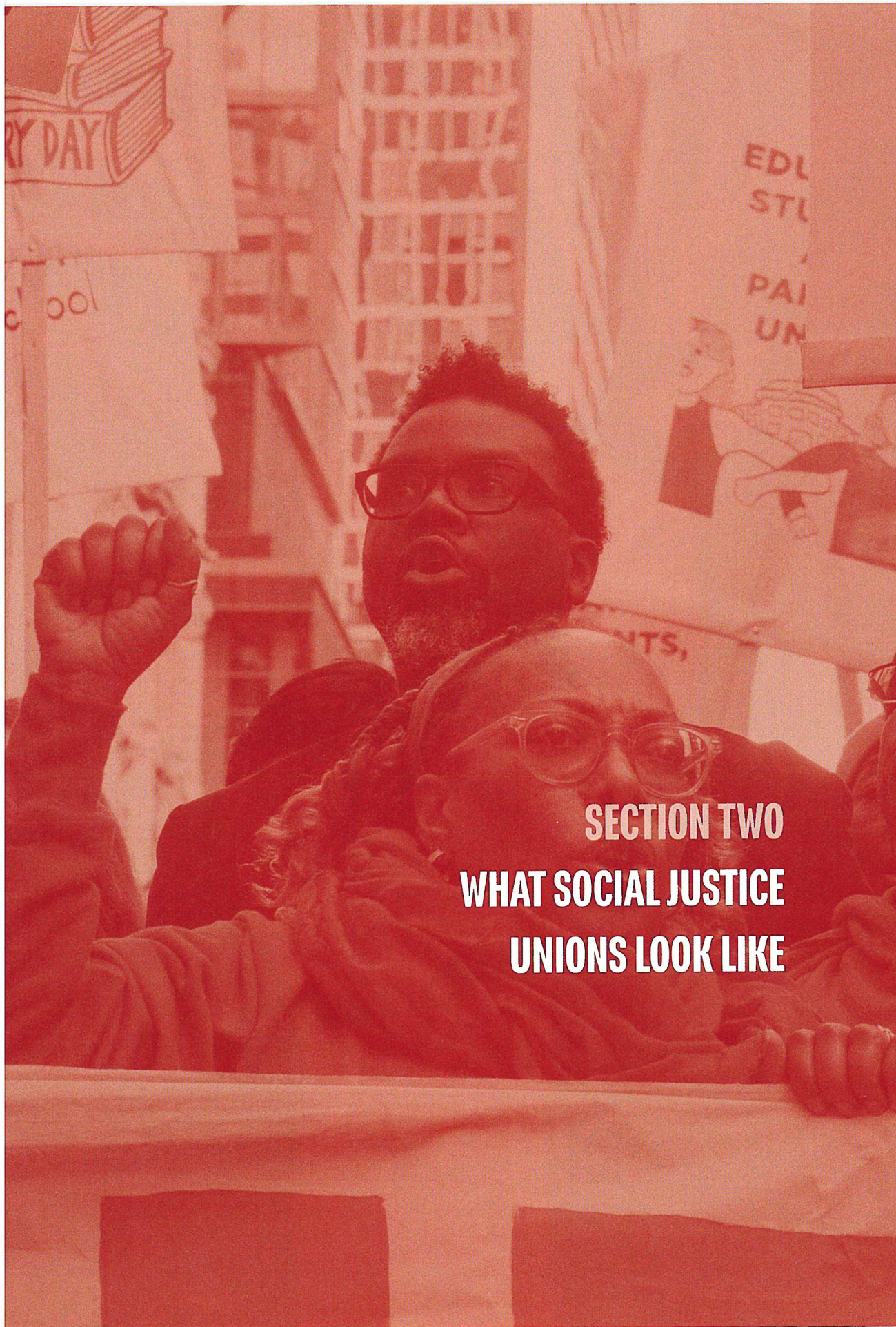




SECTION TWO
WHAT SOCIAL JUSTICE
UNIONS LOOK LIKE



Social Justice Teacher Unionism

What does it mean to fight for the schools and communities our students deserve?

BY BOB PETERSON

Less than a month into my third year of teaching I was laid off. My class of twenty-seven 4th graders had already created a strong sense of community as they shared their diverse family stories and pondered the resilience of Karana in *Island of the Blue Dolphins* during our daily read aloud. Sharing the unexpected news of my layoff at a class meeting was one of the hardest experiences in my three decades of teaching.

What made it even worse was the response from my union. Ironically, that response pushed me to question the very nature of teacher unionism.

Immediately after getting the layoff notice I called the union office and suggested they arrange a meeting of the 94 laid-off teachers. The staff person said no, asserting that union officials could individually handle any problems we had. I countered that a gathering could help us cope with this life-changing situation and organize against the layoffs. My suggestion was politely rejected.

Three days later, no longer working, I drove to the union office naively thinking I could convince them. This time the executive director came to the front foyer to repeat the union's line. We argued and I finally said, "I thought unions were supposed to organize their membership."

"We do, when necessary, but for the most part we provide services to our membership. If there is anything we can help you with in terms of unemployment or matters like that, let us know. Goodbye." He turned and walked backed to his office.

I was dumbfounded and furious.

Things got worse. At the time of my layoff a district official had told me that I had more seniority than some other teachers, but I had been laid off due to the district's super-seniority policy that protected teachers of color. I was fine with that—my involvement in the Civil Rights Movement as a high school student had taught me to be anti-racist.

Months later, however, I found out that the union—without ever consulting those of us who were laid off—had gone to court to challenge the policy. The union ultimately prevailed and straight seniority won out over super-seniority. By the time of the decision all of us who had been laid off had been offered our jobs back, so it didn't affect us. But during the following years I often argued in union meet-

ings against the union's racist stand against affirmative action.

During my years as a young teacher, these and other experiences compelled me to organize rank-and-file caucuses, become a building representative, run for union leadership, and in 1986 co-found the quarterly *Rethinking Schools*, which published for its first 15 years as a newsprint tabloid. We promoted social justice teaching and social justice teacher unionism and built a cadre of supporters to distribute the paper free of charge to the nearly 10,000 teachers in the district. Union staff and the old guard elected leadership saw us as a serious threat.

These same experiences also helped shape my critique of what was wrong with my local union, a critique that was confirmed and deepened as I met and organized with other progressive teacher union activists from around the country through the National Coalition of Education Activists. In 1994 we issued a call for activist teachers to build social justice unions, contrasting them with what we called industrial and professional models of unionism. (See NCEA, p. 74.) We asserted, "Without a better partnership with the parents and communities that need public education most, we will find ourselves isolated from essential allies. Without a new vision of schooling that raises the expectations of our students

Sharing the unexpected news of my layoff at a class meeting was one of the hardest experiences in my three decades of teaching. What made it even worse was the response from my union. Ironically, that response pushed me to question the very nature of teacher unionism.

and the standards of our own profession, we will continue to founder. Without a new model of unionism that revives debate and democracy internally and projects an inspiring social vision and agenda externally, we will fall short of the challenges before us."

Over time I used a metaphor of a three-legged stool, arguing that teacher unions should incorporate traditional industrial unionism's focus on bread-and-butter issues, professional unionism's commitment to professional development and teacher voice in shaping educational policy and curriculum, and social justice unionism's commitment to racial equity and forging strong alliances with parents and the broader community.

The metaphor lacked nuance, however, and didn't capture some key features. A social justice lens should be omnipresent throughout *all* union work whether it's wages and working conditions, professional and pedagogical issues, internal union matters, or broader policy concerns. (See editors, p. 102.) This comprehensive approach should be animated by steadfast efforts to:

1. Be democratic, engage members in a variety of ways, promote internal dialogue and debate, and resist dictatorial control by cliques of staff or elected officials.

2. Listen to and build strong ties with students, families, civic and faith-based groups, and oppressed communities—at the school, district, and state levels—promoting educational justice and social justice movements.
3. Challenge union members to internalize anti-racist, anti-oppression values and to teach from a social justice, anti-racist viewpoint, free of deficit thinking.
4. Fight against school privatization and promote public community schools as an alternative, envisioning such schools as greenhouses of democracy, and centers of resistance and renaissance in our neighborhoods.
5. Be internationalist—promoting teaching and policies that are opposed to war and imperialism, in favor of climate justice and human rights, and in solidarity with the Global South.

Embracing and implementing this comprehensive vision of social justice unionism is a long-term project. Progressive caucuses and leadership slates can only bring it to fruition through convincing their fellow union members to actively participate in the effort. And this is work that needs to be nourished by constant reflection, a willingness to confront and remedy shortcomings, and the patience and stamina to build relationships and struggles over the span of several years.

In retrospect, yes, being laid off early in my teaching career was emotionally difficult and being subjected to a “service model” of unionism was disheartening. But both events helped propel me into a lifetime of fighting for educational justice and ultimately recognizing the power of social justice unionism. Now, more than ever, teacher unions need to embody social justice and organize for the schools and communities our students deserve. 📣

Bob Peterson, the former president of the Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association, is now a member of the Milwaukee School Board. He taught 5th grade more than 25 years at various Milwaukee public schools, and was a founding editor of Rethinking Schools.

Industrial, Professional, and Social Justice Unionism



OAKLAND EDUCATION ASSOCIATION BROOKE ANDERSON PHOTOGRAPHY

The following chart highlights differences between three models of teacher unionism that operate on different principles and priorities. Different union locals, state associations, and the two national unions at different times have drawn on characteristics of more than one model.

This chart is a useful discussion starter for leaders and members as they clarify their union's vision and purpose.

We recognize that any chart has limitations in drawing differences more sharply than may be warranted. We also know that other terms have been used to analyze unions, such as “business unions,” “service unions,” and “organizing unions.” We attempted to weave those features into the chart.

This chart is an amalgamation of ideas and previous charts that draw on discussions and debates on the future of teacher unionism over the past 30 years. These debates have occurred in many forums and publications, including *Rethinking Schools*, the National Coalition of Education Activists, the Institute for Progressive Teacher Unionism, the Mooney Institute, the Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN), rank-and-file caucuses, and within teacher unions at all levels.

We believe that the future success of teacher unions in the United States depends on the degree to which they define themselves and act as social justice unions, while incorporating aspects of the industrial and professional models.

—the editors of *Teacher Unions and Social Justice:
Organizing for the Schools and Communities Our Students Deserve*

Key components in the three models of teacher unionism

INDUSTRIAL

PROFESSIONAL

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Orientation

Emphasizes separation of labor and management. The role of the union is to limit what teachers can be asked to do and to increase the pay/benefits they get for doing it.

Emphasizes and defends teacher professionalism and promotes teacher leadership at school and district levels through union/district mentoring programs, etc.

Emphasizes alliances with parents and community to organize for social justice in schools, the community, and the curriculum. Challenges white supremacy and other forms of oppression.

View of Management

Assumes labor/management relations are hostile and adversarial.

Encourages management/labor cooperation to promote quality programs and achievement.

Partners with management when they promote anti-racist social justice policies, and organizes with parents and communities against management when they don't.

Bargaining

Win/lose bargaining with emphasis on bread-and-butter issues of salary, hours, and working conditions. Views the contract as way to institutionalize changes.

Interest-based bargaining that addresses teaching quality and programmatic initiatives, include MOUs outside of the contract. Views the contract as way to institutionalize changes.

Bargaining for the common good. Bargains bread-and-butter and professional issues, but balances those demands with the broader social justice issues in the schools and community. Views the contract as way to institutionalize changes, but rank-and-file and community organizing as key features in sustaining wins.

INDUSTRIAL

PROFESSIONAL

SOCIAL JUSTICE

District Decision-Making

Management prerogatives respected at school and district levels. Union staff grieves management decisions.

Seeks to expand decision-making and instructional leadership at school and district levels. Joint labor/management committees address professional issues.

Democratic input by key stakeholders through democratically elected school boards, shared leadership at school level, and district councils and committees that include educators, administrators, parents, community, and students. Promotes creation of transformative community schools.

Internal Union Leadership

Often a “business model” that is staff- and/or leader-dominated with limited member decision-making. Promotes member passivity except for occasional mobilizations. Members view “the union” as a third party—the staff and elected leaders.

Promotes moving significant leadership to the school level and works to infuse the district operations with teacher leaders.

Broad membership engagement and involvement in decision-making. Vision and direction provided by elected leadership; diversity and debate encouraged. Members view the union as “first person plural”—We are the union.

Service to Members

Staff “solves” most individual problems through contract enforcement.

Emphasis on school-based problem-solving.

School-based leaders are trained to organize staff to solve most problems at the school level. Districtwide problems are solved through pressure and collective action.

Equity and Race

At worst, defends white privilege; most commonly ignores such matters.

Main proponents of professional unionism are silent on race issues.

Strong emphasis on race and equity-supporting movements in the community on issues that don’t directly affect teachers. Openly deals with racial issues internal to the union.

INDUSTRIAL

PROFESSIONAL

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Pedagogy and Curriculum

Union cedes control of curriculum and professional development to management.

Union promotes additional responsibility for teacher leaders and brings teacher voice to design, implementation, and evaluation of curriculum, assessment, and instruction.

Union promotes more teaching and less testing, restorative practices over punitive discipline, and culturally relevant, anti-racist social justice curriculum that is participatory and connected to students' lives.

Student Rights/School Safety

Focus is on teacher authority, classroom control. Teachers quick to refer students for discipline, without listening to students. Leads to zero-tolerance policies and enables school-to-prison pipeline.

Silent on the subject.

Promotes restorative practices and anti-bias training of staff, and fights for the "schools the students deserve," which includes full social and health services, counseling, and respect for students' personal rights.

Social Issues, Community, and Parents

Limited involvement with social and community issues; parent outreach is emphasized only during bargaining or other contractual dispute with management.

Mainly silent on broader community issues. Works with parents to improve individual parent support for their child's learning.

Reaches out to community and parents to improve the quality of teaching and learning; supports social justice movements in the community even if not directly involved with schools and encourages members to participate in such movements.

Relations with the Labor Movement

Supports labor struggle when in the self-interest of teachers. (Historically NEA rank and file not encouraged to view themselves as part of the labor movement.)	Silent on the subject.	Views teacher unions as on the front lines to revitalize the labor movement. Stands in solidarity with labor struggles—both union-based and community-based, like \$15 and a Union.
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Bargaining for the Common Good— An Overview

BY SAQIB BHATTI AND MARILYN SNEIDERMAN



JOE BRUSKY | MTEA

It was September of 2017, and United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) had been in contract negotiations with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) for months. Members of the union’s bargaining team were preparing to host yet another session with the district’s negotiators. But this session would be different.

UTLA had spent years transforming the union internally and carefully rebuilding what had been fractured relationships with community and progressive organizations around the city. The union had helped bring together a labor/community alliance—Reclaim Our Schools Los Angeles (ROSLA)—and was organizing to build a citywide movement for the schools LA students deserve.

The ROSLA partners knew that the union’s contract negotiations with the district offered a significant opportunity for a citywide conversation about public education. Instead of confining their contract demands to the traditional issues of teacher wages and benefits, the union and its community partners wanted to force

a head-on confrontation with the district, and with LA's extensive network of education "reformers" and millionaires. They wanted to talk about the decades-long neglect of the city's public schools and demand action on a wide range of issues that directly impacted students, staff, and communities. The strategy is called bargaining for the common good (BCG). It is taking hold in cities around the country, as community and labor organizations come together with a strong vision for what our communities should be and for whom.

