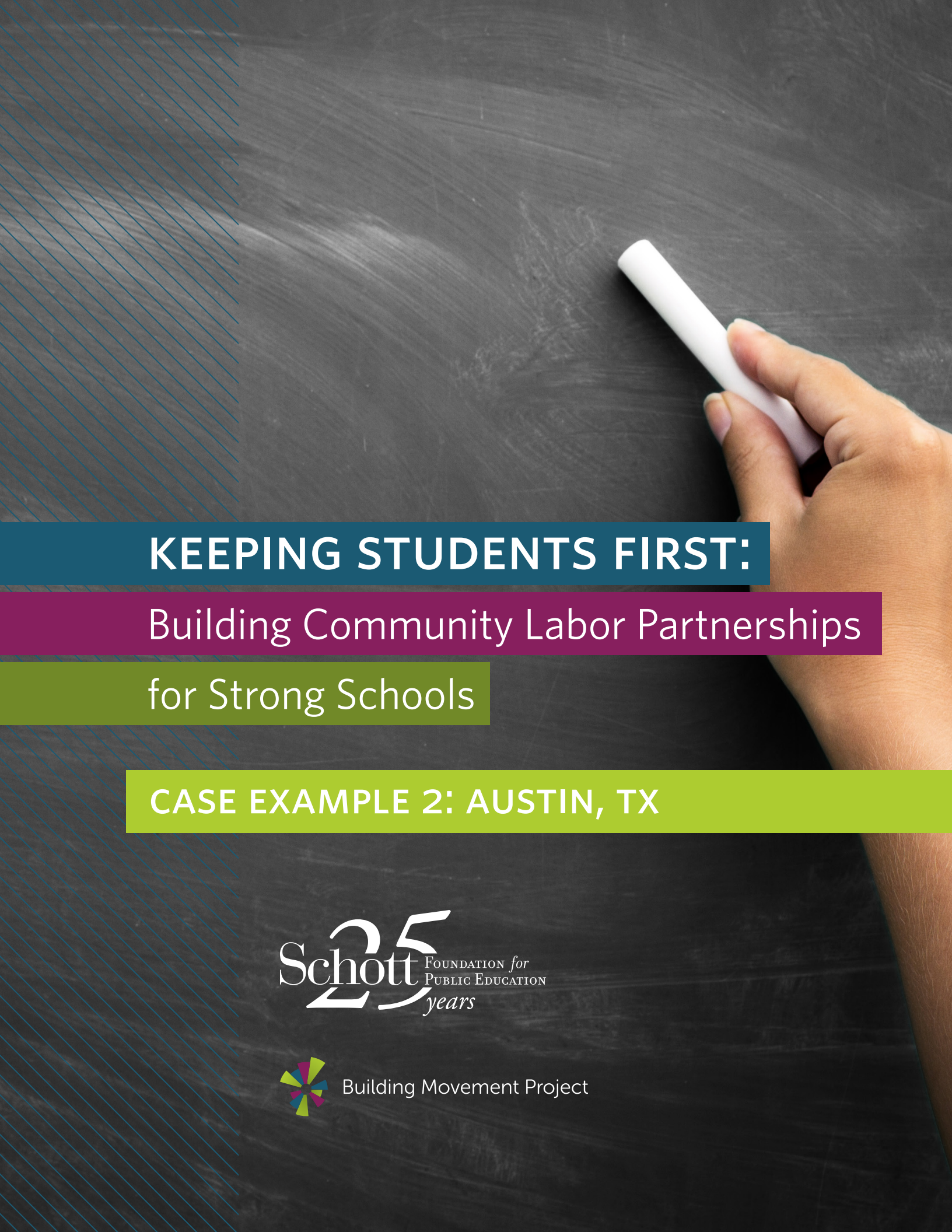


# KEEPING STUDENTS FIRST:

## Building Community Labor Partnerships for Strong Schools

## CASE EXAMPLE 2: AUSTIN, TX

Schott 25 years Foundation for Public Education

Building Movement Project

# CASE EXAMPLE 2:
## Austin, Texas

### BACKGROUND

Public education is under attack throughout the United States, but the situation is particularly dire in Texas. The overall state education budget is in perpetual crisis as a result of the legislature's focus on cutting taxes and reducing public spending. The state has an unusual means of allocating tax funding for schools. After a prior system of basing school financing on property taxes was ruled unconstitutional because it fell so dramatically short at providing low-income students with effective public education, the state created a new mechanism of distributing taxes from property-rich districts to less wealthy areas throughout the state. The policy is a particular challenge for districts like the state capital Austin, which has significant wealth and revenue from property taxes but also faces the profound challenges present in many urban school districts with significant low-income communities, and desperately needs revenue for education. The city prides itself on being a progressive environment in the midst of a deeply conservative state, but it bears the legacy of systemic racial housing discrimination and remains profoundly segregated. Rapid growth and gentrification are pushing students of color out of Austin schools entirely, and immigrant students face great uncertainty as the city anticipates reprisal for its position at odds with the state and federal government's aggressive immigration enforcement policy.

Created in 1999 from the merger of the NEA-affiliated Austin Association of Teachers (AAT) and the AFT-affiliated Austin Federation of Teachers/Allied Education Workers (AFT/AEW), Education Austin is the first merged local in Texas and is affiliated with the NEA, AFT, TSTA, Texas AFT, and the AFL-CIO.[1] As the labor union for certified and classified employees of the Austin Independent School District, it faces significant challenges in both advocating for teachers and serving students. Texas is governed by "right to work" labor laws that bar unionized workplaces from compelling employees to join the union, and makes it illegal for public sector unions to collectively bargain. In just four school districts in Texas—including Austin—a "meet-and-confer" process has been written into district policy,[2] giving the union a path to enter into discussion with district