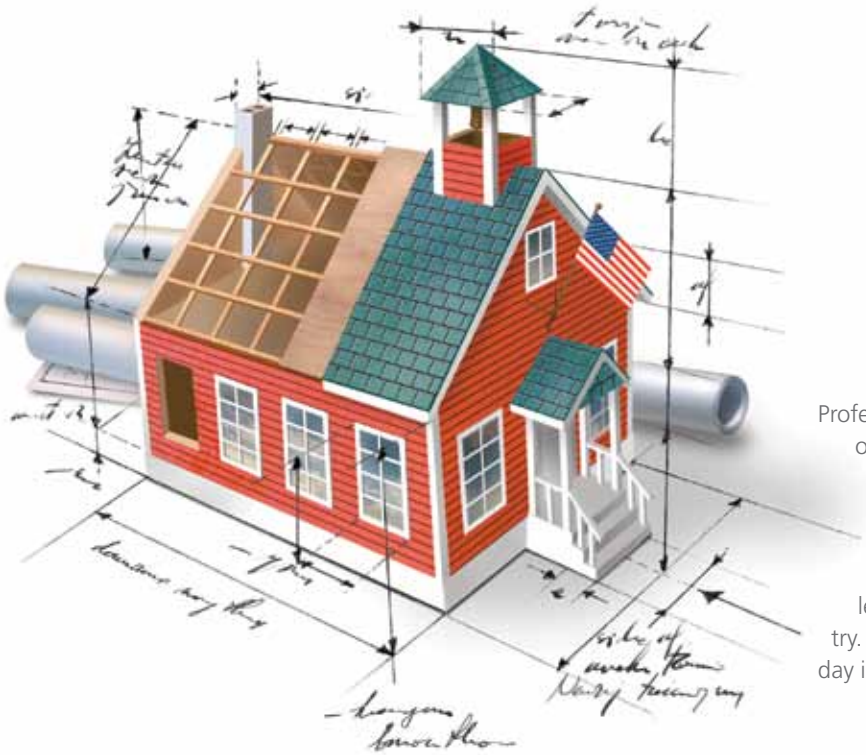
Union Members Are Community Members



Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.

By David Gray

Twenty-five years. That's how long I've had the privilege of serving as the president of the Oklahoma City Federation of Classified Employees, Local 4574 of the AFT. Our members are parents, and they're paraprofessionals, bus drivers, skilled craftspeople, mechanics, clerical workers, food service workers, groundskeepers, and scanners/security staff. They keep the schools running well and looking good.

David Gray has been the president of the Oklahoma City Federation of Classified Employees since 1988 and has been a vice president of the American Federation of Teachers since 1992. He is a member of the AFT Paraprofessionals and School-Related Personnel Program and Policy Council, the chair of the AFT Annuity Trust, and the chair of the AFT Constitutional Amendments and Convention Committee. He is the chair of the Oklahoma State AFL-CIO Human Rights Committee, a board member of the American Federation of Teachers Oklahoma, and a former vice president of the Oklahoma County chapter of the A. Philip Randolph Institute.

After my first year as the local president, I decided I would be a student of labor, and I consider myself a student of labor now. I take on each and every day, and every experience, as a learning experience. One thing I've learned is that my union members care about the quality of their schools and the well-being of their community. And they want their union to care too.

Fortunately, it did not take me all 25 years to figure that out. But it did take almost a decade to figure out what to do about it. So even though I've been president since 1988, I'm going to focus on what I've been doing since 1997: serving my members by serving their community.

In 1997, our central labor council in central Oklahoma conducted a brainstorming retreat in one of our members' homes. We were planning for our future, thinking about political action—and thinking about how we could make things better for our members and for the children they serve. The political environment was growing increasingly adversarial, and our best path forward was not at all clear.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NENAD JAKESEVIC

There was some debate, but ultimately we agreed that we should seriously think about coalition building. A few of the leaders present (we were all affiliated with each other through the Central Oklahoma Labor Federation) automatically pushed back. They had a hard time seeing beyond the union movement at first. But those of us who wanted to give this a try prevailed. Today, we have a strong coalition that includes the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the A. Philip Randolph Institute, the United Way, a wide array of religious organizations, and the Coalition of Labor Union Women, to name just a handful of our dozens of partners.

