

Teacher unions and district administrators are forging agreements based on trust rather than confrontation in pursuit of a mutual interest: improving the education of the district's children.

Q Challenge Journal

How Teacher Unions Are Working with Districts to Improve Schools

As a longtime labor leader, Adam Urbanski, the president of the Rochester Teachers Association, had negotiated a lot of contracts and knew more than most about the best strategies for dealing with district administrators. But in 2000, he decided to try something completely different.

Rather than propose a salary increase, wait for a counterproposal, and bargain over the difference, Urbanski proposed that salaries remain competitive with those of other districts in the county, and that this concept remain in effect beyond the term of the contract. In the meantime, the contract would be a “living contract,” meaning that any other issue could be negotiated at any time.

But the idea had one important condition: the union or administration must show that any proposal improves student achievement—or it is off the table.

“That was the first time in 20 years as a negotiator I went into negotiations without a salary proposal,” he says. “But we never have to argue about salaries again.”

The district and the union adopted the proposal, and the Rochester agreement was signed in September 2000. Although it is too soon to judge its effects, the proposal is attracting significant

attention around the country, and in June 2001, the Broad Foundation announced that it was awarding \$1.7 million to four districts to work toward developing similar agreements.

The Rochester agreement represents a new way of operating for teachers' unions. Rather than confront administrators over bread-and-butter issues, union leaders and administrators now increasingly are collaborating to forge agreements aimed at redesigning districts to improve student learning. While few districts have gone as far as Rochester, similar types of agreements are being signed in a number of cities.

For example, the Cincinnati Public Schools and the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers last year adopted a contract that established a new pay system that is based on the knowledge and skills teachers have, not just the number of years they have been teaching.

The Seattle Public Schools and the Seattle Education Association adopted an agreement in 1997 that gives schools authority over hiring rather than relying on seniority to determine teacher placement.

The New York City schools negotiated an agreement with the United Federation of Teachers that gives the union a substantial role in transforming low-performing schools.

And a number of districts have adopted a system for peer

evaluation that allows expert teachers to judge the performance of other teachers and take steps to improve their performance or help remove them.

To be sure, these new agreements represent the exception, rather than the rule, and some are meeting resistance from union members who want unions to continue fighting over salaries and benefits. But Urbanski insists that these accords must become the future of collective bargaining in education.

“Teachers won't do well until students do well,” he says. “No community can tolerate that disconnect.”

The new types of union contracts and the new roles for unions reflect a wider trend in the economy. In a number of industries, unions are breaking with past practices of confrontation and distrust of management and, instead, are crafting collegial arrangements that give unions more authority for improving operations—and hold them accountable for results.

Perhaps the best known of these new types of industrial union agreements is the one in effect at the Saturn Corporation, an offshoot of General Motors. There, workers and management crafted a slim contract that gives front-line workers substantial authority over the operation of the automobile plant. In turn, the workers' pay is

by Robert Rothman

The Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN) is a coalition of local affiliates of both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association. It was created in July 1995, when Adam Urbanski and the late Helen Bernstein, both local union leaders, convened a group of progressive teacher union leaders from 21 urban locals to discuss how educational reform had evolved at the local level. These leaders observed how educational reforms and massive cuts in financing had undermined public education. They further recognized that many school districts were trying to reform their schools, but rarely were the teacher unions included. This conversation led to the creation of the Teacher Union Reform Network in 1996. TURN's purpose is to challenge teacher union leaders to take steps to promote teachers as professionals, advance a broad-based new unionism, and link professionalism and new unionism to ways for improving student learning.

