

Collaboration and the Collective-Bargaining Process in Public Education

By Matthew Noggle, Ed.D.

In the vast majority of school districts, the collective-bargaining process has evolved little during the past few decades. Teachers unions have successfully represented teachers' economic and job security interests by linking them to collective bargaining and procedural due process rights, but district administrators continue to make the decisions about educational delivery and quality (Kerchner, Koppich, and Weeres 1998).

For the most part, neither side seems to recognize much need for a collaborative bond. In fact, very little information is available about how collaborative labor-management models are established and maintained.

However, in many districts, teachers unions and district administrators are beginning to incorporate

collaborative actions to their collective-bargaining processes and daily interactions. Teacher contracts are beginning to include nontraditional issues such as teacher professional development, teacher quality, instructional delivery, student achievement standards, and educational reform (Koppich 2005; Urbanski 1998).

In Miami-Dade, Florida, the school district and its teachers union use a joint committee that meets regularly to update the teachers' contract with recent initiatives that have evolved and to establish the course for future initiatives and other changes (Kerchner and Koppich 1993). In Rochester, New York, and Hammond, Indiana, the contract includes language that permits a more timely response to issues that demand more imme-



diate attention (Urbanski 2003). In those districts, as well as others across the country, issues no longer fester until contract negotiations resume; rather they are addressed at the time, when the issue is significant.

One study of collaboration between school district administrations and teachers unions revealed that collaboration emerged from a discontent with the adversarial status quo. The initial foray into collaboration did not necessarily include collaborative contract negotiations at all sites, although all districts eventually incorporated some form of collaborative interest-based approach to their collective-bargaining process. Some adopted a formal type of interest-based bargaining and received formal training to implement it, while others incorporated less formal collaborative principles to their collective-bargaining process (Noggle 2010).

The commingling of teacher and administrative roles via contract negotiations transformed the school districts in this study. Teachers unions were no longer fixated solely on financial gains. Administrative leaders began to share control over traditional administrative functions and draw on the expertise of their teaching staff, allowing greater latitude for teachers to improve their craft and that of their peers.

The essence of collaborative bargaining is rooted in a joint emphasis on communicating interests and avoiding taking positions.

By shedding traditional positional posturing, teachers union leaders and district management successfully negotiated improved salary compensation, site-based decision making, peer review programs, and improvements to teacher quality and student academic performance and secured significant grant funding for their respective districts (Noggle 2010).

The essence of collaborative bargaining is rooted in a joint emphasis on communicating interests and avoiding taking positions. Both parties should view the final negotiated agreement as a flexible, living document, subject to change as needed. This approach allows districts and unions the opportunity to address problems as they arise rather than waiting for formal negotiations to resume.

When the process is collaborative, contract negotiations are often shorter, less time is spent on labor relations, and fewer grievances are filed between contracts. Discussions throughout the district remain focused on educational issues rather than contractual issues (Doyle 1992).

Expanding teacher authority through shared decision making cultivates greater ownership in the successes of the district (Ilg 1999). Collaborative bargaining also opens other avenues for collaboration and problem solving. In the many districts that espouse collaborative bargaining, representatives from labor and management meet regularly, not just during negotiations. This approach to meeting between rounds of formal bargaining can provide a forum to settle contract issues, solve problems, and consider proposals.

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A district's readiness for collaborative bargaining depends in part on both sides having an impetus for change (Noggle 2010). If either side is satisfied with the traditional approach, collaborative bargaining will not succeed. If either side expects to win at the other team's expense, collaborative bargaining will not succeed because the premise of collaborative bargaining is that neither side wins unless both sides win (Doyle 1992).

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