I was one of the primary advocates for coalition building. To me, it was obvious that we needed strong relationships outside the union movement. Some union leaders wanted to stay under the umbrella of the AFL-CIO. My idea for a strong coalition required reaching out beyond where we were. I argued for reaching out to religious leaders—all religious leaders, not just certain groups—and then to civic organizations that shared our concerns for people, children, and the environment.

My union members care about the quality of their schools and the well-being of their community. And they want their union to care too.

I'm an avid reader; in newspaper and magazine articles throughout the 1990s, I saw the social climate shifting away from America's pro-union days. I convinced maybe two or three other leaders to see what I was seeing in terms of attitudes toward organized labor here in Oklahoma. In the mid-1990s, the attitudes of the citizens went from strong or lukewarm to indifferent. We agreed that eventually they would become hostile, so it was imperative that we reach out to the community. Sure enough, in recent years the political climate here, along with the media, has become very challenging toward organized labor.

To get started in building a coalition, we formed a small group to think carefully about whom we should contact. Well, it became a no-brainer: we saw some pastors who were well-respected community activists, and we knew we wanted to work more with the United Way. The United Way provides inroads to the community and to the people who believe in our city because it has a network of smaller agencies that it funds and supports. Like our union, these churches and United Way agencies all dealt with human concerns and were dedicated to helping people. We were all already members of the same community; we just needed some structure to help us get organized so we could accomplish more.

Of course, we did not limit our coalition building to these people and organizations—they were just a starting place. To expand, we contacted religious leaders across the board who were like-minded, progressive thinkers, and we invited them to a "meet and greet." All of this happened in 1997: the initial brainstorming and the big meet and greet. And we've been meeting ever since: every second Tuesday of every month since 1997. We've also continued to do big, open meet and greets. Everyone is welcome. These events provide an opportunity for new organizations and leaders to get to know the coalition. Attending is not a commitment to join, but each time we host one we expand our coalition.

Before I jump into what we've accomplished, I have to admit that it was hard to establish these monthly meetings. Everybody is busy. But we realized, well, everybody eats lunch. So we decided to meet from 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. every second Tuesday, and that has worked out very well. We average about 20 to 30 leaders a meeting, and we now have close to 50 members who have committed to being part of our coalition and who get involved in our campaigns.

Officially, our coalition is the Central Oklahoma Community Forum, and today we have a mix of progressive religious, labor, and civic leaders. Notice that I'm emphasizing leaders. It's the leaders, the decision makers, who come to these lunches every month. They can bring staff, but they can't send someone without decision-making authority in their place. When the coalition makes a decision, it's done. We go into action. We won't wait for a staff member to go back and ask the leader of the organization. The leader has to be at the table.

Community support has been critical because the far right, driven in part by the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce, has had a long-range plan to eliminate unions in Oklahoma. They're scratching their heads trying to figure out why we're still around and have so much support. They would be able to figure it out if they would just come to one of our meet and greets, and get to know the good work our coalition does. We are not a political organization; we invite Republicans, but they don't come.

Within our coalition, we have groups dedicated to voter registration, immigration, adoption, human trafficking, the criminal justice system, and other important causes. Our work is so broad I usually refer to it as "human concerns."

When a new leader comes into the community, we reach out. I guess you could say the coalition organizes new leaders just like the union organizes new members. We're open to everyone. We focus on issues that all progressive thinkers can support—when you're focused on student services, it's not very hard to find partners. The attitude among citizens may have become challenging toward unions, but people still want to help children. So even though the leaders of conservative organizations refuse to join us,

we have no problem finding volunteers out in the community.

Getting this coalition started took an enormous amount of time: there is no substitute for personally inviting leaders to join and answering their individual questions. But, as I found out, there is no better use of a local union president's time.

