



# KEEPING STUDENTS FIRST:

## Building Community Labor Partnerships for Strong Schools

### CASE EXAMPLE 1: ST. PAUL, MN



Building Movement Project

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## St. Paul, Minnesota

### BACKGROUND

**S**t. Paul, Minnesota has a history of active labor organizing and collective bargaining. The St. Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT)—an affiliate of Education Minnesota, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—is a powerful union that regularly negotiates its contract with the school district, and had, in earlier years, focused those negotiations primarily on the traditional purview of pay, benefits, and working conditions for their members. However, over the past decade, and under the leadership of multiple union presidents, the St. Paul Federation of Teachers expanded its community engagement far beyond financial support of local charitable efforts and events, or paying local groups to participate in union-driven campaigns that needed additional people on the ground, canvassing or voter engagement.

The union sought meaningful relationship and understanding with the community, and adopted an expansive approach to using its contract bargaining process to incorporate the concerns of students and community outside the realm of the classroom. Mary Cathryn Ricker, the president of the union from 2005 to 2014 and now Executive Vice President of the American Federation of Teachers, described the approach this way: “Using the power of your negotiating table not just for traditional wages and benefits of working conditions—which of course it’s built for, so you should use it to get regular raises and make sure your health benefits are still affordable and those sorts of things—but actually using the power you have at the negotiating table to negotiate for the sorts of tools children deserve, the sort of community those children deserve to live in. It’s the one time you have the attention of people in power so you might as well use it.”

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*St. Paul teachers at a listening session in 2012 heard from Dora Jones of Mentoring Young Adults. Teachers are including parents and community members in study groups and in bargaining. Community witnesses have even kept management from acting up at the table.*

Photo: Janet Hostetter



*Twin Cities Art Build for Public Education*

Photo: Robin King

## LEADERSHIP CHANGE AND NEW COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

When Mary Cathryn became president of the St. Paul Federation of Teachers in 2005, she heard from members that they wanted the union to take on a broader role. Members wanted the union to address “working conditions and professionalism” while also tackling issues that would improve student’s lives. “Again and again and again, it would come up that our educators wanted to do both. We looked for opportunities where we could be working on moving our profession forward, working on high-quality teaching and learning at every turn, and at the same time, not ignore some of the most vulnerable positions our students found themselves in.”

One of the initial community/union collaborations after the union’s leadership change concerned a bill that proposed providing health care for all children in the state of Minnesota. School nurses and teachers who saw the effects of limited health care access on children in their schools made the connection between health and school attendance, quality of attention, and learning capacity. When the union decided to support the legislation, school nurses—who were also members of SPFT—testified in support of the measure at the State Capitol. Community groups working on the issue saw the effectiveness of the testimony on legislators, and began reaching out to the union to encourage their continued participation in the effort. From the union’s perspective, “It was a super organic partnership. It’s not like we sat at a table and devised this really intricate coalition ... We just organically showed up on their side and they kept inviting us to planning meetings and strategy meetings.” Community groups were proactive about responding to indications that the union was interested in supporting efforts outside its traditional purview, and this helped lay the groundwork for more sustained relationship and partnership.

It was equally vital that union and community leaders earned each other’s trust by cultivating their personal relationships. In the case of one community partner in St. Paul who works with youth of color, the personal relationship cultivated with SPFT leadership allowed the community partner to act as a mediator between the union and representatives from the Black community, who had felt historically shut out from a relationship with teachers in the schools and who, in many cases, were hesitant to hear what the union leadership had to say. The community leader acknowledged the real and historical barriers between mostly white teachers and students of color, but also emphasized the necessity of building relationships since, “These are teachers that are in the classroom overseeing our children.”

The expanded set of relationships and attempts at outreach to the community nurtured union activity on issues facing students and the community outside of schools. In conjunction with community partners, SPFT has worked on issues including ending winter foreclosures on families with children, raising the minimum wage (which affects students’ families), and increasing funding for childcare. In the process of taking on a wider range of issues, the union had natural opportunities to partner with SEIU and local groups organizing around racial and economic justice, including Neighborhoods Organizing for Change and TakeAction Minnesota. Many of the local organizations included parents of students, which the union saw as a natural route to build relationships, and common ground. “The more our members listened to families, listened to students, listened to community members, the more our members realized that we were very natural allies,” said Mary Cathryn. “We wanted a lot of the same things for kids.”

## COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS

As the SPFT made increasingly intentional efforts to engage the community and build new relationships and partnerships there, the union brought the community into its contract negotiation process. By law, contract meetings with the district were “open,” allowing parents and community members to watch negotiations, but neither the union nor the district had actively promoted this policy in any systemic way. Mary Cathryn saw an opportunity to develop a more robust role for parent and family concerns in the teachers’ contract. Initially, the union established priorities in advance and then invited parents and community groups to come watch the negotiation. However, the union realized that deeper partnership was possible.