TURN's intended goal is to explore, develop, and demonstrate models that lead to the restructuring of unions so that they will become more responsive and responsible in organizing around projects designed to improve student learning. The locals and organizations participating in the network are:

- Albuquerque Teachers Federation
- Bellevue (WA) Education Association
- Boston Teachers Union*
- Cincinnati Federation of Teachers
- Columbus Education Association
- Denver Classroom Teachers Association
- Hammond (IN) Teachers Federation
- Memphis Education Association
- Minneapolis Federation of Teachers*
- Montgomery County (MD) Education Association
- Mt. Diablo (CA) Education Association*
- Pinellas (FL) Classroom Teachers Association
- Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers
- Poway (CA) Federation of Teachers
- Rochester Teachers Association
- San Diego Education Association
- San Juan (CA) Teachers Association
- Seattle Education Association
- Syracuse Teachers Association
- Toledo Federation of Teachers
- United Educators of San Francisco*
- United Federation of Teachers (NYC)*
- United Teachers of Dade*
- United Teachers of Los Angeles*
- Westerly (RI) Teachers Association

*The asterisks indicate unions that operate in a community served by an Annenberg Challenge project.
Source: *The TURN Web site <www.turnexchange.net>*

espoused would focus on improving schooling. Such an effort, he argued, is vital to the future of public education. "Simply put, in the next decade we must revitalize our public schools from within or they will be dismantled from without."

Chase was not the only teachers' union leader to attempt to redefine unions' role in education reform. In 1996, a group of union officials from 21 districts, local affiliates of both the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers, formed the Teachers Union Reform Network (TURN) to share ideas and develop tools and strategies to help members and others implement new approaches. The leaders' goals were to improve union-management relations, strengthen the unions' abilities to provide professional development for members, and develop approaches to improve teacher quality.

TURN members meet three times a year and have formed an electronic exchange to share information and ideas. They are currently engaged in developing local action plans, or strategic "road maps," to help local unions promote changes and implement their goals.

Urbanski, the Rochester union president, who is TURN's director, says the organization has helped spur a cultural shift among teachers' unions. "There is now an inclination among progressive teachers' unions to use the collective bargaining process and the contract as a purposeful vehicle for improving student achievement," he says. "There is more movement now than prior to the formation of TURN."

Linking Pay to Performance

One area some of the progressive union agreements have focused on is salary. Salaries are, of course,

tioned, in part, to the performance of the company.

Bob Chase, the president of the National Education Association (NEA), said in a widely noted speech at the National Press Club in 1997 that teachers' unions needed to break away from the traditional industrial model as well. For three decades, he noted, the union has "battered heads with management over bread-and-butter

issues—to win better salaries, benefits, and working conditions for school employees. And we have succeeded.

"Today, however," Chase continued, "it is clear to me—and to a critical mass of teachers across America—that while this narrow, traditional agenda remains important, it is utterly inadequate to meet the needs of the future."

The "new unionism" Chase

the quintessential bread-and-butter issue, one that has long been the centerpiece of union agreements. But how teachers are paid has significant implications for educational performance. Pay affects who enters the teaching profession, who stays, and how teachers perform and improve their performance.

Most districts use a fairly simple salary schedule, in which teachers earn higher rates of pay based on the number of years they have taught and the amount of graduate coursework they have completed. Before this system was created in the 1920s, women teachers tended to earn less than men and elementary teachers earned less than those who taught in high school.

Critics have charged that this system impedes quality because it does not create incentives for teachers to work harder or become more effective. Unlike in the private sector, all teachers with the same experience, good ones and less-effective ones, are paid the same. Good teachers may leave the

profession for the private sector, where they can earn much more.

Teachers have resisted attempts to replace the traditional scale with some form of merit pay, contending that such schemes rely on subjective evaluations. Without some form of objective measure of quality or effectiveness, unions argued, administrators could discriminate against otherwise qualified teachers. That's the reason the single scale was created in the first place.

In an effort to break through the logjam and create a system that would reward effectiveness fairly, the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers and the school district tried a new approach. Working with Allan Odden, a school-finance expert at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the union and the district created a “knowledge-and skills-based pay” system and adopted it in 2000.

Under the system, the district established five categories, based on standards for what teachers should know and be able to do (see sidebar, page 4). Teachers who demonstrate increasing levels of performance against those standards—measured by peer evaluations and other assessments—move to a higher category and earn a higher salary. Those who do not move out of the lowest levels within five years can lose their jobs.