Standing Up Against Privatization

For more than three decades, working Americans, public school students, and Black and Latino communities across the country have been the victims of a concerted campaign to dismantle the public sector and weaken democratic institutions.

A range of interests have merged to create this assault on the common good. These include Wall Street moguls who are attempting to pull more and more public funds—taxpayer dollars—into their own personal and corporate coffers. By driving public funds into private hands through strategies such as charter schools and voucher schemes, the public wealth can be controlled (and amassed) by private interests.

Conservative politicians are also in the game. They have an interest in neutralizing or splintering the political power of constituencies that typically support public and social services. That means working to limit access to the polls, especially for African American and Latino voters, and weakening labor unions—especially the powerful and Democratic-leaning teacher unions.

These interests have systematically built an extensive infrastructure of deep-pocketed philanthropy (the Walton Family Foundation, Broad Foundation, and others), policy development (American Legislative Exchange Council), so-called "Astroturf" advocacy groups like Stand for Children, think tanks (the Heritage Foundation, Thomas B. Fordham Institute), and message development in service of their agenda.

They have been undeniably successful: Voucher programs and charter schools continue to siphon billions of dollars away from public school districts each year. Voting rights are under assault in dozens of states. Communities of color—for generations the very foundation of support for public education—have splintered over the perceived "failure" of public education. Even the U.S. Supreme Court joined in the attack with their 2018 decision in *Janus v. AFSCME*, aimed squarely at weakening the role of public sector unions. And through it all, wealth inequality has soared to levels unseen in history. The rich are getting richer, labor is getting weaker, and somehow, public education has been branded as a "special interest." In 2014, just 25 hedge fund managers earned more income than *all* the nation's kindergarten teachers *combined*.

Something has been very, very wrong with this picture.

BCG is a rising strategy aimed at winning an economy and a public sector that serves the majority, not the wealthy few. In BCG, labor invites community allies to join with them to use the collective bargaining process to win reforms that strengthen communities and improve the lives of working people.

Working Together and Winning Big in Los Angeles

UTLA and its community partners in ROSLA built their BCG platform over months. Through that time, they systematically reached out to students, parents, and educators through community-based forums, one-on-one conversations, and broader surveys to identify the most important challenges in the sprawling LAUSD. What they heard, even from teachers, went well beyond wages and benefits. They heard frustration with the district's rapidly expanding charter sector, which required some public schools to share facilities. They heard students' frustration with the district's "random search" policy that disproportionately targeted Black and Brown students. They heard from teachers frustrated with classrooms jammed with 50 students. Together, the ROSLA partners built an expansive set of demands. And when the September 2017 bargaining session came around, UTLA invited representatives from a dozen partner groups—from Black Lives Matter to the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE) to join them at the bargaining table.

The session was both tense and inspiring, remembers Ruby Gordillo, a parent member of ACCE. One after another, community representatives presented their demands to the bargaining teams. And over and over, the LAUSD negotiators made clear that the demands were "outside the scope of bargaining"—the state-mandated issues considered permissible for collective bargaining. "We cannot negotiate on these matters," repeated the district representatives again and again. But the union and its allies held firm for more than a year—even turning down a proposal from LAUSD that met their demands on salaries. "We knew that we had picked issues that resonated with parents across the city," recalls Gordillo. ROSLA knew that parents, students, and community members had the union's back.

And so, in January 2019, UTLA went out on strike, continuing to demand action on their common good platform for the Schools LA Students Deserve. And despite the pouring rains of that January, tens of thousands of parents and students hit the streets in support.

UTLA went on to win agreements on most of their platform issues. They won reductions in class sizes. They won commitments for additional green space at schools. They won a reduction in random searches, and support for greater teacher voice on charter co-locations. They won \$12 million from LAUSD for the creation of community schools. They won new commitments to ensure that every school in the district had a full-time nurse. They won more librarians and counselors, and steps toward the reduction of time spent on standardized tests. They won supports for immigrant students and their families, and a path toward increased resources for ethnic studies. They won passage of a resolution by the LAUSD school board, calling on the governor to implement a moratorium on charter school expansion. And yes, they won their demanded increase in wages. (See Inouye, p. 252.)

Bargaining for the common good brought Los Angeles parents, community members, and students together with educators to make their voices heard against the billionaires who had been attacking their public schools for decades. The tide has turned in Los Angeles.

Key Principles of Bargaining for the Common Good

There are seven key principles that guide BCG as a strategy in preparing for and carrying out labor negotiations:

1. **Expand the scope of bargaining beyond wages and benefits.** Identify issues that resonate with members, partners, and allies, and that impact our communities. Put forth demands that address structural issues, not just symptoms of the problem.
2. **Go on offense by identifying, exposing, and challenging the real villains,** the financial and corporate actors who profit from and increasingly drive policies and actions.
3. **Engage community allies as partners in issue development and the bargaining campaign.** Bring in community partners *on the ground floor* and ask them what they need out of the bargaining campaign. In many BCG contract campaigns, labor unions bring community representatives with them to the bargaining table to engage in negotiations.
4. **Center racial justice in your demands.** Campaign demands should address the role that employers play in creating and exacerbating structural racism in our communities.
5. **Strengthen internal organizing, membership, and member engagement.** These campaigns must deeply engage the memberships of both unions and community organizations, and there must be opportunities for deep relationship-building and joint visioning between the members of the different organizations.
6. **Leverage capital in your campaigns.** We need to develop strategies that leverage the financial power of workers' pension funds and endowments in order to win common good demands.
7. **The campaign doesn't end once the union settles its contract. BCG is about building long-term community-labor power, not about giving unions some good publicity during a contract fight.** The boss doesn't automatically become a good actor once the contract is settled, and the community's demands don't become any less important.

Bargaining for the Common Good in Practice

BCG has been a key strategy in several successful labor actions over the past several years:

- In 2012 the **Chicago Teachers Union (CTU)** aligned their contract

fight with the interests of community allies to call for smaller class sizes, improved school facilities, and more. Under the slogan “The Schools Chicago’s Students Deserve,” the 2012 CTU strike brought tens of thousands of parents into the streets to support their teachers and signaled a new relationship between teachers, parents, and community. Again in 2019, the CTU used contract negotiations to force agreements on a wide range of common good issues such as school closures, charter expansion, and school staffing. The teachers centered the issues of housing and homelessness and racial justice in their campaign.

- In 2013, teachers in **St. Paul** followed suit, working with community partners to draw up a list of 29 bargaining demands. Inspired by the work in Chicago, the demands were framed in a report called “The Schools St. Paul Children Deserve.” The platform included a demand that the school district stop doing business with banks that foreclose on their student’s families, which they won. The union invited community representatives to sit with them at the bargaining table to ensure that their voices and issues were being represented. In 2020 after their strike, the district agreed to spend an additional \$5 million to hire more counselors, social workers, intervention specialists, nurses, psychologists, and bilingual educational assistants next school year to give students the mental health and multilingual support they need and expand their restorative justice work.

- In 2013, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 721 in **Los Angeles** utilized a BCG framework in their contract negotiations with the city. Local 721 represents 95,000 public sector workers, including the city’s street services and water treatment workers, librarians, sanitation workers, and others. SEIU’s “Fix LA” campaign included other unions and community allies like ACCE and AFSCME. Together, they called out the austerity budget in Los Angeles, pointing out that more money was being spent on Wall Street fees than on street repair. Demands focused on the city’s massive infrastructure needs. Targets included the Wall Street firms whose fees were overwhelming the city budget and forcing cuts to important city services.

In Bargaining for the common good, labor invites community allies to join with them to use the collective bargaining process to win reforms that strengthen communities and improve the lives of working people.

The Bargaining for the Common Good Network

As BCG has emerged as a successful strategy to bring workers and community

members together in common campaigns, practitioners have created a network to share challenges, tactics, and victories with each other.

In 2014, labor and community groups from around the country held the first Bargaining for Common Good Conference at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., followed by gatherings focused on centering racial justice, housing, climate, and other issues in this work.

The BCG Network is coordinated by the Kalmanovitz Initiative at Georgetown University, the Center for Innovation in Worker Organization at Rutgers University, and the Action Center on Race & the Economy Institute (ACRE). Through training, connecting experiences and challenges, and hands-on support, the network has helped several BCG efforts win significant change. The national advisory committee includes a dozen labor and community organizers from across the country. Learn more at bargainingforthecommongood.org. 

Marilyn Sneiderman directs the Center for Innovation in Worker Organization at Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations, bringing with her more than 30 years of experience in labor, community, faith-based, immigrant, and racial/gender justice organizing.

Saqib Bhatti is the co-executive director of the Action Center on Race and the Economy. He works on campaigns to win racial and economic justice by taking on the financial institutions that are responsible for extracting wealth and resources from communities of color and poor folks.

RESOURCES

Kalmanovitz Initiative at Georgetown University. lwp.georgetown.edu

The Center for Innovation in Worker Organization at Rutgers University. smlr.rutgers.edu/content/center-innovation-worker-organization-ciwo

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Teacher-Community Unionism: A Lesson from St. Paul

How one teacher union brought parents and students into the bargaining process—and won

BY MARY CATHRYN RICKER



GLEN STUBBE | AP

When I was elected president of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT) in 2005, I thought my own story might help transform the relationship between teachers and administrators, as well as improve the image of teachers in the community. I was a veteran middle school English teacher, and I'd been honored for my work. And I had been active in the SPFT as a political and community volunteer, as well as the union's professional representative on local and state committees.

I had also spent enough time in my classroom and in the city to know—and be bothered by—the dominant story told about public school teachers and our union by the mass media, a number of Minnesota legislators, and in many local communities. On a local TV station's evening news show, a Republican state senator, Richard Day, had even declared, "We all know Minneapolis and St. Paul schools suck." In too many conversations, I got accused of failure unless I quickly told people about the awards I had won for creating a model English/language arts classroom and running a program for my colleagues on how to improve writing in middle schools. If local citizens, especially parents, could learn about our talent, our dedication, and our ideas, I was convinced their perceptions would change.

Students in urban public schools deserve teachers who are both creative and optimistic. In addition, spending many years of your career teaching in an urban setting can stimulate good ideas about how to improve that work.

In St. Paul, we knew we were doing wonderful things both inside and outside the schools. We applied for grants to teach middle school science to students alongside environmental and community activists while rebuilding the historic watershed on St. Paul's East Side, a largely working-class neighborhood. We held public sessions where students read their essays and stories. We designed geography and history lessons about the immigration patterns of our city and our students. We lobbied our school board to maintain funding for peer mediation programs. We were thrilled to wake up every morning and share our love of these subjects with our students.

We also knew the value—and the potential—of our union. We were committed to achieving a high-quality, universal public school experience for every child. The members of the SPFT could be on the front lines advocating that goal, and our contract could be the document that helped make it happen.

But first, we had to parry negative images about us. Administrators and politicians treated students and their families as the "consumers" of an educational system, whereas we saw them as partners in building better schools. That consumerist mentality framed us as nameless and faceless workers, instead of people who were forging relationships with children and their families. It's no wonder that the notion of teachers as greedy and lazy had taken hold.

To dispel that falsehood, we had to forge an active bond with the people we served. St. Paul is a city of about 300,000 people. More than three-quarters of children in public schools belong to communities of color, and more than a third speak English as a new language. More than 70 percent of students in St. Paul qualify for a free or reduced-priced lunch. Only by talking, listening, and working with our students and their families could we change the pernicious perception of teachers and become the union we aspired to be.

The first step was quite simple: to talk to one another. In union meetings, we deliberately discussed why we became educators in the first place, what public schools meant to us, what unions meant to us, and what a decent contract would look like. We crafted *A New Narrative for Teachers, Educators, and Public Education*, which became our guiding document. Our narrative was anchored by five

key themes: We are committed to building a good society; we believe in honoring the value of each student and cultivating each student's potential; we believe that working in community is essential to student success; and we believe that educating students is a craft that requires talented and committed professionals. We are committed to working collectively as a powerful force for justice, change, and democracy.

We read from this document at the beginning of nearly every union meeting. We shared it with new teachers and asked them if this was the kind of union they wanted to join. We relied on it so much that the *Narrative* practically had a seat on our executive board. It was not unusual for a union leader to ask, in response to a question or during a debate, "What does the *Narrative* say we should do about this?"

Expanding Contract Negotiations

One practice that clearly needed to change was how we negotiated our contracts. By Minnesota law, public employee contract negotiations are open to the public; anyone can attend and observe the negotiations. Usually, a union team of five or six members sits across the table from administrators. But in 2009, we invited special education teachers to attend, and encouraged them to invite members of the families they served. In one session, we even had the traditional bargaining team get up and join the audience to allow special education teachers to advocate directly for themselves.

These actions were limited, but we learned a great deal from them. We learned not to assume that members were too busy to participate in negotiations. We also learned that families were interested in collaborating with their teachers and education assistants on issues that affected them all.

In 2011, we went into contract negotiations with a more developed plan to democratize the process. We encouraged *anyone* involved with the education of St. Paul children to attend. We managed to schedule negotiations on the same evening every week—Thursdays from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.—to help fit it into busy lives. The first session attracted just eight people, but the audience grew steadily after that. By the end of the nine-month process, nearly 100 union members, parents, and others from the St. Paul community were showing up—and we had both parent and rank-and-file voices on our side of the table.

We focused on demands to improve the quality of our teaching. We want to expand a successful pilot program in which teachers helped one another. We wanted to require that any teacher who applied for a leadership position have a recent evaluation of their classroom performance on file. And we wanted to see that class sizes would not vary widely over time. We also wanted administrators to recognize Future Educators of St. Paul, our union's program to encourage local high school students to become teachers, as a valid extracurricular activity.

Over time, we built trust within our ranks and with the residents of St. Paul who cared about and had a stake in the health of the public schools. The more we engaged them, the more they believed in our cause and our motives. One union member stood up at a negotiation meeting and said: "I came to prove that you

guys weren't doing your jobs at the table and that you were slacking off—selling us out—and what I learned was that you are fighting relentlessly for us.”

“Us” had become the rank-and-file members who no longer felt the negotiations were being conducted behind their backs. Now, local shop stewards were being treated as leaders in the process instead of just following orders. “Us” had become a neighborhood group that had been organizing independently but was now our partner. “Us” became parents who attended negotiations and shared their hopes and dreams for their children in our public schools at the bargaining table. Dora Jones, executive director of Mentoring Young Adults, who came to work very closely with us through the last two contract campaigns, said, “We can talk to the school board all day and try to make changes there, but if we don't really start dealing with the issues inside of that classroom—where the teachers are every day—then we are not really going to change anything.”

Of course, tensions within the union did not suddenly vanish. One group of members, hoping to gain higher wages and better fringe benefits, wanted to push further than others wanted to go. Some veteran negotiators on our side were anxious about bargaining in the presence of other members. We spent time talking this through and, at the end of our conversations, it came down to one question: “Do you ever recall saying anything at the bargaining table that you wouldn't have wanted our members to hear?” The answer was an emphatic “No!”

The Schools St. Paul Students Deserve

With our contract set to expire on June 30, 2013, I knew we had to prepare well before that and engage the community in the process along the way. So in the fall of 2012, eight months before our contract was set to expire, we began two study groups—or book clubs—made up of a cross section of members, parents, and community members, that met monthly until April 2013. One group read *The Schools Our Children Deserve* by Alfie Kohn; the other group studied *Teaching 2030* by Barnett Berry.

With the help of each book, the groups tackled three big questions: What are the schools St. Paul students deserve? Who are the teachers St. Paul students deserve? What is the profession those teachers deserve?

