



KEEPING STUDENTS FIRST:

Building Community Labor Partnerships for Strong Schools

INTRODUCTION

Schott FOUNDATION *for*
PUBLIC EDUCATION
25 years



Building Movement Project

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 2012 school year, the nation was watching as the Chicago Teachers Union went on strike for the first time in 25 years, after months of attempted contract negotiations with the city. The city's public school system, the nation's third largest, had become an experiment in the corporate privatization of public schools.

In the years preceding the strike, longstanding internal frustration within the teachers union resulted in numerous changes in elected leadership but no significant shifts in the union's response to privatization efforts, school closures, and the strains on teacher benefits and school conditions caused by continued funding cuts. In 2010, members of a progressive, grassroots group of teachers—the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE)—organized to win elected leadership positions in the union. The platform of CORE members called for the union to more aggressively challenge the city government's accommodation of privatization efforts and accompanying school closures.¹ The leadership of CORE had evolved from collaboration between teachers frustrated with the union's tepid response to threatened closures and community groups mobilizing to defend the targeted public schools in communities of color.² When the caucus won a sweeping victory of union leadership positions, an integral component of its platform was to engage the community in collaborative efforts to defend the city schools and fight for the needs of teachers and students.³

Empowered by its decisive victory, the new union leadership took an assertive stance in contract negotiations. The issues on the table when the union voted to strike in 2012 were much broader than a traditional labor negotiation and informed by the years of work between union leaders and the community. The negotiations covered not only pay and benefits, but also a range of attempts to defend teachers and the school system against privatization, including

pushing back against evaluation, and pay and termination based on student performance on standardized testing.

Union leaders shared their strategy with the community in anticipation of the potential strike. During the strike, polls showed more support for the teachers than the mayor, despite the seven lost school days for the city's 350,000 public school students.⁴ When the union accepted a proposed contract and returned to the classroom, it had won concessions from the city on teacher raises and procedures for identifying new placements for teachers from closed schools.⁵ And it had sent an unambiguous signal to Chicago and the rest of the country that a teachers union could take on expansive ambitions to protect public education from privatization and top-down reform through effective internal organizing and the support of community partners.⁶



More than 4,000 teachers and other Chicago Teachers Union members gathered inside Chicago's Auditorium Theater on May 23, 2012, for the massive rally.

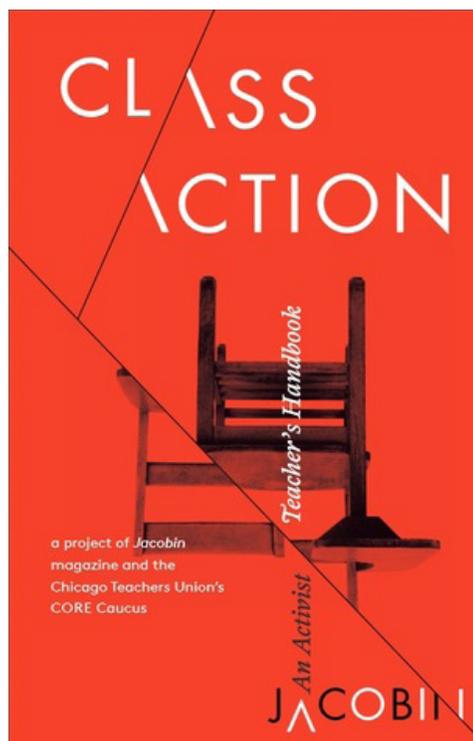
Photo: Howard Heath

KEEPING KIDS FIRST

This report explores what happened in two cities—St. Paul, Minnesota and Austin, Texas—where unions have established partnerships reminiscent of the alignment between labor and community groups in Chicago in 2012. Also, this report provides analysis and tools for labor and community groups nationwide that hope to overcome historical and systemic barriers in order to build trusting partnerships and shared power.

A collaborative partnership in which teachers' unions pursue community-defined priorities for education through contract negotiation requires an expansive view of the role of labor that extends beyond traditional union activity. In more traditional relationships between labor unions and community organizations, engagement can often be limited to financial sponsorship for local events, or contractual relationships in which unions pay community groups for local organizing to support the union's campaigns. In our research, we have found that a shift toward more collaborative community/union partnerships generally requires the affirmative support of the union. This support can come from new union leadership—as occurred in Chicago, where CORE members ran a campaign to take over the elected leadership of the union—or a proactive push by rank-and-file members in this direction—which can come slowly or haltingly. Increasingly, however, both teachers' unions and community groups have come to realize the strength that comes from partnering with each other, and are looking towards new collaborative models for ensuring the best education and schools for students, that include fair working conditions for teachers and staff.

While we found that community organizations may have limited ability to transform or re-balance the power dynamics at work in their relationships with labor until there is momentum from inside the union, education organizing and advocacy groups can be attuned to potential areas where union and community interests overlap and



Resource: For more analysis of the Chicago strike, read this collection of essays compiled by Jacobin magazine and the Chicago Teachers Union's CORE Caucus. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/02/class-action-an-activist-teachers-handbook/>



On May 23, 2012, a sea of red-clad teachers marched through downtown Chicago during rush hour and met with a contingent of supporters organized by Stand Up Chicago at the Board of Trade.

