

**BLACK
LIVES
MATTER**

**GET
MPD
OUT OF
MPS**

TEACHERS NOT COPS
ART CLASS NOT COPS
MUSIC CLASS NOT COPS
GYM CLASS NOT COPS
COUNSELORS NOT COPS
NURSES NOT COPS
JANITORS NOT COPS

GARDENS NOT COPS
HEALTH CLASS NOT COPS
BUS DRIVERS NOT COPS
THEATER NOT COPS
OFFICE STAFF NOT COPS
PLAYGROUNDS NOT COPS
FIELD TRIPS NOT COPS

SHOP CLASS NOT COPS
HEALTHY FOOD NOT COPS
SCHOLARSHIPS NOT COPS
LANGUAGES NOT COPS
MONTESSORI NOT COPS
BILINGUAL LEARNING
NOT COPS

SECTION FIVE FIGHTING THE SYSTEM

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Confronting the Education Debt

BY THE ALLIANCE TO RECLAIM OUR SCHOOLS

During winter and spring of 2018, teachers in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado, North Carolina, and Puerto Rico took to the streets demanding greater investment in their public schools. Their protests emerged, in part, out of frustration that so much school funding, slashed during the Great Recession of 2008, has yet to be restored.

But for African American and Latino communities, the underfunding of public schools goes back generations. Over the past 50 years we have shortchanged students and their schools by hundreds of billions of dollars in federal education funding alone.

Policymakers argue that there is no more money for education—*especially* in districts serving low-income and Black and Brown children. Yet there is a direct correlation between dwindling resources for public schools and the ongoing political proclivity for transferring public dollars to the nation's wealthiest individuals and corporations. The rich are getting richer. Our schools are broke on purpose.

In a 2006 address, Gloria Ladson-Billings, then president of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), introduced the concept of the “education debt.” Focusing solely on the “achievement gap,” she argued, failed to acknowledge the historic, economic, sociopolitical, and moral foundations of the disparate educational outcomes between white students and students of color.

Confronting the Education Debt, by the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS), embraces Ladson-Billings’ theory and argues that still today, the relative disenfranchisement of communities of color has allowed elected policymakers to pursue priorities that deny millions of children the educational opportunities they deserve.

Instead of funding our schools, policy decisions are made that increase personal and corporate wealth, drawing down public revenues in the process. Instead of funding our schools, we have seen an explosion of policies that criminalize Black and Brown communities, including staffing their schools with police officers instead of guidance counselors. Instead of funding public schools, privatization—through charters and vouchers—soaks up education dollars and strips the budgets of traditional public districts. All of these trends continue to compound the education debt.

While acknowledging the historic nature of the education debt, the AROS report takes a snapshot of time—the years between 2005 and 2017. A student who

entered 1st grade in 2005 would have graduated from high school in May 2017. AROS uses that time frame to explore the decisions and trends that have continued to deny Black, Brown, and low-income students access to the schools they deserve, while enhancing the bank accounts of the richest Americans.

Based on data compiled for this report, between 2005 and 2017, public schools serving majorities of low-income students in the U.S. were underfunded by \$580 billion in federal dollars alone—for programs specifically targeted at our most vulnerable children. Over that same period, the personal wealth of the nation's 400 richest people grew by a combined \$1.57 trillion. Priorities chosen and decisions made by U.S. elected officials are implicated in both of these facts.

As our elected officials have stripped funding from schools, they have also presided over the systematic transfer of wealth from public to private hands, a massive investment in the criminalization of people of color and waged a methodical campaign to privatize public education through the proliferation of charter schools and voucher programs. Taken together, these policy priorities add up to a devastating assault on public schools in Black, Brown, and low-income communities and the students they serve. The debt we owe these students, schools, and communities is vast and growing.

Public education itself is not the problem. Thousands of public schools across the nation have functional technology in every classroom, well-stocked libraries, and state-of-the-art science labs. Their young people are expected to be future leaders. There are public schools with classes small enough that teachers can individualize their instruction according to student needs. Public schools work, but only where they are fully resourced to do so. And that tends to be in white, middle-class, and affluent communities.

In contrast, without comparable resources, Black and Brown students are more likely to:

- Sit in crowded classrooms.
- Be taught by first-year teachers and/or by teachers who have not met basic certification requirements.
- Attend schools with higher teacher turnover rates.
- Have less access to high-level math and science courses (often a prerequisite for college).
- Have less access to guidance counselors, librarians, nurses, technology, and other critical resources.
- Be removed from the classroom altogether and placed in some form of detention.

Schools that fail to serve these children are not accidental, nor are they the fault of students, educators, unions, communities, or parents—all of whom seem too often to take the blame. They are the logical outcome of the systematic exclusion of Black and Brown communities from the halls of political power where priorities are set and budgets determined.

The Historic Underpinnings of Exclusion

The history of public education in the United States is a chronicle of great promise and of systematic exclusion. Until the 1960s, the nation did not even *profess* to serve all children equitably. Thomas Jefferson proposed a two-track education system, with schools serving “the learned” separate from those designed to serve “the laboring.” Southern states enacted laws making it a crime to teach enslaved people to read. Industrialists in the early 1800s created schools that emphasized discipline and obedience in order to turn out compliant factory workers. Children of the privileged class attended schools designed to turn out thinkers and leaders. Racial and class divides were strictly enforced.

In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court declared the doctrine of “separate but equal” unconstitutional, ordering public schools to be integrated to better serve children of color and our collective good. Resistance to the Court’s ruling, from white people who sought to maintain the advantage of superior schools for their own children, was immediate and fierce. In most places, racial and class segregation persisted.

In the 1960s and 1970s Congress sought to address systemic funding and resource disparities in public schools across the country. Since then, many state courts and legislatures have acknowledged the stark chasm between the resources provided to majority-white schools and those offered to Black and Brown children. The laws have bent haltingly toward justice, but action has lagged. The excuse is often the same: There is no money, or money doesn’t matter.

Money Matters

Although critics of public education have argued for years that money doesn’t matter for quality education, research has proven time and again that in fact, it matters a lot.

Districts serving white and more affluent students spend thousands to tens of thousands of dollars more, per pupil, than high-poverty school districts and those serving majorities of Black and Brown students. The challenges faced by these schools—larger class sizes, fewer experienced teachers, the lack of libraries, science equipment, technology, and counselors—all reflect a lack of resources. By failing to provide adequate funding, we deny these children the chance to fulfill their potential.

The fact that these funding disparities exist is not news. Since 2003, researchers in 25 states and the District of Columbia have conducted 41 “adequacy” studies that quantify the resources and conditions that students need to succeed in school. All but one of those studies recommended increased funding for public schools. Yet only eight states and D.C. have even partially adjusted state funding based on the findings. And the other 25 states have failed to even take on the task of determining what students need and how much it would cost to provide it.

Educational racism is continuing and growing worse. Beginning in 2014, more than half of public school students are students of color. And despite decades of promises of equal justice under law, Black children are more segregated in their schools today than they were 30 years ago.

Congress Has Failed to Fully Fund Targeted Federal Education Programs

Though the federal government contributes only about 8 percent of all spending on K–12 public schools, it is critical funding, because the majority of that funding is directly targeted at students with the greatest needs—low-income children and students with disabilities. Five decades of congressional failure to fully invest in the two largest K–2 funding streams has denied these children—and, we argue, all children—the additional supports they need.

Title I: A War on Poverty Without the Investment to Win

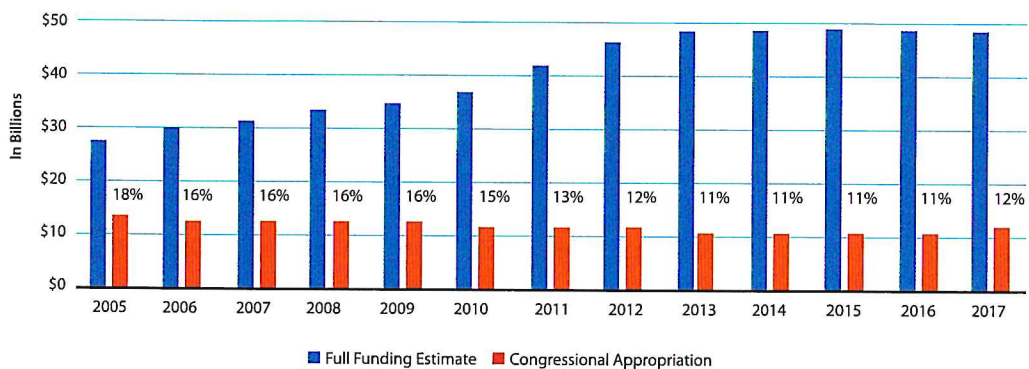
President Lyndon B. Johnson, in launching his War on Poverty, recognized that a key front in the battle against poverty was the nation's public schools. With the 1965 passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the federal government acknowledged that public schools in low-income communities need additional educational resources. Title I of the ESEA directs federal dollars to schools with high concentrations of students living in poverty.

Not only did lawmakers recognize the need for additional resources—they attempted to quantify it. Embedded in the law is the authorization—established by Congress in 1965—to provide school districts an additional 40 percent for each Title I-eligible child so that their schools could offer supplemental supports such as reading specialists and smaller class sizes.

Having established that additional 40 percent target in the law, Congress immediately failed to fully fund it, not only in 1965 but *in every year since*. Over the past dozen years, congressional appropriations for Title I have averaged less than half the promised funding. That means that the more than 56,000 Title I schools across the country lack the money they need to fully provide the supplemental supports viewed as critical by Congress in enacting the bill.

The impact of those annual underfunded appropriations is wrenchingly clear: If

Title 1 Full Funding (40% estimate) vs. Actual Appropriation



Source: Original research conducted by the Education Policy and Practice Department, Center for Great Public Schools, National Education Association. February 2018. For more information, see educationdebt.reclaimourschools.org.

Title I was fully funded by Congress, the nation's high-poverty schools could provide:

- Health and mental health services for every student, including dental and vision services; *and*
- A full-time nurse in every Title I school; *and*
- A full-time librarian for every Title I school; *and*
- A full-time additional counselor for every Title I school, *or*
- A full-time teaching assistant in every Title I classroom across the country.

If Congress funded Title I to the full amount authorized, schools serving concentrations of low-income students would have more resources that could make a real difference in student outcomes. But appropriation levels have never once met the congressionally established goal. The same holds true for federal dollars authorized to support students with disabilities.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): A Promise Denied

In 1975, a decade after passing the ESEA, Congress sought to address the educational needs of students with disabilities. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA) signaled a recognition by members of Congress that students with disabilities need additional services to allow them to achieve academically and sit side by side with their peers, and that the federal government had an obligation to help fund at least some of these services. IDEA is the second largest federal education program after Title I.

IDEA *requires* schools to identify and evaluate students thought to have disabilities and then to provide them with the supports they need in school. The financial assumption underlying IDEA is that on average, the cost of educating a child with disabilities is *twice* the cost of educating a non-disabled student. IDEA made providing these additional services mandatory and Congress pledged that the federal government would pay up to 40 percent of the cost. Under the law, local and state funds must cover the remaining costs.

Once again, having established the formula, Congress failed to invest in it. Federal funding of IDEA has never approached the promised 40 percent mark. And because IDEA *guarantees* the necessary services for all students with disabilities, state and local governments must not only contribute their share, but also cover the unfunded federal contribution. With an estimated 6.5 million students currently being served by IDEA, even the best resourced school districts are finding it difficult to meet the needs. But in districts already struggling for resources, the mandate of IDEA has shattered school budgets, affecting educational quality for *all* students—those with and those without disabilities.

Since 2005, the aggregated federal underpayment to states to help provide services to students with disabilities has reached \$233 billion. This amounts to an average of \$2,637 in additional funding each year for every special needs student in the country, 53 percent of whom are students of color.

Fully funded, this federal contribution would have been more than enough to assign an additional teacher's assistant for every 12 students with disabilities in a school.

The drain on local school district budgets has been so substantial that some states or districts have conspired to deny services to students who need—and have a right to—them, and/or to slash programming and staffing across the board in order to meet the legal mandates of IDEA.

State and Local School Funding Shortchanges Black, Brown, and Low-Income Schools

Federal shortchanging of public schools, just through the two formula programs mentioned above, approached \$55 billion in 2017 alone. But federal funding provides only a small portion of total spending on public education. Most education spending comes from local and state funds. Here too, schools serving Black and Brown students are systematically sabotaged.

Local sources—primarily property tax revenues—contribute about 45 percent of funding for public schools (this percentage varies from state to state)—a foundation of education funding that inherently discriminates against low-income communities.

With land and houses valued less on the market, low-income communities raise less revenue from property taxes than wealthy communities, and therefore have less to spend on their schools. This entrenched inequity has been recognized for decades. The Ohio Supreme Court has found that state's system of funding public schools through property tax revenues unconstitutional—four times. But change has proven difficult. Low-income communities have less political power. Wealthy districts are happy with the status quo.

State governments, which provide an average of 47 percent of school funding, can choose to use state money to offset local disparities in school resources. Only 11 states do so. Twenty states have flat funding formulas that do not distinguish between high- and low-poverty districts, and 17 states actually channel *more* resources to *wealthier* districts than to high-poverty ones.

The recession in 2008 put the squeeze on overdrive. Property values—particularly in low-income communities—rapidly lost value. Faced with emptying coffers, and with tax hikes either barred by law or perceived as politically suicidal, state and district leaders responded with budget cuts and, incredibly in some cases, with further tax cuts to wealthy corporations. Public schools, typically the largest line item in local budgets, bore the brunt. The impact was devastating in Black and Brown communities:

In 2011, in the midst of the recession, the School District of Philadelphia laid off 150 school nurses. Two years later, 12-year-old Laporshia Massey suffered an asthma attack at her school. Without a nurse on hand to evaluate her, school staff encouraged Laporshia to finish out the day. By the time she got home, her condition had deteriorated, and she died as

her father rushed her to the hospital. A few months later, a 7-year-old at Philadelphia's Andrew Jackson Elementary School collapsed. Again, no nurse was on hand. The child died.

Elected policymakers' responses to the recession impacted schools across the country, regardless of race or income. But because inequities in resources were already entrenched before 2008, and because schools in low-income communities were already on shoestring budgets when the recession hit, the impacts for them were much more dramatic. And even as the recovery began to take hold, the resource chasm between schools serving white and more affluent children and those serving children of color deepened.

The Education Trust found that in 2015 on average, districts with large majorities of students of color provided about \$1,800 (13 percent) less *per student* than districts in the same state serving the fewest students of color.

The same study found that *low-wealth* school districts on average receive about \$1,000 less per student in state funding than wealthy districts.

State legislatures have the power, but perhaps not the will, to ensure even a modicum of fairness in the funding of public schools. The "moral debt" identified by Gloria Ladson-Billings reflects, as she notes, "the disparity between what we know is right and what we actually do."

In the face of clear and convincing evidence that schools serving Black, Brown, and low-income students are being systematically underfunded, policymakers typically argue that there simply is no more money. But that is not entirely honest. We live in the wealthiest nation in the world. Funding public education—or not—is a matter of priorities.

