

Trusted and Respected

Seattle's site-based organizing

BY JOHN DONAGHY



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“**S**hannon—but she doesn’t like the union,” said a 3rd-grade teacher, then a 4th-grade teacher, and then eight more teachers over the course of the day we spent at an elementary school in North Seattle in spring 2014. My partner, a board member of the Seattle Education Association (SEA), and I were on a union listening tour. The question we’d posed to each teacher, after first asking how their year was going and about our upcoming bargaining, was “Who’s trusted and respected here in the building?”

SEA was then two years into an effort to reorganize. We’d visited at least 80 of the District’s 100 schools and spoken with more than half of SEA’s 6,000 teachers and certificated staff, para-educators, and office administrators.

The reorganization would culminate in a seven-day strike in September 2015, led by a 40-member bargaining team of largely first-time bargainers and activists. The action won guaranteed recess time for students, removed any connection between test scores and teacher evaluations, won significant raises, and launched Racial Equity Teams in dozens of schools.

The cornerstone of the reorganization was an effort to identify natural school leaders—educators trusted and respected by their co-workers, regardless of their disposition toward the union—and invite them to engage with and shape the union’s direction.

New Leaders Elected

Recognizing their union was not nearly as powerful as it could be, a new slate of SEA officers and the union’s executive director, Glenn Bafia, looked for a new approach in spring 2012. Membership participation and educator morale were low following the bruising regime of an education reformer as superintendent. The union had eaten a high-profile, though somewhat symbolic concession on teacher evaluations and student testing without much of a fight. The regular monthly meetings of building representatives were contentious and caustic, often focusing on “taking positions” on issues but with little action to back them up. Member engagement lagged well behind other locals in the state. SEA staff were buried in disciplinary hearings, grievance meetings, and evaluation conferences, without a strategy or much time to organize.

SEA’s new president, Jonathan Knapp, was a high school auto-shop teacher who’d just finished a term as vice president. Phyllis Campano, an elementary special education teacher, was the new vice president. They were both on full-time release from their teaching jobs. When I first met them, after I was assigned by the Washington Education Association (WEA) to support local organizing, the two indicated they wanted to meet one-on-one with every SEA member. Across WEA and other NEA state affiliates, local leaders were being asked to sit down with each member for a half hour or so to get to know them. I looked at my watch, pressed a button, and said, “Go!” With only four-year terms, they would need to start right away.

In Aesop’s fable, the strength of a single stick is contrasted with that of a bundle of sticks. A single stick can easily be broken, but wrap together enough of even the flimsiest sticks, and they can’t be broken. This is of course the very premise of unionism. But while Aesop’s fable holds much truth, we know as organizers that rather than members being simply scattered individuals, they have instead already grouped themselves informally around natural leaders. The work of the union, then, is to unite as many of the natural leaders as possible, who then bring along those in their circles of influence.

In unions that regularly and successfully organize unorganized workers, the identification and recruitment of natural leaders is the basis for developing effective campaigns. When the employer fights back hard against the union, either the natural leaders can assure their co-workers that the struggle is worth it, or the campaign is defeated.

The opposite approach, which is more common, puts a premium on activism and affinity for the union over actual leadership. The ticket to getting union roles is simply willingness to do something—lobby, make phone calls, come to a school board meeting—rather than any ability to bring others along. Some who get involved are in fact leaders, but many are not. When activists complain about co-worker apathy, a common refrain, it can be an indicator they simply do not have leadership. I was on a building visit in another local, and my partner there began recruiting someone we’d just met to be a building rep after she told us how big a union supporter she was—even though she also told us that she was new in the building and isolated from everyone else! We had no reason to think this person would influence any of her co-workers; if she did become rep, it was likely to be a frustrating experience for everyone.