In 2003, we had a threat of privatization. Almost our entire union—more than 1,000 employees—would have lost their jobs. The campaign to privatize was headed by Cliff Hudson, who is the CEO of Sonic Corp. At the time, he was both Sonic's CEO and the chairman of the Oklahoma City School Board. Hudson rallied support from his friends at the Chamber of Commerce; his plan was to give the custodial, bookkeeping, food service, and transportation work to Sodexo—a company that Sonic had been in talks with regarding possible contracts in 2002 and 2003. Hudson's angling to give work in the schools to Sodexo certainly smelled like a conflict of interest.

Within our coalition, we have groups dedicated to voter registration, immigration, adoption, human trafficking, the criminal justice system, and other causes.

Hudson's privatization effort focused on saving money, but the method for doing that was lowering wages and stripping the workers of health benefits. That was obviously terrible from the union's point of view, but it was devastating from the coalition's point of view too. A lot of our union members had children in the schools, so having hundreds of children with lower family incomes and no health insurance would have negatively affected the broader school community.

Since our coalition of community leaders was strong, we won big. Our leaders communicated directly with their constituents, and some even educated the community on radio programs. The school board chairman and his allies soon discovered that they weren't just going against a local union; they were going against the entire community. We even had the police department on our side. No one has proposed privatizing our work since then. Without our coalition, however, we would not exist today.

Helping Each Other

I started with the privatization example to show that coalition building is important, but that campaign is not typical of our work. Most of the time, the coalition is working not for any particular member group, but to solve a problem we see in the community. For instance, right now the coalition has an eyeglasses campaign. The Reverend Lance Schmitz, who is a regular participant in the AFT's Faith in Action program as well as a coalition member, brought the need to the coalition's attention. In a recent visit to one of our high schools, he discovered many kids who needed glasses but just couldn't afford them. So we decided right then and there to start a campaign to buy these kids glasses. We found an optical shop that would do it right—not only is it offering a significant discount, it is giving the kids really nice, stylish glasses that they feel good about wearing.

To get the campaign started, I suggested that each union in the area contribute at least $100. We have 66 locals affiliated with the labor federation in the metropolitan area, so if each local participates, that will provide a decent fund to start buying glasses. This campaign has been a good opportunity to bring more local unions into our coalition. We've been using it as a reason to meet with other locals, and they're coming on board each and every month—getting interested in the coalition and contributing to the eyeglasses campaign. It's a worthy cause. Now people from the community are hearing about the campaign and contributing as well. It has been such a success that we're thinking about moving it to a disadvantaged elementary school.

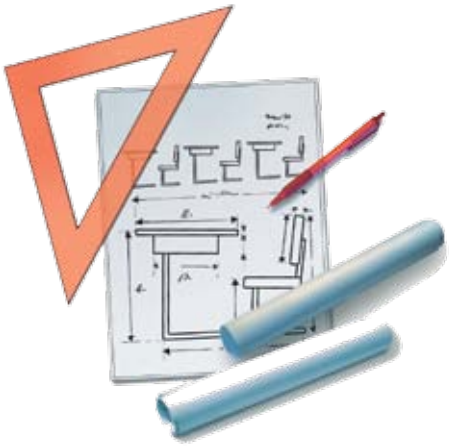
Another ongoing campaign involves student nutrition. Our coalition was able to get a school board member elected who is really concerned about child nutrition, and now we have two big issues to address through this campaign. The first is educating students and parents on healthy eating. We have an obesity problem with the students in the Oklahoma City school district. The second is to go back to real cooking kitchens in our schools so that we can offer better meals to our students.

For years we've had warming kitchens—nothing is cooked, the food is just heated up. Our food service management is run by a private contractor. When that contractor was first selected, it said it would not change the delivery of the services, that the quality of the food and its preparation would remain the same. But after a while, maybe two or three years, the contractor changed from having our food service workers prepare healthy, nutritious food, to having food shipped in that just needs to be warmed up. Well, the kids hardly eat it. It is not the quality food we used to prepare and serve.