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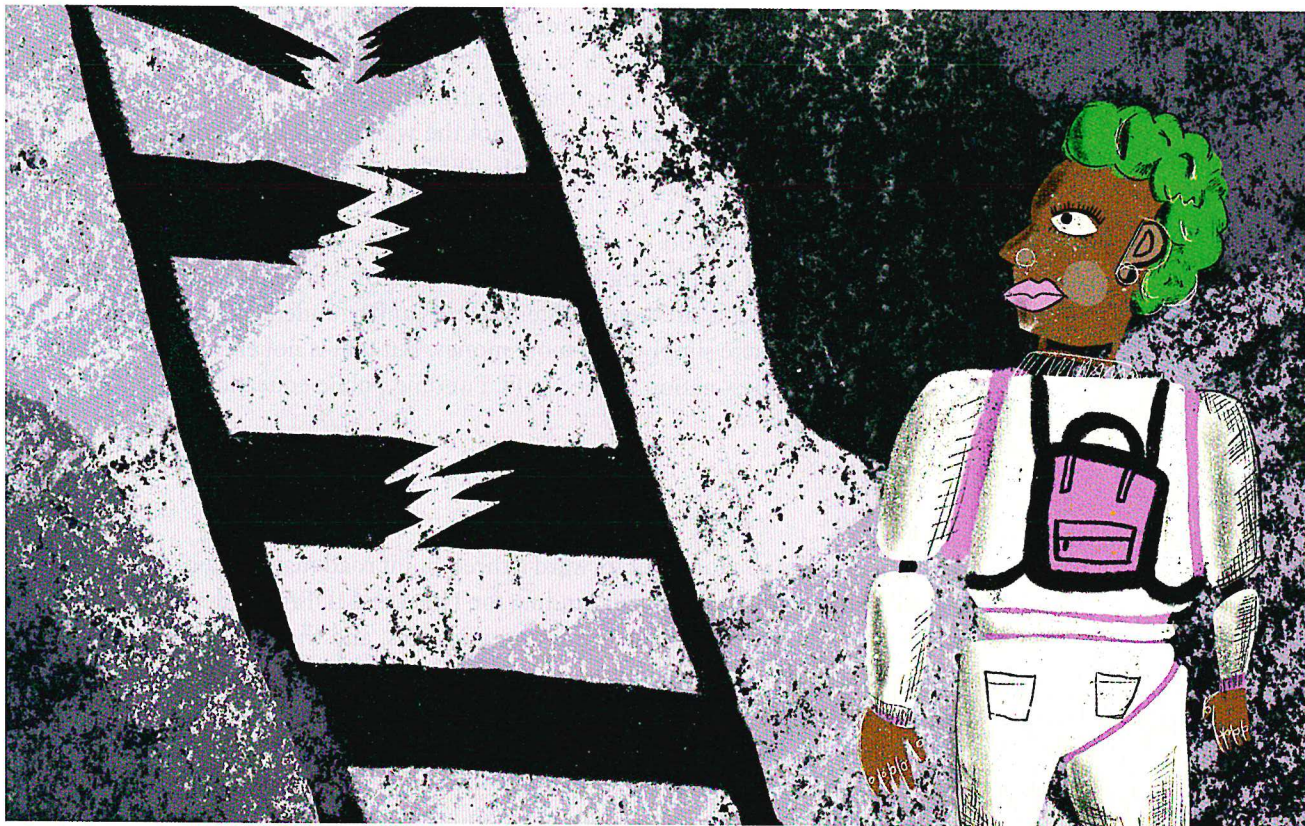
The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools put forward a three-point road map for confronting the education debt. It includes full funding for Title I and IDEA, a federal commitment to create 25,000 sustainable community schools, and the rededication of the U.S. Department of Education to its stated role of ensuring equity in the nation's public schools. To get there, AROS identifies ways to increase the tax burden on the wealthiest Americans—revenues that can be clawed back at the local, state, and federal levels and provide billions of dollars to public budgets. Indeed, a number of labor/community alliances around the country are working actively to win some of these new revenues for schools. One such campaign is profiled on p. 353. 🗳️

Excerpted from *Confronting the Education Debt: We Owe Billions to Black, Brown, and Low-Income Students and Their Schools*, 2019 by the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools. The full report is available at educationdebt.reclaimourschools.org.

The Dangerous Narrative That Lurks Under the “Achievement Gap”

And the counternarrative about
Black student potential

BY ERIC HIGGINS



EBIN LEE

When we hear the words “achievement gap,” many of us think about Black students underperforming academically compared with their white peers. Federal, state, and local governmental agencies have been called on to study the gap. Presidents, governors, mayors, and school personnel all speak about the need to close it. If you heard the words “achievement gap” and directly associated it with failing Black students, teachers, and schools, you have been directly influenced by a dangerous narrative.

This narrative, which has taken root in our news and politics, insinuates that Black students are academically inferior to their white counterparts. It tells the story of a miserable Black existence filled with poverty, dysfunctional families, and absentee fathers. According to this narrative, Black students are not only ill-equipped to handle the rigors of academia, but also innately prone to violence, drug use, and hypersexuality.

For many people, a good school is synonymous with a white school. Indeed, one 2016 study by researchers Chase M. Billingham and Matthew O. Hunt found that for every 1 percentage point increase in the Black enrollment at a hypothetical school, white parents were 1.7 percent less likely to enroll their children in that school.

And this anti-Black narrative not only affects parents' perceptions of school quality, but also teachers' perceptions of their students and their abilities.

This narrative is false.

The concept of the Black/white achievement gap as it is widely understood is a tool of oppression—and a total fabrication. Indeed, this “gap” is no more a true reflection of the potential of Black students than the achievement gap between Asian American and white students reflects the academic potential of white students. It is true that many Black students and schools are not performing well on a variety of measures of academic success, but these outcomes go beyond school achievement; they are directly linked to systemic racism, unequal treatment, and the denial of opportunities for Black families subjugated to second-class citizenship.

**“For many people,
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I contend that there is a counternarrative that tells a much different story of achievement and oppression. The counternarrative speaks of systemic racism, segregated and unequal schools, redlining, undervalued property in Black neighborhoods, blight, white privilege, and white wealth built on the back of Black oppression.

White supremacy—a system of dominance in which white people overwhelmingly control political, economic, and cultural power—makes people believe that majority-white schools are successful because white students are smarter and more disciplined. To believe this, you must turn a blind eye to how centuries of racism have denied opportunities to Black people and to government policies that have ravished Black neighborhoods.

Take for instance the G.I. Bill, which helped propel white families out of poverty and helped them accumulate wealth through homeownership. This great opportunity was denied to Black veterans for whom the dream of homeownership often became an illusion. The major racial disparities in this program can directly be tied to white wealth accumulation and educational opportunity disparities for Blacks. However, when Black student achievement is discussed we too often forget the economic and political conditions that contribute to the plight of these students. The history of ruthlessness is dismissed and forgotten.

Nearly 25 years ago, scholars Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate IV made the case for this counternarrative in their influential article “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education.” They rooted their analysis of school equity on three central propositions: “Race is a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States,” “United States society is based on property rights,” and “the intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity.”

It is only because of disenfranchisement and systemic racism that we still ignore this counternarrative and blame Black students for their own lack of educational opportunities.

When I hear words like “the achievement gap,” I understand that certain schools are designated “failing” because it fits the narrative of white supremacy. If we truly cared about the education of Black students, we would dismantle the institutions of white supremacy that help keep Black families in a cycle of poverty—the judicial system that forces many Blacks to live in a police state through unfair sentencing, the healthcare system that fails to equitably treat Black patients with preventative services and care, the private job sector that discriminates against Black job seekers.

We need more white voices bringing attention to the racist institutions and more people actively working to dismantle them. Imagine how quickly conditions would change if we shuttered the doors of white neighborhood schools or underfunded predominately white schools to the extent we routinely do to majority-Black schools. Black students deserve educators who are willing to challenge the conditions that help create school failure, not punish students and schools who are underperforming. 📌

Eric Higgins has worked in education for more than 13 years, first as a science and English/language arts teacher and now as an assistant principal of a K–6 elementary school in Missouri’s St. Louis County.

This essay first appeared in the Dec. 6, 2019, *Education Week*. Reprinted with permission of the author.

The Many Faces of Privatization



JOE JOE BRUSKY | MTEA

Privatization threatens the very existence of public education and its role as a foundation of our democracy.

Every state constitution guarantees the right to a free public education for all children, regardless of their abilities, special needs, home languages, or immigration status. Historically, public schools have been locally controlled within a broad policy framework set at the state level. In most districts, public schools are overseen by an elected school board.

Privatization of public education upends this right, by providing public funds to non-public entities, without the guarantees and transparency offered by public schools. Privatization takes several forms and evolves in various ways.

Charter Schools—Publicly Funded, Largely Unregulated

Charters are often described as “public” schools because they are authorized and funded by state law, but they are overwhelmingly privately run. They may not charge tuition and cannot teach religion. Typically, charter schools are granted a “charter” that exempts them from many regulations governing traditional public schools. In exchange, they are supposed to “experiment,” improve academic achievement, and share the lessons learned. Charters first appeared, often with community and teacher union support, in urban districts in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Over time, however, charters have become part of a charter “movement”—a national and well-funded campaign organized by investors, foundations, and educational management companies to create a parallel, more privatized school system with less public accountability and less democratic oversight. The Walton Foundation, perhaps the most aggressive funder of this movement, has given money to a quarter of all charter schools.

Oversight of charters is based on state law and can vary significantly. Some states allow for-profit charter schools and/or cyberschools. Unlike traditional public schools, most charter schools are governed by appointed boards not subject to public oversight or approval. Board members of privately run charters are not required to live in the community the school serves. They can limit their enrollment and may not have to admit students after the school year begins. Students usually must apply.

Charter schools are in virtually all states. From 2006 to 2016, charter school enrollment nearly tripled—from 1.2 million students to an estimated 3.1 million—while more than 4,000 traditional public schools were closed. Charters and public school closings are mainly concentrated in urban areas with high numbers of Black and Latina/o students.

Some major cities like Washington, D.C.; Detroit; San Diego; Cleveland; Milwaukee; Gary, Indiana; Newark, New Jersey; and many others have a third to more than half of their students going to privately run charter schools.

Most charter schools emerge one by one as individual operators apply for licenses from state-designated “authorizers.” But sometimes, efforts to wrest control of public schools from the public happens suddenly.

In some states, legislatures have facilitated privatization by creating state-run “recovery districts” or “achievement districts.” Under these initiatives, the state assumes control of a subset of “failing” schools, and begins the process of turning management of the schools over to private operators. These takeover districts have been created in Louisiana, Tennessee, and elsewhere.

After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, pro-privatization forces moved in and quickly assumed control of virtually all of the schools in the city. Both state and federal law facilitated the transfer. Today, there are no truly

From 2006 to 2016, charter school enrollment nearly tripled . . . while more than 4,000 traditional public schools were closed.

public schools left in the city. Writer Naomi Klein calls this rapid process of privatization the “Shock Doctrine.” A similar attempt began in Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Maria. (See St. John, p. 334.) Many fear that the pandemic of 2020 will similarly lead to efforts to vastly increase privatized learning, particularly by corporations like K12 that promote online “virtual” schools.

Vouchers—Still Publicly Funded, Even Less Regulated!

Voucher programs allow students to attend private schools by providing public dollars to cover some or all of tuition payments. Some programs allow parents to establish personal bank accounts to use for a range of educational expenses.

The longest-running and largest voucher program is in Milwaukee, and siphons off more than \$250 million each year from the city’s public schools. Other programs exist in Cleveland, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.

In 2020, 29 different voucher programs are operational in 16 states plus Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. They take three main forms:

- Traditional private school vouchers provide direct public money to pay for all or part of a student’s tuition in a private school. Most vouchers are used for religious schools, including Catholic, Lutheran, evangelical, Jewish, and Muslim institutions.
- Tax credit vouchers provide individuals or corporations with a 100 percent, dollar-for-dollar credit to send what they would otherwise owe in taxes to private nonprofit organizations. These organizations then offer vouchers to students to cover private school tuition.
- “Education Savings Accounts” offer public funds that can be deposited into personal accounts that are then used to pay for private school tuition or other educational expenses such as tutoring, online courses, or homeschooling.

In general, private schools that accept vouchers may impose student eligibility requirements and/or conditions on student performance. Private schools do not have the same legal responsibilities as public schools and operate with minimal oversight or transparency. Private schools, for instance, do not have to provide the same level of special education services as public schools. They can sidestep basic constitutional protections such as freedom of speech or due process when students are expelled. They generally do not have to follow requirements for open meetings and records. Religious voucher schools can teach church doctrine that is at odds with public policy, for instance basing their science classes on creationism or teaching that homosexuality is a sin or women should be obedient to men.

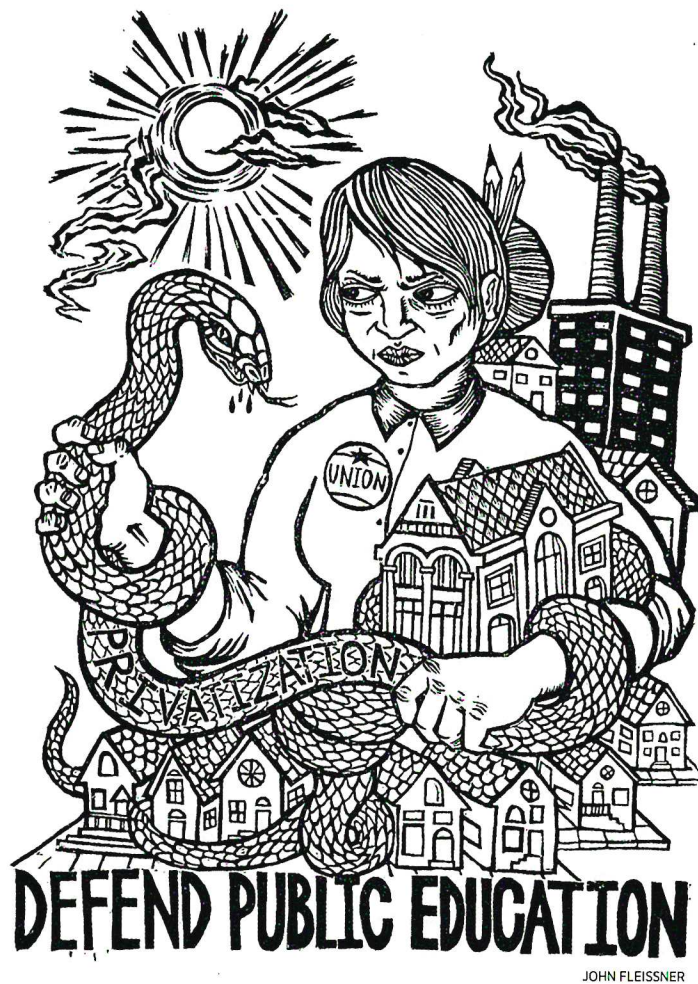
What Can Teacher Unions Do to Stop School Privatization?

All children deserve good schools and no one questions the desire of parents to find the best options they can for their children. But the central question for public policy is whether expanding charters is an effective strategy for improving public

education as a whole. Experience shows it is not. Nowhere have charters produced a model for equitable districtwide reform, and in many places charters have weakened support and funding for public education while increasing new forms of inequality. It's time to stop charter expansion and refocus public policy on providing excellent public schools for all.

To accomplish this, we educators and our unions, working in alliance with parents, community groups, and students, need to build broad alliances, coalitions, and social movements that are politically strong enough to shift policy. We must work with parents and communities to ensure that public schools are adequately and fairly funded. Affordable housing, health care for all, and living wage jobs are necessary so that our students and their families have the quality of life they deserve. As educators we should insist that our unions, the single largest organized voice for working people in this nation, take up social justice issues and make them a reality. It's up to us to take the next steps. 📢

A version of this article was published in *The New Teacher Book* (Rethinking Schools, 2018).



Resources on School Privatization

Books

Nancy MacLean

Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America

(Viking, 2017)

An in-depth and highly readable examination of the systematic assault on public schools and other public institutions.