officials, but overall blocking much of what traditionally gives labor power. In spite of the legal barriers, Education Austin has built its power by cultivating alliances with community groups, engaging in issue organizing, and showing up to support community priorities even outside of the school settings. As Education Austin president Ken Zarifis describes it: "What we've been able to do, because we don't have collective bargaining, we've been able to amass a considerable amount of power within the district, and respect, because people know that Education Austin means something, and that we will stand up, and that they need to listen."

*The proud Norman ES community speaking to the school board in Feb. 2018, asking that their beloved school not be closed.*

**Photo:** *Education Austin*

## LEADERSHIP CHANGE AND NEW COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Just months after Ken Zarifis became president of Education Austin in 2010, the Texas State Legislature cut $5.4 billion from the state's public education budget, eliminating more than 1,100 teaching positions in Austin alone, 10% of the total number statewide.[3] As a new president, he felt unprepared for such an extraordinary loss for the district, but the crisis did encourage him to engage with members of the community in a way the union hadn't done before. Ken had become union president after resisting the state and national mandates for student testing and their interference with instruction time, and had developed a good relationship with community groups that supported his efforts in this process. Now, the scope of seeking partnerships and relationships expanded. "I began to learn very quickly how to identify the constituents, the key players to organize, rally around an issue, mobilize, put pressure on those who need to be pressured on," he said. "Be it the school district, the school board – do we have partners?" In particular, he realized that parents opposed the layoffs, and saw the potential for collaboration around that shared concern. The union started making connections to groups of parents that had expressed opposition to cuts in the district that preceded the state cuts, including efforts to close numerous schools. District employees and parents both engaged with the school board to lobby against the layoffs. "We were able to save a lot of positions, we were able to save a lot of programs in the district because of this," he said. "While it was a great loss with all the people that were terminated, it was also a great win in that people found a voice – people stepped forward."