Photo: Isaac Steiner

focus on the potential to make meaningful connections and demonstrate the power and value of local organizing. For those community groups that want to prioritize building relationships with labor partners, stepping back from more traditional and transactional engagement can illuminate which partnerships have the potential to evolve into something more. Dan McGrath, Executive Director of TakeAction Minnesota in St. Paul traces the roots of their organization’s successful collaborative partnership with the teachers’ union to TakeAction’s decision to step back from relying on union contracts for funding. They believed the organization would not be perceived as a peer of labor until TakeAction had their own financial support and base that wasn’t so closely tied to the union’s funds. “The unions that only looked at community groups as a transactional partner and a means to an end, largely they just left,” he said. “The unions that hung around respected us and then we respected them. That made a difference.”

Still, in Chicago and in the case examples featured in this report, the breakthrough in changing community/labor relationships resulted from a conscious shift on the part of the union. It takes leadership from teachers unions to invest in stronger relationships with community partners, make it clear that these partnerships are welcome and valued, and signal that community partners are critical to future union strategy. Because of this, the stories in this report delve more deeply into the perspective of the teachers’ unions and focus on the shifts that led unions to establish new community relationships.

We hope these stories help illustrate not only what teachers’ unions stand to gain—particularly as public sector unions and the number of public sector jobs in education and other sectors continue to shrink nationwide—but also why these partnerships strengthen the power of community groups as well. Community labor partnerships build the voice and power of all parties, and make it harder for officials to ignore the arguments

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coming from a strong united front fighting for excellent public education that all children deserve. As Ken Zarifis, President of Education Austin said, “We have to look outside of our strict membership as our allies. We have to find common cause outside.”

KEY THEMES

The insights in this report offer snapshots of the evolution of partnerships between teachers unions and community in St. Paul and Austin. The full stories of the cities, communities and relationships featured in brief here are far richer and more complicated than a case example allows. We don’t endeavor to capture every nuance of the events described; rather, we hope to offer some insight for how community and labor partnerships can be established and nurtured, with the acknowledgement that the story is complex and ever-evolving.

Every partnership is unique, but some themes emerged through a series of over thirty interviews with labor and community leaders nationally, as well as in St. Paul and Austin, that have worked to build meaningful collaborations:

Move Beyond the Transactional

Successful collaboration does not rely on transactional exchanges that are limited to the campaign at that moment. Building meaningful relationships and trust requires open communication and frequent engagement over time.

Expand the Issue Lens

The alliances that were successful over time were not restricted to traditional school issues: they took an expansive view of what affects the community and thus, its students, engaging on policy issues including immigration, home foreclosures, police violence, local wages, and child care and early childhood resources outside of the school day. Union strategy development must be reflective and responsive to the needs of parents, students and teachers in order to truly make the partnership collaborative and meaningful.

Engage, Even when Difficult

Establishing new collaboration and taking on challenging issues often requires difficult conversations. In many of the large cities and jurisdictions where unions hold significant power, the teachers' union membership includes proportionally fewer teachers of color than the communities they serve. Addressing issues like school discipline and safety, which are common challenges for teachers and students both, requires engaging with difficult issues of structural racism and implicit bias. Tensions over these issues can make partnerships falter. To find common ground and sustain the partnership through difficult conversations, all parties must approach the conversations and the language used to describe the issues with care.

Be Patient

Although building meaningful community/labor partnerships takes time, they build the power of all parties, and make it harder for officials to ignore. "It's tough for those in power to penetrate these alliances," one interviewee told us.

We hope this report advances your education justice organizing efforts. We also invite you to join our national network of education advocates at Schott's Opportunity to Learn Network via www.schottfoundation.org.



WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN THIS REPORT

This report is designed to support community and labor groups that are ready and willing to engage in meaningful relationship building and collaboration. The case examples of union/community collaboration in St. Paul and Austin highlight two state capitals with distinctly different labor climates and educational challenges. Nonetheless, both unions succeeded by bringing the community into strategy development and partnership in a meaningful way.

This report also contains two sample exercises designed to support labor and community groups beginning to work together to explore how to better support students. "Building Our Schoolhouse" encourages parents, teachers, students, and other allies to find common ground for a vision for the schools students deserve, and identify plans for working together to create these environments for students. "Network Mapping" will help teachers, parents, and others consider the influences that affect students both in their academic success and in their overall well-being, with the goal of identifying both allies in supporting students and challenges that need to be addressed.

We hope these case examples and exercises help provide a road map of the initial steps for labor and community organizations to begin the work of increasing trust and collaboration to build their collective power to fight the corporate privatization of public education in the nation.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://labornotes.org/2010/01/reform-caucus-jolts-chicago-teachers-union>
- 2 <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/03/uncommon-core-chicago-teachers-union/>
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2013/04/the-industrial-classroom>
- 5 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/19/us/vote-scheduled-on-chicago-teachers-contract.html>
- 6 https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/after-chicago-success-union-leaders-spread-their-message/2012/09/21/cad16290-0424-11e2-9b24-ff730c7f6312_story.html



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