Barbara Miner

Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City

(New Press, 2013)

An engaging narrative nonfiction account of the ongoing struggles against school privatization and segregation in the city with the largest private school voucher program in the nation.

Diane Ravitch

Slaying Goliath: The Passionate Resistance to Privatization and the Fight to Save America's Public Schools

(Knopf, 2020)

An overview of many of the efforts throughout the country to fight school privatization.

Noliwe Rooks

Cutting School: Privatization, Segregation, and the End of Public Education

(New Press, 2017)

A comprehensive look at the historic underfunding of public schools that serve students of color and the impact of voucher, charter, and other privatization schemes through a lens of race and class.

Organizations

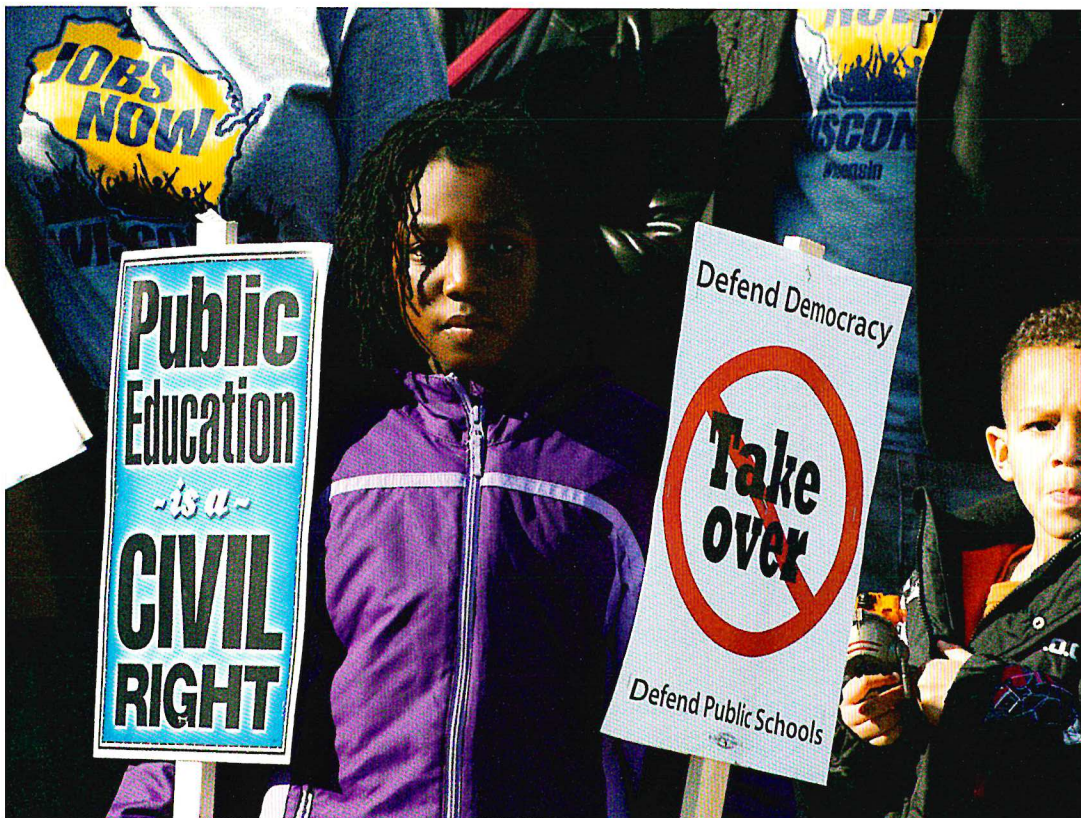
Public Funds, Public Schools is a national campaign against voucher programs. Their website has many useful resources. pfps.org

In the Public Interest is a national organization that opposes privatization in all forms, including in public education. inthepublicinterest.org

Unite! Resist! And Win!

Organizing against public school takeovers in Milwaukee

BY AMY MIZIALKO



BARBARA MINER

In the spring of 2009, just months after he was appointed secretary of education by newly elected President Barack Obama, Arne Duncan told the Associated Press that he “will have failed” if, when his tenure was up, more urban districts weren’t in “mayors’ hands.”

Milwaukee was a low-hanging fruit. Duncan, along with Wisconsin’s Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle and Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, tried to pick it.

They failed. As did the next two attempts by Republican Gov. Scott Walker,

the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce (MMAC), and the gerrymandered Republican Legislature.

Some details and lessons follow.

Milwaukee as a Privatization Petri Dish

Milwaukee is considered the birthplace of public school privatization. In 1990 the state Legislature started a city-based private school voucher program. Once the conservative Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled the program could include religious schools, it grew to be the largest such program in the country. It now includes more than 120 schools, almost all of which are religious, and annually funnels more than a quarter of a billion tax dollars into these non-accountable private schools. This was nothing short of a long-term project to break up and privatize the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), which are governed by a democratically elected school board.

In 1993 the state government enacted its first charter school law, allowing school boards the authority to charter schools. Four years later, another law was enacted permitting the Milwaukee city government to authorize privately run charter schools. (It was the first city in the nation to gain that authority.) The law also gave similar authority to the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and the Milwaukee Area Technical College. Dozens of new charter schools opened up. My union, the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTEA), did not draw a hard line when the number of privately run charter schools (called “non-instrumentality” charter schools) authorized by the Milwaukee School Board also increased significantly.

As the combined total of voucher and charter schools rose above 160, the popularity of an open enrollment law added to MPS' problems. That law allows families (most of whom are white) to send their children to predominantly white suburban schools. As a result, 2020 enrollment declined to the point where only 56 percent of children living in the city attend MPS.

The Takeover Attempts

In the midst of the voucher and charter laws that propelled this unprecedented growth in school privatization, the MMAC, right-wing ideologues, and both Democrats and Republicans promoted a new tactic to privatize additional Milwaukee schools: the “takeover.”

Attempt #1

In the fall of 2009 the Democratic governor of Wisconsin and the mayor of Milwaukee promoted state legislation that would replace Milwaukee's elected school board with one appointed by the mayor. Arne Duncan supported it, as did Democrats for Education Reform—who sent paid organizers into the state to lobby legislators. In response the NAACP and Educators' Network for Social Justice issued a call to community and labor groups to build a coalition to fight back. Within weeks, the Coalition to Stop the MPS Takeover included the MTEA and AFT Local 212, and soon grew to include nearly two dozen other community and student groups.

The coalition picketed homes of Democratic legislators and challenged the may-

or at public events, arguing that, given that Milwaukee was home to the largest population of African Americans and Latinos in the state, this was nothing short of disenfranchisement of people's right to vote. Ultimately, the coalition and its supporters put enough pressure on the legislators to narrowly defeat the legislation.

Just a year after the defeat of the first takeover attempt, in February 2011, newly elected Gov. Walker unleashed the most anti-worker legislation in Wisconsin's history, stripping collective bargaining from most public sector unions, ending fair share and payroll deduction, and forcing union locals to hold annual recertification elections. (See Schirmer, p. 76.)

A short time later Walker expanded the private school voucher program statewide and made the largest cuts to public education funding since the Great Depression.

Attempt #2

By 2013, based on the guidelines of the federal Race to the Top program, 50 MPS schools were labeled "failing" by state officials. The bottom 5 percent were slated for major "innovation." The MMAC saw this as an opportunity to take over a large number of MPS schools and privatize them. The MMAC invited the leaders of the state-run Recovery School District in Louisiana and of Tennessee's state-run Achievement School District in Memphis to a private briefing for the business community.

When news of the private meeting leaked to the press, the MTEA contacted the NAACP, and jointly they called back together groups that had successfully defeated the previous mayoral takeover attempt. New groups like Wisconsin Jobs Now that led the Fight for \$15 campaign in the city joined the revived coalition. We held a massive "Public Education Is a Civil Right" march through Black and Latino neighborhoods, with high school drum lines and representatives of many organizations. We also picketed the offices of the MMAC and lobbied local and state officials to reject any permutation of the plan. Thanks to the vehement resistance, the idea was eventually shelved.

We knew that such a defeat was only temporary. The key groups of the Coalition to Stop the MPS Takeover met and decided to change the coalition's name to indicate not what we were against, but what we were for. After many meetings we decided to rename ourselves Schools & Communities United. We also decided to do surveys and hold meetings to develop a document similar to "The Schools Chicago's Students Deserve" created by the Chicago Teachers Union. We released our 32-page document, "Fulfill the Promise: The Schools and Communities Our Children Deserve," on May 17, 2014, the 60th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board* decision, after a large march and rally. In the aftermath of that campaign and with strong encouragement by the MTEA, the school district created its first three community schools in schools that had been labeled as "needing improvement."

Attempt #3

In June 2015 Walker inserted MPS takeover legislation into the state budget. It gave Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele authority to appoint a "takeover czar" who would have the power to identify several MPS schools over a series of

five years beginning in fall 2016 and turn them into privately run charters. With so many voucher and privately run charter schools already operating in the city, this legislation had the potential to rapidly dismantle the Milwaukee Public Schools. The county executive appointed a suburban school superintendent, Demond Means, as the takeover czar to lead this new takeover effort.

The MTEA, along with Schools and Communities United, immediately began organizing at the school level across the city. We encouraged our building leaders to establish school defense committees to inform staff and parents and to prepare to take action. In the beginning, union members were fearful, asking over and over, “Which schools are they going to take over first?” and “Can we see the list?” The MTEA’s response was clear from the beginning—we will not allow one school to be taken over by privatizers. We will fight, organize, and rally any targeted school and vow to fight the way we would fight for our own school, because these are all our schools.

We mapped the schools and neighborhoods identified as “failing.” We declared that none of the schools had “failed”; rather, the schools had been failed by the state of Wisconsin, the entity constitutionally responsible for adequately funding public schools. MTEA and SCU members bird-dogged the Milwaukee County executive and his takeover czar at nearly all of their public appearances. We confronted them at town hall meetings, the county courthouse, community presentations, and even in Mequon, the suburb where Means was superintendent, at one of his school board meetings. We distributed hundreds of “No Takeover/Say Yes to MPS!” lawn signs throughout the city. We held coordinated walk-ins where staff and parents met before school, held anti-takeover rallies, and then walked into school together. After a year of unrelenting resistance by MTEA and SCU members, the takeover czar resigned in fall 2016, and exactly zero MPS schools were taken over.

A Few Lessons

The lessons from our experiences were several. For one, teacher unions can’t stand alone as insular organizations. Rather, these unions must work in multiracial coalitions with community organizations, united in our demand for fully funded public schools.

Moreover, in order to sustain a fighting union and engaged membership, our union needs to work toward three goals:

1. Improve the economic standing of public education workers, who are overwhelmingly women.
2. Fight for social justice inside our classrooms and in our communities.
3. Organize and lead our profession toward culturally responsive pedagogy, anti-racist teaching, developmentally appropriate instruction, and restorative discipline practices. 📢

Amy Mizialko is president of the Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association and former special education teacher in MPS.

The Fight Against Standardized Testing

How a rank-and-file caucus ignited a national movement

BY JESSE HAGOPIAN



NOAM GUNDLE

The origin of the Social Equity Educators (SEE) caucus in Seattle mirrored that of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) in Chicago.

In 2008 a number of progressive teachers got involved in the struggle against closing several schools, all of which had a majority of students of color. Despite our efforts, the Seattle Education Association did not oppose the closings.

The struggle over school closures convinced several of us that we needed to form a rank-and-file caucus within our union that could help the union stand up

to the onslaught of corporate education “reforms” and demand racial and social justice. As a result, when the battle over closures was over in 2009, we transformed the group that had opposed the closings into a new organization of union educators called Social Equity Educators (SEE). We were inspired by the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) in Chicago, which had started as a small study group but ultimately organized a successful win in the union election in 2010, took over the top officer positions, and reoriented the union’s stance on social justice issues.

Over the next few years, SEE organized forums on a range of issues. One included Diane Ravitch, who had newly flipped from supporting to opposing the corporate reforms of the No Child Left Behind Act, and another was titled Achievement Gap or Opportunity Gap? Fighting Racism in the Public Schools. We organized contract struggles during contract negotiations against using standardized test scores as a basis for teacher evaluation, and we helped pass a resolution in the union against the use of the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test being used to evaluate educators.

In 2013, the growing network of SEE organizers was put to the test in an eruption of activism against high-stakes standardized testing. My colleagues and I at Seattle’s Garfield High School started the rebellion by calling a press conference to announce our unanimous vote to refuse to administer the MAP test. That announcement led to what became known as the “MAP test boycott.” The boycott quickly spread to several other schools in Seattle (including Orca K–8, Chief Sealth International High School, Ballard High School, Center School, and Thornton Creek Elementary), while solidarity with the boycott spread around the nation and then around the world. Most of the schools that took up the boycott had members of SEE helping to lead and coordinate the effort. One focus of our boycott was on the way that standardized tests perpetuate racial inequities; we emphasized academic research showing that standardized testing much more accurately measures wealth and proximity to a dominant white culture than it does aptitude or skills. The racial justice focus of the boycott helped us win the support of our local NAACP chapter and helped broaden the discussion to a larger one about the purpose and power of education.

When we at Garfield High School took that first step, we had no idea where our actions would lead. Would we be ignored? Would we be vilified as bad teachers? Would the math and language arts teachers in the tested subject areas be reprimanded, suspended, or fired? In fact, throughout the school year, our struggle against the MAP test reached such a magnitude that Seattle Public Schools not only retracted its threat to suspend the boycotting teachers for 10 days without pay, but also ultimately dropped its requirement that the MAP test be used at the high school level. The success of the MAP test boycott in Seattle contributed to the formation of a sizable civil rights movement, composed of parents, teachers, educational support staff, students, administrators, and community members around the country who increasingly began organizing against high-stakes standardized testing and for reclaiming public education from corporate reformers.

The MAP boycott had taken SEE from the fringe of the union and put the

group squarely in the center of the most critical education struggles in the country. It proved to educators that we had a vision and a strategy for direct action and organizing that could win real gains in public education. SEE ran an electoral campaign in 2014 that came within 50 votes of taking over the leadership of the union and won several seats on the union's executive board. This, in a vote that had one of the largest turnouts in our union's history. As a result of these electoral wins and increased support from members, SEE proposals gained new weight in the union, and demands for racial justice and opposition to corporate education reform gained much more traction. With a newly mobilized membership committed to the issues SEE had been raising for years and new leaders in the union who were more sympathetic to the goals of SEE, the Seattle Education Association went on strike in 2015, raising important social and racial justice demands.

In 2015, Seattle Public Schools had only recently come under federal investigation by the Department of Education when it was found that Black students were being suspended at approximately four times the rate of white students for the same infractions. SEE began a campaign to raise awareness about this blatant practice of institutional racism, and the Seattle Education Association took up the cause in its contract negotiation. Leaders of the union made an important democratic reform when they expanded their very small bargaining team into a group of several dozen—including members of SEE. This new, much more robust bargaining team advanced some of the most important bargaining issues around racial justice anywhere in the country. The union's demand for Race and Equity Teams in the schools, for example, was groundbreaking. The Seattle Education Association advocated that every one of the public schools have such a team to tackle issues of disproportionate discipline and institutional racism. At first, Seattle Public Schools said they would agree to these teams in only six schools. The power of the strike, however, was such that in the tentative agreement reached between the union and the district, 30 schools were allowed to establish these anti-racist committees. This was an important victory in the struggle to uproot institutional racism and a powerful example of what's possible when you organize a social justice, class struggle approach to unionism.

