

# New York Teacher

NYSUT REPRESENTS MORE THAN 600,000 PROFESSIONALS IN EDUCATION AND HEALTH CARE

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## Focusing sights on success



**NEW  
'LEARNING  
COMMUNITIES'**  
empower  
teachers  
in quest  
to end the gap

Page 14

Expanded nursing  
program gets off  
to a healthy start

Page 13

Students in BOCES  
barber program  
are a cut above

Page 16

Where the  
state budget  
stands

Page 3

VOTE-COPE  
contributions  
set new record

Page 2

Throughout history,  
women led fight  
for workers' rights

Page 24



# NYSUT launches col 'Learning Commu



Kernan Elementary teacher Holly Dlugolecki works with kindergartners.



Ninth-grade Utica City School District students study an assignment.



Tenth-grade English tea

## *Dunkirk, Newburgh, Fulton and Utica school districts will pilot program to end the achievement gap*

By Kara E. Smith  
New York Teacher

**P**aul Csont, president of the Dunkirk Teachers Association in Chautauqua County, has never considered himself a trendsetter. But in scheduling a NYSUT workshop on Ending the Achievement Gap, he and his local union were breaking new ground.

"We arranged the August training because we wanted to make a positive difference in our district," said Csont, explaining that too many Dunkirk students do not meet academic benchmarks. One workshop discussion explored ways to assist English as a Second Language students. "We want to help close that gap."

That workshop, one of a series the union

Members of the Dunkirk and Cassadaga Valley local unions joined for an in-depth look at strategies to combat the achievement gap in their western New York locals.

held around the state, gave participants a taste of how sustained district focus and targeted strategies can benefit students at risk.

And now a new NYSUT initiative can help Dunkirk and three other districts do just that.

NYSUT is launching a two-year pilot program, "Professional Learning Communities," or PLC, which will provide on-site professional development to the four districts.

The other participating districts are the Newburgh Enlarged City School District, the Fulton City School District and the Utica City School District. All are Contract for Excellence districts, which have at least one school in need of improvement.

### ELT to provide support

NYSUT's Education & Learning Trust, which offers courses statewide focused on excellence in teaching, will implement the PLC pilot and provide professional development and ongoing support to the districts. The pilot is made possible through a grant from the National Education Association, one of NYSUT's nation-

al affiliates.

The PLC pilot is a natural continuation of NYSUT's 2007 Ending the Gap conference, which pulled together a wide array of stakeholders — including union and legislative leaders, educators, parents, school board members, administrators and business people — to focus their efforts on a common cause.

"With NYSUT's Ending the Gap conference we underscored our commitment to this issue," said NYSUT President Dick Iannuzzi. "Now, as then, we realize that collaboration is key when it comes to effectively addressing this problem. This grant-funded initiative puts many of the ideas gained from that event in action."

Defined as a disparity in student achievement determined by standardized testing, the academic achievement gap often disproportionately affects students in poverty and students of color. A root cause is an unequal distribution of school funds between poor urban and rural districts and more affluent districts.

"NYSUT's Professional Learning Communities initiative will provide an array of



PHOTO PROVIDED

# Collaborative Communities' initiative



Teacher Kerry Conley helps her students.



Teacher John Simmons works with a student on a math problem.

professional development resources tailored collaboratively with our local and the school district to help address unique needs," said NYSUT Vice President Maria Neira.

The PLC pilot is just the most recent manifestation of the union's ongoing mission to improve achievement for students at risk, she said.

"Helping students who are struggling, especially those whose families live in poverty, requires a multi-pronged effort," she said.

"NYSUT's successful lobbying for increased funding, especially for areas of high poverty, is an essential part of the solution — one we are fighting to maintain in this tough economy."

## Collaboration is key

While the increase in foundation aid is key, she said, it is equally important for districts to implement research-based strategies for improving student achievement. That's where the PLC pilot comes in.