Following the layoffs, and still only about a year into his role as union president, Education Austin faced another crisis. The union discovered that the school board was planning a vote to allow a charter network that was not based in Austin to take over a low-performing local elementary school. The union worried that the takeover of the lower school would lead to a subsequent characterization of the struggling high school in the same community, given that the elementary school was the feeder to the high school. The school board had yet to have a public meeting on the proposed plan and was just seven weeks away from the scheduled vote when the union learned of its intentions.

Education Austin opposed allowing an outside charter network to take over a local school and impose an education model that had not been developed in partnership with the community. The union began cultivating relationships both with allies established during the layoff and school facility closure debates, as well as with other parent and student activists who sought the union out to join in opposing the plan. In the weeks before the vote, the union and community partners—including students, parents, community organizing groups and local political organizations—mobilized to protest at the school board meetings, culminating in hundreds of members of the union and community watching the board vote to allow the charter takeover.

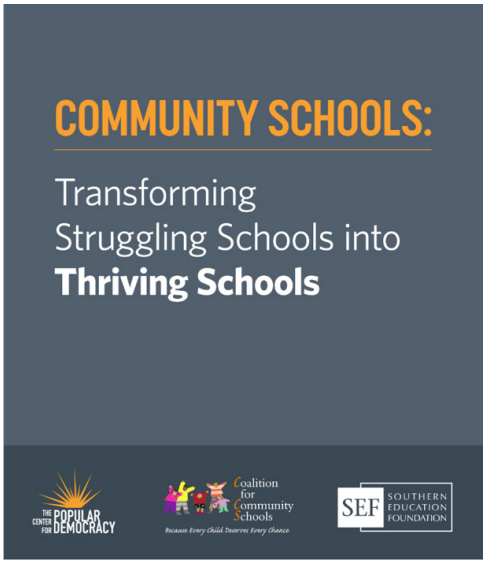
*From left to right: Trasell Underwood (Vice President for Classified of EA), Ken Zarifis (President of EA), and Montserrat Garibay (Vice President for Certified of EA)*

Despite the loss, the galvanizing effect of the vote on the community and its relationship with the union was clear to the union president, "[I] went up to the superintendent and said, 'You won tonight, congratulations, but you don't know what you just woke up here.'" The union continued organizing with the community allies that had opposed the takeover, developed a shared agenda for the district's schools, and identified people who wanted to run for school board. The next election flipped the school board from 6-3 against the coalition of Education Austin and its parent, student and community allies to 5-4 in favor of it.

## COMMUNITY PARTNERS IN COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL SAFETY

Because the commissioner still insisted that the elementary school either close, charter, or partner in order to stay open, Education Austin and its community partners had been simultaneously working to create a neighborhood-based charter school that would have the autonomy to shape a curriculum and school structure in response to community needs, but without the selective admission and restrictive attendance rules of many charters that the union and community opposed. In conjunction with their partners, they identified a community-responsive charter network that they could support to work with the elementary school that had been slated for takeover. The new charter used a community school model that utilizes the school as home base to provide wraparound family and community services integrated with the traditional academic setting. The very night that the newly constituted school board eliminated the outside charter's contract, it approved a new charter for the same elementary school for the network supported by the union and community.

In the course of this work, Education Austin connected with Austin Voices for Education and Youth, an organization that had stopped the threatened closure of other struggling middle and high schools in the district by organizing a community school model. They also built a relationship with the Austin Project, a community development organization that had piloted school-based family resource centers in Austin two decades earlier. Together, these partnerships were instrumental in the creation of the Greater Austin Community School Coalition, which includes the city, county, school district, non-profits and the union working together to provide resources and support to create more community schools in and around Austin.




Resource: *To learn more about the impact of the community school model, this report profiles community schools across the country, all which demonstrate consistent improvement in a wide range of indicators of student success. https://populardemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Community-Schools-Layout_e.pdf*

Education Austin also worked with Texas Appleseed, a statewide organization, to shape policy for the district to address the school-to-prison pipeline by advocating a ban on school suspensions for students in second grade

and below. Reaching consensus between the union and community groups required lots of internal discussion and candid communication, and building authentic personal relationships was critical.