The schedule “makes increasing one’s professional expertise serious business,” says Odden. “But it guides the process with explicit standards and expectations for teacher performance, and supports the process with professional development linked to the standards.”

While the Cincinnati agreement attracted widespread interest around the country, it also met some significant resistance from within the district, and in 2001, the

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“No community can tolerate that disconnect.”

union president who negotiated the new contract and other members of his slate were soundly defeated for re-election. While the election places the future of the system in question, the pay scale remains in the contract and district officials are confident that it will stay.

Other districts and unions, meanwhile, are moving ahead to tie teachers’ salaries more directly to student performance.

In Denver, for example, the district and the teachers’ union agreed to establish a pilot program that would test linking salaries with student performance in three different ways: based on standardized-test scores; based on teacher-made assessments; and based on a combination of teacher knowledge and skills and student achievement. After a three-year trial period, the two sides would determine whether to go ahead with a full-scale program.

The early results of the pilot were inconclusive. Only 12 elementary and middle schools, with 342 teachers, volunteered to take part in the first year, and no high schools elected to do so. Of those who participated, only 3.2 percent of teachers failed to reach two objectives.

Balancing Seniority and School-Site Management

Another bread-and-butter issue that is gaining more attention as unions seek to influence reforms is seniority. Traditionally, unions have fought to preserve rights for veteran teachers in order to encourage teachers to stay in the profession.

Challenge Journal

The Journal of the Annenberg Challenge, is published three times yearly at Brown University and made available at no charge as part of the Annenberg Challenge. Materials may be reprinted with proper credit to CJ. Address correspondence to Challenge Journal, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Box 1985, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912. On the Web: www.annenbergchallenge.org

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But critics have charged that seniority rights, which often give preference to veteran teachers in hiring decisions, thwart the ability of principals to select a cohesive staff. Moreover, some have contended that the system ends up harming low-income and minority students, who tend to be in the least desirable schools and seldom have access to experienced teachers.

Heather Lewis, director of the Center for Collaborative Education in New York City, a partner in the

Annenberg Challenge-funded Networks for School Renewal, says the seniority system makes it more difficult to build the kind of schools the networks are trying to create. “We are trying to give schools authority and autonomy to build the staff they want and need.”

The contract adopted by the Seattle Public Schools and the Seattle Education Association in 1997 was aimed at placing authority at the school site while pro-

tecting teachers’ rights. The contract states: “The District and SEA believe that staffing decisions should aim to offer students the teachers who can best help them meet their learning goals, promote excellent teaching, and allow resources to be expended where they have the highest educational value. The District and SEA also believe that school staff should have a meaningful role in the decisions that affect them.”

In practice, this means that schools can hire any certified teacher for a vacant position based on his or her qualifications. The contract also gives a role for teachers in hiring by stipulating that hiring teams at schools should screen candidates and present the top three choices to the principal, who makes the final decision (see sidebar, page 6).

Roger Erskine, the former executive director of the SEA, notes that the staffing provision is only one element in a package that also gives schools substantial authority over budgets and requires teachers to develop academic improvement plans. Without authority over hiring, Erskine asserts, the budget and planning authority would not work.

“We know the best decisions to help clients—the students—become successful have to be made as close to them as possible,” Erskine says. “The old command-and-control decision making was not helping people utilize resources effectively and make appropriate decisions.

“It was not that the system was broken; it was not responsive to help kids,” he says.

To measure if the system is working, the contract also established a substantial data-collection system. Under the system, the district surveys teachers and students to determine if schools are aligning budgets with priorities, focusing on the students who are struggling,

Cincinnati’s Knowledge- and Skills-based Pay System

The following chart outlines the five stages, or career levels, that teachers in Cincinnati go through under the new evaluation and pay system. They are rated on a four-point scale in four areas that reflect 16 standards.

