

Redefining the Role of Teachers and Their Unions in Reform Efforts

Claire Robertson-Kraft 03 April 2011

Introduction

New energy around reforming the public school system provides an unprecedented opportunity for Pennsylvania and Philadelphia to embrace system-wide change. At the heart of these reforms is a focus on developing effective teachers, a result of the fact that the quality of classroom instruction is now understood as the most important influence on student growth (Marzano 2005, Sanders and Rivers 1996). These reforms call for new ways to measure effective teaching; propose plans to use this information in decisions related to compensation, career advancement and tenure; and articulate strategies for turning around the teaching force in our lowest-performing schools.

Some current reformers have cast teachers unions as the chief obstacle to these types of reforms. They argue that unions protect ineffective teachers from being dismissed, allow for evaluation systems that fail to differentiate teacher performance, and promote a salary schedule that rewards seniority rather than teaching excellence. To

exacerbate matters, critics point to the fact that with a base of over three million members, teachers unions have used their political power to thwart flexibility and stifle innovation.

It's no secret that existing systems rate virtually all teachers good or great and fail to recognize excellence or address poor performance. In Pennsylvania, for example, teachers are granted tenure after three years on the job if they receive a satisfactory evaluation, which the overwhelming majority do, and very few are ever fired for inadequate performance. In Philadelphia, despite efforts to improve the teacher evaluation system, only 25 teachers were rated unsatisfactory in the 2009–2010 school year (Mezzacappa 2011). A significant body of research has now demonstrated that these practices make it challenging for districts to develop a high-quality teaching force (Weisberg et al. 2009). However, there's little evidence that vilifying teachers unions will help solve the problem. To the contrary, whether or not districts can successfully sustain reform initiatives of this type has historically been shown to depend in large measure on teacher buy-in, particularly from the unions (Hannaway and Rotherham 2008).

If current reform efforts are to be effective over the long term, they must be done with teachers and not to them. This will mean changing the way unions represent teachers and the way teachers unions and school districts conduct their business. Above all else, meaningful reform

will require teachers and administrators to work as partners. This philosophy of “professional unionism” should lay the foundation for any comprehensive reform effort. In a professional model, unions collaborate with school districts to ensure that teachers play an active role in the implementation of new initiatives.

From Industrial to Professional Unionism

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The industrial model of union-management relations, currently in use in most districts, assumes that labor and management are fundamental adversaries and that collective bargaining is the primary means to resolve conflict. In this model, teaching is considered a largely standardized type of work, and collective bargaining agreements seek to establish uniform conditions for the teaching workforce. Though the current model has been enormously successful in improving the pay, benefits, working conditions and job security of teachers, it is clear that these traditional contracts have also drawn a line in the sand between labor and management.

In contrast, trust and shared power lie at the heart of the model of professional or “reform” unionism. This new approach would (1) blur the distinction between labor and management, (2) expand the bargaining scope to include education policy issues and (3) promote collaborative or

interest based bargaining (Koppich 2007).

- Blur the distinction between labor and management. Reform contracts bridge the labor-management divide by identifying collective aspects of education work. Under these contracts, unions and management assume joint responsibility for improving the quality of the teaching force.
- Expand the bargaining scope to include education policy issues. Proponents of professional unionism urge that unions must organize themselves around issues of educational quality and school innovation. They should collaborate with districts to create a more attractive working environment, by ensuring that teachers have the support necessary to improve their instruction and by offering new opportunities for career and professional growth.
- Engage in collaborative or interest-based bargaining. A more collaborative approach to negotiation focuses not on dividing fixed resources but on expanding the proverbial pie. Collaborative or interest-based bargaining urges parties to overcome their competitive tendencies and instead focus on finding common ground.

Professional Unionism in Practice

The concept of professional unionism first emerged in the late '80s and early '90s, when local unions in Minneapolis, Cincinnati, Toledo, Rochester, Columbus and Montgomery

County, Maryland, began to adopt innovative approaches to labor-management relations and broaden their contracts to embrace reform-oriented issues. These contracts focused on the teaching profession, rather than individual teachers, by addressing issues such as career development, differentiated pay, new teacher induction and standards-based evaluation processes. Most importantly, over time, relationships came to be characterized by collaboration and mutual trust. Table 1 provides an example of the differences between industrial and professional unionism in practice.