Morgan Craven, director of the School-to-Prison Pipeline Project at Texas Appleseed, described how vital it was to intentionally cultivate understanding to bridge the different perspectives that each group brought to the table. This was essential to push through those moments when the community group perceived a lack of alignment between the union's stated goals of protecting the wellbeing of children and assuring that teachers have what they need to feel supported if discipline policies changed. For advocates, this meant "accepting that there were other goals on the table," besides following the lead of three decades of research showing that suspensions undermined child well-being. Morgan had to make sure that Education Austin also received "what their teachers needed to successfully implement the ban was going to be given to them by the district. It's not that anyone said 'we really want to suspend these kids'... It's just that they wanted to make sure that everyone, including teachers, felt supported." Because the union and community groups committed to building a relationship that included communicating through these tensions and building understanding between educators and advocacy organizations, the union and community partners were able to agree on policies to improve both teacher and student support for new discipline procedures.

## KEY STEPS TO COLLABORATION

- Meet regularly, regardless of whether there is a campaign.
- Get to know key partners individually and collectively outside of formal meetings.
- Identify shared issues and interests that impact students and families broadly.

Resource: *To find out more about how school boards can support these efforts, this policy guide details how school board members can lead the way in securing a high-quality education for each and every student in their district. http://schottfoundation.org/sites/default/files/2014-122_POPGuide_DIGITAL.PDF*

## PARTNERSHIP IN FOCUS: IMMIGRATION POLICY

Education Austin's work with partners to encourage the implementation of community schools helped sharpen the union's perspective on how to engage the entire community to better serve students. "I see virtually everything we need to deal with in this model," Ken Zarifis said. "We were addressing these issues separately. Now we have this framework to bring everything together. When you see a good community school working, it's got all these components – it understands their community; it has ways of adjusting behavior and discipline in a very different way; it has strong academics; the teachers and the parents are involved. It helps us in thinking, how do you coordinate all these efforts together?"

This broad view of the union's responsibility to its students, families and community shaped its efforts on immigration policy, an issue that impacts daily life for many Austin students, families and teachers themselves. Montserrat Garibay, who was elected Vice President for Certified Employees with Education Austin in 2012. In her teaching career, she saw families deported and when she called her union and the district, she was always told that immigration was too political and they couldn't get involved. When she and Ken were running for election, they knew they wanted to change this approach and incorporate immigration into the work of Education Austin.

When Montserrat and Ken won election in 2012, she knew that not everyone in the union would support work on immigration, so she began laying the foundation with the executive board. It took three meetings that involved intense sharing and discussion to pass a resolution. There were vocal opponents, and at one point Montserrat revealed that she had been undocumented herself in response to one board member's insistence that this matter didn't affect teachers. Ultimately, according to Montserrat, "we were able to talk about misconceptions,

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and eventually were able to pass a resolution." Once the resolution passed, they hosted an immigration forum and connected with United We Dream—a national network of immigrant youth fighting for reforms to the nation's immigration system—to channel their resources into Know Your Rights trainings for parent support specialists, school leaders, and social workers.

In November of that year, the Obama administration implemented the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which offered temporary work permits and reprieve from the threat of deportation to qualifying undocumented immigrants who entered the United States as minors. Education Austin officers saw an opportunity for schools to provide information and support with applications for students, as well as safe spaces for immigrant parents and community members to learn more about the program and their rights. They began integrating information about the DACA program and enrollment process into the Know Your Rights trainings.

In order to leverage the union's access to large numbers of young people and their families in support of enrollment in DACA, Education Austin sought out partnerships with local social justice organizations. The union created new partnerships with groups like the Equal Justice Center and pro bono lawyers that were supporting immigrant communities and coordinating information about the DACA program. What began as help to students and families with DACA applications grew into a fuller scale engagement with families on an even broader set of

immigration issues, including citizenship drives for eligible permanent residents – including union members. The union's Know Your Rights clinics supported hundreds of people in applying for DACA permits or citizenship.