APPRENTICE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ New teachers. ■ May have temporary teaching license. ■ Nonrenewed at end of year 2 if “novice” status not attained. ■ Salary: \$30,000, Bachelor’s degree.
NOVICE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Must have 2’s or better in all domains. ■ Must pass Ohio’s teacher-licensing test (PRAXIS 3). ■ Nonrenewed/terminated at end of year 5 as a “novice” if “career” status is not attained. ■ Salary range: \$32,000–\$35,750, Bachelor’s degree.
CAREER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Must have 3’s or better in all domains. ■ May remain in category throughout career. ■ Salary range: \$38,750–\$49,250, Bachelor’s degree.
ADVANCED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Must have 4 in “Teacher for Learning” domain and at least one other domain; must have at least 3’s in other domains. ■ May remain in category throughout career. ■ Salary range: \$52,500–\$55,000, Bachelor’s degree.
ACCOMPLISHED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Must have 4’s in all domains. ■ May remain in category throughout career. ■ Salary range: \$60,000–\$62,000, Bachelor’s degree.

Source: Cincinnati Federation of Teachers (published in *Education Week*, September 27, 2000.)

providing a closer connection between teachers and students, and other factors. Currently, Erskine says, fewer than 15 of Seattle's 100 schools are struggling according to those indicators, compared with more than half when the contract went into effect. And those indicators are closely correlated with student performance, he notes.

Like any change, though, the Seattle revision has encountered some snags and some resistance. Some veteran teachers, forced for the first time to compete for jobs with novices, have resented the new rules. And some teachers have complained that principals have failed to live up to the spirit of collaboration the contract implies, by refusing to share information or include teachers in decisions.

Other districts and unions have moved more cautiously in efforts to reduce the role of seniority in staffing decisions. In Boston, the issue was the main sticking point in negotiations on a contract that was settled on the eve of a threatened strike. The agreement ended the ability of veteran teachers to bump first-year teachers from their jobs and gave the district some authority in assigning teachers who transfer to another school. But it retained the right of veteran teachers whose jobs were eliminated to select their next assignments.

The issue of seniority had gained prominence in Boston in large part because of a report released by the Boston Plan for Excellence in Public Schools, which manages the Boston Annenberg Challenge. The report argued that schools were hampered in their efforts to improve performance by "a clumsy, seniority-driven hiring process that prevents schools from building the best team of teachers." The report recommended allowing schools to choose the most appropriate

teacher for each vacancy early in the hiring season.

Promoting Professional Development

One of the most important ways to improve schools is by ensuring that teachers are well qualified and that they get the support they need to continue developing and improving their practice over time. Some of the most far-reaching union-district agreements have sought to develop systems to evaluate and support teachers.

One such successful and well-known agreement has been in place in Columbus, Ohio, for 16 years. John Grossman, the president of the Columbus Education Association, says it got started when he and the superintendent agreed to work together to improve the district, rather than fight each other. When told that the school board was most concerned about teacher evaluation, Grossman says, he replied, "Teachers are, too!"

After working together for a year to develop a plan, the union and district administration established the Peer Evaluation and Review (PAR) system in 1986. Based in large part on a program that had been in place in Toledo, PAR includes both an internship program for new teachers and an intervention program for experienced teachers having difficulty. Both components pair teachers with classroom veterans who serve as consultants and evaluate the teachers. The program also offers professional development in partnership with the Ohio State University.

Grossman says there is "no question" that the program has improved teacher quality in the district. The assistance strengthens teachers' knowledge and skills, and the teachers involved in the program have been aggressive in removing unsuccessful teachers.

Some of the most far-reaching union-district agreements are developing systems to evaluate and support teachers.

About 5 to 7 percent of teachers have been terminated, Grossman points out, more than were removed before the program went into effect.

Most significantly, teachers stay in the profession because they get the support they need. Although most urban districts lose a large proportion of teachers after the first few years, in the first 10 years of the PAR program the retention rate in Columbus was 80 percent. It has fallen off a bit—to between 65 and 70 percent—in the past few years, but Grossman believes part of the drop reflects the fact that suburban schools are hiring veterans from Columbus. Still, "PAR has clearly stabilized the teaching force," Grossman says. "When we started, the average experience of teachers in Columbus was six or seven years. Now it's well over 15. We've gotten people off to a strong start."

