Leading a Unionized Elementary School

The history of teacher unionization can be traced to 1857, when the National Teachers Association, later to become the National Education Association (NEA), was formed to provide a collective voice for educators. In the beginning, the NEA was led not by classroom teachers, but primarily by administrators (including elementary school principals) who pressed for increased teacher professionalism.

It was not until the early 1960s that the NEA and its rival organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), began to engage in collective bargaining. Today, the NEA's 2.7 million members, combined with the AFT's 950,000, make up the most powerful and influential force in American education.

While the unions have worked relentlessly—and at times ruthlessly—to increase teachers' salaries and benefits, their actions have taken a high toll in student achievement and school improvement. Costly teacher strikes have raised havoc with school schedules and budgets. And the unions undermine their verbal commitment to having a qualified teacher in every classroom by their opposition to the disciplining or dismissal of weak teachers and to providing merit pay or bonuses for outstanding teachers.

Most principals dread negotiating union contracts and grievances. But the best ones can lessen the tension and stress by demonstrating effective leadership. As a North Carolina principal notes, "A competent leader has knowledge and experience in working with a variety of personalities and is able to listen to and hear the many needs, large or small, of a school staff and is able to meet those needs."

Look at the Bright Side

There is a positive side of contractual agreements. While some principals may view a union contract as an obstacle, and use it as an excuse for poor management, it can provide an impetus to greater efficiency and increased teacher participation in school decision-making. One principal observed that "ironically, while the contract decreases your discretion, it simultaneously may strengthen your authority through its emphasis on the application and enforcement of rule."

With increasing enrollments in private schools, and more and more parents electing to home-school their children, public education is being threatened as never before. Now is the time for principals and unions to join forces and transform their division into a great bridge. While very few studies have looked at the potential gains of union membership working harmoniously and cooperatively with school administrators, the evidence suggests that improved cooperation, teamwork, and collegiality increases student achievement and school performance.

The following policies and practices are long overdue:

- Principals and staff members holding union memberships need to view one another more as collaborators than as adversaries.
- Principals should reconsider current union ideas for educational improvement that generally support boosting student achievement.
- Principals and union members need to agree that a strike, or even the threat of a strike, can disrupt instruction, lower morale, and damage community relations, and should work diligently to prevent such an action.
- Principals and union members need to join forces in advocating for higher teacher salaries and benefits in order to attract and retain superior teachers.
- Practices that are purported to boost student achievement, e.g., smaller class sizes and designated instructional planning time, need unanimous consideration and support.
- Principals and union members should maintain the right to disagree without acting disagreeably with each other.

Student achievement in 21st century public elementary schools will be determined by harmony, trust, support, shared visions, and decision of principals and unionized teachers working together. Unify or perish: there are no other options.

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HERE’S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

Are your teachers unionized? Do you regard teacher unions as adversaries or collaborators? Share your opinions and experiences with other principals by going to www.naesp.org/speakingout/.