SEA’s leaders instead decided to apply a natural leaders approach. Early in the reorganization we were running phone banks for an upcoming school levy vote. Our usual turnout methods—email blasts, announcements at union meetings, etc.—were getting the usual poor turnout. One afternoon we received a call from an elementary teacher, Michael Tamayo, asking for the phone-banking details. A half-dozen or so of Michael’s co-workers had named him among the most trusted and respected educators in his school. A few hours later, he showed up with eight co-workers in tow. Although the union was a bit of a vague idea to him, he cared a lot about the school levy, since it provided more resources to his low-income school and to a program that provided a path for people of color to become teachers. Jonathan and Phyllis continued to seek him out, and he became progressively more involved in SEA, especially around teacher quality and racial equity, and eventually he became SEA’s president in late 2019.

With the understanding that natural leaders exist in every school, our plan was to identify and engage such leaders across Seattle’s 100 schools. That seemed more doable than sitting down individually with 6,000 members! Our theory of change went something like this: “We can reboot the Seattle Education Association by relentlessly identifying natural school leaders, building relationships with them, and inviting them to lend their leadership to a new shared purpose.”

The First Listening Tour

Eager to help the state’s largest local reinvent itself, WEA’s state president and executive director joined the SEA team of staff and local officers in June 2012 for the first listening tours. We broke into teams of two to go from room to room and office to office in our target schools to seek out staff for brief one-on-one conversations. We didn’t announce our visits ahead of time, lest various gatekeepers—principals, office managers, human resources—try to herd us into break rooms or otherwise restrict access.

The teams spoke individually with more than 700 educators in 20 schools over four days. While some union staff feared members would close their doors to us or even be hostile, the opposite occurred. Members were eager to talk with us. If they couldn’t speak when we visited, they’d insist we come find them later in the

day. While some shared criticisms, most were curious about our visits and hopeful that the union could make a difference.

The individual visits were intended to last about 10 minutes. These were not classic one-on-ones, but a survey with an eye toward mapping important relationships in the building. We mostly asked how their year was, what the school was like, and what they thought their union should be focusing on. And then we asked, who would you say is trusted and respected here in the building?

Trust and respect are the main currency in cultivating a following. You can trust someone without respecting them, or vice versa. You might have a colleague you trust enough to share complaints about the principal, but whose teaching doesn't meet your standards. Likewise, you might admire someone's excellent lessons, but you wouldn't share a complaint with them for fear it would get back to the principal. Without a measure of both trust and respect, it's unlikely someone will have much influence with you.

When the Seattle teams returned to the union office, they wrote visit reports, and then, on large posters of each school's roster, placed a colored adhesive dot next to a person's name for each time they were named by someone as trusted and respected. Dozens of educators had five or 10 dots next to their names, and in larger schools some had more than 20! While some of those members (and with union shop in place, nearly all were members) were known to union staff and leaders, others were not. Many were wholly uninvolved in SEA.

As the team looked at the posters, it was inspiring to think of the power educators could wield if these natural leaders were united. In subsequent presentations we've done with other locals, showing leaders and staff one of these charts is enough to set them salivating.

Based on my experience in Seattle and then in other locals around the country, not all team members are immediately successful at asking the "trusted and respected" question. Sometimes they aren't fully committed to the reason for asking (which can result from a less than timely orientation). They may think that the real value of the tour is in showing members their union is active and cares about them. That's a common viewpoint, but unfortunately one that reinforces the idea that the union is a third party. Others may struggle because the question can feel like a non sequitur. It takes a bit of skill to have a 10-minute conversation with someone where you establish enough trust and credibility that you can get up from the table and say, "Great talking with you today. Before we go, who would you say are some of the folks who are really trusted and respected among the staff here at Longwood Elementary?"