Meanwhile, some unions have created and operate professional-development programs to support their members. In Chicago, for example, the union that represents principals, the Chicago Principals and Administrators Association (CPAA), has developed a series of programs designed to enhance the skills and knowledge of school leaders. The programs were created in the mid-1990s, a time when principals faced new demands—they were held strictly accountable for performance at their schools—and many principals were new to the profession.

The programs include professional development for veterans,

novices, and aspiring principals. And there is some evidence that they have been successful in stabilizing leadership and enhancing principals' performance. For example, in a survey conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, teachers in 1999 gave principals higher marks for instruc-

tional leadership than they had given in 1997 and 1994.

The programs have strong support from the school district, which contracts with the CPAA for the services. In fact, according to Albert Bertani, senior executive director of leadership development for the CPAA, the district increased

funding for the programs in 2000, from \$1.2 million to \$1.8 million.

However, as in other cities, the professional development initiatives in Chicago have come under fire from some union members who want the union to return to its focus on bread-and-butter issues. "There is a percentage of people

A Role for Teachers in a School-Based Hiring Process

The 1997 contract between the Seattle Public Schools and the Seattle Education Association provides for a material role for teachers in hiring new faculty at their school. The following language is from Section 3, Article VIII, of the contract, on "Staffing—Qualifications-based hiring for certificated non-supervisory personnel."

School-based Hiring Process

The hiring process must have the following features:

- Hiring team will screen applications and resumes. The District will verify certification and categories.
- Teachers surplus from buildings will be given full consideration in the hiring process.
- Applicants who best meet the hiring team's criteria will be interviewed by a hiring team that includes a group of teachers who are knowledgeable about the requirements of the position and the school's Academic Achievement Plan.
- The hiring team should reflect the diversity at that school in such areas as tenure, educational specialty, and culture.
- The hiring team may contain parents and/or other school staff appropriate to the selection process.
- The hiring team and the principal will jointly develop criteria for staff selection that are in alignment with the school's Academic Achievement Plan.
- The hiring team may also decide to ask applicants for additional information not included on the standardized application.
- Both the District and SEA agree that the goal is to complete the majority of the hiring prior to June 1.
- All members of the hiring team will participate in a joint SEA/SSD interview training session which includes com-

munication of the legal constraints against discrimination based on age, race, gender, and other factors.

Any school that currently uses a hiring process that gives staff a more significant role in hiring than is described below as the minimum may retain their process if the school team and principal find the process serves the school well. The ideal hiring process would be based on consensus of principal and staff. Other options include, but are not limited to:

- The principal is part of the hiring team.
- The hiring team makes the final decision.
- The principal agrees to hire the number one applicant recommended by the hiring team.

The minimum requirement as to staff participation in choosing among candidates is:

The hiring team will interview candidates and submit three recommendations in preference order to the principal. The principal must select from among these choices, unless the principal and the hiring team find in checking with references that none of the candidates in fact meet the selection criteria. In that case, three additional recommendations from the hiring team will be made to the principal. If the pool contains no candidates who meet the criteria specified for the opening, the position must be reopened.

Source: Seattle Public Schools

inside the association who feel we have tipped the balance too far in the direction of professional development,” says Bertani.

Supporting Troubled Schools

In addition to providing support for teachers and principals, some of the new union agreements aim to provide support for troubled schools. Such agreements are intended to set up mechanisms for improving teaching in such schools rather than have them taken over by the district or state—and having teachers lose their jobs.

In New York City, for example, the United Federation of Teachers and the district administration reached an accord in 1999 to develop jointly a plan for improving 51 low-performing schools. The district had threatened to “reconstitute” these schools—to remove the faculty and staff and hire a new group of teachers and administrators.

Under the agreement, class sizes in the schools would be reduced, and the schools would implement research-based mathematics and reading programs. In addition, the two sides agreed to lengthen the school day to provide for additional instructional time and professional development. The district also agreed to provide some incentives, such as higher pay, to encourage veteran teachers to apply to teach at the low-performing schools.

