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All together on education reform: Michael Casserly

By [Plain Dealer guest columnist](#) The Plain Dealer

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As legislative activity grinds to a halt in Washington, D.C., amid partisan gridlock, a funny thing is happening in Cleveland. Education leaders have come together in the spirit of collaboration and compromise to reshape the city's public school system.

It is certainly no secret that unions and school district leaders often find themselves locked in bitter and tense contract negotiations, driven by opposing views of what is best for teachers and students. Past bargaining agreements in Cleveland have often served as barriers to innovation and improvement, tying the hands of management and teachers alike and undermining efforts to improve teaching and learning.

But recently, the [Cleveland School District and the Cleveland Teachers Union announced a new agreement](#) that breaks the mold -- an agreement that promises to accelerate meaningful districtwide instructional reform and spur substantial improvements in the academic attainment of the city's children.

The agreement calls for 40 additional minutes of instructional time, greater schedule flexibility and clear student discipline procedures. It increases the prospects for retaining and rewarding effective teachers, provides greater clarity on the grounds for teacher termination and nonrenewal of contracts, and specifies multiple criteria on how teachers are assessed. It streamlines work rules and grants schools greater autonomy through management discretion and operational flexibilities. And it calls for more rigorous evaluation and the differentiated compensation of teachers on the basis of their ability to improve student learning, while protecting some seniority rights and privileges.

This is the best contract Cleveland has had in generations. It succeeds where so many past agreements have failed -- in supporting the best teachers instead of protecting the worst. And it builds on a set of groundbreaking reforms that have put the district in a unique position as an innovator among districts nationwide and a school system on the verge of dramatic transformation and improvement.

Last year, [Mayor Frank Jackson, Cleveland School District officials and others developed the Cleveland Plan](#) -- a four-year strategy document for reinventing public education and holding schools accountable for the success of Cleveland's schoolchildren. To support this work, the Ohio General Assembly passed [House Bill 525](#), a piece of legislation that provided much-needed flexibility and autonomy for the district and its schools. And in November, [Cleveland voters approved a 15-mill school tax levy](#) -- a tremendous display of faith in the district's reform efforts.

With final passage of the collective bargaining agreement now complete, Cleveland is poised to become a pioneer among districts nationwide in uniting its school system, teachers union, board of education and community behind the collective goal of improving educational opportunities for students. This is true leadership.

Mayor Jackson, Superintendent Eric Gordon, Board of Education Chairwoman Denise Link and Teachers Union President David Quolke should all be recognized for their tremendous achievement on behalf of Cleveland's public schoolchildren and for possessing an attribute so rare these days -- the ability to work together to advance the city's common purpose. Leaders in Washington may want to take note.

Michael Casserly is the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of the nation's largest urban school systems based in Washington, D.C., and served as an adviser during the negotiations.