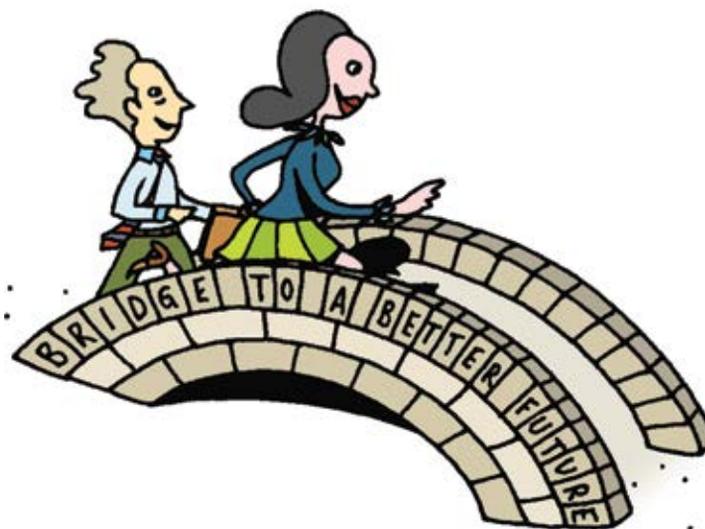
could benefit all students, including some of the district’s most disadvantaged children. So when the AFT Innovation Fund published its list of grant priorities in 2012 and extended learning time was one of them, Benigni and Benham formed a union-district committee to write a grant application. When the application was approved in June of that year, Meriden officials had only a couple months to create from scratch a program for a longer school day.

With the hard work of several teachers and district officials, Casimir Pulaski Elementary School extended learning time for students for the first time last year. This year, the hours and offerings at John Barry Elementary School have also been expanded. Both schools enroll a majority of students who receive free or reduced-priced meals, which is partly why they were selected for the program.

That teachers and administrators at both schools were

willing to try something new was another reason they were chosen. “I’ve always kind of felt this in my heart when I was a teacher: there wasn’t enough time in the day,” says Dan Coffey, Pulaski’s principal. Over the years, what he refers to as “all the fun stuff”—art, music, science, and physical fitness—has often been cut to make more time for reading and mathematics.

At Pulaski, the longer school day has allowed teachers to add the “fun stuff” back into the school day. While the regular elementary school day in Meriden is from 8:55 a.m. to 3:20 p.m., Pulaski begins at 7:30 a.m. and ends at 3:30 p.m. The school also operates on a split schedule. Teachers either work shift A, which begins at 7:10 a.m. and ends at 2 p.m., or shift B, which begins at 9 a.m. and ends at



Meriden’s teamwork has resulted in statewide recognition. The union president and superintendent both received the President’s Award from AFT Connecticut, the union’s highest honor.

\*For more on effective learning strategies, see “Strengthening the Student Toolbox: Study Strategies to Boost Learning,” in the Fall 2013 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall2013/dunlosky.pdf](http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall2013/dunlosky.pdf).

3:50 p.m. A handful of teachers at the school work the entire extended day and earn a \$7,500 annual stipend.

Students in grades 3 through 5 receive an hour and a half of enrichment instruction from 7:30 a.m. to 9 a.m. They take classes in woodworking, technology, instrumental music, scrapbooking, French, Italian, nature studies, vision studies (learning about how vision works and the parts of the eye), world cultures, mathematics games, and physical fitness. Grade-level teachers at the school worked with Coffey and Christine Laferriere, the school's instructional assistant (in Meriden, elementary schools have IAs instead of assistant principals), to create the courses. Coffey recalls telling them to teach their passions. For instance, the educators who teach woodworking and scrapbooking engage in these hobbies at home.

The regular part of the academic day is 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. for grades 3 through 5. Meanwhile, students in grades 1 and 2 receive their core academic instruction from 7:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Then they get an hour and a half of enrichment from 2 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. During this time, they participate in physical fitness activities, listen to oral readings, work on developing vocabulary, and learn about positive behaviors such as impulse control and empathy.