The fundamental problems of our education system are really the same fundamental problems shared by all the institutions in this country, for they are all the product of a highly unequal economic and political structure. Capitalism treats our schools as potential sources of profit, as a crucial mechanism for disciplining youth, and as a training ground to teach students to accept our deeply unequal society—not as places to help students unlock their potential and learn how to meet the greatest societal challenges. You see this in the disproportionate suspension rates that punish students of color at dramatically higher rates than their white peers; the increasing numbers of police officers patrolling hallways; the privatizers and philanthropists who promote charter schools; and the testocracy that finds ways to make millions of dollars by testing our kids over and over and over again, so that now students on average take 112 standardized tests in their K–12 careers—creating a multibillion-dollar industry for Pearson and other testing corporations. And you can see this view clearly in the corporate education reform movement,

summed up by billionaire media mogul Rupert Murdoch, when he says, “When it comes to K through 12 education, we see a \$500 billion sector in the U.S. alone that is waiting desperately to be transformed by big breakthroughs that extend the reach of great teaching.”

Today, the eight richest people in the world control the same amount of wealth as the bottom half of humanity. You can’t have that kind of obscene concentration of wealth without dire problems in education, health care, housing, public transportation, the environment, and all other basic social needs. The resources needed to provide for those social needs are hoarded by those who already have too much. Our task, then, is to weave together our racial justice analysis with our understanding of a highly unequal economic system that requires racism in order to function—and to build a union movement that uses the labor power of striking educators to dismantle institutional racism and bring equitable education.

Martin Luther King Jr. explained the necessity of building a racial justice movement on the basis of opposing capitalism—but, of course, this isn’t the King you learn about in school. In school, you usually hear, at best, excerpts from King’s most cited speeches, but if you dig a little deeper you might find these words:

You can’t talk about solving the economic problem of Black people without talking about billions of dollars. You can’t talk about ending the slums without first saying profit must be taken out of the slums. You’re really tampering and getting on dangerous ground because you’re messing with folks then. You’re messing with the captains of industry. Now this means we are treading in difficult water, because it really means we are saying that something is wrong with capitalism, that there must be a better distribution of wealth and maybe America must move toward democratic socialism.

The strike wave of educators—from red states to blue—over the last couple of years has demonstrated that it isn’t only the “captains of industry” who have power. The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass once said, “The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.” We educators have endured all we are willing to endure. Now it’s time to truly make Black lives matter in our education system—a precondition to making the lives of every student matter—and take the wealth from the rich to make that happen. 📌

Jesse Hagopian teaches at Garfield High School in Seattle and is an editor of Rethinking Schools magazine. Jesse edited the book More Than a Score: The New Uprising Against High-Stakes Testing and co-edited the book Teaching for Black Lives. He blogs at IAmAnEducator.com.

A version of this article appears in *Strike for the Common Good* (University of Michigan Press, 2021).

Fighting the Tests in the Land of Enchantment

BY LISA GUISBOND AND MONTY NEILL

When Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, it triggered what the national anti-testing organization FairTest calls a “testing arms race.” Influenced by a neoliberal agenda, the law instituted sweeping mandates for standardized tests and imposed brutal sanctions on schools that failed to make “adequate yearly progress.” Schools were turned into test prep factories and teachers were subject to warnings—and even firing—if their students didn’t produce “adequate” scores on the tests.

But the testing arms race is gradually ebbing, through the hard work of teachers, parents, students, and unions that refuse to buy in to the idea that you can improve schools through constant measurement and punishment. Here is one example that is worth learning from.

Las Cruces, New Mexico, sits about 45 miles north of El Paso, Texas, and the Mexican border. While New Mexico doesn’t often come to mind when we think about deep and persistent poverty, the state was ranked 50th out of the 50 states for child well-being by the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s 2019 *Kids Count Data Book*. The state was also listed 50th in the education domain with some of the lowest test scores and graduation rates in the country. And Las Cruces hasn’t escaped those rankings.

Never particularly strong, the state’s public schools have been under siege since the Great Recession that began in 2008. Republican Gov. Susana Martinez, who took office in 2011, slashed education spending, expanded privately operated charter schools, and imposed a punitive regime of teacher evaluation based, in large part, on high-stakes testing.

After a series of school-based conversations with teachers, parents, and students exposed widespread frustration with the test/test prep agenda, NEA-Las Cruces (NEA-LC) launched a campaign in 2013 to reduce testing in the district.

The union helped pull together a group called People Against the Standardization of Students (PASS), which included university and high school students, parents, and rank-and-file union members. Using social media and flyers to mobilize, the group held a rally outside the school district’s central office in Las Cruces. More than 800 people attended to show their opposition to excessive testing. Speakers included state legislators, students, parents, union leaders, and school



board members. The superintendent's response was to criticize the protesters for "emoting" in the parking lot. The union responded by gathering 1,000 signatures on a petition calling for a reduction in testing. The petitions were sent to the superintendent, governor, and secretary of education in Santa Fe. NEA-LC filed a grievance against the school district, charging it with violating a professionalism clause in its contract that mandated that administration collaborate with teachers "in the selection of student assessment methods." Eventually, NEA-NM filed a lawsuit against the state Public Education Department on the issue of local control.

It seemed that neither state nor district policymakers had a clear sense of the problem. So, in February 2014, the union surveyed its own members to lift up the reality of over-testing. The survey asked the names of each of the assessments teachers were giving, how often they were used, and how much time they took to administer. It asked how effective (or ineffective) the tests were in informing their own instruction, what kinds of teacher-created assessments they used, and their effects on students and staff. Compiling the data from more than 500 responses, the union developed a PowerPoint and presented it to the school board the following summer. The school board, which had a 4-1 conservative majority, took no action. But the information and personal voices collected through the survey were key to the union's effort to educate the public about the extent and effect of endless assessments on the district's educators and students.

"You Can't Be Passive"

In response to the lack of action on the part of the school board, the union and its allies sprang into action, involving themselves in the election for two open school board seats in 2015.

"You can't be passive. Otherwise, you don't accomplish things," retired teacher Becky King told *NEAToday*. King held a "meet and greet" at her home with the two union-endorsed candidates, attended campaign events, and was among the many educators who collectively knocked on more than 2,000 doors.

"This was about getting out there and doing something," King says. "Had we not gone door to door, it probably would have been status quo."

The union worked to make testing a front-burner issue at forums throughout the school board campaign. Members wore T-shirts with the slogan "Take Back Our Schools" on the front and "Teaching over Testing Crew" on the back. By election day in the spring of 2015, testing was, in fact, a key issue, and the union and its allies succeeded in getting their endorsed candidates elected.

Mary Parr-Sanchez, then vice president of NEA-NM, and married to the president of NEA-LC, reflected back on her leadership when union members and allies at times disagreed on how far to push the testing issue. For example, the union leadership was uncomfortable with holding the initial large anti-testing rally. "We were scared no one would show up, and we were scared everyone would show up," Parr-Sanchez remembers. The concern revolved around some members of the PASS coalition, who held more radical views on this and other issues. Would the message at the rally be consistent, and in line with the union's position on the

issues? In addition, they knew that they had agreed to work together with the superintendent and the governor on the testing issue, and they were worried that a large rally would create tensions with these critical partners.

“In the end,” said Parr-Sanchez, “we realized that union leadership shouldn’t be comfortable. If you are, you probably aren’t doing your job.” They worked with the other stakeholders to plan the best rally that they could, working through the uncertainty. They knew the over-testing was the main issue that would resonate with the public. They knew that the union’s members were lit up about using the tests in teacher evaluations. So they led with that issue. And it worked.

Building Momentum

That same spring (2015), students increased the pressure by organizing “Students Against Testing,” working with both state and national opt-out organizations. That May, hundreds of students walked out of the city’s middle and high schools. The protests spread to Santa Fe and Albuquerque.

Changing the makeup of the school board changed everything. The new board, with strong encouragement from the union, hired a new superintendent the following year. Dr. Greg Ewing was skeptical of testing and issued a moratorium on district-mandated assessments. He encouraged all school principals to eliminate any school-based tests and to administer only state- or federally mandated tests. He encouraged teachers to “close the door and teach.”

Not stopping with the district moratorium, NEA-LC joined with allies across the state, including AFT New Mexico, to reduce state-mandated tests as well. In 2017 the LC school board passed a resolution against excessive state testing, which was sent to the New Mexico School Boards Association, and from there to the New Mexico Legislature. The Legislature took action by reducing the amount of time spent on PARCC exams and eliminating the use of interim tests in high schools.

The 2018 gubernatorial race opened new opportunities. Progressives and unions across the state worked hard to elect Democrat Michelle Lujan Grisham governor in 2018. Within the first 48 hours of taking office she began reversing education reform initiatives that had been put in place by Gov. Martinez over eight years. Just days after taking office, Grisham signed executive orders ending PARCC, along with a test-based teacher evaluation system, and the A–F school grading system.

Turning from Testing to Supporting Children

As the testing pressure was subsiding, NEA-LC took a leadership role in promoting community schools for New Mexico. One result of NEA-LC’s strong “teaching over testing” work in 2013 was their linking up with Ngage New Mexico, a nonprofit coalition that serves as a catalyst to advance the well-being of all people of Southern New Mexico. They had launched a cradle-to-career initiative in 2013. The state NEA, in partnership with NEA-LC and coalition partners in Ngage, spearheaded a successful effort to establish the district’s first community school in 2017. State-wide, other groups, including AFT-NM, have also been strong advocates for com-

munity schools. The new governor ran with community schools as part of her education platform in 2018.

Buoyed by the governor's focus, the community schools work took hold across the state. The Albuquerque-Bernalillo County partnership in the state's largest city lent help and expertise to Las Cruces. These efforts have continued to grow, with Las Cruces opening its fourth community school in 2020, and the Legislature that year appropriating more than \$2 million to support an additional nine community schools elsewhere in the state.

Working with the national NEA, NEA-NM has stepped up as a statewide leader in transforming schools to community schools. In 2018, NEA pulled together experts from New Mexico and across the nation to write a training module for community schools on-site coordinators. (See Serrette, p. 150.) NEA-NM has become a hub across the nation for school personnel, including school board members, superintendents, principals, on-site coordinators, teachers, ed assistants, and others for training in community school methodology, and holding national virtual forums to bring people together to problem-solve issues.

The movement for creating community schools received increased attention in the spring of 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic caused massive school closings and exposed the widening inequities on key social conditions—housing, health care, food security—that impact the lives of students.

NEA-NM President Mary Parr-Sanchez told Jeff Bryant, a writer for *Our Schools*, a project of the Independent Media Institute, that “In our state’s response to the pandemic, we’ve had to be very sensitive to issues of poverty, and the state has challenged districts to reach all children, including special education students and homeless students.” She explained that the community school model enables schools to do just that. “What happens during the school day is not enough to improve the trajectory of children until you deal with what is really going on in children’s lives. Are they hungry? Are they homeless? The testing agenda took us away from addressing this. Community schools can bring us back.”

When asked by *Rethinking Schools* editor Bob Peterson how she’d sum up the impact of the union’s long history of work around testing, Parr-Sanchez admitted that although the union has made progress in reducing testing, it still plays “too prominent a role in our schools and continues as part of our school culture. Because of it, teachers are leaving the profession.” She concluded: “We need to continue to organize to put learning and children first. The future of testing? It’s yet to be determined.” 

Monty Neill, EdD, now retired, was executive director of FairTest.

Lisa Guisbond is the executive director of Citizens for Public Schools and a former assessment reform analyst for FairTest.

Resources on Standardized Testing

Books

Pencils Down: Rethinking High-Stakes Testing and Accountability in Public Schools

Edited by Wayne Au and Melissa Bollow Tempel

(Rethinking Schools, 2012)

Through articles that provide thoughtful and emotional critiques from the front lines of education, *Pencils Down* deconstructs the damage that standardized tests wreak on our education system and the human beings who populate it. Better yet, it offers visionary forms of assessment that are not only more authentic, but also more democratic, fair, and accurate.

More Than a Score: The New Uprising Against High-Stakes Testing

Edited by Jesse Hagopian

(Haymarket Books, 2014)

Many inspiring stories of educators, parents, and students fighting to end the scourge of high-stakes testing.

Organizations

Defending the Early Years

dey.org

An organization of early childhood educators and advocates who rally educators to take action on policies that impact the education of young children, especially around testing and standards.

FairTest—The National Center for Fair and Open Testing

FairTest.org

Excellent materials in English and Spanish on alternative forms of assessment and problems with standardized testing.

New York Performance Standards Consortium

performanceassessment.org

A network of schools using high-quality assessment alternatives to standardized testing.

Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA)

mciea.org

MCIEA is a partnership of Massachusetts public school districts and their local teacher unions, joined together to create a fair and effective accountability system that is guided by a set of principles and offers a more dynamic picture of student learning and school quality than a single standardized test. MCIEA seeks to increase achievement for all students, close prevailing achievement gaps among subgroups, and prepare a diversity of students for college, career, and life.

(Also see additional organizations listed on p. 425)

Building Community-Labor Solidarity Against Privatization in Puerto Rico

BY PATRICK ST. JOHN

Like flowers blossoming after a storm, deep and widespread social movements in Puerto Rico have emerged to confront the brutal austerity regime imposed by Wall Street and Washington, D.C., and enforced by the island's own political and economic elites. The summer of 2019 saw more than 1 million Puerto Ricans take to the streets and go on strike against Gov. Ricardo Rosselló and all that he represented, culminating in his resignation in August. Teacher union members played a large role in this powerful movement.

Puerto Rico's Colonial Past and Present

Puerto Rico's colonial status with the United States dates back to 1898, when the U.S. won its war against Spain and ignored Puerto Ricans' demands for independence. Like all colonies, Puerto Rico has been politically and economically exploited by this arrangement. Most recently, in 2016 the U.S. Congress passed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), handing virtually total control of the island to an unelected Financial Oversight and Management Board. While the role of the board was defined as helping to restructure the island's debt, the overriding purpose has always been the maintenance of profits for Wall Street investors and other large holders of Puerto Rican debt on the backs of Puerto Ricans. In the same vein as the infamous structural adjustment programs the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have imposed on nations in the Global South, the board has promoted massive cuts to public sector institutions, including K–12 schools, the University of Puerto Rico, and pension programs. The board has also pressed privatizing public services, including the island's electric utility.

The aggressive reforms by the Financial Oversight and Management Board sparked public outrage, even before Hurricane Maria smashed into the island in September 2017. The hurricane devastated the island, killing thousands, damaging countless homes and schools, and taking out the power grid.



ADOLFO VALLE

Adolfo Valle

In addition to inspiring examples of mutual aid within and across Puerto Rican communities, dozens of U.S. unions and aid groups organized support after the storm. The American Federation of Teachers, its affiliate on the island—Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico—and several other organizations distributed tens of thousands of water filters to families across the island. Others provided meals, medical care, and other supports.

But while these efforts to provide immediate support to island residents were underway, those in power began plotting and setting the stage for the privatization of Puerto Rico's public schools. Just four months after the hurricane, the island's Secretary of Education Julia Keleher proposed closing more than 300

schools (nearly a quarter of the island's total). Two months later, the Legislative Assembly passed a new law permitting both charter schools and vouchers.

By the summer of 2019, with little real progress in rebuilding essential infrastructure, and the filing of corruption charges against Keleher and another administration official, massive demonstrations began to sweep the island.

One target of those demonstrations was the proposed privatization of Puerto Rico's public schools. The demonstrators charged that the privatization agenda

took a page from post-Katrina New Orleans: backroom deals that would have gutted educator benefits and shuttered hundreds of public schools all across the island, many to be replaced by charter schools.