Contract Issue	Traditional Contract (Industrial Model)	Ref Mo
Relationship between union and management	Separation of labor and management	Blu dis
Style of negotiations	Adversarial	Col
Bargaining type	Positional bargaining	Inte
Scope of negotiations	Limited	Exp
Teacher differentiation	All teachers are treated the same: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standardized salary schedule and single role of "teacher" • Seniority-based transfer rights 	Tea bas - D role - Si ser
Professional development and evaluation	Contract limits professional development and evaluation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purposefully limited offerings • No career development 	Col pro eva • E: • D

	• Pro forma evaluation	• S
Focus of protection	Individual teachers	Tea

Note: Information in this table is based on Koppich (2007).

Learning from Other Cities

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Nothing currently prevents districts and unions from engaging more collaboratively in practices of professional unionism. In fact, the last contract between the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) and the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) was heralded among many as a groundbreaking reform-oriented contract. The PFT and the SDP expanded the site selection process, allowing principals to select staff rather than assigning teachers based on seniority. They also took steps to improve the evaluation system by implementing a new teaching rubric and instituting a Peer Assistance and Review program, which gives teachers a key role in assisting new and struggling educators. However, it is clear that the PFT and the SDP still have a long way to go in developing and maintaining a collaborative approach to reform.

Philadelphia can learn from the efforts of other cities that have managed to move toward and sustain a model of professional unionism by heeding the recommendations

drawn from Koppich and Jupp 2009.

Accept change. School district and teacher union leadership need to acknowledge that they have entered into a new era in public education where student performance must be central to decision-making. Now that the goals for student learning have increased substantially, what we expect of teachers and teaching must change as well. Union leaders will have to persuade long-time members that accepting change does not mean abandoning the more traditional focus on industrial issues; rather, it merely requires taking on an expanded role. They must also respond to the needs of the next generation of teachers, who have been shown to be more likely to support differentiated pay and embrace opportunities for collaboration and career advancement (Johnson et al. 2007).

Promote collaborative labor-management

relations. The tradition of adversarial relations and mistrust marking most relationships between teachers unions and management has hindered the movement toward professional unionism. Together, labor and management need to commit to moving beyond this partisan anger to foster a workplace culture where improving student performance is at the heart of school improvement efforts. Unions must play a key role in improving the quality of education by collaborating with school districts to ensure that their members meet the standards necessary to foster student learning.

Believe in an expanded role for teachers. If reforms are to be sustained, districts and unions alike need to operate with the philosophy that teachers should be empowered to have a voice in policy development. Change should not be imposed through top-down command and control or additional bureaucratic regulations, rather, policymakers should find ways to expand teachers' roles through initiatives such as peer review and shared decision-making. Ultimately, the best chances for the successful implementation of new reforms lie with progressive educators and union leaders who willingly work together to improve public schools.

Conclusion

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Admittedly, professional unionism is easier to write about than implement; however, important steps can be taken to put this vision into practice. In many districts, new methods of collective bargaining are emerging, where contracts are not bound by rigid multi-year decision-making cycles but can be flexibly adjusted over time to address issues that directly affect teachers' work in classrooms. When the Superintendent and PFT President sit down to negotiate the next contract, they should adopt an agreement that would allow for periodic negotiations, meaning that policy could respond to emerging conditions and issues. Moving toward this more professional model

of unionism would require that district leadership recognize teachers and their unions as equal partners in the reform efforts and that union leaders embrace new reforms by acknowledging that teachers have an important role to play in increasing student achievement. Once this results-oriented relationship with the district has been established, unions should demand a role in the discussion of setting and measuring progress on district-level performance targets, as well as decisions surrounding curriculum and professional development.

It would be naïve to assume that the district and teachers union can easily bring about these changes in practice. However, with the increased focus on reforming the school system, policymakers are becoming even more demanding and public expectations are growing, making change seem inevitable. As policy begins to hold teachers accountable for their students' performance, it must also ensure that they are given a say in key decisions that affect their instructional practice. Now is the time for teachers and their unions to redefine their role with management and assume a seat at the policy decision-making table.

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