In April 2013, the study groups presented their contract ideas to our union's executive board. The priorities included educating the whole child, authentic family engagement, smaller and more predictable class sizes, more teaching and less testing, culturally relevant education, high-quality professional development for teachers and education assistants, and a significant increase in access to our pre-school program. After a thoughtful discussion, we adopted their priorities and directed the union's bargaining teams to negotiate on that basis. We dubbed this plan “The Schools St. Paul Students Deserve.” We were realizing the kind of partnership with the community we had begun to build four years earlier.

Unfortunately, negotiators for the school district did not share our vision. Together with some elected officials, they balked at negotiating with a union that didn't behave in the narrow way they expected a union to behave. For years we

had been told that “unions would be respected more if you acted differently and showed that you cared about students.” But now, school district officials and the lawyer they had hired to negotiate for them were essentially scolding us to get back in our box and “act like a union.” It was apparently “not our job” to concern ourselves with these teaching and learning issues.

In Minnesota, matters not directly related to a teacher’s wages, benefits, or working conditions are permissive, not mandatory subjects of bargaining. Of the 29 community-supported proposals we presented in May 2013, district representatives refused to negotiate on 20 of them. For the first time in history, they hired an attorney to be their lead negotiator. She correctly pointed out that state law did not compel them to negotiate about class size, the expansion of early childhood education, or hiring an adequate number of school nurses, librarians, and counselors.

But we would not drop these or other issues in our contract campaign that we thought were important, simply because the lawyer said so. We knew these were all permissible areas of negotiations. We would make the case that it was in everyone’s interest to have agreements that made progress in each of these areas. So we arranged for representatives of the union, parents, and the larger community to present their views directly to the district negotiating team.

In September 2013 the board’s team unilaterally closed negotiations to the public in the only way they could: by calling for mediation. We weren’t deterred. We knew we had the community on our side, and frankly, they didn’t appreciate having their ideas cast aside. At 5 p.m. on Sept. 19, 2013, the district bargaining team walked into a room filled with more than 75 people and journalists from both local newspapers, read their letter, and immediately walked out—a series of smartphone photos, gasps, and scattered hissing following them. Because a small group of students, parents, and union members had been assembled to testify that evening on behalf of improved counselor- and social worker-to-student ratios and dependable access to physical education and librarians, we reassembled, listened to their prepared testimony, and then opened it up to hear what the audience had to say. The audience—made up of SPFT members, parents, and community members as well as our student presenters—brainstormed ways to continue the public dialogue about our priorities now that open negotiations were no longer possible for us.

We knew we had the upper hand if we could rally the community that had worked to create these solutions only to have them dismissed, so we went to work. We made phone calls, knocked on doors, put up “St. Paul kids deserve _____” yard signs (or, in our case, snowbank signs) and let people fill in what they liked. We held “walk-ins” inspired by the organizers of Moral Mondays in North Carolina.

The groups tackled three big questions: What are the schools St. Paul students deserve? Who are the teachers St. Paul students deserve? What is the profession those teachers deserve?

Only we held our walk-ins at the main entrance of nearly every school in the district at the end of January 2014, in a blizzard.

Some 2,500 teachers, education assistants, parents, students, and community members started their day by rallying for the schools our children deserve. Photos of signs were posted on Twitter proclaiming “St. Paul Kids Deserve Preschool”; Facebook posts depicted dozens of educators and their students outside a school, covered in snow, rallying with parents for reasonable class sizes or “More Teaching, Less Testing.” Some teachers played drums, others made up chants like “What do we want? Happy students!” or adapted the lyrics of popular songs to our cause.

Finally, SPFT members voted to authorize a strike. Our primary demands were better access to preschool, consistent class sizes, more teaching and less testing, and equitable access to nurses, librarians, counselors, social workers, art, music,

and physical education. Two days before our last scheduled mediation, we held a rally in front of the district headquarters before the school board met. Parent after parent spoke to the crowd. They then filed into the school board meeting to make their views known.

When that final, mediated negotiation session before our authorized strike vote arrived, we spent almost 24 solid hours together with the district’s bargaining team—now including three Board of Education members, just for this meeting—negotiating on every contract proposal that

was put forward. When we emerged (in the aftermath of another blizzard) we had made progress in every priority area advanced by the study groups. And our cars had been shoveled out by a parent and community member, which almost brought us to tears.

In the end, we averted the strike and made progress on nearly every issue for which we had fought. We won a commitment to expand the preschool program and to hire additional nurses, counselors, librarians, and social workers. We won an agreement for reasonable and predictable class sizes and a reduction of standardized testing. We established School Climate Improvement Teams composed of educators and parents who would collaborate to make students of all ethnic and racial backgrounds feel welcome and reduce the number of suspensions and other measures used to discipline children. We also successfully negotiated a method of redesigning schools to replace the mandated school restructuring process, which had until then forced school closings, turned schools over to charter management organizations, or forced removal of half the teachers. Our process would be teacher-led, allow teachers and parents to design school programs together, and draw on the assets of the communities in which schools were based.

In a larger sense, we felt vindicated by the democratic process we had created. Members of all the groups who had worked together asked one another, “What comes next?” I had negotiated almost a dozen previous contracts for the SPFT.

When we emerged we had made progress in every priority area . . . and our cars had been shoveled out by a parent and community member.

But, for the first time, I felt that signing a contract was just one step in building a larger movement.

Later that year, in summer of 2014, I was elected executive vice president of the national American Federation of Teachers. And in 2019 I was appointed commissioner of education for the state of Minnesota.

The union-community partnership I helped build in St. Paul is a natural extension of the priority the AFT has given to community engagement, since we seek to improve our teaching and our schools, and not simply file grievances and try to protect our wages and benefits. Similar things are taking place in Chicago, Los Angeles, Toledo, New Haven, Albuquerque, and elsewhere. In local after local, teachers are rebutting those who view them as failures. Everyone is learning that teachers can be a powerful force to create the kind of schools their students deserve. 📖

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IMPROVING OUR PRACTICE

A Cincinnati High School Forges Ahead as a Teacher-Led School

BY DAVID LEVINE



KEITH HENRY BROWN

As the bell rings for the last period of the day at Cincinnati's Hughes STEM High School, social studies teacher Allen Frecker is convening the 10th-grade team for its daily meeting. In addition to Frecker, the team includes the math, science, English, technology, Spanish, and special education teachers and two student teachers. As Frecker moves the team through several agenda items, the discussion is punctuated by humorous asides and laughter, reflecting the obvious camaraderie that animates

them. The team efficiently reviews a range of topics: guiding students through a career exploration program, coordinating some required standardized testing, finding a volunteer to help a student with a capstone project.

When a teacher pledges to make a special effort to get up a student recognition display, Frecker says, “You are so kind. Thank you for volunteering all the time.” He conducts the meeting with a crisp efficiency that safeguards consensus. As decisions are reached, he chimes in with an “Everybody good?” or a “Does that sound like a plan?” Frecker’s work as chair of the 10th-grade team reflects his status as a “lead teacher.” Like lead teachers throughout the district, he earns a \$6,000 stipend by taking on extra work and responsibility in areas deemed critical to the success of his school.

Lead teachers are at the heart of a vigorous system of shared decision-making at Hughes. Their role within the Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) grew out of an effort by the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers (CFT) during the 1980s and 1990s to move beyond industrial unionism to invent a new kind of professional unionism. This new approach held true to the traditional goal of fighting for better wages and benefits, but also sought to give teachers a meaningful voice in educational policies and school governance, and to build alliances with community members to make the school system more democratic and effective. Ginger Rhodes, a CFT leader who went on to become a school board member and later served as Hughes’ principal, explains, “We wanted to use the union to build a powerful teaching staff to teach kids, but we also wanted to build a powerful citywide coalition of other organizations, and draw people in . . . to a mission of good schools in this city, and public schools that were run well and effectively for kids.”

Careers in Teaching

Tom Mooney, the CFT president at that time, explained that this new brand of professional unionism builds “on teachers’ desires for professional respect, status, and pay, but also appeals to their commitment to kids. It challenges and empowers teachers to adopt research-based best practices rather than clinging to tradition.” In the late 1980s, a joint teacher/administrator committee fashioned a “career ladder” program. Implemented in 1990 and codified in the bargaining agreement, the initiative is designed to ensure that teachers are effective, to support professional growth, and to provide leadership opportunities. Teachers enter CPS as mentored “resident educators.” If evaluated as competent, they advance to become “career teachers” as they gain further expertise. Career teachers assessed as “accomplished” gain the status of “advanced teacher.” Advanced teachers with at least three years of teaching experience are eligible to apply to become lead teachers. According to Mooney, the union “wanted [teachers] to have an impact on how the school system was run. We wanted to give teachers a much greater voice in the professional decisions, leadership within the district.” During the 1990s, the CFT also helped deepen democratic governance within the school system by collaborating with top CPS management to implement a systemwide move to site-based management and increasing reliance on grade-based teaching teams to coordinate instruction. As

part of these initiatives, lead teachers served as team leaders, department chairs, curriculum developers, and program facilitators.

For the last 30 years, the CFT has fought to maintain and improve the Careers in Teaching Program, and especially to safeguard the role of lead teachers. Although some CPS administrators have been supportive of teacher leadership, the dominant administrative response has been resistance. Former CFT president Tim Kraus comments: “Every year and in every contract, the CFT had to fight to keep the program, because a lot of administrators saw it as a hindrance to their own power and authority at the building level and districtwide.” This hostility, coupled with chronic underfunding of the school system, has often imperiled the lead teacher program. Yet the union has been able to preserve the strong role lead teachers play in the district. The present contract stipulates that lead teacher positions will amount to 10 percent of the district’s total teaching force, although this percentage is subject to agreement between the union and management regarding available funding. The union created the position of professional issues representative to monitor and help administer professional development opportunities and to ensure that lead teachers are allowed to operate effectively. Kraus attributes the enduring viability of the program to the effectiveness of lead teachers in individual schools and the critical role they play on the district’s Curriculum Councils, and Quality Improvement and First Level Grievance committees.

As an innovative school characterized by strong collaboration between staff and principal, Hughes was often a key arena where this struggle for democratic de-

cision-making and teacher leadership played out. Despite often-contentious interactions with the central office, Hughes has been an exemplar of district efforts to promote innovative teaching and shared governance since the 1990s. In 2009, based on the work of a planning team composed of Rhodes and a small group of lead teachers, Hughes was reinvented in its present incarnation as a comprehensive

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grade 7 through 12 STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) school. Though many of Hughes’ largely African American and low-income students arrive after years of instruction characterized by low expectations and watered-down curriculum, Hughes’ teachers work to provide a nurturing, intellectually stimulating, and rigorous learning environment. As a STEM school, Hughes offers the traditional core subjects of math, English, social studies, and science, as well as “career pathway” courses in engineering, health sciences, plant and animal sciences, and programming and software development. Its signature features include project-based learning, daily advisory classes so teachers can provide academic and personal support, and twice yearly weeklong “intersessions” organized around career exploration and teacher-designed classes that often incorporate experiential learning and community engagement.

Every teacher I interviewed emphasized that to understand what made

Hughes tick, you had to understand that it functions as a “teacher-led” school. Teachers analyze and seek ways to strengthen classroom instruction through discussions in interdisciplinary grade-level teaching teams and academic departments. They plan schoolwide activities and address schoolwide issues through several committees: Positive School Climate, Curriculum, Data, Intersession, and Advisory (to guide the daily advisory meetings conducted by teachers). Like all CPS schools, oversight of the school’s academic mission and budget is provided by a Local School Decision Making Committee, composed of administrators, teachers and other staff members, parents, and community members. An Instructional Leadership Team (ILT)—composed of the three administrators, grade-level team leaders, department chairs, two non-teaching staff members, and two parent representatives—guides the school through decisions regarding student conduct, resource allocation, and curricular/pedagogical issues.

Frecker and other teachers note that one critical ingredient to Hughes’ success is Principal Kathy Wright’s commitment to giving teachers a strong voice in school governance at all levels. In contrast to the stance of many traditional administrators, Wright has a strong commitment to collaborative deliberation. For example, in ILT meetings, she notes, “Everyone has an equal voice. It’s a very democratic process. I try to be a full partner in sharing ideas around instructional pieces that are going to be impacting the qualitative learning of students.” Although the range of topics at ILT meetings encompasses issues such as student conduct and operational matters germane to daily school life, Wright prioritizes discussion on how teachers can collaborate to deepen classroom instruction.

All staff members are encouraged to participate in the collaborative work of the school, with lead teachers playing decisive roles on staff committees. Hughes’ lead teachers are effective because they are carefully chosen, are willing to put in extra hours and effort, and are adept at cultivating and relying on the strengths of their colleagues. Through considering the professional journeys and work of one prospective and two current lead teachers at Hughes, we can gain insight into the deep potential of teacher leadership at schools that are committed to democratic decision-making.

Angela’s Story: The Rigorous Road to Becoming a Lead Teacher

As she completed her student teaching at Hughes six years ago, English teacher Angela Schnormeier felt she benefited tremendously from the strong team-based collaboration and mentoring the school provided. She then landed a job in a neighboring district where she taught for two years. When an English teaching job opened up at Hughes, her Hughes student teaching mentor urged her to apply. For Schnormeier, coming back to Hughes “was like a dream.” She took on leadership roles during her first two years teaching at Hughes, and her potential was quickly recognized by her colleagues and Principal Wright. As a new teacher, she wondered if she was ready, but “with the support and encouragement and push of my [teaching] team” she applied to become a lead teacher and is currently in the middle of the application process.

As Schnormeier describes her current responsibilities as chair of the nine-member Intersession Committee, I can see why her team believes she will make a good lead teacher. As chair she has to make sure that every teacher in the school is committed to leading a weeklong educationally valuable intersession class of between 15 and 30 students. She also works out room assignments, monitors enrollment, collects data on student choices, disseminates sign-up choices to students and parents, and organizes the collection of permission slips and fees. She comments, "I've definitely strengthened my organizational skills: placing 1,000 students in 41 different intersessions is a huge task. And not only placing them, but also making sure they are not repeating the same intersession year after year."

To qualify as a lead teacher, Schnormeier is being assessed by a lead teacher candidate evaluator who herself went through a rigorous process to qualify for this role. To verify that Schnormeier is highly effective in the classroom, her teacher evaluator will make four unannounced visits to her classroom in a year and evaluate three interconnected lesson plans. Each lesson plan must be accompanied by any student assessments connected to the lesson, as well as a reflection document that explains how the instructional strategies used benefited students and how the lesson relates to district goals and curricular standards. Schnormeier notes, "It's a lot of being on your toes and really making sure that good teaching is happening every single day." In addition to demonstrating teaching excellence, lead teacher applicants must document strong leadership skills. They submit two recommendation letters from colleagues and complete a questionnaire that includes questions such as "Describe how you have demonstrated consistent leadership in your school community and the teaching profession." After completing her assessment, Schnormeier's teacher evaluator will make a recommendation to a Lead Teacher Panel composed of three lead teachers appointed by the CFT and three administrators appointed by the superintendent. The panel makes the final decision on her application.

Although Schnormeier is still in the application process, her thoughts are already racing ahead to what her focus might be as a lead teacher. A prime candidate in her mind is the district's Language Arts Curriculum Council, a committee of teachers and administrators that she believes falls shy of its potential. As district administrators press for higher test scores, she believes that they can be insufficiently empathetic and not "entirely aware of what our day-to-day is like. The demands they have put down on us are sometimes not reasonable." She believes that as a strong teacher and articulate advocate she would be adept at "bridging the gap" between administrators and teachers and fostering essential conversations on curriculum and assessment.

