Why teachers must come to regard— and organize— themselves as mind workers

by CHARLES TAYLOR KERCHNER

Deindustrialization

The pragmatic question of whether teacher unions can lead education reform is linked with an ideological question, whether they should. Is it their role to reshape public education, or should they limit themselves to pressing for their members’ economic and job security? Many of those who believe that unions can’t lead reform also believe that they shouldn’t. On the contrary, I believe teacher unions should have both the right and the responsibility to engage in education reform. This belief is rooted in my beliefs about teaching and schooling. I believe that teaching is hard and skilled work: a mixture of craft, art, and profession. It follows that teachers should be organized as mind workers and not around the assumption that they are industrial workers subject to micromanagement. Creating an occupation built on the assumption of teachers as mind workers is the most important education policy frontier facing us. It may also be the most contentious.

There is substantial opposition within unions themselves and within the ranks of teachers to the idea of teaching as a self-policing profession. Most teachers are not accustomed to judging their colleagues’ performance or their fitness to remain as teachers. However, the highest barrier to the engagement of teachers in education reform comes from conservatives who believe that teacher unions shouldn’t be involved in substantive decisions about the direction of school reform. They see union involvement as an unwarranted intrusion of labor’s influence into the rightful domains of school managers, school boards, or legislatures. They urge further restrictions on the scope of collective bargaining and generally seek to organize education reform around rather than with teacher unions.

Reforming the schools by restricting or ignoring teacher unions is counterproductive. The teachers’ contract often channels more than half of a school district’s operating budget and sets the pattern for much more than that. Unless they engage the labor contract’s rules and financial flows, reform efforts are stunted. Not bringing reform issues to the bargaining table or other sites of labor relations means that reforms are never discussed, much less agreed to. Unions essentially escape responsibility for reform. They serve a role in the hearts of conservatives as political whipping boys, but political satisfaction is purchased at a high price. Engagement is better than blame.

Organizing around Quality

By the 1960s and 1970s, when large numbers of teachers entered into collective bargaining, the word unionism largely meant industrial unionism, a form of unionism designed to work within large hierarchies. Older forms of worker organization— guilds, artisan associations, and craft unions— had largely disappeared. In public education, industrial unionism was labor’s answer to an education system constructed on the principles of scientific management, a system in which the content and pacing of work was designed not by teachers but by school administrators. Schools were bureaucratized long before they were unionized. It is somewhat ironic that teacher unions remain one of the strongest supporters of the very system whose managerial excesses and rigid rules they sought to tame with collective bargaining.

Still, schools never were factories. There is more than a little truth to the teacher’s adage, “I’m in charge when the classroom door is closed.” In the industrial sense, schools were always incomplete bureaucracies. Although the assertion would horrify most teachers, schools are dramatically undersupervised by industrial standards. Nonetheless, the logic of industrial organization created a clear division between work creation and task execution. Strictly interpreted, industrial organization would hold teachers responsible for the faithful reproduction of lesson plans and classroom routines developed elsewhere. Invention, creativity, and spontaneity would not be required or expected.

A small but growing number of teacher union locals have attempted to go beyond the industrial unionism model by fashioning new ways of organizing teaching around high-quality practice and high-performing schools. Scattered efforts— sometimes called “random acts of innovation”— have begun to coalesce into a systemic connection between the everyday practices of labor relations and a quality school-reform agenda. In districts such as Minneapolis, teachers have begun assuming greater responsibility for how quality is assessed and how quality standards are enforced, and they have gained greater authority over their work lives. These expanded work roles are compatible with many organizational forms. Like those in Minneapolis, most teachers work for complex hierarchies that could become more participatory and streamlined while retain-
ing their basic shape. Even unions in industrial settings, such as Saturn Motors, have accomplished such a transition. Charters and other more autonomous schools could function as producers' cooperatives or professional practice corporations. If schools were under private management, the union contract might call for an equity stake in the corporation, as does the agreement in Miami-Dade County for teachers working in Edison Schools.

