Teachers Unions as Partners, Not Adversaries

Keith Catone

The work of teachers unions in Chicago and nationwide offers a promising model of teacher and community engagement.

Chicago has long been one of the national epicenters for public school reform. In many ways the reform efforts of the past decade in the Windy City have served as the blueprint for the current focus of federal education priorities. In particular, federal policy for school turnaround and transformation takes clear cues from the efforts that current Secretary of Education Arne Duncan oversaw in Chicago when he was CEO of Chicago Public Schools from 2001 to 2009. Shuttering low-performing schools (as measured by test scores), facilitating the restructuring of schools (often resulting in major shifts in personnel and student population), and promoting the growth of charter schools have all been strategies for Chicago reform and are now centerpieces of federal school turnaround guidelines.

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However, for such technical approaches to school turnaround to be successful, they must be accompanied by close consideration of the social, political, and cultural dimensions of school change. Without attending to these other dimensions, Chicago has experienced the alienation of its professional teacher corps and the disillusionment of many parents and grassroots community leaders with regard to public school reform, outcomes that undermine the social capital and trust that ensure broad local support for public school systems.

Scores of underperforming and, yes, failing schools across the country are in severe need of turnaround and transformation. However, federal policies that introduce technical change and innovation without careful attention toward how to create change collaboratively with teachers, parents, and other community leaders miss crucial opportunities to engage those for whom the change matters most. The work of the Chicago Teachers Union provides a promising model of teacher and community engagement that the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) can look to as they seek to create policies and guidelines that will support sustainable reform, particularly in urban areas.

TEACHERS MATTER

Many grassroots community organizations, parents, and teachers in Chicago who have been fighting for high-quality education for years do not believe the city's reform strategies have worked in their communities. In fact, in June 2011 a network of more than 100 Chicago-area university professors – Chicagoland Researchers and Advocates for Transformative Education (CReATE) – published a research-based statement on Chicago school reform that decried the vast majority of reforms initiated in the previous decade. They specifically sought to counter what they describe as a "myth" that "school turnarounds have benefited Chicago Public Schools by giving 'failing' schools a new start."

Instead, CReATE cited evidence that since the implementation of Chicago's major school turnaround policies, districtwide high school student achievement hasn't risen and most of the lowest-performing high schools saw student test scores decline. The researchers also pointed to the disproportionate impact of school closings on low-income African American and Latino communities and increasing trends of violence inside and outside of "turned around" schools (Chicagoland Researchers and Advocates for Transformative Education 2011).

Disappointment in Chicago school reforms also led to the formation of the Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators (CORE), which was started by a group of teachers who came together to read Naomi Klein's (2008) *The Shock Doctrine*. Klein argues that in the practice of "disaster capitalism," policymakers and corporations take advantage of man-made and/or natural disasters to push through particular changes as a response to crisis. CORE members saw connections between Klein's argument and the ways in which education reformers were framing changes in Chicago as a crisis response, forcing school closures, transformations, and conversions to charters.

In five years, the leaders of CORE won election as the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) – evidence that they were not alone in their critique of the direction in which Chicago Public Schools were headed. In the midst of contract negotiations in June 2012, CTU displayed a high degree of solidarity when 90 percent of its membership voted to authorize a strike should the union leadership deem it necessary (Davey 2012). This vote

signaled not only that Chicago teachers overwhelmingly supported their union leadership, but that they were just as overwhelmingly disillusioned with the leadership and direction of Chicago's public schools.

Virtually the same school turnaround strategies tested in Chicago are what have driven federal regulations for the School Improvement Grant program, Race to the Top, and ESEA waivers. As in Chicago, federal policies have promoted practices that have been criticized by teachers and teachers unions, such as teacher evaluations and school accountability based on student test scores alone and the spread of charter schools that are not unionized. These priorities have little or mixed research-based evidence for success (Springer et al. 2010; Fryer 2011; Fryer et al. 2012; Center for Research on Education Outcomes 2009).[1] In the absence of such evidence, the value of the serious disruption and alienation of the teaching force should be questioned.