In the first year of operation, the 51 schools in the program improved their performance at a rate twice that of comparable schools. The improvements slowed in the second year, but the schools remained on an upward trend.

“The union was critical in turning around failing schools,” says Heather Lewis of the Center for Collaborative Education. “It’s absolutely critical that the union gets behind it. They could take a

different position and fight it. Then it couldn’t be done.”

Lewis credits Sandra Feldman, the former president of the United Federation of Teachers (now the president of the American Federation of Teachers) for setting the tone for the collaborative venture by admitting that schools were failing and that the union had a responsibility to turn them around. “She used the union presidency as a bully pulpit,” Lewis recalls. “She went public about the data—the number of failures, the dropout rate. She was not defensive, not protective of bad practice or poor student outcomes.”

While the new types of agreements between teachers’ unions and district administrators may address different issues, they share one common thread: they are all based on trust rather than confrontation. Before they can agree on specific terms, both parties must agree that they can work together, rather than opposing one another, in their mutual interest: the education of the district’s children.

In addition, building a cooperative relationship means more than simply adopting language from another contract. “This is work that has to be done over time,” says Seattle’s Erskine, who is also co-director of TURN. “I get nervous when people look for silver bullets.”

Of course, building such trust is not always easy, particularly when the two sides have had a long history of antagonism toward one another. In Seattle’s case, the union leadership and district administration spent a year talking and “soul-searching,” rather than submitting competing proposals across a bargaining table. Such efforts seem to pay off better than those in which districts attempt to negotiate this new type of contract through mediators who try to find

Some of the new union agreements set up mechanisms for improving teaching in troubled schools, rather than have them taken over by the district or state—and having teachers lose their jobs.

the common ground between the two sides. In that case, Erskine says, “The only thing you get is a contract. You don’t build a relationship.

Those relationships often forge not only more lasting agreements but more successful ones as well. As an example, he notes that the Seattle district and union worked for a year on a plan to tie teacher evaluations to student performance. When it was put to a vote, 80 percent of the union membership passed it. “And it’s a fairer proposal,” Erskine notes, “one with a greater chance to succeed than if we had bargained it out on a table and prayed.”

The agreements can also help smooth the way for further collaboration. Once administrators and unions see that they can work together for the mutual benefit of schools in the district, rather than seeing the other’s gain as their loss, a lot of opportunities for continuing to work together arise.

“This has created a whole different culture in the district,” says John Grossman of Columbus. “The administration and the union look for positive things to work together on.”

In the past 16 years, he adds, “Twenty partnerships have grown out of this. Once you lay the foundation, you can open doors.” **CJ**

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Resources

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Organizations

- Boston Teachers' Union, 180 Mount Vernon Street, Boston, MA 02125; 617 288-2000; <www.btu.org>
- Chicago Principals and Administrators Association, 221 N. LaSalle Street, Suite 2350, Chicago, IL 60601; 312 263-7767; <www.cpaacps.k12.il.us>
- Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, 1216 E. McMillan, Suite 201, Cincinnati, OH 45206; 513 961-2272; <www.cft-aft.org>
- Columbus Education Association, 929 E. Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43205; 614 253-4731; <www.ceao.org>
- Denver Classroom Teachers Association, 1500 Grant Street, Suite 200, Denver, CO 80203; 303 831-0590; <www.denverclassroom.org/>
- Rochester Federation of Teachers, 30 North Union Street, Suite 301, Rochester, NY 14607; 716 546-2681; <www.rochesterteachers.com/>
- Seattle Education Association, 720 Nob Hill Ave. N., Seattle, WA 98109; 206 283-8443; <www.wa.nea.org/Info/Orgnzt/SEAHomepage/home.htm>
- Teachers Union Reform Network (TURN), <www.turnexchange.net/about.htm>
- United Federation of Teachers (New York City), 260 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10010; 212 777-7500; <www.uft.org>