In the experience of most tour leaders, members are actually happy to answer that question and recognize some esteemed co-workers. It does tend to be better not to ask them directly who they *themselves* trust and respect; that can feel too personal. But asking them who is generally trusted and respected seems to create the needed personal distance (and in fact often results in the member sharing who they personally trust and respect, saying for example, "She's such a great teacher.") The No. 1 mistake we make is not to give enough time to answer the question. In-

stead of letting the question hang out there while the person mentally goes down the building's roster (or looks at the roster we have), we rephrase the question, most typically into something like "you know, who do people go to?" That's actually a different question, one that tends to result in a skew toward naming people with more access to knowledge or resources, such as department chairs, team leaders, office secretaries, union building reps, or even the principal.

Combating Racism and Implicit Bias

Evidence-based leadership identification and recruiting is an important check on implicit bias. Without it, we are likely to pick people who tend to be like us. At future decision points, SEA leaders would check the name of every potential recruit to a committee, lobbying team, or other union body against what their co-workers indicated. We weren't shy about calling each other out for seeking to elevate someone we personally liked in the absence of evidence of leadership. If none of your co-workers placed you among their most trusted and respected colleagues, it wouldn't make sense for the union to ignore their views and elevate you into a representative role. This created some delicate situations when eager volunteers or longtime activists were turned away. While this could be awkward, officers believed the benefit to the union made it worthwhile.

Officers and staff were keen to discern the leadership of educators of color. On one hand, we had a fairly objective measure, but on the other, it was an overwhelmingly white certificated workforce (paraprofessionals and office staff were much more racially mixed) naming whom they trusted and respected. Although there were in fact many educators of color who were named by their white co-workers as trusted and respected, we chose to bake an assumption of bias into our future recruitment efforts. If you ask a white educator to name colleagues they trust and respect, we assumed that they would be at least somewhat more likely to think of other white people first. So when we were recruiting elementary teachers to a committee, for example, we might build a starting list from all the educators of color who received at least three dots and all white educators who received at least five dots.

While this method supported robust recruitment of educators of color into union roles—membership of color on SEA's 40-member bargaining teams has been at least 40 percent over the last three bargains, far higher than the share of educators of color in the workforce—some wondered whether the chosen educators of color were those who were named more by their white peers than their peers of color and how that might be skewing representation. (No one argued that the leadership of an educator of color who was frequently named by white peers should be discounted, only that we needed to be sure that educators of color were represented by leaders of their choosing as well.) To some degree this concern was met by over-recruiting from schools with higher proportions of educators of color, virtually guaranteeing that the leaders were named by educators of color. SEA has also begun in recent years to enter more data into NEA's new membership database, called NEA 360. This allows the union to note exactly who each member names as those they trust and respect, and thus reports can be generated that

provide some insight into that question. In the meantime, SEA did generate one useful data point on that question: a survey about new graduation requirements asked 1,000 high school staff to name staff they trusted and respected to serve on a bargaining committee with the district. SEA was able to disaggregate responses by race and compare who educators of color and white educators each chose and fine-tune recruitment (although in that survey, at any rate, largely the same educators were chosen by both groups).

Intentional Leadership Recruitment

The issue that led us to Shannon's North Seattle school in 2014 was that we'd gotten almost no signatures from there on a petition to place a class size initiative on the Washington state ballot. The union's building rep told us people were apathetic. We were puzzled, as members at other buildings were collecting signatures like crazy—the first fruits of our efforts to involve more natural leaders over the previous two years. For the first time anyone could remember, SEA was among the state's leaders in participating in a coordinated WEA action.

Members at the school told us that Shannon (not her real name) didn't like the union and had spoken against the initiative at a meeting. It would have been easy to take a pass on initiating contact with Shannon—there were 100 other schools to get signatures from. But not every school has a Shannon, trusted and respected to the virtual exclusion of anyone else. We often find three or four staff taking top billing. If we were going to get any signatures from her school, or probably much support for anything union, we needed to meet Shannon.