Four labor-relations interventions form what may be called the Diamond of Quality—peer review, teacher induction, professional development, and performance rewards—all held together with a system of standards and indicators that focuses both labor relations and school operations on student achievement. All of these reforms are consistent with developing the art, craft, and profession of teaching. Some—such as peer review and new compensation systems—are controversial within labor and management, but all fall within the range of negotiability.

A Bedrock of Data
Because the central idea is to use labor relations to focus on student achievement rather than on adult privileges, the core of the quality diamond is a system of standards and indicators. If teachers don't create and analyze data on student achievement, tying a system of evaluating or compensating them to the outcomes of their students becomes capricious and counterproductive. Teachers may gain or lose money, but they are literally senseless about how actions they took or didn't take are connected to performance results.

Even though there are substantial misgivings among teachers themselves, both national teacher unions have supported Reform Unionism (Figure 1)
In select, mainly urban school systems unions have negotiated reforms that alter antiquated systems of teacher pay, evaluation, and training.
a national system of educational standards. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has made standards the key to its quality-schools strategy. Its Task Force on Redesigning Low Performing Schools has created an intervention strategy that includes indicators of poor performance and materials, procedures, and established schoolwide improvement strategies that can be used to respond.

Constructing a good system of data and indicators and training teachers and site administrators to use one is a substantial undertaking. The Seattle Public Schools and the Seattle Teachers Association have an agreement to train three teachers in each school in the district’s quality and data measurement system. This is seen as a long-term project. A series of agreements between the Minneapolis Teachers Federation and the school district has created an interlocking system of data use and development. In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers has a joint project with the school district to integrate standards-based teaching in the district.

Teacher unions are potential allies in today’s most far-reaching reform effort, the effort to establish and implement standards. Historically, education has not lacked for standards; it has suffered from their lack of implementation. Implementing standards means teaching differently. Teaching differently means retraining the existing work force and inducting new teachers into new ways of teaching. Creating budgets and work schedules for professional development is typically a subject of bargaining.

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Unions also forcefully prod state and local officials to synchronize the tests, the standards, and the curriculum so that the test can reflect what the students actually learn in school.

Peer Review. Performance review by colleagues is a hallmark of a profession, both for entrance into an occupation and for the ongoing assessment of a professional’s performance. In higher education, it is the norm. Union-sanctioned peer review for elementary- and secondary-school teachers has a record long enough for reasonable claims to be made for its success. Started in Toledo, Ohio, in 1982, it has spread to about 50 other sites, and both national unions endorse it. Although no comprehensive study exists, anecdotal evidence suggests that peer review provides a more thorough system of inducting and evaluating novices than is currently used in most school districts. Peer review also seems to be more effective than administrative evaluation in the remediation or removal of veteran teachers with serious performance problems.

A complete peer-review system, such as that in Poway, California, works at three levels. First, novice teachers get the introduction to teaching they need and deserve. In contrast, most U.S. teachers still survive sink-or-swim induction. A culture of isolationism among veteran teachers often prevents assistance to new teachers. Peer review links experienced teachers to novices and provides greater formative assistance. Ultimately, supervising teachers learn to “call the question” (as they say in Rochester, New York), making a judgment about a novice’s performance. Second, peer review works for teachers in trouble. They get help, they get better, or they get out. Third, it operates as an alternative to the pro forma classroom evaluations carried out by most principals. For example, in Poway, the peer-review process evaluates teachers against criteria based on the guidelines of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

When peer review is established, teachers will work hard to defend it. Teachers have gone to the brink of strike to save their peer-review programs in Toledo (in 1995) and in Cincinnati (in 1999 and 2000). Unionists disagree about whether peer review is a proper union role. Union leader Adam Urbanski, whose essay follows, is fond of saying, “Peer review is controversial in all the places that don’t have it.” He is largely correct. Schools and unions that have adopted the system are largely happy...
with it even though administrative organizations frequently oppose the idea. In Rochester, the administrators’ union unsuccessfully sued the teacher union and the district over the peer assistance and review program, claiming that allowing teachers to evaluate one another violated the rights of administrators.

