Critics of teacher unions have long alleged that education reform is often hindered by teacher unions and the contracts they negotiate. No empirical evidence has ever been offered to substantiate these allegations, but those who believe that collective bargaining is likely to have a positive effect on students’ academic performance have also been hard pressed to support their positions with solid research evidence.

Recently, however, researchers from Indiana University and the University of South Carolina studied the relationship between the prevalence of teacher unionization in a state and...
scores on the two main college-admission exams, the SAT and the ACT. To quote the study’s authors, their findings, which were reported in the Winter 2000 issue of the Harvard Educational Review, “challenge the position that teacher unions depress student academic performance.” Instead, they found a strong link between the presence of teacher unions in a state and high performance on the two exams. They even suggest that the unions are most often criticized in the very areas where their presence is conducive to higher student achievement. Specifically, unions are responsible for securing better pay and working conditions, which in turn attract better teachers. Unions also tend to raise the standards for teacher licensing, which ensures that only qualified candidates enter the profession. “Taken together,” the authors write, “these possible benefits of unions may enhance not only the status of teachers but also the educational climate to which students are exposed.”

It is important to note that this study is by no means definitive. There are simply too many demographic, policy, and financial differences among the states to make isolating the causes of interstate differences in student achievement an easy task. Nevertheless, the researchers’ conclusions are noteworthy and cannot be dismissed.

These findings may seem surprising, but not to me. I have always known that, by and large, teachers want what students need. It has always made sense that improved teaching conditions translate into improved learning environments. As is often the case, this research merely confirms common sense. Nonetheless, this important study is a strong reminder that the collective-bargaining process can be a significant tool for enhancing the prospects for student success. It powerfully reinforces the argument that the scope of collective bargaining should be expanded to include professional and instructional issues.

In addition to the traditional “bread and butter” issues such as salary and benefits, teacher unions should seek to negotiate class size, curricular matters, the content of professional development, the structure of instructional time, the organization of teaching schedules, and all the other professional and instructional issues that are now, at best, elective items of bargaining. Because these are not mandatory items of bargaining, representatives of management can and often do refuse to address them at the negotiating table. One way to change that is to change the existing legislation that keeps these issues off the bargaining table. Failure to do so deprives us of the collective wisdom of practitioners on issues about which they know the most—the needs of their students. Including teacher unions as partners in transforming public education is essential to achieving the ultimate goal of improving student learning. Progressive union leaders have begun to recognize that fundamental cultural change in their own organizations is a precondition to broader reforms that will culminate in better education for students.

Hard-Fought Gains

A persuasive case for reforming the teacher unions can be made only in a manner that is sensitive to the experience and culture of these unions. This, after all, is not a matter of abandoning what teacher unions are; it is a matter of building on their foundations.

Until the mid-19th century, teacher unions were viewed as illegal conspiracies. As late as the 1920s, they were being prosecuted under antitrust laws, which were intended to promote competition among business enterprises, not to break unions. While these prosecutions did not prevent the unions from existing, they effectively constrained them to the most basic and immediate concerns with salary, benefits, and related matters. Not until the late 1950s did the teachers' organizations begin to depart from the meet-and-confer (“collective begging”) is what it seemed like to teachers) mode of dealing with school authorities.

The shift toward a more confrontational,
Teacher unions have not only the mandate from their members but also the responsibility to take an active role in education reform.

Why Change?

Just like today’s schools, teacher unions today are stuck in the past. They still expend most of their energy and resources on defending a very small minority of troubled members; they still define their mission narrowly in terms of bread-and-butter issues; and they still confine themselves to reacting to management’s provocations. Strong unions have secured important professional rights and benefits for teachers, but their power must now be harnessed to create a more genuine profession for teachers and more-effective schools for all students.

Our colleagues in higher education achieved the right to negotiate professional issues. Because they have a say about course offerings, grading policies, hiring and promotion of colleagues, and even the right to elect their “leaders,” college and university faculty members are more likely to have a feeling of ownership of their work and therefore responsibility for it. That right unfortunately was denied to teachers in elementary and secondary schools; in essence, teachers there have a so-called profession but little or no voice on professional matters.

New teachers now expect their unions to invest no less in meeting their professional needs (securing their opportunities for professional development and to plan, design, and implement new programs) than in the traditional union priorities, such as contract negotiations and grievance processing.