With the recent emphasis on child nutrition, we think we can do even better than before. We're certain we can prepare much healthier food than the not-so-appealing things that our food service workers are currently required to simply warm up. Oklahoma City has a very disadvantaged population; 90 percent of our public school students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. During

the school year, our students get most of their food at school. What we serve them is extremely important. (Like so many schools across the country, we also have a Weekend Backpack Program in which we chip in to buy nonperishable food for students. It goes in their backpacks every Friday to get them through the weekend.)

In addition to our campaigns, the coalition hosts events. They are short-term and relatively easy to do—and they provide constant opportunities for us to support each other. For example, the coalition participates in the annual Peace Festival downtown. This is headed by one of our leaders, Nathaniel Batchelder. He is the director of the Peace House Oklahoma City, which is dedicated to social justice. Besides educating the community about nonviolence, the Peace House uses peaceful methods to advocate for human rights, economic justice, and environmental sustainability. This festival has dozens of educational booths hosted by different organizations, as well as local arts and crafts vendors.



In a recent visit to a high school, a reverend discovered kids who needed glasses but couldn't afford them. We decided right then to start a campaign to buy these kids glasses.

It's the type of event that many of my union members choose to attend with their families, so it's an obvious choice for the union to support the event and have a booth. Being part of the coalition gives us many opportunities like this to show that we are caring members of our community.

An annual event in which the coalition supports my local union is the labor breakfast. For us, this is a big deal. The coalition is the sponsor—this is not something we could do on our own. We have a guest speaker to highlight union and community issues, and we normally have about 170 labor, religious, and civic leaders attend. In 2012, we had AFT President Randi Weingarten as our speaker, and she drew in 325 participants—that's almost double our normal attendance. Her message reinforced the work of the coalition and showed the leaders that it's not just our local, but also our national affiliate, that is committed to working with community groups.

Logistics

As I mentioned, our coalition has been meeting every second Tuesday from 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. since 1997. Labor issues, and especially education issues, are on every agenda. All of the larger organizations take turns hosting and providing lunch. We open with a welcome from our cochairs—one of whom is the head of a labor union, the other is the head of a religious organization—and we take time for introductions around the table. We always make sure we welcome those who are new and make them feel comfortable. We also have them tell us a little bit about who they represent.

Then we go into discussions about issues and how we are going to develop campaigns and events to address those issues. We give everybody enough time to make their presentations, and we also make decisions, so the hour and a half is time well spent. We try to have at least three or four good community outreach campaigns going every year, usually concurrently.

Of course, developing a campaign is the easy part. In order to accomplish anything, every coalition leader has to get his or her members involved.

One strategy my local has found effective is to survey our members. Ask your members what interests them and what groups they belong to. It will amaze you. We found out that many of our union members are volunteers for the American Red Cross. We have a leader from the Red Cross in our coalition, so right there we have two ways to reach out to these individuals. Many of our members also belong to child advocacy groups, as well as religious organizations. Since we regularly conduct these surveys and we know what interests our members, it is easy to do targeted outreach to them. I know which of my members will take a special interest in the coalition's eyeglasses campaign or healthy food campaign, and which ones will want to volunteer at the booth during the Peace Festival. These surveys help in the planning phases too, because I know which issues to raise at coalition meetings; I know what's important to my members not just from the union perspective, but from their varied perspectives as community members.

When it comes to reaching out past our active members to all members, we have a website and newsletters. Person-to-person contact, however, is still the only really effective method. Knowing that, it's not all that difficult to maintain a network of shop stewards and other activists, to create talking points, and to push information out through individual and small-group conversations. The coalition work overlaps with organizing too. Organizing new members and getting existing members active are things we do every day—but we have to have an issue. For my union, the core issues are wages, benefits, and professional development, but everything we do to help the community helps the union too.