In the fall of 2019, members of the Journey for Justice Alliance (J4J) visited the island to support and learn from these demonstrations and share what they could from fights against privatization on the mainland. J4J is a nationwide education and racial justice network spanning more than 30 cities. Their visit and movement exchange culminated in a joint conference on the island.

Later that fall, the Schott Foundation for Public Education hosted an opportunity for conference participants to reflect on what they learned. Three primary lessons emerged from the discussions.

1. Struggles for Education Justice Are Linked. Advocates Should Be, Too.

"The fight against school privatization is not new in the United States, and it's not new on the island," noted Jitu Brown, director of J4J. "Brave parents and community members and educators have been fighting school privatization in Puerto Rico."

Just four months after the hurricane, the island's Secretary of Education Julia Keleher proposed closing more than 300 schools (nearly a quarter of the island's total). Two months later, the Legislative Assembly passed a new law permitting both charter schools and vouchers.

The playbook of privatization—mass school closures, attacks on employee pensions, and the imposition of charter schools—is the same one used both in Puerto Rico and on the mainland, pushed by the same constellation of powerful forces. “Since Hurricane Maria, there’s been an effort to do similar to what’s happened in New Orleans: to take advantage of human disaster . . . to privatize,” Brown said.

Zakiyah Ansari, organizing director for the New York-based Alliance for Quality Education, described the post-disaster exploitation as “vultures that come in and try to tear up our communities. That’s something that’s very relatable” to cities across the country.

Members of J4J and organizers in Puerto Rico found cooperation natural. “When we started talking to each other, we realized we were going through the same thing. Often, policy initiatives that may have started somewhere else are just repackaged. . . . When we talked about what our children need we were on the same page. We knew we needed community schools, we knew we needed to end zero-tolerance policies. Building unity wasn’t hard,” said Brown.

Organizers came together, lifting up and sharing each other’s stories and experiences. “The stories we share and offer as a way to unify but also to fight back,” Ansari added. “We can learn from each other.” One of the things Ansari found powerful at their conference “was the centering of women of color: how our power, that of Black and Brown women, is so centered in what we do.”

Another organization that participated in the conference was AgitArte, an organization of working-class artists based in both the U.S. mainland and Puerto Rico who create projects and practices of cultural solidarity with grassroots struggles against oppression, and propose alternatives. Jorge Díaz Ortiz, AgitArte’s executive and artistic director, talked about the ways that popular education and art were integrated into the struggle for education justice in Puerto Rico. “When we’re talking about cultural organizing,” he said, “we’re talking about organizing, just with culture as an entry point.”

2. Attacks on Public Goods and Attacks on Democracy Go Hand in Hand.

The abolition of democracy in public education, through attacks like state take-overs, mayoral control, and other emergency measures, is often the first stepping-stone in bypassing the community and forcing drastic policy changes upon them. From Chicago to New Orleans to Puerto Rico, it’s a tried-and-true tactic.

While attacks on the public sector have been ongoing for decades, noted Diaz, “really, the big thrust to shut down schools starts with the imposition of the fiscal control board, which was a measure that the White House under President Obama did with bipartisan support. It established a dictatorial board that is over the Puerto Rican government.”

This is an important lesson for communities: If elites go after democratic institutions, privatizations and sell-offs will not be far behind. But it also means that the positive projects of public reinvestment and re-democratization must go together as well: If we win the former without winning the latter, it’s easy for those victories to be rolled back.

Resisting these attacks takes the grassroots coordination and integration of people across varied groups and locales, including students, parents, educators, and community members who are willing to invest their resources and take the needed risks to pressure policymakers and economic elites.

The Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (FMPR) has been leading grassroots mobilization efforts in Puerto Rico, connecting with grassroots groups and hitting the streets against the corporate control of the island's schools. Mercedes Martinez, FMPR's president, wrote in *Labor Notes* in August 2019:

This has been a glorious summer, where hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans participated in the biggest general strike ever on the island. The strikes and demonstrations that brought down the Rosselló regime were largely spontaneous and broadly democratic, but the seeds of the insurrection were planted by decades of struggle.

These struggles have been led by feminists who fought against gender violence and homophobia, muckraking journalists who uncovered the depths of government corruption, activists organizing for the debt to be dropped, community members building autonomous centers of self-organization, environmentalists who stopped a pipeline, students who went on strike to keep their universities public, artists who preserved and created culture, and unionists who refused to compromise away working people's futures.

No one party, organization, or union called for the strike and demonstrations. Many groups contributed to their outbreak and political character.

If we can learn something from this victorious moment, it is that the road ahead lies in fighting back for the future and refusing to compromise.

3. People-Powered Organizing Can Halt the Advance of Privatization and Build Momentum Toward Positive Reforms.

History shows that isolated struggles can grow exponentially and win when they spread outside of their sector, embracing and lifting up the collective interests of a wide swath of society. As Audre Lorde put it, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives." Breaking down barriers between movements is difficult but important, and when it comes to education justice, no barrier more urgently needs to be dismantled than that between community groups and labor unions.

The FMPR is a good example of a social justice/social movement union: an organization that's based in communities and works alongside other organizing groups. It is one of the key groups that spearheaded the recent protests against Gov. Rosselló that expanded into a larger, more comprehensive struggle. "FMPR as a union has deep roots in many communities," Brown said, "so there's a strong relationship with parents, with students, and with other organizers and activists."

Despite the 2018 charter school law, which would have allowed the conversion of 10 percent of the island's schools to charters, only two schools out of 856 have been privatized. "That is because of the battles that teachers, students, and parents have given in defense of public education," noted Martinez.

Grassroots organizations like J4J have also offered tried-and-tested solutions to the crisis—ones that can work across many contexts, like sustainable community schools and the replacement of harmful and racially biased school discipline policies with restorative justice; as well as ones that are specific to Puerto Rico, like the abolition of PROMESA and the reinvestment of public funds into pensions, schools, and public services.

Moments of resistance are also moments of imagination: a break in the logic of state and capital opens up possibilities that may have been previously unthinkable. When social movements explode against privatization and reactionary measures, what moves many people isn't just a yearning for a return to the previous status quo, but for a more liberated, just, and democratic future.

Brown emphasized that it is within struggles against the worst that we can begin to imagine the best. "It provides a moment to dream about what education might look like on the island."

**Moments of
resistance are
also moments
of imagination.**

Labor-Community Alliances Need Support

As we saw in Los Angeles and Chicago in 2019, building ongoing relationships with community-based allies is key to winning the schools our students and neighborhoods deserve. While the gold standard for community organizations is a membership-based dues structure to ensure not only consistent funding but also independence, in its absence these groups have to rely on individual donors, philanthropic funders, and unions (ideally with as few strings attached as possible). Unions in particular, as dues-based organizations themselves, should provide financial support to help expand and sustain local grassroots work. This support should be not just in the run-up to a contract fight but on an ongoing basis, with a healthy acknowledgement that there will be points of disagreement that should be seen as a chance for patience, growth, and mutual understanding—not a prompt for one partner to take their ball and go home. As a recent series of case studies on community-labor partnerships pointed out:

The alliances that were successful over time were not restricted to traditional school issues: They took an expansive view of what affects the community and thus, its students, engaging on policy issues including immigration, home foreclosures, police violence, local wages, and child care and early childhood resources outside of the school day.

All empires fall, and all oppressed people eventually stand up. Horizontal links of solidarity between working people across jobs, neighborhoods, borders,

and oceans—like those formed in the education justice struggle today—are the tinder upon which the flame of justice and liberation will be kindled. It's up to all of us to encourage every spark we see to catch. 🧯

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Founded in 1991, the Schott Foundation is a national public fund serving as a bridge between philanthropic partners and advocates to build education justice movements to provide all students an opportunity to learn.

RESOURCES

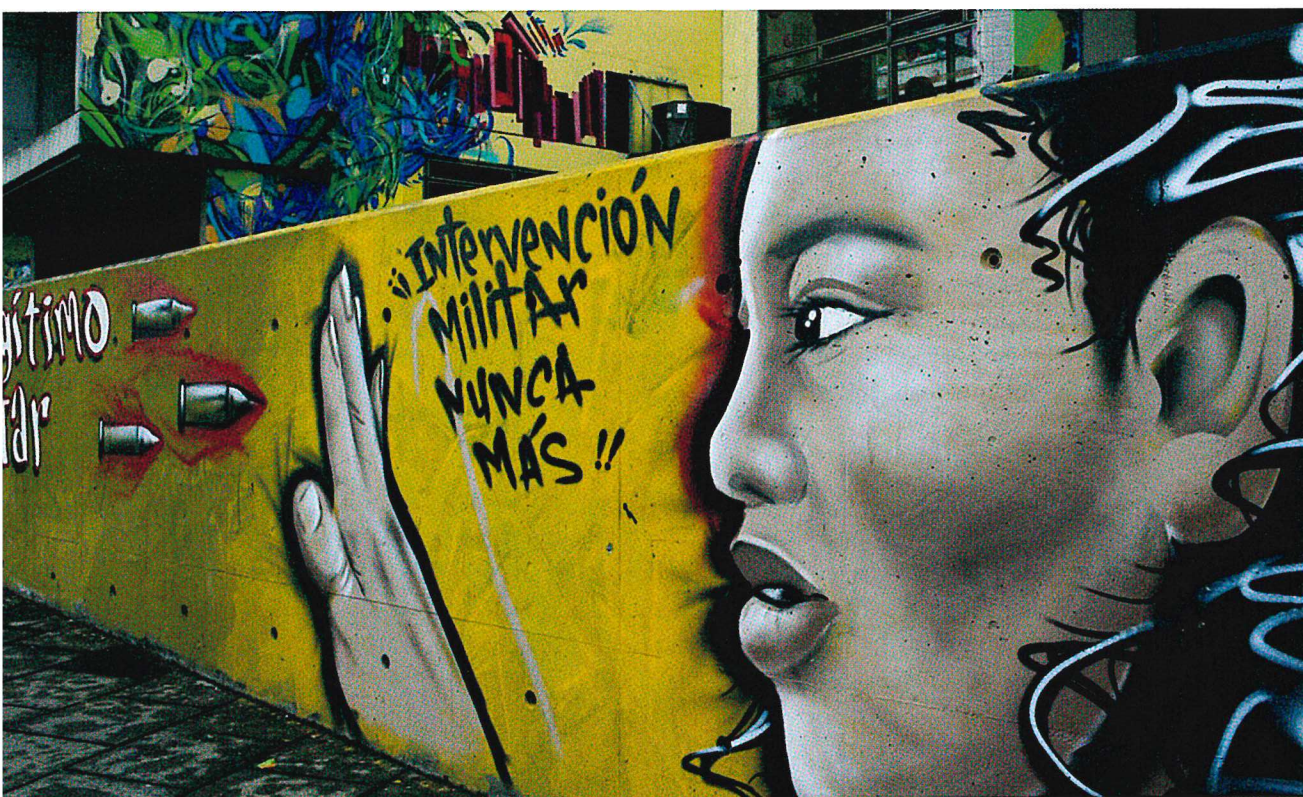
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Throwing Books at Bullets

Despite violence and intimidation, Colombia's teachers have been a bulwark for workers' rights

BY BOB PETERSON



BARBARA MINER

Tuesday, Aug. 25, 1987, began like any other day for Luis Felipe Vélez, president of the teacher union of Antioquia, Colombia's second-most populous state. Shortly after 7 a.m., Vélez said goodbye to his wife and three young children and headed to the union's office in downtown Medellín.

But as the 33-year-old was about to enter the modest adobe brick building, two assassins leapt out of a green Mazda 626 and opened fire, riddling his body with bullets. Vélez died two hours later.

Word spread quickly among human rights activists, teachers, and Vélez's colleagues in the Association of School Teachers of Antioquia, and by 5 p.m. a large crowd had gathered at the union office for a vigil.

Among the throng were Héctor Abad Gómez and Leonardo Betancur, two well-known human rights leaders. As Abad Gómez and Betancur entered the union office, two men jumped off a motorcycle and walked toward the crowd. One shot Gómez six times; the other chased Betancur into the office and killed him.

It was a bloody day in a bloody period. During the 1980s and '90s, assassinations were an everyday reality for union and human rights activists in Colombia. And violence, while on the wane, continues to this day.

According to Colombia's National Labor School (ENS), more than 1,000 teacher union leaders were killed between 1977 and 2014—the equivalent of 7,000 teacher union leaders being murdered in the U.S. The ENS has also documented more than 14,000 incidents of violence against labor activists, ranging from assassinations to beatings, kidnappings, and torture. The perpetrators have been brought to justice in only 1 percent of the cases.

This campaign of intimidation and murder (in combination with neoliberal restructuring) has taken a toll on Colombia's labor movement. Union membership is 4.4 percent of the national workforce today, down from 17 percent three decades ago.

As the movement has shrunk, public educators have become increasingly important. Teachers in Colombia now make up about half of the membership of the Central Union of Workers, Colombia's main federation of unions.

And they have one more thing in common with teacher unionists in the U.S.: They're fighting neoliberal reforms tooth and nail.

Global Front Lines

In December 2015, during a long visit to Colombia to study Spanish and learn about the situation in the country, I walked into the same teacher union office where Vélez was assassinated. On the wall hung portraits of Vélez and the 66 other teacher union leaders in Antioquia murdered since 1977. Above the pictures, a wooden sign read (in Spanish): "Here we are and here we will be forever in the heat of the struggle in defense of human rights."

Seeing the dozens of portraits of slain teachers was chilling, a stark contrast to the congratulatory plaques lining the office walls at my own union, the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association.

I had been aware of the danger facing private sector union activists in Colombia—especially those organizing against multinational sugarcane, banana, and mining companies—but the pictures drove home the importance of public sector workers to the struggle for justice and human rights in Colombia. Elites in the country literally had them gunned down to try to weaken popular resistance.

While the situation outside Colombia is less dangerous, public sector unionists across the world have emerged as a bulwark against efforts to eviscerate public services. From Chicago to Colombia, teachers have leveraged their position in society to fight the privatization and disinvestment national governments and

international institutions are pushing.

Teachers and schools are in nearly every town and city in the world. Urban and rural teachers are in daily contact with impoverished and disenfranchised communities. And despite anti-union attacks and growing privatization, teacher unions remain among the largest in the world. (In the United States, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers have some 4.7 million members, making K–12 public education one of the country’s most unionized sectors.)

Educational International, the global federation of teacher unions, has launched an international campaign against the commodification of education. But much more is needed.

To be successful, teacher unions must take our struggle beyond the school-house door and fight for more than just the rights of our members. We must struggle for a more genuine democracy, a more expansive social justice.

Colombian teachers, many of whom have given their lives, are on the front lines of this struggle.

Culture of Fear

Though separated by thousands of miles, my conversations with teachers and union activists in Colombia underlined the commonality of our struggles.

Teachers from Colombia and the U.S. alike decry the growing emphasis on standardized testing, the tendency to blame teachers for not solving problems created by pervasive poverty, the top-down commands that devalue teaching as a profession, and the narrowing of the curriculum, which edges out all-important issues such as social justice and critical thinking. They object to corporate reforms that privilege private schools and defund public education—reforms that, at their heart, represent an attack on democratic rights.

“We are fighting privatization of our public schools,” said John Avila, a former social studies teacher and later head of research for Colombia’s Federation of Educators (FECODE) in Bogotá. “The neoliberal agenda . . . is strong in Colombia.”

In the spring of 2015, the federation led a 15-day national strike that focused on two issues—meager pay and a new teacher evaluation system that consisted of a single written test. The union made gains on both, winning a 12 percent pay increase over three years and a more sophisticated evaluation system that does not include a written test.