Halla's Story: Leadership for Equity

When Halla Shteivi started teaching at Hughes, she felt bolstered by her own life experiences. From the age of 15 through her early 20s, she took on a varied range of responsibilities in her family's restaurant business. She notes, "As a teacher, you are focusing on 20 different things at one time and you need to make sure that ev-

everything is in its place. I think that [restaurant experience] was extremely helpful in helping me manage [as a teacher]. I think that going to college gets you the content material that you need, but I think that life experience gives you the management [skills] you need to run a classroom.” She started college as a business major; but working as a college math tutor convinced her that she had an aptitude and passion for education. Even with the benefit of this life experience, and the seasoning of three long-term subbing positions, Shteivi’s first two years at Hughes were rough. Her students “had been through one teacher, and he left on the weekend and never came back. Then sub after sub after sub, and I came in.” She stuck it out, determined to prevail over classroom challenges with the sentiment “If you think that I can’t make it, watch me make it.” As she developed her teaching skills during these first two difficult years, she was encouraged and guided by a supportive teaching team. Fortunately, during her second year, her team leader taught next door to her classroom and provided her with critical advice throughout the day. As a lead teacher and chair of the Math Department, Halla carries on this tradition of collegial support. She currently spends her lunch and planning period every Friday mentoring a struggling colleague.

Shteivi’s prime goal as department chair has been to boost the caliber of instruction. She believes this can happen as her department colleagues raise their expectations for students and implement policies and teaching practices that make higher expectations reachable. She is keen to challenge the belief among some teachers that “Because we are an inner-city school our kids can’t do the work.” This is an issue, she says, because “with our students we are trying to give them the same kind of education that you would find in a suburban school.” To operationalize this commitment to racial equity in achievement, Shteivi has implemented a policy that lets students retake tests on an unlimited basis. To retake a test, a student is required to correct test errors, complete skill-strengthening homework, and obtain a parent’s signature. Shteivi has gathered data that demonstrates that almost all the students electing to retake tests experienced growth in math achievement.

The heart of Shteivi’s campaign to raise math achievement at Hughes is her effort to convince her Math Department colleagues to adopt standards-based instruction and assessment. To this end, she provides guidance on how to design lessons based on clearly defined and discrete objectives, effective teaching strategies, and careful assessments that lead to reteaching concepts as necessary. Moving toward effective standards-based instruction within the department has been difficult. She notes that “resistance was 100 percent at the beginning.” Progress has come as Shteivi has developed relationships with members of her department and moved her colleagues toward a culture of collegial support. She has initiated frequent departmental and team-based discussions on effective standards-based

She is keen to challenge the belief among some teachers that “Because we are an inner-city school our kids can’t do the work.”

teaching and facilitated department members participating in professional development workshops. The department took a critical step by voting to adopt a system of peer observations designed to encourage collective and supportive reflection on classroom practice. Twice a month, each Math Department teacher has a 15-minute observational visit by a colleague, who records what they like and what the observed teacher might consider doing differently. These written observations are shared with the observed teacher and inform departmental discussions on how instruction can be improved. Although Shteivi still gets frustrated when she believes a teacher is falling short, she is encouraged that now seven of the 12 members of the Hughes Math Department have integrated standards-based assessment into their classroom practice.

Randy's Story: Relationships Are Key

The last period of the day has ended, and I am sitting in on a meeting of 8th-grade lead teacher Randy Gibson's "Jedi Science Club." Reflecting Gibson's strong interest in helping his urban students engage with nature and ecological issues, this year the club is partnering with Cincinnati's Mill Creek Alliance, a local environmental group, to study the impact of trash on the creek. Gibson is guiding the students through a "photo voice journaling" activity, an approach that utilizes photos for creative narrative construction. The students collaboratively review dozens of pictures they took during a recent trip to Mill Creek—disparate images of foliage, a peaceful creek, liquor bottles and Styrofoam cups, an encampment of a homeless person—to select 10 photos that tell the story of their visit. They then move on to a guided activity through which they chronicle what they did, saw, and heard during the day, and pose a question they want to ask about the creek. Through subsequent visits to the creek and further reflective activities, the club members will create their own analyses on the sources and impact of trash on the creek, and collaboratively produce a video on their learning journey to be shared with the school. Throughout the club meeting, Gibson manifests qualities that make him an effective teacher: humor, affection for his students, respect for their analytical capabilities, and a penchant for creative pedagogy that builds upon student strengths and interests.

Gibson considers strong student-teacher relationships to be "the driving force" underlying academic success, a belief that grows out of both his 20 years of teaching experience and his own challenging journey to professional success. Growing up poor in a predominantly white Appalachian Cincinnati neighborhood, he went to CPS schools, attending a magnet science program at the integrated Woodward High School. He became a first-generation college student at the University of Cincinnati but dropped out with a 1.1 GPA. At 24, he enrolled in the small Mount St. Joseph College, where he felt sympathetic professors "took me by my hand" and enabled him to gain academic competence and a growing sense of direction. As a young teacher in CPS, growing success in the classroom and validation from colleagues he respected enhanced his self-confidence and led him to take on increasing professional responsibilities. He attended a powerful learning insti-

tute on an inquiry approach to science instruction in Colorado with a team of CPS teachers, and subsequently worked with district science coaches to teach district colleagues how to implement this way of teaching. He views this experience as “the beginning of seeing myself in a leadership role” and a few years later successfully completed the process of becoming a lead teacher. As a lead teacher, he has served as both a department chair and a team leader. He is currently taking a break from lead teacher responsibilities to complete a doctorate in action research through the University of Cincinnati.

As a team leader, Gibson found that more than half of team meetings needed to be devoted to effectively managing all sorts of day-to-day issues: emergent needs of particular students, scheduling and staff coverage of school events, parent liaison, and the ongoing work of agreeing on and implementing classroom routines and norms that “raise expectations and lower behavioral issues.” While not neglecting these critical tasks, he was always keen to focus as much team meeting time as possible on discussions of how to deepen classroom instruction. He notes that teams were able to significantly shift the balance toward pedagogical discussions when team meeting times were expanded from a one-hour meeting weekly after school to their current schedule of meeting four periods a week during the school day.

Because of his intense interest in pedagogy, Gibson finds discussions of classroom teaching “an amazing place to be.” He notes that for the past four or five years, there has been a helpful trend for teams and departments to examine data on student performance as an entry point for discussions on how to improve student learning. For Gibson, standardized tests are best considered one data point among many rather than the “be all and end all” assessment of student learning. Hughes’ teaching teams also focus on significant data points that flow out of daily classroom instruction such as quizzes, science labs, and varied writing assignments. Gibson is enthusiastic about his current team’s goal of using assessment data to promote writing across the curriculum. He thinks that this “cohesive way” of teaching across the curriculum has especially strong potential to help the many struggling readers within their classes.

I’ve Got Your Back, but Don’t Dare Be Slack: When Solidarity Embraces Professionalism

Since the early 1980s, the CFT has sought to forge a new kind of teacher unionism in which militant defense of teacher rights and welfare is fused with teacher leadership to foster heightened professionalism, new paths of collaboration with administrators, democratic school governance, and deeper learning among CPS students. In large and meaningful measure, the staff at Hughes High School is enacting this vision. Their work to do so is beset by enduring difficulties. Principal Kathy Wright notes that the impact of the Common Core, shifting curriculum maps, and new textbook adoptions add up to pressure from the district for schools “to be very cookie-cutter.” These challenges are exacerbated because it has often been hard to translate substantive learning within Hughes’ classrooms into higher

scores on state-mandated standardized tests, despite concerted efforts by the ILT to analyze weaknesses in student academic performance and coordinate teacher efforts to improve instruction. For Wright, the press on the school to standardize instruction often makes her feel that it's a struggle to stay true to what "makes us unique" as a school with a strong STEM identity manifested through a distinctive curriculum and pedagogy.

Hughes' staff is sustaining itself in the face of such challenges through a collegial culture that provides peer momentum toward both striving for excellent teaching and participating in collaborative decision-making. Wright notes that teachers "who just want to come to work, be told what to do, and leave . . . end up leaving after a year because they are wanting everything to be dictated to them." A key ingredient in nurturing this culture is the prime focus that lead teachers put into mentoring relationships. Such mentoring is evident when Schnormeier notes that Frecker "has kind of taken me under his wing" in teaching her how to take leadership, when Wright notes that Gibson is providing vital support to the new and inexperienced Science Department chair, and when Shteivi prioritizes building relationships and providing one-on-one coaching to her Math Department colleagues. And, it is important to note, this is a kind of mentoring in which empathy is balanced by high expectations. Wright encourages department chairs and team leaders to find supportive ways to have difficult problem-solving conversations with colleagues regarding shortfalls in their teaching. She explains that when this happens, "the accountability just shoots way up because people don't want to disappoint the principal, but people [especially] don't want to disappoint someone who is in their department, who is their friend." In fashioning this blend of empathy, toughness, and collaboration, lead teachers at Hughes honor the pioneering work of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers and provide an exemplar for teacher union activists throughout the United States. ■

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IMPROVING OUR PRACTICE

Peer Assistance and Review in Seattle

BY DREW DILLHUNT



SIMONE SHIN

Early on the morning of Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2015, following four months of contentious negotiations, a six-day strike, and hours of late-night deliberation, the Seattle Education Association (SEA) and Seattle Public Schools (SPS) reached a tentative contract agreement. The agreement, approved by the full membership the following Sunday, included a slate of bread-and-butter gains such as significant pay increases and lower student-teacher ratios. However, the contract also reflected an intentional shift by the union—guided by thousands of individual conversations with members—to expand the field of issues SEA would bargain well beyond the frame of traditional industrial unionism.

As a result, the new collective bargaining agreement also boasted an array of gains focused explicitly on social justice and racial equity. The agreement included 30 minutes of guaranteed, daily recess for all elementary students in the district (students of color continue to receive significantly less recess time on average than their white counterparts). It also guaranteed dedicated training and financial support for 30 racial equity teams in schools across the district. These teams support an ongoing analysis of how racism manifests itself at the building level; they work collaboratively to “interrupt the status quo by mitigating, disrupting, and dismantling the school system’s initiatives that uphold racism.”¹

This shift toward social justice unionism helped to connect the bargaining process to the core values of the membership and communicated to the larger community that SEA was committed to prioritizing the needs of students and families,² even where that meant smaller traditional gains for members in terms of compensation and benefits.

On that final night of bargaining, the only issue left on the table was the indirect use of student test scores in teacher evaluations—a measure introduced in Seattle five years earlier to meet the requirements of the federal Race to the Top Program. The language in the 2010 collective bargaining agreement governing student growth measures had been developed collaboratively by SEA and SPS to ensure that while student growth scores could lead to a closer look at teacher practice, they would remain confidential and would not directly impact evaluations.³ By the time the 2015 teacher strike arrived, however, the push from the SEA membership to have student test scores completely decoupled from teacher evaluation had swelled significantly.

The following morning at the bargaining table, the district bargaining team suggested Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) as a possible way forward that promised to satisfy the interests of both sides by separating student test scores from teacher evaluation while introducing a growth-oriented approach to accountability. It was from that suggestion that the two sides hammered out the remaining section of the tentative agreement:

SPS and SEA agree to develop a Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program using an interest-based bargaining process during the term of this collective bargaining agreement. The PAR . . . working group will . . . design authentic indicators of teacher performance and discuss the role of assessments in teacher evaluation. SPS and SEA agree to eliminate . . . District-Determined Growth Ratings for the term of this contract.⁴

These three sentences—the last lines to be added that early morning—were not the portion of the tentative agreement most talked about by the media, the community, or even by the membership of SEA. Nonetheless, this short piece of exploratory language not only helped to finalize the collective bargaining agreement, it also had a significant impact on the working relationships between the three constituent groups guiding the work of teacher evaluation: the Seattle Education Association,

the central office of the Seattle Public Schools, and the Principals' Association of Seattle Schools. The interest-based bargaining process called for in this language would be the first of many steps in establishing the kinds of collaborative relationships needed to begin co-constructing systematic solutions to complex problems.

Professional Unionism

Driven throughout by the social justice unionism of the SEA membership, the 2015 collective bargaining process closed with an unexpected invitation from SPS to embark on a collaborative journey of professional unionism. Where traditional unionism understands accountability for the profession as an external responsibility and the exclusive arena of principals and managers, professional unionism strives to “look beyond the self-interest of individual teachers” by framing teachers as “professionals who uphold high teaching standards” while navigating “the interdependency of teachers with the local school authorities.”⁵ PAR systems, and the interest-based work required to develop and sustain them, sit squarely in the domain of professional unionism. (See p. 103.)

That October, the PAR working group, composed of 14 educators (seven SEA members, four district administrators, and three building principals), traveled to Montgomery County, Maryland, for a training at the Montgomery County Education Association titled “Leading to Organize: PAR & Teacher Evaluation.”

During our first four days working with Montgomery County Public Schools, we expected our counterparts there to tell us about how PAR worked in their system. Instead, what they talked to us about was the larger Professional Growth System, of which PAR was just one part. Everyone we talked to in the system—be they teacher union members or district administrators—told us narratives unique to the role they played, and each story had a deeply shared sense of what it meant to be a professional in that district. These shared stories reflected a shared vision and mission around this work, which our system clearly did not yet have.

Most importantly, the entire Professional Growth System was framed through a model of distributed leadership, where those closest to the work drive the work—where educator voice is central to decision-making at all levels of the system. Distributed leadership empowers what Alma Harris has described as “collective influences” to positively impact organizational outcomes.⁶ This immediately resonated as a key interest for the SEA members in the PAR working group.

We were pleased to discover that nearly all of the components of Montgomery County's Professional Growth System were already in place in Seattle. Unlike many of the other visiting districts, SPS already had a robust mentoring program for new-to-profession teachers and a parallel program for coaching experienced teachers who received below-proficient evaluation ratings, as well as a building-based teacher leadership program codified in the 2010 collective bargaining agreement. All three of these components already had dedicated financial and logistical support in our system. While there was plenty of work to do coordinating these components under a shared vision, we wouldn't need to build these components from the ground up.

What stood out to the working group most clearly was what our system was missing. A key component of the Professional Growth System in Montgomery County is their foundational coursework series. The series includes two courses on effective teaching practices (all teachers in the district take this course) and another on observing classroom practice and giving effective feedback (expected of all building evaluators and consulting teachers). These courses are designed and facilitated by teacher-leaders. We had nothing parallel to this in our system.

“Evaluation alone will not improve practice,” writes Linda Darling Hammond; “productive feedback must be accompanied by opportunities to learn.”⁷ Any effective system of teacher evaluation and accountability must have at its core a system of growth-oriented supports. That system of supports must explicitly communicate and actively engage teachers in learning not just the standards of effective teaching, but also the *how* and *why* of effective teaching.⁸ Ensuring an effective teacher in every classroom is impossible where we don’t yet have a shared vision or language of effective teaching.

We left Montgomery County convinced that in order to develop an effective PAR system, we had to commit to undertaking the much broader and larger project of developing a truly coordinated system of professional growth by developing foundational coursework and fully integrating that coursework with our already existing components of support.

Identifying Shared Interests

Back in Seattle, the number of voices represented in the working group expanded, with each constituency identifying additional members to more fully represent the many perspectives in the system. The group of nearly 40 educators who agreed to be part of designing the new professional growth system included classroom

teachers, mentor teachers, union leadership, union staff, building principals, and central office administrators. The next step was to develop a plan.

