



Unions Leading Innovation in the Use of Time

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Issue Briefs provide an engaging snapshot of impactful features of NEA Foundation's local union, district and community collaborative partnerships.

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Dear Colleagues:

As the nation pursues the twin goals of educational excellence and equity, it continues to develop large new initiatives, such as substantially re-invented teacher evaluation systems and the emerging Common Core State Standards. Recognizing the resultant, rising pressures on teachers that this work creates, a small number of innovative teacher unions and districts are exploring new ways to make the most of a scarce resource that is essential to student success: the wise use of teacher time.

This Issue Brief provides a snapshot of the work and experiences of two NEA Foundation-supported local unions and the teachers they represent—the Springfield Education Association (SEA), MA and the Elgin Teachers Association (ETA), IL as they partner with their respective school districts to ensure high-quality instruction for all students. In both communities, structures and processes are being explored to configure time during the professional workday in new ways so that teachers can engage in ongoing and more robust professional learning—increasing the effectiveness of teachers and supporting improved learning conditions for students.

We trust that you will find these snapshots to be as informative as they are inspiring of new collaborative action on behalf of all of our students.

Sincerely,

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Unions at a Crossroads

Teachers and the unions that represent them are at a daunting crossroads. Political pressures placed on them such as changes to collective bargaining laws, witnessed most notably in Wisconsin and Ohio, are driving unions to examine their existing and potential roles. Professionally, teachers are grappling with the rapid implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS); they are being challenged by an ever-expanding vision of what 21st century teaching and learning entail; they are being evaluated against complex performance rubrics; when, by whom and to what end teachers are evaluated have become central problems that must be resolved quickly. Professional learning opportunities must keep pace and be refined and expanded. The relationship established by research between these challenges and improved student outcomes supports the notion that professional work conditions (for example, the allocation of teacher time used for instruction versus planning, or for substantive and collegial interaction with their peers) are inseparable from student learning conditions. Where teachers and unions focus their collective energy moving forward can determine whether the excellence and equity to which we aspire can become a reality in our school systems¹.

Susan Moore Johnson, Director of the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers at Harvard University, observes about teachers who formed local unions in the 60s and 70s and who are now retiring:

“Many of these teachers participated in their union’s initial efforts to gain a voice at the local level. Some took part in strikes and walked picket lines. For the past 35 to 40 years, local union presidents could count on the steady support of those early members, but the future is less certain.”

Veteran teachers, she points out, expect their unions to support traditional approaches to pay and autonomy in the classroom. New members, in contrast, want unions to provide ongoing training, pursue innovation in pay, and create opportunities for differentiated roles for teachers.



The shape of the 21st century teachers union will be impacted by:

- growing consensus regarding the enterprise of teaching and learning—its ambitious goals and its complexity²
- generational variation among teachers in demographic characteristics, professional aspirations and career trajectories³
- the availability of student outcome data and the use of data to measure the success of the public education enterprise—and individual districts, schools and even teachers
- the growing demand for choice by parents, policymakers, and legislators

Unions must continue to grapple with these dynamics. A recent review of the research⁴ explores specific ways teacher unions can impact educational reform that benefits both their students and teachers. The researchers point out that “[m]any unions have adopted the ‘new unionism,’ a more collaborative approach to collective bargaining emphasizing the importance of increasing the scope of unions’ role in decision making to include professional and education reform agendas.” Teachers and their unions should be leveraged as knowledgeable professionals and legitimate decision-making authorities with expertise and experience. Equally important, in what new ways will unions hold themselves accountable and be held accountable by other stakeholders as they assume greater authority?

The Springfield, MA and Elgin, IL snapshots that follow are examples of “new” unions that have spearheaded, or co-led with their districts, bold efforts to ensure that all teachers can continue to grow professionally and help students achieve.





A New Look at “Teacher Time” in Springfield, MA

Two state-mandated initiatives—a new teacher evaluation system and the implementation of the CCSS—are driving the reform agenda in the Springfield, MA district. These efforts require teachers to embrace new ways of teaching and have resulted in an examination of the way in which they use their existing time.

Nancy deProse, the Closing the Achievement Gaps initiative manager, remarks that

“The teacher workload in the schools has exploded over the past few years, and we must look at why—
teachers, administrators, principals, all of us. If there is a single aspect of teachers’ professional life that
most closely brings work conditions and learning conditions together, it’s how time for teacher professional
learning is used and distributed. The research and our experience as teachers are clear on this. It cannot
remain an undiscussable elephant in the room.”

