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## What Matters Most

by Randi Weingarten President, American Federation of Teachers

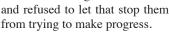
## Detroit Teaches America a Valuable Lesson

Our country has been through a lot this past year. An economic crisis brought the nation to the brink of depression and job losses devastated families across the nation. Although help is still needed, there are encouraging signs. And one of those signs is coming from Detroit.

For many, Detroit has become a symbol of past fortunes and present problems. A heavily industrial city in a post-industrial nation; an urban center that missed out on the urban renaissance during the 1990s; a shrinking city attached to a struggling industry. And Detroit's public schools, not surprisingly, have struggled as a result.

But for many people, Detroit is home — not a symbol — and it includes real people committed to working together to revitalize their community and its schools. Six months ago, 7,000 school employees came together with their union, the Detroit Federation of

Teachers and the school system's new chief — its emergency financial manager — to spend a day talking about how to work together to give their students a rich, rigorous public education. They looked at what was happening to their city, devastated by a lack of funding, and refused to let



And on December 3, they came to a preliminary agreement on a contract that is much more than a collective bargaining agree-ment; it is a covenant between educators and administrators in service of Detroit's children and their families. These were not routine contract negotiations. Both parties were trying to avert catastrophic cuts, and stabilize an urban school district on the brink of bankruptcy and a city that must once again be one of America's creators of good jobs. And Detroit's public school teachers are a crucial part of that equation. This is their city and their students and they know that the prospects for both are tied to the strength of their schools.

This tentative agreement includes several reforms that will drive the enhancement of student achievement, including school based bonuses, peer assistance and review and a new, comprehensive teacher evaluation system. At the same time, both parties recognized the severe financial conditions of the district and sought innovative approaches to save money. Teachers, who are also struggling in these tough times, are being asked to sacrifice — by agreeing to a reduction in pay received now and deferring pay increases until the third year of the contract. Teachers will receive a bonus when leaving the district. The players also recognized the need to address skyrocketing health care costs and agreed to measures that will save the district millions.

What's happening in the Detroit Public Schools is illustrative of the national debate around jobs and the economy. Thing are really tough right now. And Detroit is teetering on the precipice. But real long-term recovery starts in our public schools. We can't afford to make deep cuts in our classrooms when the children who fill them will

who fill them will be carrying this nation on their shoulders in just a few short years.

Providing aid to states to continue to prevent teachers from being laid off is precisely the kind of smart, long-range thinking that ensures that as our children graduate

children graduate into the working world, they are prepared with the skills they will need in the 21st Century. Tackling our byzantine and unduly expensive health care system ensures that down the road, we will have more funding to invest in the industries of the future and help our economy grow. That kind of help is what Detroit — and our nation — needs to get back on its feet.

On the eve of this holiday season, educators, their union leadership and school administrators in De troit have given us all a helpful reminder of what community means. And while this agreement must still be ratified, its negotiation taught us that compromise, collaboration and mutual respect as well as smart investments, even in a tough economy, are needed to bring our country back from these tough times. We can all learn from the example set by this city and its decision to not let itself be a symbol of urban decline, but a symbol of community.



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