Indeed, despite right-wing violence and a culture of fear, despite limits on organizing, despite the prohibition of agency fees, Colombian educators have persevered—roughly 70 percent of the country’s teachers are union members.

The Longest Civil War in Modern History

To fully understand the challenges and potentials facing Colombia’s teacher unions, a bit of history is necessary.

Colombia’s civil/guerrilla war dates back to the 1960s and is considered the longest contemporary struggle in the world. A central issue was land tenure—

wealthy landowners and multinational corporations seizing land for mining and banana and palm oil plantations. Another issue was the country's closed political system—the ruling oligarchy and their two political parties had formed a national front in the 1950s that effectively prevented legal means of politically challenging their rule.

In the 1980s, Colombia's narco-trafficking escalated, further complicating the country's politics and unleashing an increased level of violence. This situation became more problematic when both paramilitaries and left guerrillas began to use the drug trade to help fund their operations.

The U.S., meanwhile, linked its War on Drugs with its crusade against left movements in Latin America. The high point was in 1999, when President Bill Clinton and Colombian President Andrés Pastrana signed "Plan Colombia" to fight drugs and terrorism in Colombia. From 2000 to 2008, the U.S. Congress provided more than \$6 billion to Colombia, making it the largest non-Middle Eastern recipient of U.S. military assistance. How much went to fighting drugs and how much to fighting left guerrillas has never been clear. As the MIT Center for International Studies noted in 2008, Plan Colombia is "a counter-narcotics strategy that has turned into a counter-insurgency one."

But both the War on Drugs and the counter-insurgency failed. Colombia remains the world's leading producer of cocaine, and the government was unable to defeat the leftist guerrillas. When I visited, after decades of violence in the country, there was a yearning for peace in Colombia.

The 2016 peace accord between Colombia's government and leftist guerrillas raised hopes that teacher unions would be able to bring even more people into their ranks. As Carlos Diaz Lotero—longtime labor leader and now the director general of the ENS—put it: "It's a lot easier to organize for worker rights if leaders are not routinely murdered."

Two decades ago, peace talks between the government and the guerrillas led to the formation of the Patriotic Union, a left political party. But both the Patriotic Union and the peace process collapsed when the ruling oligarchy and paramilitaries launched a campaign against the nascent party. According to the House of Memory Museum in Medellín, nearly 5,000 members of the new party were "assassinated, disappeared, or massacred" between 1984 and 1997.

In 2012, peace negotiations were restarted again in Havana, Cuba, between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The process gained public support and attracted international scrutiny and assistance. A final agreement was reached in August 2016. However, a referendum in October to ratify the agreement lost after 50.2 percent of the voters voted against the deal, while 49.8 percent voted in favor. Six weeks later FARC and the Colombian government signed a revised deal and it was ratified by both houses of Congress.

Every educator and teacher union leader I spoke with supported the peace process, in the hopes that it will rein in paramilitary death squads and provide space for organizing and social transformation.

Unfortunately, implementing the agreement has been difficult, complicated by the continuing assassinations of dozens of labor, community, Indigenous, and environmental leaders.

Perseverance

As the peace process in Colombia struggles forward, the unions have developed a broad agenda to fight for worker rights. And because of Washington's continued involvement in the country, Colombian union activists say the solidarity of U.S. progressives and unions is essential.

Diaz Lotero spoke in particular about provisions in the U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement, which was signed in 2011. Because of pressure from the U.S. and Colombian labor movements, the pact included a Labor Action Plan intended to safeguard worker rights. Now Colombian unions are fighting to make sure that language is put into practice.

Provisions of the Labor Action Plan include establishing a ministry of labor, ending subcontracting designed to prevent unionization, opening an office of the International Labor Organization in Colombia, and changing legal codes to expand and enforce basic labor laws.

The plan also calls for measures to prosecute perpetrators of anti-labor violence and increase protection for activists, including government funding for bodyguards and armored cars. Intimidation is an ongoing concern. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, "threats against labor leaders and activists have increased significantly, in the form of text messages, phone calls, letters, emails, and other forms."

But as I spoke with teachers and union leaders in Colombia, I was struck by their matter-of-fact perseverance—a persistence examined in a book that all union activists in Medellín seem to have read: *Tirándole libros a las balas* (*Throwing Books at Bullets*). The book chronicles the history of violence against teachers in Antioquia from 1978 to 2008.

Fernando Ospina, president of the Antioquia teacher union, explained the title's significance: "Teacher unions have been targeted by violence and bullets," Ospina said. "Our response has been with education, social research, and social justice. They shoot bullets. We throw books." 📖

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.

Earlier versions of this article were published in *Jacobin* (April 6, 2016) and in FECODE's magazine *Educación y Cultura* (Edición 115, Julio 2016).

Education and Social Justice: A Global View

An interview with Angelo Gavrielatos



MARK KERRISON/ALAMY LIVE NEWS

Angelo Gavrielatos is the president of the New South Wales Teachers Union. Previously he was the federal president of the national Australian Education Union, and he worked five years for Education International, leading EI's response to privatization and commercialization of public schools. He was interviewed on Feb. 8, 2020, by Bob Peterson.

How did you originally become a teacher union leader?

The answer goes back to why I became a teacher. Like many others, I was inspired by my own teachers. I grew up politicized because of my family background and was active politically at the university. Early on I recognized that public education is a great social enterprise that has the transformative power to create a better society. It led me to joining my union on my very first day of teaching.

Once a teacher, I realized that if you want to make change in your classroom alone, that's great, but if you want to make change beyond your classroom or school, the only way to do that is through the collective strength of our unions.

What pushed you to believe teacher unions should go beyond narrow trade union demands and take up social justice issues?

I was never attracted by narrow economic unionism. We are privileged in the teacher union space to be able to go easily beyond the narrow unionism. In some other unions and industries, making that connection with social justice issues is more difficult. I was always drawn to an appreciation of the broader role of education and unionism in building community and movements. I realized the power of the collective in transforming schools and society. My perspective was further influenced by writings about social justice unionism in *Rethinking Schools* many years ago. I am referring to the taxonomy that distinguishes between economic unionism and social justice unionism. There was one other publication of yours, *Rethinking Globalization*, that sticks with me. In that, a high school student was . . . quoted saying something like “once you’ve tasted the thrill of solidarity, there is no way of going back to individualism.” I use that statement in mass rallies with young teachers all the time.

What is Education International?

Education International (EI) is a global federation of teacher unions and other education employees. Together it represents more than 32 million members from 179 countries and territories. Among other things, EI promotes the “principle that quality education, funded publicly, should be available to every student in every country.”

What was your role in EI?

Previous to me working for EI I was connected with its leadership while serving as president of the Australian Education Union. In 2012–2013 we realized that we had become very good at describing the problem of privatization and commercialization of our schools and that we gave great speeches, but what we hadn’t done was figure out what we were going to do about it. In 2015 I stepped down from being AEU president, moved to Brussels, and became responsible for leading EI’s global campaign against the growing threat of commercialization and privatization of education.

At that time, large global corporate actors had already started using their huge reach, depth, and strength to target public schools with no regard for national borders. These forces are capable of exerting incredible influence across the globe. They are stronger than most governments in the countries in which they are operating. EI decided enough with describing the problem—if we are going to confront it, we needed to start building a genuine global response to deal with the global dimension of privatization.

Who are some of the key players that you are referring to?

Pearson is the biggest global actor, and it has changed dramatically as a company. What started off as a publisher some decades ago has now made a conscious decision to move almost entirely into the digital space and is seeking to expand its reach over public education. It’s pretty much a tech company now, and it [and] a

few other tech groups are driving this privatization agenda.

It's not only the corporate world. We also have this agenda being driven by the World Bank and other related international financing institutions and intergovernmental organizations. They are doing it all for ideological and financial reasons. Education is valued around \$6.3 trillion (U.S.) a year. It's a "very lucrative market" as they would describe it, but to get to that market, education has to be removed from the public sector. Some five or six years ago there was a meeting of venture capitalists in the U.S., and they declared they were satisfied with the extent to which they had privatized health care, and their new frontier was education. Education is not only a lucrative market for these groups, but it is the most sustainable market in the world.

How many countries did you visit in your five years as leader of the anti-privatization campaign at EI?

I don't know. I've lost count—many countries, maybe 40 or 50, but I actively worked with a smaller number. In each country there are various manifestations of privatization—depending on historical and political factors. But every country was somewhere on a continuum of levels and types of privatization.

What's an example of a privatization attempt?

Liberia. In 2016 the Liberian government announced its intention to outsource all of its primary and pre-primary schools to one global actor called Bridge International Academies supported by the likes of Pearson, the World Bank, Zuckerberg, Gates, and others.

That is the endgame. The moment when a government hands over all of its education system to a corporate entity. People have said to me, "Liberia is an outlier. Is that the best example you got?" Interestingly, at same time in February 2016 that the Liberian government was announcing its intention to outsource all of its schools to private actors, David Cameron, England's prime minister, announced an almost identical policy stating his intention that all schools that remained in control by local government authorities become academies operated by private actors. Academies are analogous to privately operated charter schools in the U.S. So it's not just Liberia but countries like England. I dare say that's the intention of the Trump administration—to see all schools in the hands of private actors, destroying that social enterprise of free, quality, secular, universally accessible public education for all.

What's the status of the anti-privatization fight-backs?

There are lots of fight-backs underway. It's important for teacher union leaders to recognize that the biggest and maybe the last barrier capable of stopping these privatizers' dreams is the teacher union movement—domestically and internationally. There are other organizations defending public education, but unions are the strongest and most capable of mounting a sustained, organized defense. That's why we've become targets of the privatizers and governments as well.

When we launched our anti-privatization campaign in the Philippines, a union leader said to me, “Angelo, you realize that you are asking us to do something that could get us killed.” Taking on these corporate actors like Pearson and their partner in the Philippines, Ayala Corporation, led this union leader to say that to me.

Our colleagues in Colombia, who are very familiar with targeted killing of their leaders, also said taking up this anti-privatization struggle could get more of their people killed. “We are taking on vested interests,” one leader told me.

In Uganda supporters of privatization fabricated allegations against our researcher in 2016, and he was arrested and detained.

We never used to hear about this in the education sector. We heard about it in other sectors of the labor movement when vested interests were being exposed in mining, fishing, and logging. Welcome to the modern world of education that is worth \$6.3 trillion.

We are having some success. Is it at the magnitude we’d like? No, but ours is a long struggle.

Give me an example of a success.

I mentioned Liberia, where the government initially sought to outsource all the schools to one actor, Bridge International Academies. We forced them to retreat. We attacked their strategy, and they were forced to come up with a pilot plan involving a number of actors. We weren’t fooled; we knew what they’re all about. In education policy, whenever a reformer uses the word “pilot,” one should read it as “We will do you slowly.” It’s the politics of gradualism and attrition. We continue to fight in Liberia. In Uganda because of our efforts the high court deemed Bridge International an “illegal operator” that “set out to operate illegally” and the court called on them to be shut down.

There was a similar case in Kenya. So our efforts using a variety of political and legal and other organizing strategies have resulted in some wins. But it is a long struggle. We will persevere, we must persevere at all levels—whether at the local, regional, national, or the global level. It is one struggle.

What are key lessons you’ve learned?

We started the global campaign in 2015 and refined it periodically based on our ongoing evaluations. We quickly realized that strategic research was crucial for us to understand the dynamic in each country, which varied greatly. There are a large number of activist researchers, academics around the world who want to help unions. Our researchers examined the various manifestations of privatization. Based on those findings we built national campaigns to confront privatization. A national campaign with a powerful inside-outside communication strategy is necessary. The inside communication was necessary to organize and mobilize our own members. The outside strategy was to inform and build the necessary alliances with other unions and like-minded organizations.

Building unity was also critical. Regrettably, in many countries around the world there are three, four, five, seven, or more teacher unions. In those countries

unity is just a word. EI tries as much as possible to build solidarity—local, national, and global through action. Some of the solidarity actions were very powerful.

Give an example of one such action.

On a couple of occasions we linked the U.S. and U.K. unions with African teacher unions in actions against Pearson and the World Bank. We had leaders from a number of countries descend on Pearson's annual shareholder meeting. We got inside and it was pretty powerful for a leader of the Kenyan teacher union and a Ugandan teacher union leader to ask them, "Can you explain to me why you think it's a good idea what you are doing to my country? When did you ask us?" These were powerful moments, and the media and social media coverage in different countries helped spread our message.

Let's change the conversation and bring it to the United States. What are your thoughts on the red state revolts of 2018 and subsequent strikes by UTLA, the CTU, and others?

Teacher unionists from a distance are looking very closely and have been following these developments in the U.S. It's inspiring and motivating to see teacher unionists in these "right to work" states say "enough is enough," and it's inspiring to see them rise up articulating the needs and aspirations not only of themselves but more broadly the needs of their students and public education. Those struggles in the U.S. in the last few years have been well located within the frame of social justice unionism.

U.S. historian Howard Zinn once told me, "If teacher unions want to be strong and well supported, it's essential that they not only be teacher unionists but teachers of unionism." How important do you think it is for unions to encourage their members to teach about the working-class struggles and social justice movements?

People have asked me why these large corporate actors—the Mark Zuckerbergs, Bill Gateses, and the Rupert Murdochs of the world are so determined to privatize schools. Do they really need to become richer? That question relates to Zinn's statement, because there is something more fundamental that the privatizers want to control—the curriculum. Everyone recognizes the power of curriculum, because any curriculum taught today will shape the society of tomorrow. Given that . . . it's key that both teachers and students understand the struggles and value of unionism and other social movements.

This raises the related issue of the importance of member education. As union leaders we must always ask, "How can we better educate ourselves and our members?" One of my colleagues in Canada talks about the need for leaders to "reach within, reach out, and reach beyond." We need to reach within to ensure the heart of the union operation is operating in a democratic and effective manner and that we are getting the best out of all union leaders, officials, and employees. We need to reach out to all the members to make sure that they are fully appreciative of the struggle ahead and to enlist the support and the expertise in our broader membership. We have large memberships of very smart people. Are we working hard

enough to enlist their engagement, their activism, their expertise? And then are we reaching beyond to the broader community of unions and union members and others to strengthen our movement? We need to do all three things.

Howard Zinn is absolutely right. We not only need to be students of unionism but we must be teachers of unionism.

You are returning to Australia to work in New South Wales, where massive fires have consumed millions of acres and killed an estimated billion animals. What advice do have for teacher unions on the matter of climate justice?

We have the responsibility as teacher unionists to do four things, and I list them in no particular order: To look after our members, our schools and students, our communities, and our planet.

We are living in a climate emergency. What has occurred in Australia in the last couple of months [December 2019 and January 2020] has provided ample evidence for all those deniers. People ask, “Do you believe in the science?” What a ridiculous question. People might as well ask me if I believe there is a solar system or if the world is round.

The science tells us what’s happening. But like many other countries, in Australia the fossil fuel industry is corrupting the political process. There’s lots of work to be done. We need to fight that industry and their supporters. We need to ensure that we have the best curriculum available for teachers. We teach the science, we embrace science, we don’t teach dogma. The more we and our students understand the science, the better we can build the movement to confront the deniers.

In the U.S. and internationally, white supremacy and xenophobia are growing. How has the Australian teacher union responded to those issues?

