



Teachers Unions: Strong Organizations Rising to the Challenge of 21st Century Teaching and Learning

The NEA Foundation Issue Brief
Number 11



June 2014

ABOUT THE NEA FOUNDATION

The NEA Foundation is a public charity supported by contributions from educators' dues, corporate sponsors, and others who support public education initiatives. We partner with education unions, districts, and communities to create powerful, sustainable improvements in teaching and learning. Visit neafoundation.org for more information.

ABOUT THE NEA FOUNDATION REPORTS AND ISSUE BRIEFS

Occasional reports issued by the NEA Foundation provide in-depth coverage and analysis of innovations designed to increase teaching effectiveness and student achievement. Selected innovations are drawn mainly from the NEA Foundation program sites. Issue Briefs provide an engaging snapshot of impactful features of NEA Foundation's local union, district and community collaborative partnerships.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The NEA Foundation would like to thank: Dennis Van Roekel, President, NEA; Rhonda Johnson, President, Columbus Education Association; and Kevin Welner, Professor, University of Colorado Boulder, School of Education, and Director of the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) for their contributions to this Issue Brief. We also are very grateful for the many contributions of Liz Dunning, The NEA Foundation Senior Vice President of Programs and Rodolfo Careaga, The NEA Foundation Vice President of Programs.

Opening Letter from Harriet Sanford

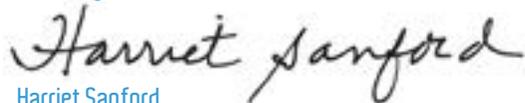
Dear Colleagues:

This Issue Brief provides a point of departure for teacher union leaders and members to peer into and unpack the “black box” of union organizational development. It is intended as a tool for self-assessing organizational capacity against an evolving landscape of educational reform at the local, state and national levels, and must consider, among other factors:

- union size and structure
- specific reform initiatives on which unions have or must henceforth be focused
- the sets of relationships they have or must cultivate

As we enter further into the 21st century, we are confident that the extent to which unions are able to initiate and/or actively participate in shaping the conditions that affect teaching quality” (Bascia 2003) and the status of the profession of teaching writ large will continue to grow.

Sincerely,



Harriet Sanford
President and CEO

Mark Howard Chichester
Chair

Crystal Brown
Vice Chair

John Stocks,
Secretary-Treasurer

Robert Lee Adams Jr.

Donna Meacham Blackman

Kimberly Oliver Burnim

Jeremiah Collins

Sean Patrick Corcoran

Christian L. Duffus

Sharon Gallagher-Fishbaugh

Peter H. Heckman

Julian Vasquez Heilig

Jerry L. Johnson

Paige Johnson

Lola Kelly

Herb Levitt

Lori McFarling

Carmen Ortiz-McGhee

Harriet Sanford

Dennis Van Roekel

Lauren Woodman

Cathy D. Zier

Help Us Help Kids Know More

Introduction

In 2012, researchers Nina Bascia and Pamela Osmond observed that “successful, enduring teacher organizations seem to share particular organizational characteristics. There is much that can be done by tending to their own organizational priorities that arise out of member needs; by ensuring that they are flexible, can manage a comprehensive array of programs, and are internally coherent; and by finding ways to express a different, more productive message about teaching and schooling and, in the process, provide a new discourse by which educators and the public can understand the workings of the education enterprise more fully and with greater empathy. Re-conceptualizing the role of teachers in the arena of educational decision making requires a significant paradigm shift.”¹



This Issue Brief is organized according to four areas of organizational growth and development—**vision and mission; organizational development strategy; leadership; and shaping the reform landscape.**

It is presented primarily as a tool for union organizational self-assessment and planning in all four areas, with corresponding questions for reflection by union leaders and members.

Summaries of our experience and what available research indicates regarding high-capacity organizational functioning are also provided.