Given the fractured trust that still characterized the relationship of our three constituent groups as a result of the recent strike, Ellen Holmes, our NEA facilitator, encouraged us to take time to independently caucus as three separate constituent groups (SEA, central office, and the principals’ association) both prior to and following our shared work together back in Seattle.

This intentional caucusing helped to normalize the reality that we would continue to have positional differences around some issues (e.g., compensation and class size) even as we identified significant overlaps in our shared interests.

Perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, having the opportunity to name our

Having the opportunity to name our differences in our constituent groups allowed us to better see our shared interests when we met as a full group. This process slowly fostered a sense of trust in our relationships with one another.

differences in our constituent groups allowed us to better see our shared interests when we met as a full group. This process slowly fostered a sense of trust in our relationships with one another. We were able to lean into productive conflict around our shared work. The process acknowledged that we didn't need to agree on everything, or even most things, in order to work productively together toward our shared interests.

From our list of shared interests—which, to the surprise of many of us, was not a short one—emerged five distinct working groups, each focused on a specific component of the coordinated professional growth system we were now designing. These components included Foundational Coursework, the Teacher Leadership Cadre, the Consulting Teacher Program, the PAR Panel, and the Professional Growth and Educator Support System (PGES) Steering Committee. The five proposals developed in these groups would eventually be formalized as the SPS Professional Growth and Educator Support System in the 2018–19 SEA collective bargaining agreement.

Unsurprisingly, the three-year path leading from the launch of the PAR working group to the adoption of those proposals was neither simple nor straightforward. Members left the working group; new members joined. We relaunched the interest-based bargaining process and we developed norms all over again. A new superintendent took the helm of the district just prior to the ratification of the one-year contract in which the proposals from the PAR working groups were codified in the collective bargaining agreement. Yet, as a result of the shared commitment to the work by all three constituent groups and because of the principled relationships that had been developed, the work continued to grow and our shared interests began to coalesce into a shared vision.

Peer Assistance and Review

Classroom teachers who are released from their building to provide individualized coaching and assessment of instructional practice, known as consulting teachers, are the core of any PAR program. In Seattle, these teachers serve for a term of no longer than five years and must return to a classroom assignment for at least three years before being eligible to reapply. Consulting teachers are chosen for their teaching and leadership skills and receive ongoing training around effective mentoring.

Because Seattle already had a well-established mentoring program, the biggest change that has resulted from the shift to PAR is the addition of the consulting teacher summative assessment of teacher practice. Assessment had not previously been part of the mentor role. The PAR program was piloted over the course of the 2017–18 school year with 10 participating classroom teachers, all of whom had already received a full year of mentoring (but had not yet reached a fully proficient overall evaluation rating).

The 10 teachers who agreed to participate in the pilot were offered the opportunity to receive a second year of consulting teacher support with the understanding that they would engage in and give feedback on the newly expanded consulting teacher role. The PAR pilot allowed the assessment processes outlined in the pro-

posals to be launched on a small scale under low-stakes conditions with ongoing feedback from participating teachers. It also allowed the eight consulting teachers who took part in the pilot to share their perspectives on how a shift to PAR, and the inclusion of the summative assessment, might affect their practice as mentors and their learning-focused relationships with participating teachers.

In parallel, Seattle piloted the PAR Panel, a deliberative body composed of eight SEA members and eight members of the principals' association. The panel serves as the designee of the superintendent and makes consensus-based decisions about continuing contract offers, additional consulting teacher support, and non-renewal. All panel decisions are made in closed deliberations informed by anonymized principal evaluations and consulting teacher assessments. The identity of the classroom teacher, the building evaluator, and the consulting teacher are not known by the panel.

Over the course of the pilot year, the panel finalized its norms and engaged in practice cases. The PAR Panel also worked with SEA's Center for Racial Equity to begin the ongoing work of developing tools and protocols to explicitly name implicit bias as it shows up during the panel's consensus-based decision processes.

In the fall of 2018, following the ratification of the new collective bargaining agreement, Seattle's PAR program launched at full scale, serving both new-to-profession teachers and experienced teachers not currently meeting the performance schedule. Experienced teachers who were already working with a consulting teacher prior to the shift to PAR were given the opportunity to opt into PAR (which all of them did).

In order to truly cultivate distributed leadership, the design of a PAR program must be the result of an ongoing interest-based process at the local level. As a result, the mechanics of each PAR program, including how teachers enter into PAR, vary widely from district to district.⁸ In Seattle, all new-to-profession teachers are automatically entered into PAR and receive a full year of consulting teacher support. That support can be extended to a second year—and in rare cases a third year—by the PAR Panel. Building evaluators may also refer experienced teachers with provisional contracts (three or less years of service in the district) for PAR support following two observations where significant performance concerns are identified and communicated explicitly to the classroom teacher.

Experienced teachers with continuing contracts are required to enter PAR only as the result of an overall below-proficient summative evaluation. However, experienced teachers with continuing contracts may also choose to request PAR in coordination with their evaluator, as soon as significant concerns are raised, in order to access early consulting teacher support. Teachers with continuing contracts generally receive consulting teacher support for one to two years.

Having the PAR program explicitly named in the collective bargaining agreement has guaranteed significant and consistent financial support from the central office for developing and sustaining the new PGES. In 2018, when all five components were added to the collective bargaining agreement, existing programs were consolidated, which streamlined the work and allowed us to hire three additional consulting teachers, bringing their total number to 21. This has allowed the con-

sulting teacher program to ensure manageable consulting teacher caseloads (an average ratio of 1:17) as the assessment role of PAR is added to their work.

As a result, there are now 26 SEA members housed in the human resources department, coordinating and implementing the work of the PGES. This has been an essential step not only in ensuring that the PGES is a coordinated system but also in maintaining the connectivity between SEA and the central office needed for this interest-based work.

Foundational Coursework

During the final months of the working group's three-year design period, we finalized the overarching vision statement for the Seattle PGES, which would ultimately appear in the collective bargaining agreement.

Seattle Public School Educators believe that education is a civil right. Our Professional Growth and Educator Support System . . . is designed and managed by those who work closest with students . . . and centered on quality student learning for all.¹⁰

While this language is deeply connected to our core values of educational equity and distributed leadership,¹¹ it does not in itself ensure any substantive change in our systems. What it does do is explicitly formalize those values as the foundation of our shared work in the PGES. This provides a dependable space from which to ask the question "Is the current design of our systems aligned with our professed values?" Where the answer to that question is "No," we must commit to change.

This vision statement has already had an impact on the development of the foundational coursework, which all new-to-profession teachers and all teacher leaders are expected to complete. While the design team's initial focus was almost exclusively on supporting educators in developing their practice as culturally responsive teachers,¹² we quickly realized that in order for the learning activities to align with the vision of "education [as] a civil right," participants would also need ongoing opportunities to develop and sustain their racial equity literacy—understanding that an examination of our own unconscious and dysconscious beliefs as teachers must be at the center of any culturally responsive practice.¹³

This realization led the design team to create an initial draft of what would eventually become Seattle's Foundational Beliefs for Supporting Student Learning.¹⁴ These five foundational beliefs, intended to guide the work of all educators in our system, explicitly name the ongoing impact of racism in our system and the necessity of active countermeasures in all parts of that system. The adoption of these five beliefs by SPS has in turn supported both consulting teachers and building principals as they work to more explicitly communicate what effective culturally responsive practice looks and sounds like in the classroom.

The SPS foundational beliefs document continues to be an avenue for the work of the PGES to come alongside the already well-established anti-racist leadership within SEA and SPS. During the pilot of the foundational coursework,

members of the SPS Department of Racial Equity Advancement engaged in the course as participants and provided actionable feedback on the coursework. This process helped not only to refine the content but also to make the facilitation of the coursework more culturally responsive. A key shift was beginning to intentionally disrupt the white supremacy norms (e.g., individualism, discomfort with feelings, and “product over process”) that are consistently baked into the way we deliver learning to students and adults alike.¹⁵

Professional Unionism as Anti-Racist Work

School systems in the United States were never designed to serve all students. Peer Assistance and Review and the other professional structures will not inherently disrupt racist policies and practices. They must be explicitly designed to do so—otherwise they will simply reinforce and deepen existing patterns. In Seattle Public Schools, as in many districts across the country, teachers of color are disproportionately identified as having performance concerns. This pattern of disproportionality exists both in districts with PAR and in districts without it.

In a truly anti-racist professional growth system, we should expect that disproportionality to disappear over time. In order for this to happen, our PGES will need to come fully alongside the already established anti-racist leadership within SEA and SPS. We’ve been in partnership with the University of Washington from the very beginning of this work to collect baseline data to analyze the impact of the changes we’ve implemented. We will need to continue to ask hard questions to see if the systems we’ve created are doing the anti-racist work they were intended to do. If not, those systems will need to be redesigned.

Ultimately, the lessons we’ve learned as a system through this process are not about the importance of implementing a PAR program. Rather, our lessons as a system have been about the power of engaging in productive conflict using an interest-based approach, about implementing a model of distributed leadership where those closest to the work, in this case classroom teachers, drive the work.

It’s too early to make any definitive claims about the impact the new PGES is having on teacher growth and student learning in Seattle Public Schools. However, what we do know is that, as a result of consulting teacher assessments, 59 new-to-profession teachers (roughly a quarter of those supported) have already been recommended for additional consulting teacher support, which they would not have otherwise received. This year, the consulting teacher program was also able to offer new-to-profession teachers of color the option of requesting a consulting teacher of color (an option that 23 teachers of color took advantage of).

Distributed leadership has already begun to create collaborative spaces within the PGES where collective influence is not only possible but also encouraged. The leadership of the PAR Panel and the PGES Steering Committee, for example—both composed of SEA, central office, and principals’ association members—led to specific changes in how teacher evaluations are written to ensure they more clearly communicate a full picture of teacher practice. As long as Seattle’s PGES continues to develop in alignment with the core values outlined in its vision statement, this

collective influence will expand. However, only with members continuing to push from within—as well as from without—will we be able to fully interrupt and redesign our systems in ways that are explicitly anti-racist and which allow us to meet the needs of all educators and all students in our district. 9

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IMPROVING OUR PRACTICE

Parent-Teacher Home Visits in St. Paul

BY NICK FABER

Two white middle school teachers walk up to a student's home in St. Paul, Minnesota. The community they are visiting is reflective of their school community: high poverty and primarily families of color. Though the teachers have taught here for years, this is their first time entering a home in this neighborhood.

There are two young men hanging out on the porch who nod as the teachers approach but say nothing as they walk up and knock on the door. The student answers and welcomes her teachers in with a smile and excitement. They sit with her mom in the living room and for the next 45 minutes, she talks with the teachers about her dreams for her child, their hopes for what the student is able to achieve this year, and about the mother's own middle school experience. Mostly, they just have heartfelt conversations around what they all have as a common interest—the student's success in school and life.

Outside, after the visit, the teachers are energized and excited. As white middle-class teachers, they were outside of their comfort zone, but they were surprised how quickly they became comfortable. They are used to talking to parents within the “safety” of their classroom. But here, they were somewhere new, somewhere the *parent* and *student* felt more comfortable. In the end, they walked away not only feeling they had a better understanding about this student and her family, but also about themselves.

And that's the point.

At the Saint Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE), the Parent Teacher Home Visits initiative has been a key for us as a union to help teachers break down the implicit bias they may have toward the students who are in their classroom and the communities where they live. And that's powerful and important union work.

A Welcoming School Isn't Enough

In 2000 I was working at a full-service community school in Saint Paul Public Schools—before full-service community schools were a “thing.” Our district, along with a community partner, had a vision for schools with wraparound services that would serve as a hub on St. Paul's East Side—a community of poverty, immigrants, and a rich history.



OLIVIA WISE

My colleagues and I believed at the time that the school where we were teaching, John A. Johnson Elementary School, could also benefit from a stronger plan for parent engagement. Our school opened its doors at 8 a.m. and closed them at 8 p.m. All day long, parents and students came and went, taking advantage of the school's housing and job services and dental clinic. But we started to realize that, as teachers, we really weren't interacting with many parents. In fact, we pretty much just saw parents at parent-teacher conferences in the fall and spring. We would see a few parents—not necessarily the ones we most needed to reach—during parent nights at school to discuss curricular changes in math and reading or show them how they could help their students with core subjects at home.

We wondered why more parents didn't come to the school for these evening events and engage with their children's teachers. Among other things, we as educators began to realize that we were part of the problem: We were looking at parents from a deficit lens. We were essentially telling them, "You don't know something and we do, and we're going to ask you to come into school, a place where you don't feel comfortable, and we are going to tell you what you don't know." And then we (the staff) were going to stand around and wonder why they don't show up.

It was about this time that I heard about the Parent Teacher Home Visit Project (now Parent Teacher Home Visits, or PTHV) that had been operating in Sacramento, California, since 1996.

Parent Teacher Home Visits

PTHV was started by a Sacramento community organization that was seeking ways to strengthen the relationships between schools and communities. Through several years of careful organizing and assessment, it built a local home visits program and began to see strong results. As word spread about the success of the program, PTHV hired staff and began to provide training to districts outside Sacramento. It has since grown into a national organization.

The practice of teachers visiting students' homes is not new. But what PTHV brings to the process is an intentionality to ensure that real relationships are being built, and that both families and educators are deeply invested in the strategy.

PTHV's model is adapted in a wide variety of settings across the U.S., but follows five non-negotiable core practices:

- Visits are always voluntary for educators and families, and arranged in advance;
- Teachers are trained, and compensated for visits outside their school day;
- The focus of the first visit is relationship-building. We discuss hopes and dreams;
- No targeting—visit all or a cross-section of students so there is no stigma; and
- Educators go in pairs to all visits and reflect on them afterward together.

Interested in the model, we contacted the organization, and they were eager to come out and train some of our staff on their model of home visiting.

Learning How to Listen

I told our district's area assistant superintendent about the program and the training that they offered at a cost of \$3,000. I got the typical response: "There's no money." So, I went to Mary Cathryn Ricker, at the time the union president (and as of this writing the commissioner of education in Minnesota), and asked if our local could fund the training. I explained to her that home visits could not only benefit our students, but also help our teachers become better acquainted with the community. She was intrigued and began looking for ways to fund the initiative.

Mary Cathryn eventually found grant funding for the PTHV trainers to come to St. Paul. They trained six teachers from our school (including myself), our community school coordinator, and our principal. Mary Cathryn participated as well.

During the three-hour training, we learned the nuts and bolts of this particular model, including how to set up the visit and questions to ask to get to know a parent quickly. Visiting teachers focus on asking about the parent's hopes and dreams for his or her child and what school was like for the parent when he or she was young. Such questions let teachers learn more about parents' interests in their children's education and enable parents and teachers to better relate to each other throughout the school year.

In the training, we also explored the barriers that might impede a strong visit: for instance, negative assumptions we may hold about our students' families, and fears we may have, such as making some sort of cultural faux pas when interacting with parents, especially those who are new to our country. And we discussed the importance of feeling comfortable around other cultures and languages—more than 70 are spoken in St. Paul public schools.

Those six teachers visited about 15 families that first year. After the visits, we met as a group to debrief. We realized we held so many different assumptions that proved to be wrong—for instance, that because a lot of our students lived in poverty, we were going to find parents who weren't passionate about their children's education and success, and houses that were falling apart and in disarray.