The rise of xenophobia, the politics of fear, the politics of division—we are seeing that grow globally aided and abetted by the Trump administration; in Latin America with Bolsonaro and now in Bolivia after the coup; in Europe with Orbán in Hungary—it’s all around the world. In Australia we are not immune from these politics. Let’s not forget that modern Australia hasn’t reconciled its past with our First Nations people. For example, we still celebrate “Australia Day,” similar to your Columbus Day. Australia Day celebrates the Jan. 26, 1788, arrival of the Europeans to this continent, which was populated by more than 500 Indigenous groups. How can we seriously celebrate Australia Day when our First Nations brothers and sisters consider it to be invasion day? How is that a day of national unity? It’s a big debate. Conservative commentators attack anyone who dares question that holiday. A satirist said, “You’d think it’d be easy to get a consensus that committing genocide is a weird excuse for a barbecue.”

Of course, the politics of fear and xenophobia is not restricted to our Indigenous brothers and sisters; it also plays out through Islamophobia. Australia is not in a good place in terms of racism and xenophobia, and we will do everything, whatever we can, to develop the necessary racism awareness for our members and our students in order to confront and deal with racism. One of the things we say: “Racism stops with me.”

How has international solidarity between teacher unions been in recent times?

The leadership of the NEA and AFT is active on the international stage and we know that we can rely on the NEA and AFT to extend support to struggles involving sister unions around the world. That needs to be acknowledged. Regrettably, that is not apparent to everyone, but from my experience, I know the broader movement is grateful. And similarly, the broader union movement has lent support to our brothers and sisters in the U.S.

During the height of the Red for Ed strikes in the spring of 2018, a lot of unions from around the world extended messages of solidarity to the U.S. At the height of detention of families and children at the U.S.-Mexican border when the U.S. government were putting children in cages, a lot of the unions around the world that had in the past been recipients of solidarity messages from the U.S. reciprocated, not as an act of reciprocity, but because it was an important statement to make. The challenge for all of us is to grow international solidarity at all levels of our unions. We need to reach within, reach out, and beyond on this issue as well.

How do we enhance notions of international solidarity among our members?

First, we acknowledge that our members are busy and stretched. Their work is ever increasing with the top-down compliance measures. I understand when our members say, "I haven't got time to do more." It's through no lack of desire on the part of teachers to be informed and get involved. Teachers know that when it comes to the well-being of children, our concern goes beyond our classroom, our school, our borders—it's global.

We should encourage the notion of solidarity that the well-being of any child anywhere in the world is teachers' business.

How do notions of building solidarity intersect with the ongoing wars and massive refugee crises that exist in several places around the world? It's easy to have divergent views on unions taking up those issues.

Promoting peace is teacher union work. Not long after WWII, dozens of countries formed the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Australian teacher union leaders came back from one of UNESCO's early conferences with a message that has remained part of the DNA of our union ever since. That message was: Every war that is fought, is fought against children—it denies their hopes and dreams. That's why peace and the antiwar movement is teacher union business. How many times have we in the teacher union movement been told, "It's not teacher union business"? We've been asked, "Why are you involved in the peace movement and antiwar movement?"

It's because every war is fought against children. I think of war memorials that have stone panels engraved with names of those who died in war. Often such panels have blank spaces waiting for future names. Well, those panels will be engraved with the names of our future students, to say nothing of the thousands of civilians, many of them children who will forever remain nameless. If anyone says it's not our business, then whose business is it? 📍

“We Won! Now We Keep Fighting”

Winning investment in the schools
Massachusetts students deserve

BY LEIGH DINGERSON



ARI BRANZ

For more than a quarter-century, advocates for public education have been fighting for resources for public schools in the commonwealth of Massachusetts. It has been a campaign saga marked by wins, draws, and defeats. In 2019, advocates celebrated when Gov. Charlie Baker signed new legislation that promises to send nearly \$1.5 billion to public schools over

the next seven years. This victory was won through a multifaceted campaign that brought together litigators and organizers, lobbyists, parents, students, and teachers united in a demand to “Fund Our Future.”

Yet, on the day the new law was signed, the only realistic message was “We won! Now we keep fighting.” Ensuring the investment that our students deserve is an ongoing struggle. This is the story of the campaign in Massachusetts.

History and Context

While Massachusetts is often lauded as the birthplace of public education in the United States, and while the state boasts some of the top student outcomes in the nation, Massachusetts struggles, like other states, to ensure that all students have access to the resources they need and deserve in their schools.

In 1990, a lawsuit challenged the state’s school funding formula—or, more accurately, *lack* of a formula—for offering state dollars to supplement district spending and help equalize access to resources across the state. In 1993 the Supreme Judicial Court (SJC) ruled that the state was in violation of its constitution, and ordered the legislature to come up with a way to ensure adequate funding, particularly for districts without enough local resources to fully fund their schools.¹

Even before the court ruling, the Massachusetts General Court, as the legislature is formally known, had seen the writing on the wall, and passed a new law to address disparities in educational resources. The 1993 Education Reform Act, signed by the governor just three days after the SJC issued its ruling in the legal case, established one of the first “foundation formulas” for education funding in the nation.

The act² established the estimated cost of a minimum set of resources, materials, and learning conditions that each child deserved access to, according to the court. The cost of those resources was calculated by district, based on enrollment. On top of that, the new formula added additional monies on a per-pupil basis, for students with special needs, English language learners, and very low-income children. Combined, the formula created a “foundation budget”—the amount each district should spend on its public schools.

Next, the new law assessed the amount of money that each district could afford to contribute toward that budget through local revenues. This amount was set as the district’s “minimum required contribution.” The new formula then committed the state to making up the difference between each district’s minimum required contribution and its foundation budget.

The legislature set a target of ensuring full funding within seven years, and mandated incremental annual increases to keep up with inflation.

Two Steps Forward, Two Steps Back

In its initial years, the Education Reform Act pumped significant new resources into school districts across the state, particularly disadvantaged ones. In FY 1993, for example, the state’s lowest-income districts spent about \$1,400 less per pupil

than the highest-income districts. By FY 2000, this gap had narrowed to \$370 per student.³ But after about 10 years, the progress stagnated while costs climbed and budgets tightened. At the local level, districts were unable to keep up with the growing costs because of anti-tax legislation passed in the 1980s, which limited property tax increases. And at the state level, a series of tax *cuts* enacted between 1998 and 2002 made additional spending on education difficult.

The rising costs of education did not affect only low-income districts. Skyrocketing healthcare costs were a large part of the problem. In addition, the costs of providing services to students with special needs were also rising. Neither of these expenditure areas was subject to belt-tightening. Health care was a contractual right for all employees. The bills just had to be paid. And the provision of services for students with disabilities is mandated by federal law. In order to meet these costs, most districts were forced to pull funds from other areas of their budgets, leading to larger class sizes, declining facilities, and reductions in programming and staff. In schools across the state, the promise of adequate school funding was becoming a promise denied, year after year. And the state legislature did not have the political will to act.

By early 2015, as conditions worsened, legislators began to feel growing pressure to address the inadequacy of the foundation budget. Finally, the General Court called for a Foundation Budget Review Commission (FBRC) to reassess the calculations the budget was based on. The commission held six public hearings around the state, hearing from teachers, parents, students, and administrators.

The FBRC's report, released on Oct. 30, 2015, was blunt.⁴ The body found that "dramatic growth" in healthcare costs was breaking district budgets and that the foundation formula had underestimated the number of students with special needs, as well as the costs of providing the services they were entitled to. The commission found "a sharp rise" in the numbers of new immigrants, many of them refugees from war-torn regions who often arrived with serious social and emotional needs and limited formal education for schools to build on. Additional support was needed, noted the FBRC.

Finally, the commission found that the weights written into the foundation formula were insufficient to provide needed support for low-income students. Overall, the commission found that the way the state calculated the foundation budgets understated the cost of educating students to the tune of at least \$1 billion per year.⁵

The commission report served as a wake-up call for the general public. But already, community groups, teacher unions, and student-led organizations were beginning to build a campaign to reclaim public education in Massachusetts. For them, the commission report was validation of their message: We need more for our public schools, and we need it now.

In schools across the state, the promise of adequate school funding was becoming a promise denied, year after year.

The Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance

In late 2015, the Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance (MEJA) brought together a wide range of labor and advocacy groups, including the Massachusetts Teachers Association, the Boston Teachers Union, Citizens for Public Schools, FairTest, Jobs with Justice, AFT Massachusetts, PHENOM (the Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts), the New England Area Conference of the NAACP, and Youth on Board, a Boston-based youth-led organizing group. The statewide alliance emerged from the successful work of the pre-existing Boston Education Justice Alliance, built by the Boston Teachers Union, which was already having an impact in reducing cuts to the Boston Public Schools budget.

MEJA began networking across the state to encourage and support local labor/community coalitions, eventually helping to create chapters in more than a dozen cities. Members of each of these local alliances met regularly, cross-pollinated with other MEJA chapters, attended trainings and information sessions, and planned initiatives to educate and persuade their representatives to the General Court and the general public about the challenges, threats to, and needs of the state's treasured public schools.

MEJA's trial by fire arrived the following year, when the state's charter school lobby, frustrated by the legislature's refusal to lift the cap on the number of charters permitted in the state, filed petitions to place the issue on the ballot in the November 2016 elections.

"NO on 2"—MEJA Beats the Charter Industry

Question 2 on the ballot in Massachusetts in November 2016 asked voters to approve lifting the cap on charter schools. The lavishly funded "Yes on 2" campaign was run through the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association and relied on its messages of a parent's right to choose and the supposedly long lists of parents waiting for a charter seat for their child. The governor, and even the state's secretary of education, were vocal (and, it turned out, financial) supporters of the initiative.

MEJA led the opposition, focusing on the financial impacts of charter schools on local districts, and the role of billionaires in the state who supported charters, while failing to pay their fair share of taxes to support public schools. MEJA and its partners mounted a formidable grassroots campaign, including coordinating resolutions in opposition to the initiative from 215 of the state's 318 school committees.

MEJA's message, which has been successfully used in other states as well to highlight both the corporate backing of the charter industry and the false narrative of austerity, resonated in Massachusetts. On Nov. 8—the same day that Donald J. Trump won the presidency—Question 2 was defeated by a wide margin (62 percent opposed). The outpouring of opposition signaled a resurgent commitment to public schools by the state's voters, and it stunned the charter industry.

A Plan for New Revenue: Raise Up Massachusetts

Adding to the winds of change, a separate coalition, called Raise Up Massachusetts had also formed, and was advocating for a \$15 minimum wage as well as guaran-

teed family medical leave. They had also proposed a “Fair Share Amendment” that would increase taxes on incomes over \$1 million and dedicate the anticipated \$2 billion in annual revenues from that tax increase to education and transportation projects across the state. Here was a way to insist that the state’s millionaires and billionaires contribute to the general welfare.

As an amendment to the state constitution, the Fair Share Amendment required signatures from across the state, and then votes in two consecutive years, by the General Court, convened in a constitutional convention. Raise Up had jumped these hurdles, and the amendment was cleared for the November ballot in 2018 and widely expected to pass. MEJA joined the coalition to support the millionaire’s tax.

Fund Our Future!

The General Court took up the FBRC report in their 2018 session. Several bills aimed at recalculating the foundation formula and pumping new money into education were filed and debated. Legislators, who had twice signaled their support for the Fair Share Amendment, assumed that the millionaire’s tax, scheduled for the November ballot, would provide the revenues needed to fund an education formula overhaul.

They also passed a new minimum wage law, and family medical leave. It seemed that progressive breezes were blowing.

But in the middle of the legislative session, the Supreme Judicial Court struck the Fair Share Amendment off the ballot for technical reasons. And despite determined organizing work, the school funding bill failed in the very final hours of the very last day of the legislative session. Senators and representatives—while agreeing that a new formula was necessary—could not agree on the numbers.

As the session was gaveled to a close, MEJA issued a scathing press release, vowing to be back in 2019. The failure of the legislature to act allowed MEJA to increase the militancy of its organizing and approaches to lawmakers. It also offered time for some MEJA partners—those with the ability to engage electorally—to crystalize their work for candidates in the November 2018 election cycle, by demanding new faces on Beacon Hill—legislators who would fight even harder for the investment that Massachusetts students deserve. Indeed, the chair of the state’s House Ways and Means Committee, who had been a staunch opponent of new funding for schools, was toppled in November, signaling that there would be political implications if the legislature failed to act on school funding in the next session.

In December 2018, MEJA and other allies launched Fund Our Future—a campaign specifically directed at winning passage of a new foundation formula.

Organizing to Fund Our Future

By 2019, the Fund Our Future campaign was mobilizing across the state as parents, educators, and students demanded action on Beacon Hill. The campaign wanted to be certain that any bill that passed would include full funding, based on the FBRC’s \$1 billion price tag, and that it didn’t include any steps backward on charter schools, state takeovers, or other conservative education proposals.

Local Organizing Was Key to #FundOurFuture

Key to the success of #FundOurFuture was the organizing that happened outside of the state Capitol.

Malden, Massachusetts, is one of the most diverse, and the most chronically underfunded districts in the commonwealth. An influx of immigrants has had a dramatic impact over the past decade. There are now 70 different languages spoken in the Malden schools.

Students in Malden have spent their entire elementary and secondary years in underfunded schools. The city has put in “every spare dime” that it could, but this hasn’t been enough. “The school funding formula hasn’t been changed since I was 12 years old!” says Deb Gesualdo, president of the Malden Education Association (MEA). “How is that OK?”

The district has an early learning center, five K–8 schools, and one high school. Most students don’t have access to world languages until they get to high school. Access to music and art at the elementary level is limited. The district has only a single charter school, but district financial transfers to that school suck \$11 million annually from the district budget. Down the road in wealthier communities, it’s a totally different landscape.

The teacher union hosted a community forum in the spring of 2018. More than 200 residents, students, parents, and educators turned out to hear their state senator, along with an officer of the national NEA and the president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, talk about the need for new school funding legislation.

As the #FundOurFuture campaign moved forward, the MEA hosted school walk-throughs with the mayor, and their state senator. They had the senator sit down with students, who explained what underfunding looked like to them every day. They held focus groups with teachers and organized smaller events as well.

They also organized resolutions supporting the school finance report. These resolutions were passed by the local school committee and the City Council.

“When the Student Opportunity Act passed, we had this feeling of elation . . . but also disbelief,” said Gesualdo. “It’s hard to wrap your mind around what this could actually mean for our schools.”

But soon the union was back at it, scheduling new forums to start planning their platform for the next round—the development of a plan for spending the new money, which was required by the law. “We’re going to bring educators, students, parents, and guardians together to provide input,” Gesualdo noted.

“It’s going to be life-changing. This will literally change lives of our students.”



New England Patriots players Devin McCourty, Jason McCourty, and Duron Harmon wear T-shirts in support of the Massachusetts “Fund Our Future” campaign.

COURTESY OF THE NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS/DAVID SILVERMAN

MEJA began to hold “boot camps” to educate parents and teachers across the state about the legislation. A series of Days of Action mobilized parents, students, and educators to call their representatives in the General Court. While thousands were mobilized for a rally on the Statehouse grounds in May 2019, local MEJA chapters and unions took resolutions in support of a new funding formula to their school committees and other elected bodies. More than 100 school committees, city councils, and other governmental bodies passed resolutions calling for full funding—most of those by unanimous vote.⁶

Countless in-district meetings with legislators took place, with teachers, parents, and students making their case. In many cities, legislators were taken on tours of schools to witness firsthand the conditions that students and their teachers were working under.

Even some members of the New England Patriots spoke out. Three members of the Players Coalition—a national advocacy group of NFL players focused on racial justice and equity issues—went to the Statehouse to testify in favor of new investment in education. They took legislators on a tour of a local school and kept the issue alive on their social media platforms. The players gained national attention when the Patriots twitter feed featured a photo of the three players on the practice field, sporting Fund Our Future T-shirts.

Actual negotiations around the bills took place behind closed doors. But the bill that emerged from conference in October 2019 stunned advocates. Instead of the \$1 billion recommended by the FBRC, the bill called for even more funding.

