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Saving students

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How can the public schools improve classroom performance in general and, specifically, close the achievement gap between white and minority students? Those questions continue to vex educators throughout the country, as they search for answers wherever they can find them. This week, that search turned to Albany, where the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education is holding its national conference.

This isn't a run-of-the-mill educational conference, either. To the contrary, it has attracted partners as diverse as NYSUT, the state School Boards Association, the state Council of School Superintendents, Questar III BOCES and the LEADS Initiative at Stanford University. All have come to Albany to discuss what works, and what doesn't, and to seek ways to reach and motivate young minds that might otherwise become part of tomorrow's statistics of failure.

The National Urban Alliance is a relatively young movement that is fast gaining national acceptance, largely because of its training programs that help teachers better relate to students at risk of failure. School districts throughout the country have sought its guidance. New York City schools are the latest to express an interest in signing on.

Two years ago, the Albany school district contracted with the alliance in an attempt to narrow the achievement gap and respond to state warnings to improve classroom results in some of its schools. This week, Albany became a laboratory of sorts for the visiting educators as they not only discuss the achievement gap but also assess Albany's progress first hand. Already here are signs of improvement in elementary and middle school grades.

The idea for the National Urban Alliance sprang from educators involved with higher education, at a conference of the College Board in 1987. A year later, Eric Cooper, now the alliance president, began compiling training tapes and holding conferences, and drawing on his own experiences as a teacher in a downstate inner city school. The result was a new approach to the classroom. Instead of focusing on students' deficiencies, the alliance emphasizes their strengths, building their self-confidence and motivating them to learn. And instead of the age-old classroom model of teacher as lecturer and student as passive listener, teachers and students engage one another.

Many educational experts have written extensively about the failings of public schools, and suggested ways to reverse the trend. That dialogue is sure to continue for many years. But there is no substitute for an ongoing experiment that educators can witness first-hand and assess results. From all appearances, they are promising -- in Albany and beyond.

THE ISSUE: Albany hosts a national meeting on education.

THE STAKES: Without innovations in teaching, classroom performance will suffer.

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