Csont said participating in the pilot evolved from the NYSUT "End the Gap" workshop, which was a hit with Dunkirk educators and administrators. "We're excited to be a part of this program," he said. "We welcome the additional training."

The four pilot districts were selected through a three-month review process that wrapped up last month. NYSUT leaders sought Contract for Excellence districts with a clear plan and a positive union-administration partnership.

"A program like this really requires that both labor and management are comfortable working closely together," said Neira. "If the relationship lacks trust, the program won't take root and grow."

## No one-size-fits-all solution

Creating Professional Learning Communities in the pilot districts is a key aspect of the program.

"This involves training the professional staff

in a school, or within a district, to work collaboratively to both identify problem areas and strategies that work with students," said Matt Jacobs, NYSUT manager of field services administration.

Too often, professional development provides one-size-fits-all "solutions" for district problems.

A better approach is working with districts to design problem-specific answers, explained Neira.

"When given the freedom to brainstorm achievement gap issues, educators develop great solutions," she said. "These are the people who know the students' needs."

Instructors from NYSUT's ELT program will work with the districts to first develop an action plan, then identify ELT programs to meet the districts' needs.

Once a plan is collaboratively developed, ELT instructors will travel to the districts to provide on-site programs, explained Debra Nelson, director of NYSUT's Education & Learning Trust.

The goal for 2009 is to build the capacity of a cadre of district educators to work as professional development leaders on a range of issues, including mentoring and peer coaching.

The union plans to offer at least two professional development programs annually in each pilot district, and incorporate research-based instructional practices during the 2009-10 school year.

"Ending the achievement gap is one of NYSUT's primary commitments," said Iannuzzi. "That's why we are so proud to launch this project."

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Good nutrition and exercise  
improve academic  
performance



By Sylvia Saunders  
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Healthy, active kids do better in life and better in school.

Research clearly shows that good nutrition and regular exercise improves students' concentration and cognitive functioning, giving them the edge to succeed academically. Down the road, overweight children are more likely to develop serious health problems, including coronary disease and respiratory illness.

That's why NYSUT has taken a leading role in stressing the importance of healthy eating and exercise by offering its 24/7 Let's Go! Healthy Lifestyle program. Since the free program began in 2005, thousands of free kits have been distributed around the state, complete with calendars and stickers to track progress and pamphlets explaining the program for educators and parents.

The idea is for students to strive to do seven healthy things, seven days a week, and to build healthy lifestyles. Healthy suggestions range from eating a banana to holding a neighborhood Olympics.

Developed by NYSUT's Health Care Professionals Council, the program stresses the importance of healthy eating and exercise, offering teachers, school nurses and other health care professionals an accessible, kid-friendly way to teach healthy habits. Kits are free to NYSUT members and can be ordered by sending an e-mail to [orders@nysutmail.org](mailto:orders@nysutmail.org). Be sure to include a mailing address and specify how many sets you need.

The information is downloadable online at [www.nysut.org/247](http://www.nysut.org/247). The Web site offers an article on the Top 10 Nutrition Myths, a Q&A on eating disorders and "Healthy Bites," with interesting tidbits offered by NYSUT health professionals. The articles are all written by NYSUT members.

"The overall goal is to get kids off the couch and into action; to avoid junk food and to eat healthier," said NYSUT Vice President Kathleen Donahue. "This program puts NYSUT at the forefront of helping children develop better eating habits and recognizing the importance of exercise."

On another front, NYSUT has called for the state Legislature to put more muscle into enforcing the state's existing — but often ignored — physical education requirements for students.

Joanne Hamilton, a Sayville Teachers Association physical education teacher who serves on NYSUT's Subject Area Committee for Health, Physical Education and Family and Consumer Sciences, said healthy children learn better and physical activity helps in knowledge retention. "Movement activates the brain," Hamilton said. "Participation has been correlated with increased attention span, improved focus, improved breathing and an increase in one's energy level and relaxation."