Further, federal competitive grants like the Race to the Top initiative require teachers unions to co-sign the application. This creates competing interests for teachers unions: they are pressured to either support reforms that will alienate their members or be blamed for unsuccessful grant applications. For the DOE to avoid replicating these dynamics across the nation, federal priorities need to reflect a clear and proactive commitment to engage with teachers and their union leadership, looking for common ground and working to ensure that teachers are not automatically placed on the defensive. Treating teachers and their unions as true partners, not as coerced co-signatories, will go a long way toward ensuring that the resulting reforms and priorities represent a viable and sustainable path for change in our public schools.

1 For an additional list of research showing the negative impacts of high-stakes testing, see the source list for FairTest's Resolution on High-Stakes Testing at http://fairtest.org/sites/default/files/resolution_on_high_stakes_testing__signing_final_w_biblio_4-23-12.pdf.

COMMUNITIES, PARENTS, AND STUDENTS MATTER

Teachers and communities have a mutual interest in collaboratively addressing the real impacts of poverty on a child's readiness to engage in academic learning. Not only should teachers unions be seeking to partner with families and communities around these and other issues, but policymakers should also be shifting priorities to support these partnerships and address these challenges.

Union-Community Collaboration in Chicago

Public opinion polls conducted during the CTU strike repeatedly showed that more Chicagoans supported the teachers than they did Mayor Rahm Emmanuel. In fact, more people actually blamed the mayor for the strike than they did the teachers. Community organizations, parent groups, and youth groups all spoke out in support of the teachers' strike (Clawson 2012). The widespread support for CTU surprised many observers, but not the CTU. Since winning leadership in the CTU, president Karen Lewis and her team made it a priority to organize and build relationships with community members as well as teachers.

Caught in an education reform context that has made it commonplace to blame teachers as a primary cause for the failure and underperformance of our public schools, the CTU shifted their relationships with the communities in which they work. They embarked on the development of their own research-based reform agenda for Chicago's public schools, "The Schools Chicago's Students Deserve." The agenda calls for

ten essential elements that are student and community centered and focus squarely on important issues of teaching and learning conditions, such as reducing class size, supporting students and families with wrap-around social services, directly addressing systemic inequities, partnering with parents, and respecting and supporting teachers as professionals (Chicago Teachers Union 2012). Efforts like these have solidified CTU's legitimacy within Chicago communities. The union has worked hard to earn the trust of parent, youth, and community organizations by articulating its interests in ways that align with the interests of these other constituencies, and this trust garnered the support CTU experienced during its strike.

Taking Union-Community Collaboration to Scale

More broadly, both major national teachers unions – the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) – are working to build authentic community ties and relationships with families to identify and organize around mutual interests. With the support of national staff, AFT union locals and community partners have been co-hosting community-based town hall meetings to discuss the development of "community-driven reform agendas" while committing to "solution-driven unionism" (American Federation of Teachers 2012). To date, these meetings have been attended by hundreds of teachers, parents, and other community leaders in over ten cities. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) has been supporting these meetings by documenting the content of the conversations and will help the AFT and their community-based partners throughout the country distill the major themes and ideas for change that will inform a truly grassroots and partnership agenda for school reform (see the sidebar on page 59 for more on AISR's work with teachers unions).

For the past three years NEA Priority Schools Campaign (PSC) has targeted intense support for teacher-community collaborations in the neediest schools where their members are committed to "disrupting the status quo." The campaign focuses on supporting three key levers for student achievement (National Education Association, n.d.):

- A strong partnership between the school and students' families.
- An investment in increasing the skills and effectiveness of the school staff.
- Community-provided social and health services for students and their families.

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NEA PSC accomplishments have included support for innovations to strengthen teacher-family partnerships focused on student learning and achievement. In Sacramento, the Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project disrupts the cycle of blame and mistrust that is often found between teachers and parents. In Phoenix, Academic Parent-Teacher Teams have revolutionized parent-teacher conferences to support interactive meetings between

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parents and teachers aimed at developing capacity for effective at-home learning activities. The Compadres in Education program in Oklahoma City has worked to alleviate previous language and culture barriers between teachers and families at a city high school, overturning the feeling that parents were unwelcome at the school. Each of these NEA-supported innovations works to build the joint capacities of parents and teachers to support student learning, with the ultimate goal of dramatically increasing student achievement.