Peer review remains legally clouded in some states. Ohio has amended its statutes to allow peer review. California encourages it with financial incentives. Nevertheless, in some cases outside of public education, bargaining rights have been denied to employees who are considered supervisors because they are involved in assigning, disciplining, or dismissing other workers. In a much-cited U.S. Supreme Court case, faculty members at Yeshiva University were denied bargaining rights because their faculty senate and its committees made substantive university decisions. A recent National Labor Relations Board decision applied the same logic to health care workers. Public policy—in particular state labor statutes—signals what is expected of labor and management. The current signals mandate a union interest in the economics of teaching, but they do not say that educational quality is the union’s responsibility. They should.

Induction. Peer review should be part of a general induction process that trains and retains new teachers. Several union locals, including those in Columbus and Cincinnati, Ohio; in Miami-Dade County, Florida; and in M inneapolis, Minnesota, have strong working relationships with local universities that provide a pathway into teaching that is grounded in teaching internships. In Columbus, the same supervising teachers who help and evaluate novices in the workplace help to train them at Ohio State University. In Cincinnati, the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, the University of Cincinnati, and the school district overhauled teacher training based on their analysis of what is required to be an effective teacher in an urban setting. The Cincinnati plan includes a program in which prospective teachers study for two undergraduate majors, one in a discipline, another in teaching. They take an internship in their fifth year and work alongside senior teachers at a professional development school. During the fifth year they are paid half-time as interns, easing the economic burden of preparing to teach.

Unions have been roundly criticized for their opposition to opening up the teacher labor market so that those with substantive knowledge but without certification can teach. Some of the criticism is justified, but some is not. For the most part, big-city school districts do not use relaxed hiring rules in order to hire retired rocket scientists to teach math or gifted authors to teach high-school composition. Districts such as New York City and Los Angeles generally use “emergency” certification to hire thousands of teachers each year who have neither a strong academic background nor good teacher training. At the same time, these districts maintain personnel procedures that discourage qualified applicants. Teacher-education directors from top-ranked schools such as Columbia and UCLA report that red tape often discourages their graduates from applying to urban school districts; the procedural delays often result in suburban schools’ tendering employment offers earlier.

Professional Development. Staff development that is embedded in a teacher’s workday is the logical extension of a good induction program. In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers and the school system collaborate in creating staff development that is woven into the workdays of teachers. More than 220 teacher specialists staff professional development centers in schools. Through the centers, these teachers deliver classroom coaching and mentoring and assist directly with school-adopted interventions, such as the whole-school-reform program Success for All.

Embedded staff development takes many forms: collegial planning, team teaching, study groups, or teacher centers, as in New York. Such arrangements offer fertile ground for connections with external partners. Teacher academies exist with union collaboration, in Louisville and Cincinnati. School and university partnerships exist in scores of places. Teacher networks, such as the National Writing Project or the Coalition of Essential Schools, offer ways to bring a web of knowledge to bear on school problems. All of these programs connect teachers’ professional development with the examination and analysis of what students do.

Performance Rewards. Since its introduction in Denver and Des Moines in 1921, the single salary schedule has become virtually universal in public education. Teachers are paid the same depending only on their years of service and level of academic preparation. This was thought to be both a model of fairness and a reasonable incentive system. The salary schedule rewarded teachers for investing their time and personal funds in further education, and it ended the longstanding practice of paying men more than women and white teachers more than minorities. It also took pay raises out of the hands of school administrators, which at the time was seen as a way to substitute objective criteria for favoritism and political influence in compensation. The single salary schedule was in place almost everywhere long before teachers bargained collectively. The usefulness and ease of administration of this system explain its long tenure. Only recently has there been serious discussion of alternatives. The most discussed alternative is actually a relatively slight modification of the existing system: paying for knowledge and skills.