Instead, we found parents who really did care about their children's education and that the fundamentals to support their learning were available at Johnson Elementary. They shared their stories of where they were in life, how they got there, and how they wanted better for their children.

Many parents were resistant to our visits at first. They were suspicious of our interest in coming to their houses, and understandably so—teachers in St. Paul didn't typically do such a thing unless something was wrong (really wrong). But because we visited a cross section of our students, never targeting any subgroup, and offered to meet somewhere else in the community if the parents felt more comfortable doing that than meeting in their home, all the parents agreed to our visits and word got around that our efforts were sincere.

After these initial visits, we realized what a positive impact this program

could make in the lives of our teachers and students. So we, as a union, decided to expand it. Again, we asked the district for financial support. And again, the answer was no. We were disappointed but not deterred.

Open Bargaining Helped Win Funding

A few months later, we brought the idea to our bargaining team during contract negotiations. The team loved the home visit concept and put it on the bargaining table. We conduct open bargaining here in St. Paul, meaning that the public can attend contract negotiations (and therefore parents are in the room). This proved to be to our advantage when presenting the program to the district negotiating team. It would have been hard for them to say, “No, we don’t want our teachers going out and visiting parents.” In the end, the district agreed to the program, and we won \$50,000 that year in our teachers’ contract to fund it. The amount, which has increased to \$175,000 in our current contract, pays for stipends for teachers’ home visits. Today, the district still primarily funds the stipends, while SPFE pays for conducting the trainings for teachers before the visits. That relationship is changing, however, as the district and union are working more cooperatively in this area and the district sees the value in the project. PTHV contract language is also in the other two paraprofessional bargaining units that SPFE represents as well. (See Resources, p. 418.)

Key Components of the Program

The Home Visit program in St. Paul is totally voluntary. Teachers in every public school in St. Paul can participate but are not required to do so. They are compensated \$50 for each home visit they make—a stipend meant to cover their time setting up and making the visit as well as their transportation. Typically, home visits last 30 to 40 minutes.

To receive the \$50, a teacher must complete our training, which we’ve extended from three hours to four. A training team made up of six teachers, a paraprofessional, and two parents—all of whom have been on (or, in the case of the parents, have received) home visits—runs the project, with occasional advice from two administrators. The team meets regularly to plan trainings and outreach and never holds a training without one of the two parents present. SPFE compensates parent trainers for their time at the same pay rate as our teachers.

The visits take place outside the regular school day, on the teacher’s own time. We encourage teachers who participate in the program to conduct a home visit in the fall with each of their families. We also encourage a second visit in the spring. Teachers must go in pairs on the visits so that parents build relationships with two educators in the school building. And I say “educators” here, rather than “teachers,” because our paraprofessionals do these visits as well. In addition to teachers, SPFE represents two groups of paraprofessionals: educational assistants, and school and community support professionals. These groups’ contracts now also include the PTHV. They have the same language and compensation per visit as teachers have. Typically, these paraprofessionals go on home visits with a classroom teacher, but some paraprofessionals in our high schools visit together.

Because the emphasis of the first home visit is on establishing relationships, teachers and paraprofessionals don't bring anything with them. These visits are not for having a parent-teacher conference, getting an individualized education program (IEP) signed, or going over school rules—all of which can take place at another time and in a different setting. Home visit time is sacred and meant for establishing relationships, so we don't want to raise anything that might distract from that.

The educators also don't need to take notes during their visits, since visiting homes in pairs allows them to debrief together immediately after. They remind each other what was discussed and bounce ideas off one another. It's especially important for teachers to remember what they learn about students—their interests and any activities they participate in after school—so they can better connect with students and possibly work that knowledge into a lesson plan.

At the spring visit, the visiting educators might bring materials along based on the parent's expressed interests for the child from the fall meeting. Once you have established a relationship with the family and know about something the parent wants to work on with the child, you can follow up. For example, you might say something like "I know you've been talking about wanting to make sure your child is up to grade level in reading this year. I heard that at our first visit, and you mentioned it at parent-teacher conferences. So I brought you these books that you might want to read this summer to help your child's literacy skills improve. I know that's something that you really value and that we can partner on."

We want parents to know that we, as educators, see them as an asset. The philosophy of our home visit project can be summed up this way: No matter who you are, no matter what life has dealt you, you know something about your child you can share with me that can make me a better teacher.

Another key has been sharing experiences. We learned from other districts around the country that sharing home visit experiences and learnings during staff meetings or staff professional development was critical. Teachers must log their visits after they occur and submit records of those visits to the project coordinator. And they are required to attend a two-hour debriefing session after their visits in the fall and spring. To keep the program strong and growing, we felt that it was important to meet regularly as a group. Attendance at the debriefs, which take place at the union office, are required in order to be compensated. This has brought hundreds of members into our union hall each year who would not necessarily come otherwise. At the debriefs, we often take time for announcements about upcoming union events. And we spend time hearing from the home visitors what they are hearing from parents, so that we can advocate for those concerns in contract nego-

The philosophy of our home visit project can be summed up this way: No matter who you are, no matter what life has dealt you, you know something about your child you can share with me that can make me a better teacher.

tiations or meet-and-confer meetings with the district.

SPFE continues to stay connected to the national PTHV project, whose roots are in community organizing. Although there are other models out there, other organizations, PTHV remains closest to its roots.

Challenges

Of course, there are challenges. Our biggest stumbling block right now is that most of our educators, like educators everywhere, are just short on time. In St. Paul, schools with teachers who are making the greatest number of home visits are the ones whose principals have unlocked the class list early in the summer so that teachers can visit families during their summer vacation, when they have greater flexibility in scheduling these visits. Our big push now is to convince the entire district to commit to sharing class lists with our teachers by Aug. 1. So even if teachers choose not to do home visits, they can still reach out to parents in some way, by phone or email, before school starts the day after Labor Day.

Their Favorite Part of the Job

Since it first began in 2010, our home visit program in St. Paul has grown significantly. We have gone from having a handful of teachers make 15 visits nearly 10 years ago to having close to 200 educators make more than 3,000 visits this past school year. And more than 50 of our schools, nearly all of them high-poverty, now have anywhere from two to 20 educators who have received training and have made, or are prepared to make, home visits.

Teachers and principals have been enthusiastic about this program and take pride in its success. At our debriefs, teachers report numerous benefits. They feel supported by their students' parents, and they talk about being able to communicate more freely with them. Greater communication allows teachers and parents to take care of academic and behavior problems quickly, before they get out of hand, enabling students to stay in class and therefore increase their learning time.

An evaluation of the program commissioned by the national Parent Teacher Home Visit Project and SPFE found that teachers do indeed value the home visit model. Of the educators who visited homes during the 2013–14 school year and who responded to a survey that was part of the evaluation, 76 percent said that home visits changed their assumptions about parents. And 93 percent said that making a home visit taught them something about their students they didn't already know. This echoes the results of a national evaluation recently conducted that showed this model of how visiting helps reduce implicit bias in educators and shift their mindset regarding their students and families.

According to the evaluation, which was also based on observations of debrief sessions, "teachers reported feeling energized by the process of home visiting," with some teachers calling it "their favorite part of the year or their job." It just makes sense that when teachers build relationships with parents and feel supported by them, they find their work more rewarding.

Home visits also helped teachers strengthen their connections with col-

leagues. As the evaluation makes clear, “In a profession that can often isolate teachers in their classrooms, the home visiting program gave them a shared experience and time to build relationships with their fellow teachers.”

Students have been receptive to the visits. Some get very excited when they know their teacher is planning to see them in their home. It’s not uncommon for students to eagerly ask their teachers, “When are you coming to my house?”

Parents have also welcomed the initiative. They respect the effort educators are making to come into their home. And just by teachers extending themselves outside the school day, they are showing parents that they actually care about their children.

Nationally, the PTHV project has been the subject of a series of evaluations and research studies (see Resources list below). All have found quantifiable results, including decreases in chronic absenteeism and improved assessment scores.

Just as important, the program in St. Paul, which is run entirely by educators and parents, has helped parents move away from seeing the teacher union as an obstacle. Now they are saying, “Wow. Our teachers’ union wants its members to go out and visit us in our community and have a relationship with us.” That’s a pretty powerful message to send, and it’s one that has helped us organize parents to advocate for the resources their children—our students—need.

Parents know things about their children that can make us better educators, but except for one or two parent-teacher conferences each year, we may not see them at school much or get an opportunity to talk with them about their child’s interests. Many parents work long hours at multiple jobs to provide for their families. It’s not the interest in their child’s education they lack, but the time to devote to it.

This work can be uncomfortable at times. It can be scary at times. The same feelings are being felt by our parents, too. But we are at a unique moment. If there was ever a time where our need to understand each other was vitally important, it is now. If there was ever a time for members of our union to understand and feel comfortable in the community, it is now. 📍

Nick Faber is an elementary science specialist in St. Paul Public Schools where he has taught for the last 35 years. He is currently on leave as the president of SPFE. Nick is also the former board chair of Parent Teacher Home Visits (pthv.org).

RESOURCES

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The Six Pillars of Community Schools

Public schools as greenhouses of democracy



JOE BRUSKY

In response to privatization and other damaging “school reform” initiatives, growing numbers of educators, community activists, and teacher unions have promoted a vision of “community schools” that incorporates key values and components that speak to what all children deserve. Such schools promote democratic practices and engagement in the broader community, the school, classrooms, and the curriculum.

Some schools label themselves as community schools because they provide some “wraparound” social, health, and recreational services. Although such services are important, they alone won’t transform a school and are only one part of a successful community school. Such schools must also have engaging curriculum, high-quality teaching, inclusive leadership, positive discipline practices, and significant parent and community engagement.

These additional characteristics have been described in various ways. The National Education Association speaks of “the six pillars of community schools”—all of which promote equity and democratic practices. The components of community schools below are based on the NEA’s six pillars.

1. Strong and Culturally Relevant Curriculum. Educators engage students with challenging, culturally relevant curriculum using teaching strategies that pro-

vide active, project-based learning with critical reading, writing, speaking, and thinking skills in all subject areas. Students learn to value all people and how to stand up and act to promote democracy and justice. Curriculum includes the students' lives and heritages as well as additional languages, fine arts, physical education, and before- and after-school programs.

2. High-Quality Teaching. Community schools are places of inspiration and freedom. Educators have adequate time to plan collaboratively and analyze student work to improve their teaching skills and pedagogical approaches. Creating student-centered classrooms, teaching problem-solving and critical thinking, and engaging students with rich, challenging curricula are a central schoolwide focus.

3. Inclusive/Shared Leadership. Leadership is a responsibility shared by the school principal with a community school coordinator and the community school committee that includes parents, community partners, school staff, youth, and other stakeholders.

4. Community Support Services. Community schools are hubs of their community. They provide a host of services, often in conjunction with community partners, including meals, health care, mental health counseling, and other services before, during, and after school.

5. Positive Discipline Practices. Community schools foster positive school climates and healthy relationships among students and between students and staff. Zero-tolerance policies that promote suspension and expulsion are replaced with restorative practices that build relationships and improve school climate. Discipline issues are dealt with in proactive ways. For example, restorative justice practices may be used to address conflict within a positive school climate that values and respects all members of the school community.

6. Family and Community Engagement. Parents and community members are full partners in community schools. They have substantive roles in school governance and setting school policies. Educators' expertise and experience are valued and respected, but all partners have a seat at the table and a voice in the learning community.

Past practice shows that in order to successfully implement these six pillars, schools need to hire a full-time community school coordinator, conduct regular needs and asset assessments, develop strategic plans, and create school-based problem-solving teams. Schools that do these things in collaboration with community stakeholders have become sustainable and show dramatic improvements.

When people hear of the six pillars, they often say, "That's what all schools should be like." That's true. But to achieve that goal requires resources, enlightened leadership, and the support of broad sections of a community.

It also requires intentional organizing and advocacy on many people's parts, particularly educators. Encourage your colleagues to ask your local union and parent and community organizations to help build the kinds of schools that all children deserve. 

Reprinted with slight changes from The New Teacher Book.

Community Schools, Teacher Unions, and Black Lives Matter

An interview with Jennifer Johnson of the Chicago Teachers Union



Editors' note: This is an edited excerpt from a longer interview with Jennifer Johnson, CTU's chief of staff, from the book Black Lives Matter at School. Jesse Hagopian interviewed Johnson about the racial justice victories of the CTU's 2019 strike.

How does the CTU's contract with the Chicago Public Schools deal with social justice?

The fourth demand of our 2019 strike was around different social justice issues. Even though really all of our demands were around social justice, this is where we focused on the fight for affordable housing and community schools. We didn't win the affordable housing we had hoped to make the city agree to, but we did end up winning additional full-time positions in our schools where students have the highest rates of homelessness.

In our last contract in 2016 we won \$10 million for 20 sustainable community schools. These schools follow principles like self-determination and racial justice, and then they work with the community to enact these principles.

Can you be more specific?

These schools focus on culturally relevant pedagogy, effective teaching instead of high-stakes testing, restorative justice, wraparound services, cooperative decision-making, parent engagement. We fought really hard to win expansion of that program. The district was threatening to cut it off but we won \$10 million per year of the contract, so a total of \$50 million to keep the program running.

What an amazing example of how to fight to change the school system to make Black lives matter. What do you think the role of unions should be in the struggle to make Black lives matter at school, and what is your vision for education that would truly make our Black students' lives valued?

Wow. Beautiful, big questions, Jesse. I think the role of teacher unions is critical. I am only a union leader because my rank-and-file colleagues in our caucus and

our leadership believe that racial and social justice is inherently built into our work as educators. I would not be a part of our union if it was otherwise. The students who we serve are our partners. We need to be working with our students to design a future that we think is collectively best. We can only do that if we recognize the inherent value of our students' identities, our students' families, our students' communities, and their challenges. . . .

I am a Black woman myself, and so this is not something that I had to learn, but it's something that teachers, union leaders have an opportunity to teach those who might not see it this way. I think the unions have a very particular role to make all educators feel it is their responsibility to contribute to anti-racist work. That includes unions that are in mostly white districts. We have to actively push people to see their role whatever their location, and whoever their students are, as contributing to a more just society. Black Lives Matter at School Week, I think, is just such a powerful call to action because it gives educators everywhere the ability to join in this racial justice work. BLM at School gives educators concrete activities to make that work real. Otherwise teachers can sometimes just talk about it, or say that they believe it, but Black Lives Matter at School Week has concretized, and made space, and shared resources across the country for that work. It is a clarion call to hold educators accountable. This action asks educators, "What does it look like in your classroom?" "What does it look like in your school?" "What does it look like in your district and your union?"

Our goal must be to create a school district where students, parents, educators, administration, and community members are in partnership with a mission of racial and social justice. That requires educators, and administrators in particular, to relinquish some control and power, to see themselves as a part of a collective effort to educate one another. It's not just about educating our students in a one-way direction, but learning from our students and finding areas where we need to grow.

How is the goal of "collective power"—all stakeholders working together—being realized in community schools in Chicago?

Our sustainable community schools program is not perfect, but it's a contribution in the struggle for that kind of an education. We need to work at building more schools where decision-making is shared, because once decisions become shared, community voice and community wisdom can be respected. That's not easy; this is about breaking down power dynamics, and that's something that school districts inherently resist with their hierarchical organization. Sometimes it is something that teacher unions resist, because they can be hierarchical too. We have to struggle against those instincts and push for more democratic instincts that we have as educators to listen, to debate, but also to be able to listen to parents, students, and community wisdom. When we include everyone in the decision-making process—especially the Black and Brown voices that have been marginalized for too long—the vision of Black students' lives mattering to the school becomes attainable. ■

Why Community Schools?