IN THE FIELD | MINNESOTA NEIGHBORHOODS ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE

Excerpted with permission from "Real Parent Power: Relational Organizing for Sustainable School Reform" by Keith Catone and Sara McAlister, forthcoming in National Civic Review.

Minnesota Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (NOC) is a multi-racial member-led organization whose mission is to build power in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods across the Twin Cities. A large part of NOC's organizing focuses on home foreclosure prevention and changing the policies that govern foreclosure. NOC has also worked on other economic justice issues and voting rights. In 2010, NOC surveyed its members about the issues they wanted to prioritize for the upcoming year. Though education was not included on the list, a large proportion of members wrote it in as a top concern.

While NOC leaders and staff were gauging members' specific interests around education in early 2011, the Minneapolis school district announced plans to close North High School. North was more than 100 years old and had been an anchor of the predominantly African American North Side. It had lately struggled through a cycle of declining enrollment and sinking achievement, which NOC and many local families attributed to the district's previous decisions to close all of North's feeder elementary and middle schools, eliminating the school's attendance zone. NOC joined with other community organizations, student and alumni groups, and the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) to form the Save North High Community Coalition. Their public campaign convinced the district to reverse its decision and bring in a nonprofit school reform organization to lead a community redesign process.

To build off the momentum of the North High campaign, NOC leaders decided to conduct a community-wide survey to understand how families felt about the public schools and what issues resonated widely. Based on their collaboration on the North High campaign, they decided to approach the MFT to see if the union would be willing to help fund the survey. The MFT and the St. Paul Federation of Teachers both agreed to support the survey and a part-time education organizer for NOC. The group experienced some pushback about their decision to engage with the teachers unions from allies who saw unions as impediments to improving teacher quality. But NOC leaders and staff believed that in order for whatever campaign they might develop from the survey to gain traction, they would need

TURNING GOOD WORK INTO GOOD POLICY

These efforts demonstrate a significant and substantive commitment to building partnerships with families and communities and offer promising blueprints for federal, state, and local education policymakers to use in developing reform agendas seeking similar partnerships among all stakeholders. There is an opportunity in this next Obama administration to chart a new bold course for reform, one that includes teachers unions as leaders and partners rather than as adversaries. Without meaningful partnerships between policymakers, unions, communities, and families, we will continue to witness the failure of school reform and the separation of teachers and communities. The DOE should both acknowledge and utilize the substantial and effective work of unions and communities in Chicago and nationwide to lay the foundation for powerful, sustainable reform.

the support of classroom teachers to carry it out. They saw the process of jointly developing the survey as a way to build understanding between families and teachers.

The process was not without tension. The SPFT's contract was up for negotiation, and the union was nervous about questions that NOC had developed (with the help of AISR staff) that asked parents to give their child's teacher, the school, the district, and the state a letter grade. NOC leaders felt that the question was important for understanding parents' concerns, and the question stayed. The two unions were able to suggest a question that would help inform the upcoming contract negotiations in St. Paul. NOC conducted a massive survey collection drive, through door-knocking, phone-banking, and attending community festivals and other events. More than 400 parents from neighborhoods across the Twin Cities completed the survey. Parents rated their teachers quite highly, giving them much better grades than the district or state. Two clear issues emerged from the parent survey: reducing class sizes to allow more individualized attention and providing more time and avenues for parents and teachers to communicate about children. Both mattered a great deal to teachers, as well, and the union embraced them as priorities in their contract negotiations.

The SPFT was able to use the survey results to demonstrate broad parent support for lowering class sizes and new programs to facilitate communication. Union leaders invited parents involved in NOC to sit in on the bargaining sessions and explained what was happening at each step of the process. Through the survey development and contract negotiations, parents and teachers built a great deal of trust and developed personal relationships. The final contract included pledges to keep class sizes low and district investment in a Parent-Teacher Home Visit project, based on a model developed by another community organizing group, the Sacramento Area Congregations Together. NOC leaders are currently working with several schools to improve parent engagement and strengthen relationships between teachers and families.

For more on Minnesota Neighborhoods Organizing for Change, see www.mnnoc.org. For a short AISR-produced video featuring the NOC story, see www.realparentpower.com.

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