According to the Task Force on Developing Research in Educational Leadership (2003), “Effective educational leaders help their schools to develop or endorse visions that embody the best thinking about teaching and learning. School leaders inspire others to reach for ambitious goals.” Your school must have a vision that all staff members recognize as a common direction of growth, something that inspires them to be better. An effective vision also announces to parents and students where you are heading and why they should take the trip with you. (ASCD)²

- How has (or might) the mission, vision or constitutional purpose evolve(d) to reflect an expanded union role?
- Do you have an explicit and shared understanding of a new model of unionism—“new unionism,” “post-industrial unionism,” progressive unionism,” professional unionism,” “social justice unionism”?
- In what ways does the mission, vision, constitution or bylaws promote shared decision-making and a “culture of inclusiveness” among members and union leaders?
- How does the mission and vision set the stage for the union role as co-managers (with district partners) of teacher and learning?

High-Capacity Unions:

- **make explicit their primary purpose as the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for students in their governing documents**
- **focus on the advancement of the profession of teaching by creating, supporting and enforcing standards for teaching**

“Because internal organizational fragmentation is a serious detriment to teacher union effectiveness, it is important to develop organizational strategies that strengthen communication, the appropriate distribution of resources, and access to information, and to recognize the necessity of unions’ multiple roles. Ensuring teacher commitment by providing a variety of ways for teachers to meaningfully participate should help reduce the tendency to take a triage approach to union functions.”³

- Does the organization conduct strategic planning?
- Does the strategic plan promote organizing around organizational effectiveness and educational quality?
- Does the plan make explicit ways in which the union resists, supports or leads change efforts within the district?
- How does the configuration of union divisions (and corresponding sub strategies) support the organization-wide strategic plan?
- What percentage of the membership is involved in progressive union activities?
- How does the strategic plan promote greater accountability by unions and members for quality and outcomes?
- Does union staff possess the requisite knowledge, skills and abilities to support the strategic plan?
- How are gaps in knowledge, skills and abilities addressed within the organization?
- What mechanisms are in place to communicate and reinforce internally a coherent message about the new union role?
- How is leadership and decision-making on substantive matters of teaching and learning distributed across the organization? Role of the president? Role of executive director? Role of school-based representatives? Role of members?
- How does the organization inquire into and manage knowledge about its functioning and effectiveness?
- How does it use this knowledge to midcourse correct or respond nimbly to threats and opportunities?

High-Capacity Unions:

- have strategic plans that are regularly assessed for progress by leaders and members—those that are responsible for ensuring that goals are reached
- collect and use data regarding their organizational growth and impact to develop and refine strategies
- are learning organizations, that is, organizations made up of members and leadership skilled at creating, acquiring, transferring and acting upon knowledge to preserve and grow the institution
- ensures that voices and perspectives representing teachers drawn from diverse demographics (e.g., race, age, years of service) are included in leadership, governance, and other organizational structures
- builds the professional capital of its members and leadership and staff by supporting activities such as academies, retreats, ongoing professional learning embedded in practice, action research, participation in policy and practice conferences and meetings, teacher networks, etc.
- frames and promotes dialogue on substantive issues of teaching and learning for its members and district partners drawing on research, data, and best practices
- builds stakeholder (parents, business, community, civic authorities) knowledge and awareness of these issues through effective and regular communications strategies



Teacher Unions and Educational Reform: A Research Review

[http://feaweb.org/_data/files/ED_Reform/Teacher
Unions_and_Educational_Reform.pdf](http://feaweb.org/_data/files/ED_Reform/Teacher_Unions_and_Educational_Reform.pdf)

“Most [union presidents] said that conventional union priorities were necessary, but not sufficient, given the increasing expectations of new teachers for professional support, the demands of school reform, and growing competition from charter schools and other nontraditional forms of public education.”⁴

- How do union leaders (execs and board) promote nontraditional bargaining centered on substantive issues of teaching and learning?
- In what ways does leadership promote resistance to, support of, or autonomous spearheading of reform initiatives?
- Does the union engage in transition planning to ensure that the knowledge, skills and dispositions of future leaders (EDs, presidents and building reps) is consistent with the new or evolving vision and mission?
- How has or might board membership change to support this vision and mission? What are the structures (e.g., ad hoc or standing committees) that need to be put into place?