To begin a formal examination of how time is used by teachers in the district, the Springfield Education Association (SEA) commissioned a study by university partners at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Released late last year, the report, *It’s More Than Teaching: A Report on the Actual Workday of a Springfield, Massachusetts Public School Teacher*,⁵ analyzed surveys of 608 Springfield Public School (SPS) teachers (30.1% response rate) during the spring of 2012—with sobering results. The two new state-mandated initiatives—CCSS, which SPS must implement immediately, and the new teacher evaluation system, which is already implemented—require substantial *additional* time from staff. Teachers spend three hours and 28 minutes each day performing non-teaching related activities. (Respondents reported that the most time-consuming non-teaching activity is behavioral management, connecting with their students about a “personal or family-related problem,” and contacting parents about student behavior or progress. Though teachers are scheduled to instruct for five hours and three minutes during the school day, teachers actually spend only an average of four hours per day in the classroom, instructing students. The growing administrative burden and the ongoing instructional requirements make it difficult to imagine how teachers will find the *additional* time required for the high quality professional learning required by CCSS. Indeed, the report recommends that if “effective evidence-based teaching practices” are to be a legitimate goal of the Springfield District, teachers are going to need to be released from other non-instructional, time-consuming duties.”

In response to this data, and in order to take a deeper dive into the work to address it, the district and the union have jointly formed a new team. In the spring of 2013, SEA President Tim Collins and SPS Superintendent Dan Warwick made the following joint commitment:

“We are very pleased to be launching the SPS Committee on Teacher Time. We know that teachers in the Springfield Public Schools are making large commitments of time to engage and teach students, to develop professionally, and to work with one another. We also know that to ensure ongoing improvements in student achievement, teachers and school-based administrators must be able to focus their energies on the most important tasks of teaching and learning. The Committee on Teacher Time will help us with this. As a part of our continuing efforts to work collaboratively to meet challenges, the teachers and administrators on this labor-management team will analyze recent research and data, discuss strategies for improvement, and make recommendations for future action.”

Tim Collins, SEA president, points out that the amount of time presents only part of the challenge. Echoing the report findings, he reiterated that to maximize the value of the time teachers commit to professional learning, “teachers must help drive the content of that learning, especially as it occurs in grade or content teams, or in professional learning communities, where they have deep and specific knowledge to bring to bear.” He also wants to push for the broader collaboration required for teacher peer observations. “Time (for this kind of professional support) is needed to improve instruction. Under current conditions, that time is simply not available. We can no longer avoid a restructuring of time for teacher learning.”

While the ways in which time for teacher learning will take shape continue to be deliberated among union and district leaders, Nancy deProse asserts that the study of teacher time, the reviews of the research literature, and the engagement of the perspectives of educators is “not only a symbol of the union’s intellectual leadership, but an affirmation of teachers’ leadership, their deep awareness of teaching and learning issues, and their interest in their own and their peers’ continuing development and growth as highly effective practitioners.” She adds that “This work is all a continuation of the collaborative practices we have been developing through our Closing the Achievement Gap efforts. A number of our collaborative structures—such as district and school-based instructional leadership teams co-led by administrators and teachers—will provide important venues to address these issues in the years to come.”



Elgin, IL “Time for Transformation”

Like Springfield, Elgin is proud of its long history of and commitment to collaboration between the district and union. This commitment has resulted in: an instructional council which is a joint committee of teachers and administrators and reviews all curricular proposals; a Common Core implementation team, a group of teachers and administrators working together to implement the new educational standards; and a “Teacher Appraisal Plan Oversight Committee” which continually monitors the teacher evaluation and rating system. Most recently, the union and district have piloted a Peer Assistance and Review program which began in the 2012-2013 school year.

A centerpiece of its current collaborative work is an effort to examine the configuration and length of the teacher day, including: elementary planning time, student contact time, required professional duties for teachers, and adult collaborative time. Through a memorandum of understanding entitled “Transformation Task Force” (TTF), included in the 2012 Elgin Agreement, the Elgin Teachers Association (ETA) and district representatives of the task force began work to design the optimal school day for students, teachers, and the school community in the belief that: “Our students will have a school structure which is designed to provide a learning environment that meets the needs of all students to achieve, grow, and develop; our staff will have a working environment that supports effective teaching and learning; and we will assure our school community is an essential partner in our work.” It was agreed that the complexity of the issues needed “further study and recommendation from a broader representation, and both parties agreed that the TTF should be created to research and make recommendations regarding these issues⁶.”

Kathryn Castle, ETA president, reflects on the union role in helping to shape the direction of TTF’s work:

“As a union, we’ve tackled the core professional concerns held by our members related to their ability to self-reflect and to learn from their peers. We are bringing our collective experience and voice to bear on how instruction needs to continue to evolve to help students meet higher standards. We also continue to define what true teacher leadership means and how that will redirect the needed changes to our public schools—and it’s about time.”