BY KYLE SERRETTE



It is common knowledge that there are neighborhoods and communities in the United States where children are supported so comprehensively that they can be whatever they want to be when they grow up. In these places, the children have strong public schools and affluent families, and they are lifted up no matter how many times they fall down.

In other places, it is rare for children to achieve their dreams. They attend under-resourced schools and live in beleaguered neighborhoods. Their family members often have low-paying jobs, if any, and face a variety of forms of discrimination.

This is societal inequity. Core questions for educators and teacher union



SUSAN SIMENSKY BIETILA

leaders include: What are the best strategies to address such inequality? What role can schools play? And how can school communities influence their surrounding neighborhoods and cities to address this inequity as well?

To date, there is one school-based strategy—community schools—that has demonstrated the ability to successfully challenge such inequities and foster an environment where *all* children have a solid chance at being able to achieve their dreams.

It may seem like a preposterous claim that there is only *one* school-based strategy out there that has worked to successfully challenge these inequities, but it is true. Consider that the average student spends 1,000 waking hours per year

inside school and 4,500 waking hours outside of school. There is general consensus within the research community that academic success is dependent upon excellent enrichment during the 1,000 hours *and* the 4,500 hours. And the data also show higher-income families invest heavily to ensure their children have high-quality experiences outside of school (e.g., tutoring, soccer, piano, chess, coding classes, trips abroad, etc.).

In fact, the annual gap between what lower-income and higher-income families spend on out-of-school enrichment activities is \$8,000, a figure that has tripled since 1972.¹ Meaning, low-income families generally do not have the resources to pay for high-quality activities outside of school time. If a student is in an out-of-school environment that is not only lacking in quality enrichment, but is perhaps harmful as well, then we know the chance of this student being able to achieve their dreams is slim, even if they have an excellent school experience.

The community school strategy, if implemented in a transformative way, has proved in a large number of research studies² to be very successful. This strategy mobilizes students, families, educators, and community members to develop a grassroots vision for their schools *and* their communities; together these stakeholders work to achieve their vision. In other words, the community school strategy targets the 1,000 hours spent in school, and the 4,500 hours spent outside of school, and works to improve *both*.

Yes, there are other school-based strategies that have resulted in students being able to achieve their dreams, but all those strategies rely upon some level of selectivity—a parent must apply, a student must test in or must keep up with the rigorous environment, etc.

What differentiates the community school strategy from other successful school strategies is that it is designed to work in any community, with any student body, and within any public school feeder pattern, while the other whole-school strategies rely upon selectivity to create the environment necessary to achieve those results. The problem with selectivity-based strategies is that they pick a small number of “winners” and leave inequity for everyone else. And of course, you can’t scale up selectivity. This is why the community school strategy is special, and the only strategy that has proved to achieve transformational results on a small and large scale.

Demonstrated Success

In 2001, stakeholders in Cincinnati decided to turn all of their schools into community schools (called Community Learning Centers). At the time, Cincinnati was the lowest-performing district in Ohio and had an achievement gap between Black and white students of 14.5 percent. Today Cincinnati is the highest-performing urban school district in Ohio, and the achievement gap is only 4.5 percent. In 2010, two of the lowest-performing schools in Austin, Texas’ highest-poverty neighborhood went from the brink of closure to becoming the highest-performing Title I schools in their city.

In the 1990s Kentucky converted almost all of its schools into community

schools—called Family Resource and Youth Service Centers. Kentucky went from being consistently ranked one of the worst in the nation in education to outperforming half of all states and reducing their socioeconomic achievement gap to the smallest in the nation. Cincinnati, Austin, and Kentucky all accomplished these results without selectivity.

Some schools have implemented a community school model without explicitly naming it. In fact, this seems to be a characteristic of the community school strategy. As John Rogers, a community school historian at UCLA, stated: “Community schooling has achieved a peculiar form of longevity. Unlike other long-standing innovations such as standardized testing that have followed a direct pathway from the margins to the educational mainstream, community schooling seems to rise and fall in salience every generation. It is an idea that has been continually ‘rediscovered’—by educators, community activists, policymakers, and presidents.”

Take, for example, the great results³ coming from LeBron James’ I Promise School in Akron, Ohio, and the strategy⁴ to which they attribute their success—STEM curriculum, wraparound supports, and trauma support systems (all hallmarks of the community schools strategy). You will not find one mention of the community school strategy on the I Promise website, and there is little evidence that they deliberately chose to use the community schools strategy. Instead, the I Promise School “rediscovered” the strategy, and it is working. The problem is that our students and communities can’t wait for the community school strategy to be rediscovered. The strategy is urgently needed across the country.

Challenges and Opportunities

All this sounds good on paper and has proven quite successful, as discussed above. And yet this is a particularly challenging model to implement. Resource-strapped school districts often struggle to fund full-time coordinators at each school. Communities have different levels of wraparound services that are readily available, whether they’re from the city or county governments or nonprofit social service agencies. And while before- and after-school programming can enrich non-school hours, that too costs money, to say nothing of the need for neighborhood improvements—housing, health care, violence reduction, and jobs. Thus in Cincinnati they’ve strategically targeted not only school improvement but neighborhood improvement as well.

Beyond the issue of money, some of the six pillars of community schools (see definition on p. 146) are particularly challenging. Inclusive/shared leadership is not a given in many school districts where hierarchal leadership styles are common. Similarly, discrimination and low expectations—by educators and the curricular offerings, and by the broader community itself, are not easily overcome.

And yet the power of this strategy is that it explicitly demands that such issues be addressed. Several school districts that have adopted this strategy insist that schools demonstrate their readiness through an application process and a favorable vote by students, staff, and parents. Building strong models from the very start is essential.

New York City

Many education justice coalitions and unions have worked together to take on the funding dilemma, at times winning millions to provide public schools with the resources to adopt the community school strategy, and new community schools are already starting to get great results. In New York City, for example, the Coalition for Educational Justice organized and won funding for 200+ schools to adopt the community school strategy. According to a 2020 RAND study,⁵ the community school strategy is “having tangible impact on a variety of student outcomes.”

Durham, North Carolina

The Durham Association of Educators (DAE) and a coalition of community allies set the goal of winning funding to start a small number of community schools. Given the history of top-down reforms in their district, the DAE wanted to approach their members from the bottom up. To do this, the DAE decided to hold a vote at four schools so that their members would determine whether or not their schools would adopt the community school strategy. Over the course of four months, a DAE organizer held information sessions, conducted one-on-ones, and mapped “yes” votes and “no” votes. The vote was approached just like a traditional National Labor Relations Board election campaign. While there wasn’t the traditional union-busting counter campaign, there were hurdles due to member skepticism about “another school reform strategy.” In the end, the four schools overwhelmingly voted to adopt the community school strategy, and their members and allies successfully pushed for funding from the county and the school board.

Los Angeles

Several years ago in Los Angeles, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) and a number of powerful community organizations in LA started a coalition called Reclaim Our Schools LA (ROSLA). The platform the group developed was visionary and included a demand for community school funding. While ROSLA was still forming, the education landscape in Los Angeles shifted dramatically, with the loss of a pro-union school board majority. The shift was funded by a group of billionaires, led by Eli Broad. Before the new board was seated, ROSLA worked with the outgoing school board president and board to pass a resolution supportive of community schools. The resolution, which the board passed unanimously, called for the creation of a Community Schools Implementation Team (CSIT) composed of district leaders, community-based organizations and nonprofits, academics, and labor organizations. After a year of work that ROSLA led, CSIT submitted recommendations to the superintendent. At the same time, UTLA was engaged in a bargaining for the common good campaign that was aligned to the ROSLA platform. Years of deep member and community engagement preceded the negotiations, and eventually the 2019 strike. The district resisted ROSLA’s bargaining proposals and eventually offered good pay and benefits, consistently leaving community school funding off the table. The bargaining team, which included ROSLA

members, decided to stay on strike until their non-economic key priorities were agreed to, which included funding to start 30 community schools. UTLA and the district convened a labor-management community table to oversee the implementation of the community school strategy. There are many lessons from LA, but two important ones are: 1) build coalition power to win your priorities *and* make sure you maintain enough power to ensure your priorities are implemented with fidelity; and 2) build a community school implementation table that has real authority to make decisions, and make sure coalition partners are members.

Hillsborough, Florida

In Hillsborough, Florida, the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association worked with community organizations and the district to pass a community school resolution and policy. Today, Hillsborough is home to six community schools. The union is a lead partner in the implementation of Hillsborough's community schools. Borrowing a page from Los Angeles, Hillsborough created a labor-management community table to oversee the implementation of their community schools. Even though their program is only in its first year, they have already started to produce great outcomes.

Las Cruces, New Mexico

In 2015, Las Cruces, New Mexico, had an anti-union school board majority, a superintendent aligned with the worst aspects of education reform, and a new, determined education coalition that was eager to make big changes. (See Guisbond & Neill, p. 328.) In 2020, Las Cruces opened its fourth community school, there is now a friendly school board and superintendent, and nine new state-funded community schools recently opened after legislation passed last year appropriating more than \$2 million to support community school efforts. All of this happened because the education coalition organized and organized some more. NEA-Las Cruces is a key member of the coalition.

Milwaukee

In Milwaukee, the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTEA) and the Schools & Communities United coalition convinced the school board to start three community schools as an alternative to draconian alternatives that were part of No Child Left Behind. Soon after, the local United Way got involved to help fund the community school coordinators, which in turn led to an agreement between the school district, the MTEA, and the United Way to be the three organizations to collaboratively lead implementation. As the community schools grew in number to 12, the United Way funded another position to supervise and assist the school-based community school coordinators. According to a recent study by the University of Wisconsin–Madison into the effectiveness of the strategy in Milwaukee, the high school completion rates of the two schools that have used the strategy the longest show more than double the growth of the rest of the district.

Conclusion

The community school strategy works because it is a strategy that grinds its way to equity under the power of the aspirations of students, families, educators, and community members. The concept is simple but its implementation can be challenging. Yet it works in rural, suburban, or urban communities throughout the country. Up until 2010, community schools did not have a powerful institutional force coordinating local, state, and national efforts to scale the strategy. Today, powerful institutions, the teacher unions, have dedicated significant resources to seeding and supporting the growth of community schools across the country. They have done this in collaboration with community school leaders, community organizations, student organizations, and parent organizations. The hope is to escape the pattern of rediscovery described by Dr. John Rogers. Let's hope for the United States' sake that they stick with it, so that one day a young person's dreams are not determined by their ZIP code. 🍌

Kyle Serrette is a senior policy analyst at the National Education Association.

ENDNOTES

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Resources on Community Schools

American Federation of Teachers

aft.org/position/community-schools/resources

Coalition for Community Schools

Sponsors biennial national conferences and has many resources on its website, including *Community Schools Playbook: A Practical Guide to Advancing Community School Strategies* by the Partnership for the Future of Learning.
communityschools.org

Center for Popular Democracy

Community Schools: Transforming Struggling Schools into Thriving Schools, published by the Center for Popular Democracy, the Coalition for Community Schools, and the Southern Education Foundation.
populardemocracy.org

Journey for Justice Alliance

A network of more than two dozen community organizations that organize to improve public schools, stop school privatization, and promote transformative community schools.
j4jalliance.com

National Education Association

The Six Pillars of Community Schools Toolkit: NEA Resource Guide for Educators, Families & Communities
nea.org

Partnership for the Future of Learning

A helpful toolkit on the nuts and bolts of developing community schools.
Community Schools Playbook: A Practical Guide to Advancing Community Schools Strategies
futureforlearning.org/2019/04/19/community-schools-playbook/

“You Have to Stop. You Have to Create Space”

A union takes the lead in implementing restorative justice

BY LEIGH DINGERSON

Growing inequality, poverty and homelessness, racism and the rise of open white supremacy, mass violence—the context of our daily lives and those of our students don’t get left behind at the schoolhouse door. They impact our moods and our relationships with others in conscious and unconscious ways.

Too many schools have responded by hunkering down; adopting “no excuses” policies to control children and “hardening,” reacting as if violence is inevitable; strengthening security systems; staffing schools with police officers; and even arming educators.

Taking a different direction, though, hundreds of schools across the country are turning away from rigid, compliance-based discipline and school management strategies and turning instead toward restorative justice, a school culture shift that views relationship building as a more effective way to strengthen school climate, make schools safer, and improve learning and teaching conditions.

One strong example can be seen in Howard County, Maryland, where the educators’ union is leading an initiative to transform school climate by implementing restorative justice in a cohort that includes six of the district’s 77 schools. And although the work is in its early stages and has yet to win the financial backing of the district, it appears to be making a difference for educators as well as students.

Howard County, Maryland: A Small District, Learning to Do the Right Thing

Howard County sits about midway between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. It is solidly suburban, and home to some of the most affluent communities in the state.

The Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) serves 58,000 students in 77 schools. The student body is diverse: 36 percent white, 24 percent Black/African American, 22 percent Asian, and 11 percent Latino. But that diversity is not as pronounced at the building level. Most of the schools are comparatively segregated. And most of the district’s educators—86 percent of them—are white.

Though lauded as one of the most successful districts in the state when it comes to academic outcomes, the HCPSS has not escaped the impacts of racism. Black students in Howard County are between two and 18 times more likely to be suspended than the overall student population. Data show that nearly half of suspensions are for subjective offenses such as disrespect or disruption. And a recent effort by the district to redraw school boundary lines to adjust to population shifts in the county and attempt to diversify the schools by both race and economic status surfaced deep divisions between communities.

Restorative Justice Circles as an “Activity” . . . or Real Transformation?

For many years, the district has offered professional development in *restorative practices* as an “alternative to suspension.” But, says Colleen Morris, president of the Howard County Education Association (HCEA), it has not equipped educators with the necessary foundation or knowledge to be effective practitioners. The



trainings were shallow and inconsistent. And the use of circles focused primarily on students. While Maryland has articulated an option for schools to use restorative approaches, it has been marketed as something you do *to* students.

This approach to restorative justice does not shift school culture, Morris asserts. It should not be simplified as an alternative to suspension. Restorative justice, when

implemented correctly, must begin with the *staff*, to ensure that they truly understand, believe in, and support the practices associated with the overall philosophy.

Three years ago, the HCEA decided to take a more active role in introducing a comprehensive approach to restorative justice in schools. Morris herself was

frustrated with the professional development the district was offering, which, she said with thinly veiled sarcasm, “trained the entire district staff in about 20 minutes.” Now, Morris cringes at the thought of that training. “It was just so wrong on so many levels,” she says. Some schools were getting the 20-minute version of the training, others were getting slightly more. But the result of the trainings wasn’t a transformation in school culture. It was increasing skepticism and cynicism among the district’s educators, who began to believe that restorative justice didn’t work, and certainly didn’t meet their needs or the needs of their students.

When Morris stepped into the union presidency in 2017, she had a lot on her plate: building relationships with the superintendent, increasing the union membership, and impending work on policies and essential state funding. But she also wanted the union

to play a role in figuring out how to implement restorative justice with fidelity. That year she also met Dwanna Nicole, a civil rights advocate who has been working to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and helping districts implement restorative justice for years.

Identifying Committed School Leaders First

Morris collaborated with Nicole, who works with practitioners nationwide through the Restorative Justice Partnership, to provide a series of professional development offerings. In the first year, 11 targeted schools were invited to participate. The schools were invited based on their suspension and referral data, and level of high-needs students. The HCEA also invited schools based on union surveys of overall morale at the buildings.