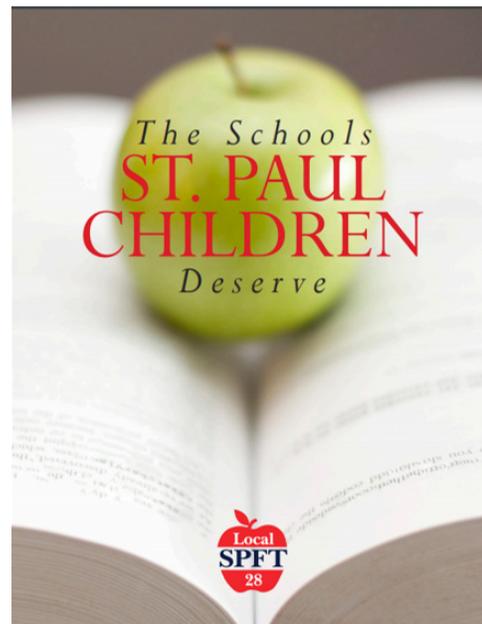
Beginning in 2012 during the lead up to the 2013-15 contract negotiations, union leadership decided to ask community members what should be in the teacher contract instead of coming up with the platforms solely through an internal process. Over five months, they worked with an outside facilitator to lead community listening sessions around three questions:

1. What are the schools St. Paul children deserve?
2. Who are the teachers St. Paul students deserve?
3. What is the profession those teachers deserve?

At the same time the union was gathering feedback and priorities from the community, it was internally discussing the emerging themes to find out what resonated with members. Eventually seven priorities emerged that both the community and the union could get behind:

1. School environments that address not only education but the health, relationships and environments of students by providing support services including counselors, nurses, and social workers;

2. More authentic engagement between teachers and families;
3. Smaller class sizes;
4. A reduction of classroom time dedicated to standardized testing and test preparation;
5. Effective professional development for teachers;
6. Expanded access to preschool; and
7. Assuring that teachers are equipped to meet the needs of a culturally diverse student population, a goal that later evolved to include an explicit commitment to advancing racial equality and social justice within the school system.



**Resource:** For more details on how these priorities were developed, see this report from the SPFT about the process. <https://spft.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/The-Schools-Saint-Paul-Children-Deserve-.pdf>

The union developed negotiating proposals based on these priorities. The district initially refused to negotiate on the grounds that these issues fell outside the mandatory subjects for contract negotiations. Because the community had helped shape the union's priorities for the contract and was invested in their success, the union had support from parents and students throughout the months it took to bring the district to the table to negotiate. Community members supported the union and its priorities through appearances at public meetings, signature drives, and directly contacting the district to push it to deliver for both teachers and community. The union ratcheted up the pressure on the district, including authorizing a vote on whether to strike. The fact that the community remained invested in the jointly developed proposals and felt its own sense of ownership in their success—not solely for the union, but for the community and students as well—helped to eventually bring the district to the negotiating table.

This process accomplished a number of important outcomes that laid the groundwork for deeper partnership moving forward. Trust was built between community and teachers, helping to demystify the union and counter negative stereotypes about its purpose and intentions. Community concerns were directly addressed in the teachers' contract itself, and the resulting programs—such as expanded training and support for parent/teacher home visits—both addressed community needs and assured that community/educator relationships and understanding continued to develop. All of this was key when the community and the union worked together to address school safety, an issue that has strained relationships between teachers, students, parents, and community members across the nation.



## KEY STEPS TO COLLABORATION

- › Create safe spaces to bridge the experiences of teachers and community members.
- › Look to community practice and experience to approach and deal with specific issues (e.g. restorative practice model).
- › Take the time to build individual relationships between parents and teachers responsible for rolling out programs.

## PARTNERSHIP IN FOCUS: SCHOOL SAFETY

Issues of school safety surfaced when the union and community partners were working on the community provisions secured in the 2013-15 contract and preparing for the next round of negotiations. According to Nick Faber, the current President of SPFT, "we recognized that we were dealing with this crisis, or at least in the media, around school climate." Teachers had been assaulted, and at the same time the St. Paul school district was trying to address a major racial discrepancy in suspensions. "We knew we needed some sort of radical change around that."

It was important that teachers and parents were able to hear from each other about their experiences. The union hosted small group discussions facilitated by trained leaders from the union's bargaining team. Through these discussions, parents and community members heard what teachers experience in the classroom, and members learned about what parents and students face in the community. The goal of these efforts was to "build the capacity of understanding" that was essential to bridging divides and enabling people to hear each other's concerns in a meaningful way.