Lessons Learned

I've learned more from our big challenges than our big wins, so here's an example of an issue that the coalition struggled with

internally. We all agreed that the minimum wage was too low, so we wanted to launch a campaign to change the city charter to set a higher minimum. The internal debate was whether to advocate for a living wage or an increase in the minimum wage. A living wage is an amount that a family of four could actually live off of—not luxuriously at all, but it's supposed to be a wage high enough for safe housing, nutritious food, health care, and other basic needs. The exact dollar amount of a living wage depends on where a family lives, but all across America a living wage is a good bit higher than the federal minimum wage. Fundamentally, the idea is that if you work full time, you should not live in poverty. We were having this debate several years ago, when the federal minimum wage was $5.15 an hour.

The majority of the coalition members thought raising the minimum wage was just as good as establishing a living wage. But I'll admit that I could not move from my position on a living wage. Finally, after four or five meetings debating this issue, I said, "Look. Maybe I'm not getting it, okay? Maybe I want a whole loaf, and these folks will settle for half a loaf. So now I'm taking half a loaf at a time, as long as we move." I gave in because that's part of the leadership role in working with others: it's important to fight for what you believe, but it's also important to listen to your partners. You won't always win, even with your friends, and you have to figure out when to fold. Since we had so many other important issues to work on, I could not continue to hold up the coalition over this. So I was ready to fully commit to fighting for an increase in the Oklahoma City minimum wage. We were just getting the campaign together when the issue became moot. The US Congress passed an amendment to the minimum wage law in 2007 that established three increases over two years (which brought it to $7.25 an hour, where it has stayed since 2009).

That's the only time I remember serious internal conflict. We did fight, but we're like a family. Even in the middle of a heated debate, we stayed on speaking terms and worked things out. That's important not only for the strength of the coalition, but for the issue. My fellow coalition members know this is an issue I will raise again. The federal minimum wage is far too low—its purchasing power is much lower than it was 30 years ago. Working people need a living wage. This time, I'll be a little less bullheaded about it, and I'll start with educating our community partners about the issue. The United Way of Central Oklahoma will be a big help. It regularly releases a series of reports called "Vital Signs" that track key indicators of community well-being. These should help leaders see how many of our poverty-related problems could be reduced with a living wage. I think you'll see a campaign for paycheck justice in Oklahoma City fairly soon.

Today, the coalition is strong, and our campaigns and events are great, but we do struggle to bring the community together. We succeed mainly through our commitment to help each other. We not only fight like a family, we also stick together like one. Above all else, we trust each other. For example, there were times during our campaign to prevent privatization when I just had to step aside. I was president of the local, and it was my union members who were going to lose their jobs, but there were times when I could see that other community leaders would be more effective than I could be. I stepped aside many times to let community leaders take over different projects. Not only did they do a great job leading them, but they garnered much broader community support and got more people engaged than I could have.

It's not reasonable to expect partners to trust each other after a few months. Most of the leaders in the coalition have been committed and active for 10 years.

It takes time, but building strong relationships like that is worth the effort. My local was largely in my partners' hands. That takes years of working with, getting to know, and coming to trust another local leader. And it works. As I said, we won big. But that type of relationship can't be developed right when you need it; it's not reasonable to expect partners to fully trust each other after just a few months. We invest time in each other every month. Not just our lunches but also our lower-stakes campaigns and events. And then we're there for each other when a real challenge arises. Most of the leaders in the coalition have been committed and active for 10 years.

Early in my career, I was the first African American to join the International Association of Heat and Frost Insulators and Allied Workers, Local 94. It was not easy, but I learned a lot about different people, and I developed some lifelong friendships. That experience helped me develop leadership skills, including skills for building relationships and crossing lines.

Looking back over my career, and having worked with a great variety of people, one of the things I've noticed is that I have a different leadership style than most. I don't believe you can go into any leadership position or relationship thinking that you know it all. It turns people off—and it's not possible to know everything. It's much better to meet people where they are. You really need to listen and resist focusing on your issues: you have to listen to their issues and concerns. But once you start doing that, pretty soon they start to listen to you too. And then you have the common ground you need to start your own coalition. ☐