High-Capacity Unions:

- have leaders that bargain specifically on substantive issues of teaching and learning
- adopt explicit leadership models that are consistent with an expanded role of unions in leading and co-leading reform in high change environments (e.g., adaptive, distributive, change)
- promote organizational learning by sharing information and distributing decision-making
- clearly articulate leaders' (president, executive director and board) requisite knowledge, skills and dispositions that are consistent with high-quality educational policy and practice, and conduct regular self-assessments of effectiveness against these qualities
- promote labor-management collaboration
- effectively frame teaching and learning issues for members drawing on member perspectives and pressing challenges confronting the profession (teacher evaluation, compensation, seniority, professional learning, teacher induction, hiring and retention, etc.)

“For more than a decade, the debate over public school reform has created friction between teachers unions, administrators, school boards, parents, policymakers, and other stakeholders in public education and has fueled disagreements over how to improve the quality of teaching and learning for children. While many factors make consensus elusive when it comes to school reform, a key obstacle to finding agreement around educational improvements and bringing such improvements to fruition is ideological policy divisions...”⁵

- How does external partnership development minimize boundaries between the union and the field?
- How do partnerships help build the “intellectual capital” of the union?
- Is there a clear partnership development strategy?
 - with philanthropy?
 - with community leaders?
 - with parents?
 - with other locals?
 - with state associations?
 - with national offices (AFT and NEA)?
 - with other education stakeholders (the school board, local education support organizations (ELOs))
- How are partnerships with state associations structured and to what ends?
- How does the union leverage partnerships to articulate and disseminate a “coherent message about how the education system (and its parts) should work as well as provide necessary supports for teaching and learning”?⁶

High-Capacity Unions:

- create partnerships (universities, neighborhood organizations, community services providers, etc.) that ensure optimal mutual information and idea sharing
- use partnerships to develop financial, political, professional, human and social capital to support new opportunities for student learning and teaching effectiveness
- strengthen the mutual influence between local and state-level association activities to positively shape policy contexts

Moving Forward

Recent literature is rich in descriptions of ways in which education unions are leading and co-constructing efforts to improve educational outcomes for students. Learnings from the NEA Foundations evaluation and management of Gaps and Institute sites indicate evidence of union role expansion at both the school and district levels. Many unions now sit at the policy and practice table with districts and school-based management to improve teaching effectiveness, engage parents and the community, and improve student achievement. That about which we must continue to learn is how union leadership, organizational structures and internal processes are evolving and must continue to evolve to accommodate an expanded role, greater collaboration, and greater knowledge, authority and accountability for all matters teaching and learning.



Teachers Unions and Management Partnerships
How Working Together Improves Student Achievement

End Notes

1 See Bascia and Osmond at:

http://feaweb.org/_data/files/ED_Reform/Teacher_Unions_and_Educational_Reform.pdf

2 See ASCD at:

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/107042/chapters/developing-a-vision-and-a-mission.aspx>

3 See Bascia and Osmond at:

http://feaweb.org/_data/files/ED_Reform/Teacher_Unions_and_Educational_Reform.pdf

4 See Moore Johnson and others at:

<http://www.educationsector.org/sites/default/files/publications/UnionLeaders.pdf>

5 See Rubenstein and McCarthy at:

<http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Rubinstein-EduReform-report.pdf>

6 See Bascia and Osmond at:

http://feaweb.org/_data/files/ED_Reform/Teacher_Unions_and_Educational_Reform.pdf



Help Us Help Kids Know More

1201 Sixteenth Street, NW Washington, DC 20036-3207 202.822.7840 p 202.822.7779 f www.neafoundation.org