It was passed unanimously by both the Senate and the House and signed by Gov. Baker just days before Thanksgiving 2019.

The Student Opportunity Act

The Student Opportunity Act (SOA) committed the state to inject nearly \$1.5 billion into the commonwealth's schools—exceeding FBRC recommendations. There were virtually no poison pills—no charter expansion, no new testing requirements.

In specific, the act:

- Lifts the definition of low-income to 185 percent of poverty, up from 133 percent, allowing more schools and districts to qualify for additional aid;
- Increases per-pupil funding by as much as 100 percent for low-income students in districts with high concentrations of poverty;
- Increases special education and English language learner allocations;
- Adjusts/considers additional costs for guidance and psychological services for students;
- Adjusts for the actual costs of health insurance to employees and retirees;
- Expands additional reimbursements to include transportation costs, and more.

The law also included an embedded organizing handle. Although advocates were not in favor of an increased oversight role for the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the law required superintendents and school committees—with input from parents and other community stakeholders—to submit three-year improvement plans, specifying how the new money will be spent.

MEJA summed up the campaign in a victory statement the day the governor signed the bill: “We Won! Now We Keep Fighting.”

Looking Forward

There was little time to savor the victory. For the grassroots advocates, all eyes were now on the development of local district plans, due in April 2020. “Money doesn’t solve problems unless there’s a real vision,” says Charlotte Kelly, the director of MEJA. “Suppose a district stands to get \$100 million in new funding through this bill, and they decide to spend it on increasing the police presence in schools. There’s still a fight to be had. If we don’t center our work around anti-racism and dismantling white supremacy in our schools, we’re avoiding the core of the problem that brought us here in the first place,” she noted.

In late winter 2020, MEJA was holding a series of “boot camps” around the state to help local labor/community coalitions develop platforms of resources and supports they can take to the table as district plans were being developed.

Groups knew they would also have to monitor the governor and legislature to make sure they held to their commitments. And Raise Up Massachusetts re-

newed its efforts to win a millionaire's tax on the 2022 ballot. There was much to be done. But spirits were bolstered in January 2020 when Baker released his FY 2021 budget proposal. It included \$355 million toward the new law—just *over* the amount needed to meet the scale-up of the funding commitment. “We will keep a close watch on Beacon Hill over the next seven years to make sure lawmakers fulfill their pledge to provide every student with a high-quality education no matter where they live, their family income, the color of their skin, the language they speak at home, or the services they need to succeed,” said Denise DaPonte Mussothe, of Fall River, whose son had been a lead plaintiff on a pending lawsuit, again challenging the state’s funding formula, when the legislature passed the SOA.⁷

A huge swath of Massachusetts residents has been mobilized and educated to understand the school funding debate. Through grassroots organizing, sophisticated lobbying, communications, and strategically mounted litigation, the commonwealth is now full of people who will monitor the implementation of the Student Opportunity Act, and quickly stand up to the next—no doubt inevitable—effort to circumvent the law or cheat students out of the resources they are entitled to.

The fight doesn’t end, and won’t. But the 2019 victory has every appearance of being historic. 

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.

ENDNOTES

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Teacher Strike Threat Backs Off ExxonMobil

BY BARBARA MADELONI

Sometimes the boss offers us a fight that directly exposes the destructive effects of corporate power.

In Baton Rouge, Louisiana, that moment came when ExxonMobil asked for yet another handout from taxpayers—property tax exemptions totaling \$6 million.

For the 9th-largest corporation in the world, it was a routine request. ExxonMobil is accustomed to receiving such perks from obedient state officials. But teachers saw it differently: as a \$6 million theft from the local school budget.

Educators and other school employees voted 445-6 on Oct. 23, 2018, to stage a one-day walkout the following week. Teachers planned to pack a hearing on ExxonMobil's requests.

Within hours of the union vote, the company's exemption bids were off the Board of Commerce and Industry's agenda.

Government + Business = ♥

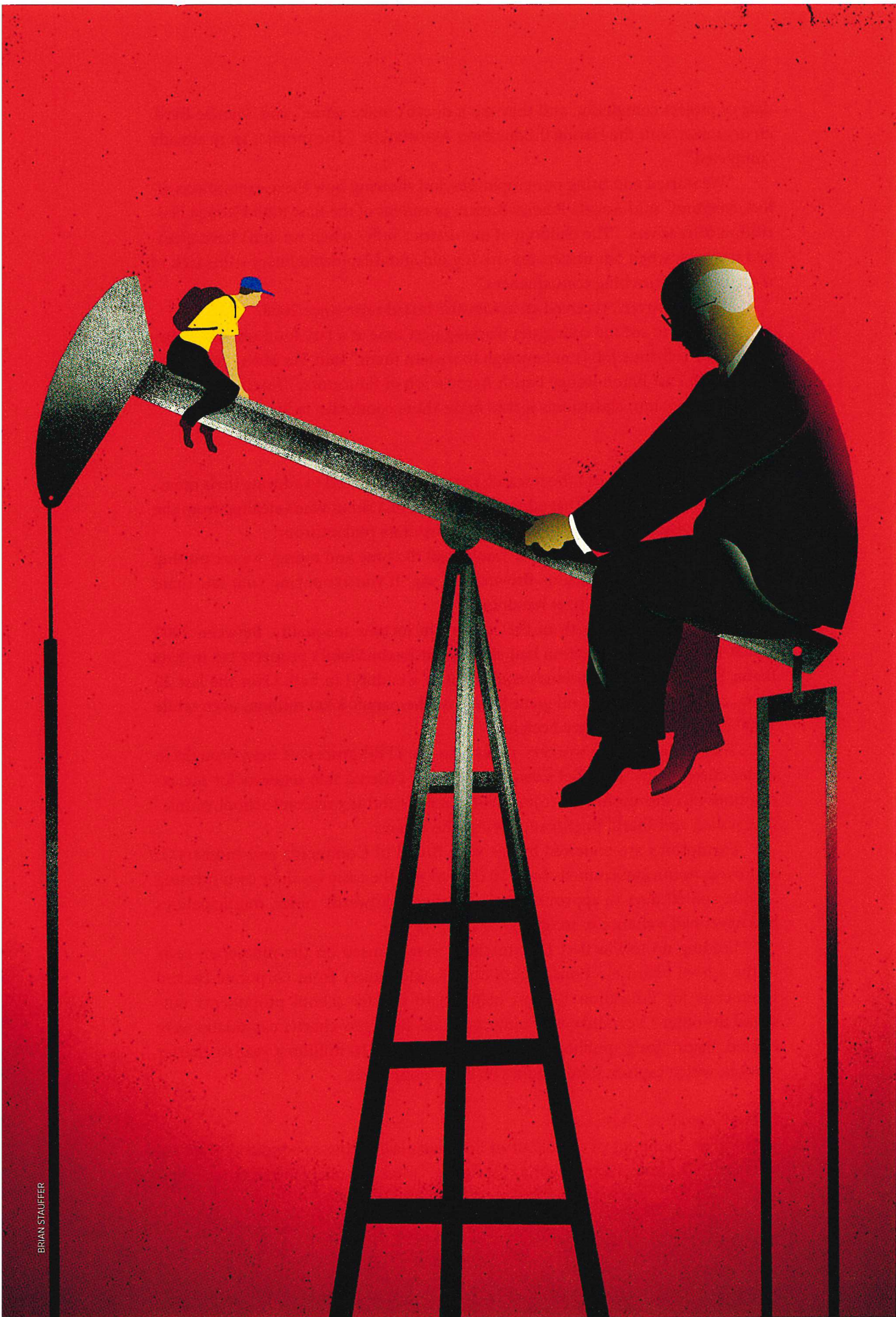
The backstory here is how members of two teacher unions and an SEIU local in East Baton Rouge got educated about the connection between corporate giveaways and the deteriorating conditions in their schools.

These unions participate in a faith, labor, and community coalition called Together Baton Rouge, which holds its Civic Academy Series to educate about community issues, including education. It was there that union members learned more about the state's Industrial Tax Exemption Program (ITEP).

ITEP, enacted 44 years ago, makes corporations eligible for tax exemptions if they can show—or claim—that their expenses for projects will contribute to a community's economic growth.

In this round of requests, ExxonMobil was asking for tax exemptions for work completed in 2017. The company didn't even bother to argue that the new exemptions would bring jobs or more revenue.

In the Civic Academies, union members learned to find ExxonMobil's submissions and read them for themselves. "They see the date of submission and the



date of project completion and they see it doesn't make sense," said Shanize Byrd, an organizer with the National Education Association. "The projects were already completed."

"We started educating our employees and showing how these exemptions affect everyone," said Angela Reams-Brown, president of the East Baton Rouge Federation of Teachers. "The children of our district suffer when we don't have qualified teachers, when bus drivers are driving old and dilapidated buses—this lack of money has far-reaching consequences."

Teachers haven't received an across-the-board raise since 2008.

"It hurts to see my colleagues working part time at a fast-food restaurant because their full-time job is not enough to sustain them," said Tia Mills, then-president of the East Baton Rouge Parish Association of Educators. "Teachers put a lot of their money into classrooms just to make them conducive to learning."

Corporate Handouts

Together Baton Rouge did the research that the unions used to educate their members and the community. That education was not just about who's stealing from the district—it also exposed the distortions of corporate philanthropy.

"Exxon comes back and says, 'Look at all the time and money we are putting back into the city,'" said Reams-Brown. "We say, 'If you are paying your fair share of taxes we will not need your handouts.'"

Louisiana ranks fourth in the country in income inequality. Between 2007 and 2017, the ITEP exemption had already cut ExxonMobil's property tax in East Baton Rouge Parish (Louisiana's equivalent of a county) in half. Over the last 20 years, exemptions for the oil giant have cost the parish \$700 million, even while 1,900 ExxonMobil jobs have been lost.

Teachers and other workers' input into the ITEP process is new, brought in under current Gov. John Bel Edwards. Edwards ordered that requests for tax exemptions include resolutions from parish councils and any relevant school, municipal, police, and sheriff boards supporting the request.

Exemptions are reviewed by the state Board of Commerce and Industry. If approved, municipal councils have 30 days to put the issue on their own meeting agenda and 60 days to approve or reject. Prior to Edwards' order, municipalities had never had a chance to weigh in.

Leading up to Election Day, teachers were focused on the nine open seats in the school board elections, where out-of-state money from corporate-backed Democrats for Education Reform helped two charter school proponents outspend the other 13 candidates by almost double. Both pro-charter candidates were elected. Baton Rouge public schools lose more than \$10 million a year to charter schools, which capture state funding on a per-pupil basis.

Strike Wave Fired Them Up

There were rumblings of a walkout in Louisiana last spring as educators watched teachers strike from West Virginia to Arizona. "Most definitely the red state rebel-

lion influenced the teachers,” Reams-Brown said. “We said it is always possible but it requires great planning. We want the community and the parents on our side.”

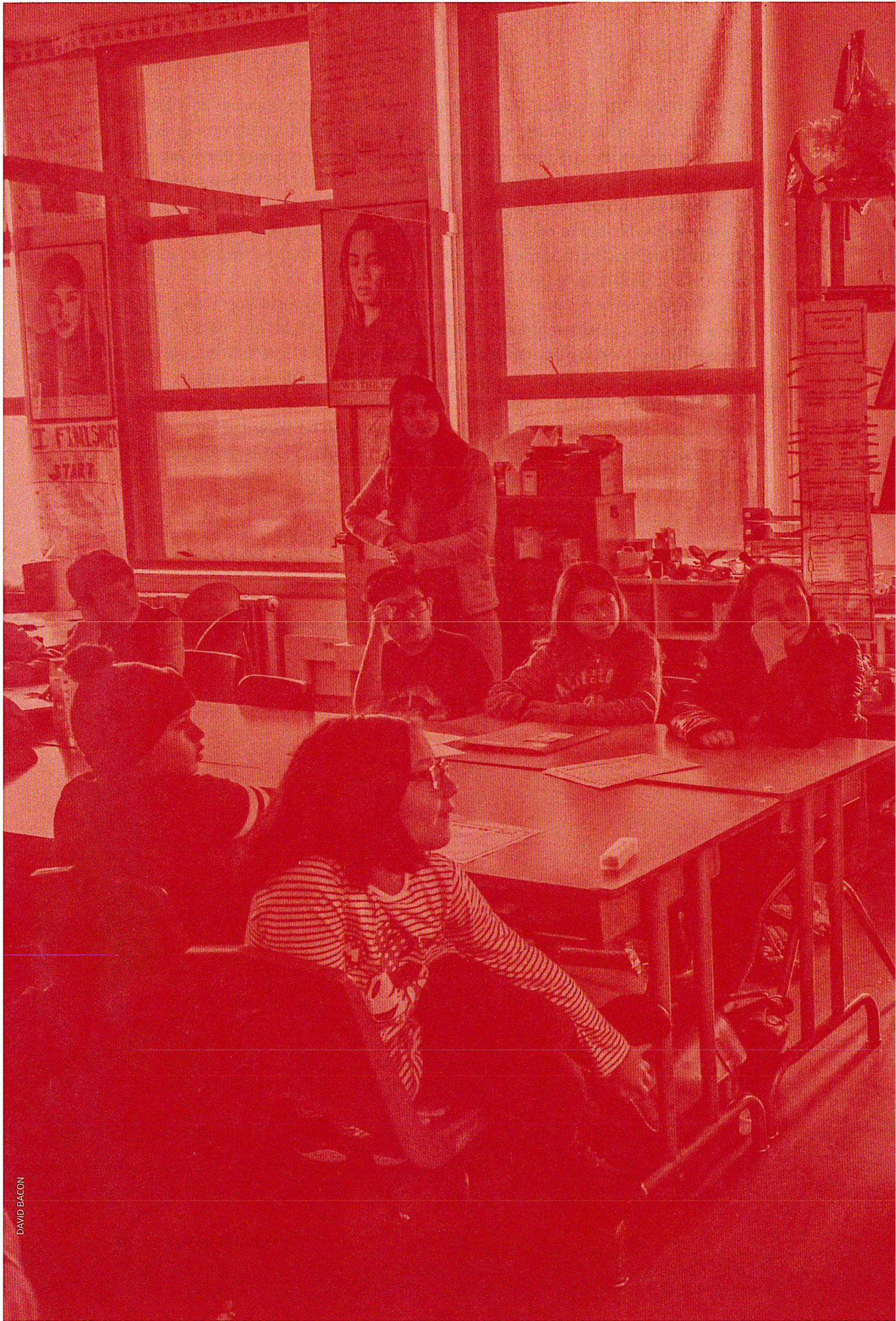
Members were still fired up at her union follow-up meeting, the week after ExxonMobil removed its requests and the walkout was canceled. Some were disappointed not to walk out. Byrd said she had never before seen members not wait for staff or leadership to tell them what the next steps would be: “They said, ‘Let’s do this.’ They have learned the mechanics of organizing. They are ready to go back into their schools, talk to people, and take action.”

While school employees are continuing to organize—including making plans for a walk-in to celebrate public education—the unions have also filed a lawsuit against the tax assessor, who they claim has improperly left ExxonMobil and other corporate properties off the tax rolls, costing the district millions of dollars.

Meanwhile, Mills said, the superintendent just indicated he’s going to recommend deep cuts in next year’s budget. “We are going to be experiencing deep cuts but we are giving money to a big corporation,” said Mills. “How is giving money to business good for our children?” ■

Barbara Madeloni is the education coordinator for Labor Notes. Prior to working for Labor Notes, she was the president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association.

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DAVID BACON