Echoing her sentiments, a “Values and Beliefs” document created by the TTF Steering Committee was generated to guide all future work, presenting a shared and clear focus on differentiation of the professional teaching day to include:

- efficient use of teacher time
- professional voice in all areas of practice
- opportunity for teacher-led professional collaboration
- discretionary/duty free time
- management of instructional preparation time
- meaningful contact time with students

President Castle remarks that while there is widespread support for the vision and values of the TTF throughout the schools, educators recognize the need to continue to deliberate research and best practice through a series of subcommittees (for example, elementary and middle schools’ committees) before committing further to specific structures or changes. To gauge both teachers’ and administrators’ actual experience and perspectives, the TTF designed and distributed a survey to all ETA members and district administrators to get input from as wide an audience as possible.

Superintendent Jose Torres is proud of the effort, celebrating the fact that the work of the TTF has already been utilized: “The TTF’s elementary subcommittee’s draft recommendations were used as the model for restructuring 10 elementary schools beginning next school year.” He cites this work as an opportunity for deep collaboration with ETA “to close excellence gaps in the ten schools by the 2015-16 school year.” The school day at each school will be restructured to include at least 75 minutes of teacher collaboration time per week for each teacher to work regularly with colleagues to improve core instruction. A coach at each school will be trained in a teacher collaboration methodology (involving teams of teachers regularly examining data, reviewing student work samples and observing each other’s practice) that will be used to build capacity and drive instructional improvement.

The impact of the restructuring plan in the 10 elementary schools will provide ETA and the district with valuable insight on restructuring other grade levels in the years to come. The NEA Foundation coach assigned to Elgin to provide ongoing assistance and support for district and union collaborative efforts, observes that the rich and shared intellectual leadership and collaborative planning by both the union and district is driving home the question and conversation around impact on student learning, and how to measure it. He states:

“The union and district both get that no amount of restructured time for teacher learning, sharing, joint planning, data review will be meaningful in the long haul if a link to increased outcomes for the kids cannot be shown. This is the hard part—and neither the union nor district is shying away from the challenge.”



Moving Forward

NEA Foundation-supported unions such as the SEA and ETA have collaborated with district and community partners to increase teaching quality in ways that:

- place student achievement and growth at the center of all reform proposals (for example, linking teacher work conditions involving allocation of time for professional learning with student learning conditions);
- seek to challenge or expand current district initiatives to improve student outcomes;
- bring union content knowledge and instructional leadership to bear, acting as organizational and intellectual leaders, to guide collaborative reform projects;
- embrace and systematically tap teachers' experience and expertise, helping to ensure that district-designed initiatives reflect and resonate with classroom experience;
- bring teachers into deeper and more substantive contact and exchange with their colleagues and with administrators; and
- sustain change efforts through contract agreements, memoranda of understanding, and/or other structures and processes such as joint labor-management committees and task forces.

In Springfield, efforts to redistribute time respond to the expressed needs of teachers. The SEA is raising awareness among its members that to authentically and meaningfully collaborate with peers as a way of systemically improving instruction, teacher time must be redistributed and renegotiated. In Elgin, to sustain the rich tradition of collaboration between the union and district and to redefine working and learning conditions as a single construct, ETA has helped to drive the TTF steering and subcommittees. ETA has demonstrated organizational flexibility and its capacity to manage a comprehensive and coherent array of programs.

Through changes in their ways of working, the community of educators represented by these unions has begun to consciously and strategically “express a different, more productive message about teaching and schooling,” an important characteristic of high-performing and reform-minded “new” unions and educators⁷. In this way, unions are evolving to meet the pressures, challenges and opportunities of the 21st century and promoting the profession of teaching as a worthy and complex enterprise. Unions and districts, as integral parts of a single teaching and learning system, can work together more productively to increase buy-in for needed reforms, facilitate their implementation, and retain top talent. The gap between well-intentioned policies and effective practice at the frontlines in classrooms can thereby be closed, keeping students—their learning and life opportunities—at the center of all collaboration.

Endnotes

- 1 Times—The Common Core: Who’s Minding the Schools, June 8, 2013
- 2 See: Ball, D., & Forzani, F. (2009). The work of teaching and the challenge for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 60(5); Cochran-Smith, M. (2003). The unforgiving complexity of teaching: Avoiding simplicity in the age of accountability. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 54(1)
- 3 See: The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers at:
http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=hgse_pngt
- 4 See: Teacher Unions and Educational Reform: A Research Review, Nina Bascia and Pamela Osmond at:
http://feaweb.org/_data/files/ED_Reform/Teacher_Unions_and_Educational_Reform.pdf
- 5 Full text can be downloaded at:
<http://www.ler.illinois.edu/labor/images/Springfield%20Teachers%20Study-%20Final.pdf>
- 6 Interim TTF Report, December 2012 at
<http://theeta.org/contractual-committees/transformation-task-force/ttf-interim-report>
- 7 See: Teacher Unions and Educational Reform: A Research Review, Nina Bascia and Pamela Osmond at:
http://feaweb.org/_data/files/ED_Reform/Teacher_Unions_and_Educational_Reform.pdf



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