Vice President Phyllis Campano stopped by a few days later. As it turned out, Shannon was not anti-union, but rather simply believed the union's priority needed to be compensation, not class size. Phyllis couldn't persuade her our ballot initiative was the right priority, and we never did get many signatures from her school. But a relationship was begun that eventually led to Shannon being a member of the 2015 bargaining team, and then of SEA's executive board. In the years that followed, I can't recall a union event that Shannon attended, and there were many, where she didn't bring along a sizable group of colleagues.

After the initial round of visits in June 2012, SEA visited another 50 schools the following school year. But the follow-up with leaders was slow and not terribly successful. The officers invited identified school leaders to lobby days and other events, but had few takers. SEA's leadership team knew the union wasn't seen as very powerful, and these natural leaders were clearly reluctant to invest time and energy in an uncertain proposition. Also, many of them were already highly engaged both at school and in their personal lives.

One leader at a North Seattle high school was on our radar for several years. Although she always seemed on the edge of getting involved, she never made the leap. She led a vibrant after-school horticulture program, was science department chair, and was in training to be a principal. A few weeks *after* the strike in 2015, however, she walked into the union office and told us she'd stepped down as department chair and wanted to prioritize union activism. It took the success of the

strike for her to believe collective action by educators, and her union, held more potential to make the change she wanted to see. While we were fortunate that not all natural school leaders needed this level of proof, there is a positive feedback loop between organizational success and leadership commitment: More of one spurs more of the other.

The leadership team pivoted in the winter of 2013–14. Instead of recruiting leaders to join the union’s work, which hadn’t borne fruit, we set up a series of meetings that simply brought these leaders together to meet and talk about what was important to them. We approached about 75 of the newly identified leaders, most of whom had little or no union involvement, and more than 60 participated, an astonishing turnout. After a brief welcome from Jonathan and Phyllis, they rotated World Café-style in groups of four for the next hour or so, responding to some open-ended questions. The leaders were excited to have met and to have had rich conversations, and were intrigued by what this convening said about their union.

The meeting did not include an ask, which is something of a sin in organizer circles, but making an ask is what they expected us to do, and we knew we needed these new leaders to join us in figuring out what was worth asking and doing as a union. We never did get around to reconvening these groups, but they provided an important entrée to establish new relationships and signal to these leaders that there was untapped possibility in their union.

Time to Fight Back

SEA’s leaders correctly assessed that there was a significant lack of trust in the union and its leadership. SEA had accepted a concession on testing and evaluation in 2010 and failed to remove it in bargaining in 2013. While the practical impacts of the provision were limited, and the contract settlement was otherwise pretty typical, the contract passed by only a thin margin. Educators at Seattle’s Garfield High School had organized a high-profile and successful boycott of the district’s use of the standardized MAP tests that spring, but the union had failed to leverage that into a robust or successful contract fight over testing and evaluations. Members were understandably reluctant to express approval for a deal that reflected that failure. While the union had tried to organize some pushback in the summer of 2013, it was too little, too late.

In truth, the natural leaders of the workforce were largely on the sidelines as far as the union was concerned and were not responsive to calls to action, such as there were. Most immersed themselves in the work of their individual schools. Some joined Social Equity Educators (SEE), a member caucus, to push the union and Seattle Public Schools toward a more progressive agenda. When natural leaders did choose to become reps, many quickly quit or confined themselves to their buildings. As many confessed to us, they found the monthly Rep Assembly absurdly contentious, and seemingly irrelevant. Indeed, the first Rep Assembly I witnessed featured a lengthy debate over a letter to an elected official of another state. Meanwhile the union’s bargaining team had just begun bargaining and virtually no time was devoted to any meaningful discussion of what was at stake.

Following the 2013 bargain, SEA's leadership team and staff conducted more school visits but also focused on following up with the hundreds of members identified as natural leaders. They found that almost to a person they were angry about education reform, cynical about the district's leadership, and, although wary of SEA, appreciative that union leaders had recognized their leadership and were reaching out to them. Finally feeling some sense that they could turn things around, union leaders were challenged in early 2014 by an announcement from the district that it was going to cut 50 positions due to an unexpected budget shortfall.