Participants were required to come in teams, including the school’s principal, interested educators, and at least one community member. These initial opportunities included both four-day peace circle trainings and one-day workshops on the school-to-prison pipeline and restorative justice.

What is a circle?

The most comprehensive restorative justice practice is a circle. A circle can be used proactively, to develop relationships and build community, or reactively, to respond to harm. Circles provide people an opportunity to speak and listen to one another in a safe atmosphere and allow educators and students to be heard and offer their own perspectives. Circles can also be used to celebrate students, begin and end the day, and discuss difficult issues.

Source: Restorative Practices Guide.
schottfoundation.org/sites/default/files/restorative-practices-guide.pdf

Out of these initial trainings, four cohort schools were originally chosen. What they were looking for and found, says Nicole, was school leadership that was interested and committed to the work. “In the end, the principals chose us,” she says.

Research on restorative justice implementation has found that one of the strongest indicators of success in transforming school culture through restorative justice is strong leadership. “You have to have someone at the top who really believes in it,” says Nicole. “You can have staff that want to do it, but if you don’t have the building leader on board, it won’t happen schoolwide. And to do it right, it has to be a whole-school effort.”

The current six-school cohort in Howard County includes two high schools, two middle schools, and two elementary schools. One of the high schools—Long Reach High School—won the agreement of the district to create a 9th-grade academy called the Reach Academy as an initiative immersed in restorative justice. The academy draws about 100 entering 9th graders each year. The students are selected through conversations between middle and high school educators looking for students who are performing fine in middle school, but who could excel if provided with intentional supports and motivation. The academy centralizes relationships as the key to learning. Students play a role in building school community, participate in an accelerated course progression, and experience an infusion of co-curricular activities with the intention to increase engagement in school.

“You Have to Breathe”

The work of implementing restorative justice well is time-consuming and requires a lot from educators, including a real shift in mindset.

Plenty of educators have been resistant, Morris notes. For the most part, that’s because they’ve been frustrated by professional development in positive behavior practices that are inadequately taught and poorly implemented. “We have to demonstrate that this is different,” she says.

Josh Wasilewski, principal at Long Reach High School, agrees. “The restorative practices professional development originally offered by the school system placed an emphasis on how to facilitate community circles as a means to develop a sense of community and trust in an instructional setting. It wasn’t until I experienced the four-day restorative justice training that I realized the philosophy extended way beyond meeting in a circle. The training provided a space for participants to explore and understand the philosophy behind restorative justice as well as learn the important essential elements of facilitating a peace circle. It was by far the most powerful professional learning I have ever experienced.”

The power of these trainings notwithstanding, one of the biggest challenges for educators is the lack of time. They are under so much pressure to get everything done, and it feels impossible to take the time to fully engage in the training and practices necessary to fully embrace restorative justice. In response, the union has arranged substitute days so that they are able to pull educators into these intensive trainings in small groups, so that only a few of them are away from the building at a time.

This time-consuming process is critical to the culture shift, though. “One of the biggest takeaways from the process and the trainings is exactly this: You have to stop. You have to create space and time for your students if you want to build the relationships that are at the heart of this school culture shift. If something has to give, you have to change your mindset that the rewards—what you’re going to get back and how you’re going to change the culture of the school—are fundamental to investing this time in your students,” says Morris. “You have to breathe.”

Finding the Right Resources

A key partner in the Howard County effort has been Dr. Kevin F. Gilbert, director of the HCPSS Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. He has been supportive and willing to advocate for restorative justice within the administration, as well as assist with hands-on training and implementation. The district is viewed almost as a cohort in and of itself, Gilbert notes. The union’s strong relationship with his office, as well as with the superintendent, have been invaluable.

The role of the union and the union’s president has been critical. “Colleen has really showed up as union president. She’s in the schools, at the meetings, at the trainings,” says Nicole. Her presence neutralizes some of the educators’ fears and concerns.

But the district has so far not been able to designate funding for this work, other than allowing some of the professional development funds to be utilized. To date, most of the funding has come directly from the union. Morris estimates that the union has invested about \$200,000 toward this work in the last 18 months. In 2019, the union won a new grant from the NEA to help with implementation. But more and ongoing funding is needed.

At the core of the work are the four-day peace circle trainings, which take place regularly and with different groups of people. To ensure that the needs of those trained continue to be met, the HCEA offers a monthly space for them to build community and reflect on their practice and experiences. Principals and their restorative justice teams receive an implementation training every summer before the school year begins. And now, students are being trained to keep circles, even at the elementary school level. “This work is about sharing power, and what better way to do that than to have students keep circles on topics that are of interest to them and their peers,” says Nicole.

So far, the union has been able to cobble together the resources needed to continue. But at some point, they know the district will have to step up and embrace the work.

Challenges and Next Steps

Challenges to the work of transforming school climate through restorative justice can come from outside. In 2019, Howard County Superintendent Dr. Michael J. Martirano announced an effort to redraw attendance zones to better balance the schools, not just for race, but also for economic diversity. The system is a high-performing one overall, but segregation inside individual schools needed to be addressed.

The proposal ignited an ugly episode. Communities were angry that some children would be moved to other schools. During the public comment period there was racist language used to describe a number of schools within the county, including some of the cohort schools. It was a painful moment. The cohort schools were able to host healing circles to address and acknowledge the harm and think through ways they could support each other moving forward.

One challenge continues to be engaging impacted families, particularly to help drive political will inside the district to fund the work. Too many impacted families feel that they've never been listened to at their child's school. And issues of race and class play out between families, educators, and administrators. But including families in this work is vital, Nicole says. The Restorative Justice Partnership has been able to assist with this effort. By partnering with the union and school district, they recently held a public panel discussion about restorative justice and the ongoing work within the cohort schools. The panel included students, families, staff, and administrators from within Howard County; Paterson, New Jersey; and Denver.

"We are moving the needle," says Morris, albeit slowly.

More educators are coming to the union, asking for the training. Nicole says that the focus for 2020 was to get more people engaged. "We need to work with the folks who really want to do this. Sure, some educators are waiting to see if this is just the shiny new thing that eventually goes away. For now, we are focused on investing in those who are committed, while continuing to provide education and resources to those who need and want it."

Beyond the Reach Academy, the union doesn't have much quantitative data on the results of their work yet. But experiential indicators are beginning to be reported. "To see the changes that have occurred since implementing restorative justice proves to me that all of the work that our staff and students have done to build community and relationships has positively impacted the day-to-day life at Swansfield," says Allison Birmingham, a pre-kindergarten teacher at Swansfield Elementary.

Laurel Porter, her school principal, agrees. "Staff are truly learning and growing together! The relationships being built among our staff are ultimately having a positive impact on our students. Those relationships are important when working and supporting students and creating a network of people to support each other and the students we work with," says Porter. "One of the most telling signs is that we have staff members who are asking for more professional learning. While at first they thought they should see immediate change, they have learned and recognize that it takes time to do this right, and they have a real desire to do just that. People believe in the power of us taking this journey together and believe we owe it to every student who walks through our doors each morning."

Issues of race and class play out between families, educators, and administrators.

For Colleen Morris, the academic outcomes will happen. But in these initial years, the cultural change has been gratifying. “We have been able to breathe. When we can create space for our educators to breathe, they’ll be able to create space for their students to breathe.” 

Leigh Dingerson is a former community organizer, and currently a freelance writer and researcher on community and labor struggles for education justice. She is the author, most recently, of Building the Power to Reclaim Our Schools, a case study on the 2019 Los Angeles teachers’ strike.

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Teacher Strikes Boost Fight for Racial Justice in Schools

BY SAMANTHA WINSLOW



JOE BRUSKY | MTEA

During their 2019 strike, Los Angeles teachers demanded an end to random searches where students were yanked out of class to be frisked. By the time they walked back into work, they had won a partial victory.

As of 2020, these searches were coming to an end districtwide—landing a blow against racism in the schools.

LA teacher union activists, like their counterparts in Chicago, Seattle, St. Paul, and other cities, are making contract demands to confront segregation, underfunding, and the criminalization of the students they teach—problems that hit Black and Latino students hardest.

The LA strike elevated a wide range of demands, including smaller class sizes and more nurses and social workers. After listening to students about their top concerns, strikers also highlighted the issue of random searches.

The district started this practice more than 25 years ago after school shootings, with the stated goal of keeping weapons out. But as of 2019, LA was one of very few districts using random searches—only 4 percent do nationwide.

Students are pulled out of class while administrators and security officers search their bags and scan them with a metal detector. When these staff are short-handed, teachers and counselors are sometimes asked to do the wandering.

Not So Random

A UCLA report on two years of searches (2013–15) found that overwhelmingly, ordinary items were confiscated, not guns and weapons. Contraband included markers, highlighters, white-out, lighters, and body spray.

And the “random” searches weren’t so random. The student-led group Students Deserve, which also includes parents and teachers, reported that students in magnet schools and advanced classes were rarely searched. Black students got searched most often.

Students said it made them feel like suspects at their own schools. Marshé Doss, a senior at Dorsey High School during the strike, had been searched and had her hand sanitizer confiscated; a school official accused her of bringing it to school to get high.

“As Black and Brown students, we have all of these things piled up against us,” said Doss. “I had so many questions after that experience.”

Teacher Sharonne Hapuarachy sponsors the Students Deserve chapter at Dorsey High. When the random search happened in her classroom, she was shocked. “It was really disturbing and scary for me, even as the teacher,” she said. She was taken aback by the way the students were spoken to. “It felt very serious; it creates a sense of anxiety.”

Made Them Bargain

Ending random searches was one on a long list of union demands that the district did not legally have to bargain over. The district ignored these—until the walkout.

“Because the strike brought out public opinion in support of our issues,” said Arlene Inouye, secretary of United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), “we were able to leverage that at the end to get things we would never get before.”

In the deal that ended the strike, the district committed to a pilot program, letting 14 schools apply to opt out of the searches for the 2019–20 school year; 14 more would become eligible the following year.

Other union wins were class size caps, more staff, legal support for undocumented students, and green space on school campuses.

But the strike momentum led to a bigger win on the issue. In May, a school board seat opened up. With UTLA's help, a union ally won the seat. And in June, the board voted to sunset the random searches with the end of the 2019–20 school year.

Joined Student Activists

Four years before the strike, teachers came to union leaders complaining about the searches, Inouye said.

She recalled one teacher in particular who brought the issue to her attention. “He never thought that the union would be interested in the issue,” Inouye said. “Of course we would,” was the leaders’ response, she said, “but we have to build and organize around it.”

Teachers and counselors said when they were asked to conduct the searches, it broke the trust they were trying to build with students. They also argued the searches were a waste of time that could be spent learning.

So UTLA teamed up with Students Deserve and the American Civil Liberties Union to launch the Students Not Suspects campaign. They organized forums and protested at school board meetings. High school students designed and handed out 18,000 #studentsnotsuspects buttons. Students and parents spoke up about why searches weren’t making schools safe.

“We fear it [being stopped and searched] outside of school,” said Amee Monroy, a Students Deserve activist who is a Dorsey senior this year. “We shouldn’t have to fear it in school.”

Students had been organizing on this issue since 2016. But “having UTLA on our side added way more people to the movement,” Monroy said. And the strike added big leverage.

Counselors Not Cops

LA teachers aren’t alone. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has been outspoken about the racism of that city’s school system.

Schools with many students of color are disproportionately deprived of funding and staffing. And before their 2012 strike, Chicago teachers battled a wave of school closings in parts of the city where the district should have been adding resources, not subtracting them.

When Seattle teachers struck in 2015, they demanded funds and training for every school to form an equity team, which would identify and change racist discipline policies. They won these teams in 30 schools.

A central demand in St. Paul teachers’ near-strike in 2016 was alternatives to harsh discipline practices that disproportionately affected students of color. They won that push.

In 2017, teacher activists in Philadelphia and Seattle first organized a week of action on the theme Black Lives Matter at School. Since then, a growing number of unions and grassroots education activists around the country have participated

every February. One united demand is to end “zero-tolerance” discipline policies that impose mandatory suspensions or push students into the criminal system for certain infractions.

Many school districts have moved to limit suspensions. But unions assert in bargaining that it’s not enough just to change the rules. What students need instead is more time and attention from trained adults; districts have to put money into staffing.

In fall 2019, teachers in Chicago made racial justice demands again when they walked out for 11 days. On top of guaranteed nurses, counselors, and librarians in every school, they proposed that the district allow high schools to reduce the number of police officers stationed inside and redirect that funding to hire staffers trained to counsel students.

They also demanded that the district stop cooperating with Immigration and Customs Enforcement and with the city’s police database of gang members.

A Learning Process

The CTU has protested the decline of Black teachers in the district—from 40 to 20 percent in two decades. It calls for the district to create pipelines to train and recruit teachers of color.

The union works in coalition with police accountability groups. When the city says there’s no more money for schools, teachers point to its creation of a \$95 million cop academy.

Students on Strike

Dorsey High School students who were active in the Students Not Suspects campaign supported UTLA’s six-day strike in 2019.

The district was trying to keep schools open during the strike, but student activists encouraged their peers to increase the pressure by not attending school.

Instead, 150 students attended a block party nearby. They made art and played music, then headed over to the school board for a protest and sit-in to show their support for striking UTLA members.

Students from different schools joined candlelight vigils and protests at the superintendent’s Malibu mansion and at school board members’ houses, demanding that the board meet the teachers’ demands and end the strike.

For Amee Monroy, an 11th grader at the time, a standout moment was joining 40,000 UTLA members and supporters in an enormous march through downtown LA despite pouring rain.

“I will always think about holding my umbrella and being in a sea of red,” she said. “It was so fun, and we were making change at the same time.”

All this action for racial justice didn't crystallize overnight. It has taken discussion for members to build a consensus that school climate is a union issue. And those discussions aren't over.

"There's a lot more work to do to help people think about this differently, how racism presents itself economically [in terms of allocation of resources]," said CTU's chief of staff, former social studies teacher Jennifer Johnson. "Our students don't need punitive systems, but support systems."

In Chicago and LA last year, district negotiators spent months dismissing demands that went beyond legally sanctioned topics like wages and benefits.

"Of course the district said no at first," Inouye said. "They weren't going to hear any 'common good' demands." It took strikes to make the districts move.

The CTU did not win its demand to swap out school police for support staff. But it did win increased staffing for nurses, social workers, and therapists, and new contract language about restorative justice, an alternative approach to student discipline that emphasizes solving problems and making amends rather than punishing infractions.

Next, Pepper Spray

In LA, the Students Deserve coalition as of 2020 had set its sights on ending the use of pepper spray against students. In one incident at Dorsey High, school police used pepper spray on students who were fighting—but also ended up spraying other students who were trying to break up the fight or just walking by.

Since the random searches were coming to an end, Students Deserve presented the school board with its list of proposed school safety alternatives. The students recommended adding more staff to offer help and guidance. They also recommended that the district involve the community, rather than the police, in a "safe passage" program to provide adult supervision on routes where kids and teens walk home from school.

Student activists were to organize this campaign the same way they'd organized the last one, Doss said: "talking to students, doing direct action, doing things bigger."

For the union, taking on the issue of random searches has uncovered new leaders like Hapuarachy. She said campaigns like this one have gotten her more active in the union. For her, UTLA's mission includes "fighting for racial justice in schools, making sure there aren't pockets of schools where students are being treated differently [than students are] in other parts of the city." 📢

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