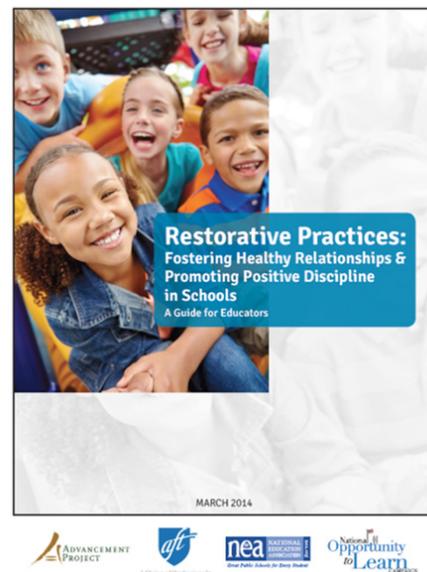
What emerged from these discussions was an agreement to address school climate and discipline issues through restorative practices, which create structured community space for mediated discussion between people on different sides of a conflict to reach resolution and healing. Some St. Paul schools had racial equity teams in place as part of existing district efforts to address disparities in school discipline and achievement, and members of these teams were included in exploring how the next contract negotiation process could help attain funds for restorative practices to move racial equity work forward. The resulting contract language funded a three-year pilot study at schools where 75% of staff approved implementing a “restorative practices” program, as well as evidence of parent and community support for the idea.

The six pilot sites (selected from 18 applicants) got underway during the 2016-2017 school year. There has also been a residual effect among the twelve schools that didn't get selected, several of which have started restorative practices using their own funds. “With their own building funds, [schools] were saying ‘Let's go down this path,’” said Nick. “And it was because we used the high-profile nature of our contract campaign to elevate that conversation about that in ways that involved our members and community and the district, and it was really powerful.” In the second year, three additional sites were selected from 13 applicants.

The pilot program is led by a district employee and union member, and community leaders with expertise in restorative practices informed its design and application. The community leaders who are engaged in shaping the restorative programming have also led professional development in restorative practices for teachers outside of the program, which helped deepen teachers' investment in the community's role in shaping the program. “Oftentimes we are educated by people who have more education than us, or have a very prescriptive kind of education that is more

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**Resource:** For more information, this toolkit from the Advancement Project details how to use the “restorative practices” model to build healthy relationships between students and adults in educational settings. <https://advancementproject.org/resources/restorative-practices-fostering-healthy-relationships-promoting-positive-discipline-in-schools/>

than what we have,” said Becky McCammon, Restorative Practice Program Coordinator for SPFT. “For [educators] to sit with folks that aren't every day in classrooms or that have been working in community specifically, or have been working in justice, or have been working in all sorts of different ways—I think the educators really beautifully responded to being taught by community.”

The work of repairing harm and building new relationships between schools and communities remains challenging, but the commitment to the process continues to open spaces that facilitate better understanding and communication that had not been present before. Moreover, from the perspective of Becky, the very fact that the union and community were able to formalize the commitment to the work through the contract negotiation process highlights the overall potential for the union to reflect the community's needs in its bargaining and strategic priorities.

SPFT successfully negotiated to increase funding to their restorative practices work, and have continued to use the bargaining table to address issues facing students and families, including a recent proposal for the school district to engage in responsible banking and contracting, including not working with banks that foreclose on families during the school year and only contracting with companies that pay at least a \$15.16 minimum wage and provide specific benefits to their employees (<https://spft.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Union-6-Racial-Equity-and-Social-Justice.pdf>). According to Becky, approaching the union's bargaining power this way serves to expand "the spirit of what we can do and what we can innovate to be better stewards of [our community]."

## KEY LESSONS

### Think Differently about which Partnerships are Natural

SPFT built some of its initial community partnerships by connecting with other organizations that serve the same constituents, including local organizations serving immigrants, low-wage workers, people experiencing homelessness, and more. "The people they're advocating for were the parents of our students," Mary Cathryn said, which made it seem natural to reach out and cultivate partnership.

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### Transparency and Listening

Mistakes will be made as relationships of trust are built, and it's crucial to allow tensions to surface without jumping to blame or shutting each other down. For example, the initial rollout of the restorative practices didn't include sufficient community input, and the union and program worked to meaningfully acknowledge community frustration and allow its input to shape revisions to the program and application process. Meaningful partnership depends on all parties believing that they'll be heard. "Our parents, and particularly our parents of color, were not afraid to speak up and push back," said Nick Faber about a recent training in advance of the next contract negotiation. "When they didn't agree with something they let us know. They didn't just not show up at the next thing ... I think a lot of that is just in being in relationship and being really intentional about building those relationships."

### Build Out Leadership

Both internally and externally, it is important to develop leadership that can continue the work beyond one dynamic leader at the top. Embedding the lessons and practices of community labor partnership ensures that the impact of the work will be lasting. For SPFT, that meant building beyond traditional union leadership structure to empower more members with negotiating skills to engage in the bargaining and serve as leaders in structured conversations with the community, as well as cultivating member's leadership within the union by providing opportunities for them to take initiative in areas of expertise.



Building Movement Project

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