The standard salary schedule pays teachers for additional education, but many of the acceptable courses are only loosely connected to teaching responsibilities, subject matter expertise, or knowledge of contemporary pedagogy. Allan Odden and Carolyn Kelley argue that teacher pay should be linked to formal education, as it now is, and to the achievement of knowledge and skills demanded by new curriculum standards and the
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They also promote the use of contingency pay, an extension of what is commonly called “extra pay for extra work.” But instead of being focused on extracurricular activities, as are most current contingent pay schemes, Odden and Kelley’s plan emphasizes enhancing student achievement. Teachers who complete professional development tasks, for example, would be eligible for bonuses, as would teachers who collaborated on a project linked to creating school programs to raise achievement or who worked on valuable individual projects.

A assistance in preparing for evaluation by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and stipends for obtaining “board certification” are forms of contingency pay. Both unions have supported legislation to encourage teachers to become certified, and in many localities unions have bargained salary incentives for board certification. Collective bargaining allows schools to link monetary incentives to board certification. For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District and United Teachers Los Angeles bargained a 15 percent annual salary supplement for any board-certified teacher. In New York City, board certification qualifies a teacher for a salary differential of approximately $3,700.

Board certification is important in its own right, but the influence of the board’s methodology—evaluating teachers based on demonstrated practice rather than credit hours alone—is already influencing other domains. Districts and unions are considering using the types of evaluation tools and standards developed by the National Board in internal evaluations of teachers.

Although a recent union election cast doubt on the durability of the arrangement, Cincinnati has become the first public school district in the country to scrap the traditional salary schedule in favor of a system that pays teachers according to their classroom performance. An agreement with the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, first discussed in 1997, was narrowly ratified by teachers last year. The hallmark of the system is five career stages, not unlike the movement through professorial ranks. Advancing in rank and earning salary increments requires specified professional education and evaluations by both a principal and a supervising teacher. As is the case in colleges and universities, teachers who do not advance from the lowest ranks in a specified period are to be dismissed. Meanwhile, the Denver Public Schools and the Denver Teachers Association have captured attention for agreeing to a two-year pilot of a program that ties pay for all teachers in participating schools to student performance and to further teacher education.

Expecting More

Let’s face it. Teacher unions can be a terrible nuisance. They are noisy and contentious. Their leaders espouse values that frequently differ from those of school managers and board members. Management’s adage that the shortest contract is the best one is a comfortable path. Why, after all, spend time dealing with people with whom one disagrees? Why give them the privilege of having a speaking part in the drama of school reform?

The answer is simple: teacher unions control essential resources for school reform. Unions mediate much of the fiscal contract and most of the psychological contract between teachers and school districts. Teacher unions effectively define the occupation of public school teaching. If we are content with teachers who follow industrial-era scripts—who work specified hours, follow a prescribed curriculum, and follow detailed behavioral rules—we can get by with industrial-era labor relations in which the union’s exclusive concerns are wages and work rules.

However, if we have higher aspirations for teachers, we must also have higher expectations of teacher unions. If we want to nurture high standards, if we want teachers to take responsibility for the quality of instruction and for student outcomes, we need public policies and school organizations that demand that teacher unions behave differently. Just as it is in our national interest to engage nations and heads of governments, our leaders find disagreeable and sometimes pernicious, it is in the interest of governors, legislators, and school officials to engage teacher unions in education reform.

Engaging teacher unions does not mean forgoing criticism, debate, or confrontation. It does not mean the end to contentious bargaining. It does, however, mean expecting more of labor relations, anticipating as a matter of public policy that union leadership will lead teachers on reform issues. It means raising questions about the connections between union activities and education reform again and again until they are answered. Those who think that unions should speak for teaching as well as for teachers, for the institution of public education as well as for explicit self-interest, have both the right and the ability to ask tough questions. Those who don’t think unions should lead education reforms have just let them off the hook.

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