Union leaders believed the district had enough in reserves to cover the shortfall, but complaining publicly about that in board meetings hadn't stopped such cuts before. So rather than focus on getting a few dozen or even a few hundred people to a school board meeting to protest, leaders devised a strategy to create chaos in the school-by-school budgeting process then underway. It would require schools to vote down their budgets, which by contract would trigger a mediation process facilitated by a central office administrator. Even though the superintendent held final say over each school's budget, such a strategy would have the potential to involve thousands of educators right where they worked.

Successful execution of the strategy would require influential educators in each school to endorse it and validate the union's recommendation to vote no on their school budget, *even if their school was untouched by the cuts*. The SEA Rep Assembly endorsed the strategy somewhat lukewarmly, expressing doubts about the union's analysis and strategy. But SEA's leaders then began reaching out to the school leaders they had been cultivating relationships with to get their thoughts on the strategy. With many schools at a loss on how to cope with the coming cuts, they took a leap of faith and, along with many of the building reps, began recommending that schools vote down their budgets to force central office administrators to come explain themselves.

Within three weeks, nearly 50 schools voted to reject their budgets, with more reporting in each day. After the first school's mediation, and faced with the prospects of dozens more, the district called the union to say they were re-analyzing their budget for ways to avoid the cuts. In a school board meeting shortly thereafter, the district's budget director publicly thanked SEA for pointing out that there was a "fudge factor" that could cover the cuts. District administrators then privately appealed to the union for help in getting new school budgets passed, without the cuts, expressing particular bewilderment about "all these solidarity votes" where even schools without cuts had rejected their schools' budgets.

Following the budget action, SEA began recruiting its team for the upcoming bargaining. While the budget fight had garnered SEA's leadership some credibility,

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they still barely won re-election later that spring. The following school year, SEA's leadership team proposed quadrupling the size of its bargaining team. We wanted as many members as possible to know someone on that team who held their trust and respect. The countless hours of relationship-building, the success of the budget fight, and the commitment to open the process to many more people led to a tremendous amount of interest from heretofore inactive leaders in joining the new team.

2015 Bargain and Strike

The 2015 bargaining kicked off a year later as locals up and down the I-5 corridor had been going on one-day strikes against the Washington Legislature. Seattle chose May 19 for its one-day strike, the day *before* bargaining was to start. The march through downtown Seattle was a blocks-long warning shot to the school district; this was not the SEA they had been dealing with in recent years. While everyone from SEA's building reps to district officials expressed doubt that a 40-member team could functionally bargain, as team members walked into bargaining in their red T-shirts, still jubilant from the previous day's action, our power was evident.

Most team members were new to bargaining, and many to being active in the union. Others were seasoned bargainers, and at least five were members of the SEE caucus. SEA's leaders had made a particular effort to recruit natural leaders who were in SEE, including their candidate for vice president in the recent election. SEE members, for their part, made it clear they weren't going to drop their critique of union leadership nor back off from their own progressive advocacy, including guaranteed recess for all students, not a typical union demand (and which was immediately dismissed by the district as outside legal bargaining parameters).

The union officers knew that all on the team, even their critics, were highly credible to their co-workers, and that would lead to a cohesive and effective bargaining team. The team debated and hashed out proposals from recess to teacher quality, from racial equity for students to the pay gap between ESPs and certificated staff, and won on virtually all of them (including recess). When the district brought a late-game takeaway to the table, a raucous meeting of thousands of SEA members gave the team unanimous authority to call a strike. When talks broke down the night before school was to start, our team let the district know that we were now on strike.

Any large strike of any length is a story in itself, and Seattle's seven-day strike is no exception. Almost to a person, the WEA and NEA staff who joined in to support our strike noted how incredibly well organized each school's strike operation was, and how little was needed of them. The natural school leaders were in charge. 📍

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