Coffey says first- and second-graders are more tired at the end of the day, which is why their enrichment takes place in the afternoon. He has found the morning activities energize students in grades 3 through 5, and that helps them focus on their academics for the rest of the day. He says students in all grades have responded well to the program and are eager to come to school. Pulaski's daily attendance rate in the first year of the program (last year) was 96 percent, up from 89 percent the previous year.

The school's demographics have changed since Coffey, who grew up in Meriden, attended Pulaski 42 years ago, and since Mark Benigni attended 30 years ago (Benigni's wife, Amy, teaches at Pulaski). Approximately 80 percent of Pulaski's students receive free or reduced-price meals, and 8.4 percent are English language learners. Parents usually work two jobs and may not have time to help students with homework or take them on educational outings to museums. Many families also live in apartments or condos, high-density areas where children may not have enough space to play outside.

Because of these factors, Pulaski's students especially benefit from the exposure to enrichment activities. "One of the biggest things I noticed in less than a year was they were bringing back more prior knowledge," says David Wheeler, a fifth-grade teacher. "They were saying, 'We did that in the extended day.'"

Wheeler has taught at Pulaski for 44 years. He is professionally and personally invested in the school. His daughter teaches second grade and his granddaughter is a student in third grade there. He chose to work the full extended day because it was a new program he thought would boost student learning and add joy to the educational experience. With the program, "We've been given the go-ahead to do fun things in the classroom that we basically haven't had time to do," he says.

For instance, the school received an \$8,000 science grant from 3M Purification Inc. in Meriden last year to buy model rockets and an accompanying curriculum. He taught rocketry and Newton's laws of motion as part of the morning enrichment and will do it again this year. As part of the class, students built rockets, which they launched

on campus. Wheeler's face lights up when he talks about it: "They had a great time with it," he says. "They learned a lot."

In recent years, Wheeler has noticed the union taking a greater role in educational programming, such as the extended day. "Before, it was always basically bargaining," he says. "Or if there were teachers having difficulty with something, they'd consult the union." He lauds the MFT for its strong support of teachers over the years and is especially pleased to see its efforts in improving instruction. The union was "the instrumental force for getting us the grant" for the extended-day program.

Pulaski's teachers also credit district officials for realizing that educators were crucial to its success. "You have to have buy-in from the teachers," says Colleen May, a first-grade teacher and a member of the MFT executive board. "[The district] really listened to our needs."

**N**ot everyone has always fully supported the close relationship between the union and the district. Robert Kosienski Jr., a longtime member of the board of education, admits he was initially skeptical of Pulaski's program because of the union's role in creating it. When the central office staff and the MFT came forward with the extended-day proposal, he recalls people telling him, "When you start being collaborative with the union, you're going to be beholden to the union."

Kosienski enjoyed good relationships with previous MFT presidents, and he has supported the union and the district's teachers throughout his 22 years on the board. Yet, he still had concerns and decided to share them with his father, who had worked with the police officers' union in his 17 years as Meriden's police chief. Kosienski remembers telling his father, "I'm not really comfortable with letting the union kind of put together a program, and we just follow along." His father leveled with him: "Rob, if I didn't have the union as part of my team, I wouldn't have been able to run the police department," Kosienski recalls him saying. "You need to be able to walk in and look across the table and know that that person, you can trust them. Once you earn their trust, they're going to be loyal."

Kosienski's father persuaded him to give the partnership, and the resulting new program at Pulaski, a chance. In the last year, Kosienski has been impressed by the MFT's leadership, as well as the leadership of Pulaski's teachers and administrators, in helping to implement the school's extended day. And he has begun to realize that student achievement in the district has steadily increased because teachers, administrators, and the board of education "have all bought into the fact that we need to work together."

The overwhelming sense of teamwork has resulted in statewide recognition. Last May, Benham and Benigni both received the President's Award from AFT Connecticut, the union's highest honor. Never before in the 30-plus years of the award's history has it been given to an administrator or been awarded because of union-district collaboration. "There was an openness and a willingness to do what was best for the education of those kids in Meriden," says Melodie Peters, AFT Connecticut's president, as to why she honored the two leaders. She hopes that by highlighting their efforts, other districts in the state will take note and follow their example. "Good things can happen if people are willing to sit down and work things out." □