The relationships built in this process became long-lasting, multi-issue partnerships. For example, the union built a collaborative relationship with a student group at the University of Texas called University Leadership Initiative, which was affiliated with United We Dream, and worked in collaboration with the union's teachers, counselors and social workers to share resources and provide guidance on how to advocate for undocumented youth served by both organizations.

This work took on a new urgency with the election of Donald Trump and the accompanying threat of more aggressive and punitive immigration enforcement, as well as state-level "show your papers" legislation that sought to empower local police to demand proof of immigration status and punish so-called "sanctuary cities" like Austin that limit coordination with federal immigration enforcement. In this tense environment, the union's immigration efforts came under heightened scrutiny from both the school district, which initially offered very restrictive guidance on how teachers and the union could support undocumented students and families, and local media, which drew public attention to the content of Know Your Rights materials the union had distributed for years. Facing this pressure head on, the union worked with community partners, faith organizations, and supporters on the city council to reaffirm that their support for undocumented students and families was unwavering.

From the union's perspective, establishing and maintaining a clear commitment to support the immigrant community was critical to both serving the full needs of students and to maintaining its organizational power to serve its teachers in the future. "If we want to grow our union it needs to be about social justice, because that's the way that we're going to be able to touch younger teachers and younger members, because they want to be part of the change," said Montserrat. "They want to help Austin to be better."

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Overall, one of the things that made all this work so successful is that Education Austin was led by a diverse group of individuals who were able to connect with their community in a personal way. As Montserrat put it, "sympathy isn't the same as having lived experience on staff." She went on to say, "When unions can build diverse leadership and provide members with tools and training to lift people of color up, then this is what happens – you develop a powerful union that leads on the issues because they understand the issues personally."

## KEY LESSONS

### Build Relationships Outside of Campaigns and Formal Meetings

Campaigns often provide the impetus to recruit partners and allies, but it's crucial to cultivate relationships even when not working toward a specific goal together and to spend time with partners in settings where there isn't urgent pressure to resolve or accomplish something. Many interviewees described how frequent communication between the union and its partners makes it possible to extend trust and reach resolution when differences or misunderstandings arise.

### Unlikely Partners

In Austin, the union took action to support issues that weren't explicitly related to the school environment. A campaign to ensure better wages for district construction projects, for example, wasn't directly related to either Education Austin members or students, but it allowed the union to build trust and accountability with student's families and communities – who in turn showed up to support the union and joint efforts to assure that teacher and student needs are met. The union connected to the Workers Defense Project, an advocacy organization for low-wage workers, including many immigrants with children in Austin public schools. The union supported the Project in campaigns for better workplace protections, and in turn, the Workers Defense Project supported the union's organizing on issues such as teacher salaries.

### Acknowledge the Complexities of Challenging Issues

The effort to ban suspensions of young children involved discussions about structural racism and implicit bias that sometimes made teachers feel defensive and left the community feeling unheard. Community groups found that conversations were more effective when grounded in the acknowledgement that the situation involved systemic problems that no one person or group created or could solve alone. "We have allowed, essentially, a terrible, punitive system to be created in our schools, and since it is there it is being used," said Morgan Craven of Texas Appleseed. "But I also acknowledge that [teaching] is a hard job, and there are challenges that they are experiencing that I don't quite understand." A commitment to understand the experiences of all parties and the complexity of issues at play helped make progress possible. In addition, it's important to learn how and when to challenge people's understanding of an issue in order to be the most effective and keep conversation going.

> "I acknowledge that [teaching] is a hard job, and there are challenges that they are experiencing that I don't quite understand.

# ENDNOTES


1 https://www.educationaustin.org

2 https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2012-02-17/austin-education-vs-education-austin/

3 https://www.texastribune.org/2012/09/27/report-examine-budget-cuts-affected-texas-schools/



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