Teacher unions have not only the mandate from their members but also the responsibility to take an active role in education reform. Teachers ultimately implement any initiative. If an initiative conflicts with what they know about how children learn, it will fail. If it does not respect their professional knowledge and experience, they will reject it. Teachers ensure that reform goes beyond rhetoric, that good ideas are translated into practice.

I envision a teacher union that acts not only as an advocate for educators but also as a lobby for all students. In recent years, vestiges of industrial unionism have begun to yield to changes that promise to make public education more effective. The scope of collective bargaining has begun to expand from considering simply wages, benefits, and working conditions to negotiations on professional issues. Some unions now promote such practices as awarding salary differentials for hard-to-staff subjects and specialties; allowing students and parents to choose among public schools; transferring teachers based on criteria other than seniority alone; and involving parents, students, and peers in teacher evaluations.

In Rochester, New York, for example, teachers learned during the past decade and a half that the more their union promotes reforms and professionalism, the stronger and more credible the union becomes. We also learned that the stronger the union becomes, the more successful it is at promoting reforms that raise student achievement. By rethinking our priorities and collaborating with school administrators, the Rochester Teachers Association effected changes that involve teachers in planning and reform, alter the compensation structure to promote reform goals, and provide the training and support teachers need to be effective. For instance, we negotiated a new teacher evaluation process based on portfolios that include peer evaluations and that parallel the principles and criteria of
the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Teachers’ compensation plans now include pay for knowledge, skills, and additional service; accomplished teachers can now become “lead teachers,” assuming additional responsibilities in exchange for additional pay. Instead of having an industrial-style dismissal time, their workdays end whenever their professional responsibilities (as determined by the teachers) are complete. We also supported a public-school-choice program as a way to empower parents and students while providing additional incentives to schools. Teachers now have a formal role in the annual evaluation of their supervisors, and parents have a role in the evaluation of teachers.

Last September, the union and the Rochester school district negotiated a “living contract” that includes a mutual commitment to adopt “what’s best for students” as the shared value, the common denominator, and the litmus test for any proposal advanced by either the district or the union; to conduct continual negotiations to resolve problems in a timely fashion rather than having one-in-a-while battles; and to view collective bargaining as collaboration rather than an adversarial process.

By placing a priority on what we are for, not just what we are against, we began to bridge the gap between unionism and professionalism. Although this has been a rocky route, we remain determined to continue on this path in collaboration with school management when we can and alone when we must. A long the way, we have found it necessary to promote “creative insubordination” and “reform without permission” during periods of hostile and anti-union school-management postures.

TURNing Unions Around
The Rochester Teachers Association’s commitment to union and school reform is not unique. In fact, the leaders of both the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) champion the very same impulses and directions. Prime examples are the outspoken support of peer review by NEA president Bob Chase and the position on not tolerating low-performing schools taken by AFT president Sandra Feldman. Local teacher unions within the AFT (in cities such as Toledo and Cincinnati, Ohio) and the NEA (Columbus, Ohio, and Seattle, for instance) have been pursuing similar goals.

In July 1995 representatives of progressive teacher unions from both the AFT and the NEA formed the Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN), with the express purpose of redesigning teacher unions to be more effective partners in the effort to improve education in America’s public schools.

TURN is a union-led effort to restructure the nation’s teacher unions to promote reforms that will ultimately lead to higher achievement for America’s children. The organizing idea is that because teachers are closest to students and to the learning process, they are in a unique position to play a powerful role in stimulating the necessary changes. Critical to creating high-performance unions is developing a network of reformers to share ideas, to create mutual systems of support, and to participate in the evaluation of progress.

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With a grant from the Department of Education, six TURN locals are involved in a two-year effort to demonstrate what additional capacity teacher unions need to successfully accommodate the expanded educational agenda of the teacher unions. By additional capacity I do not mean mainly additional funds. Instead, teacher unions must rethink their structures, goals, and core beliefs. In important ways, they must redefine their enlightened self-interest and recognize their responsibility not only to their members but also to their members' students. In collaboration with the Pew Forum, TURN is seeking to develop articulated standards for student-centered labor-management relations and for standards-based collective-bargaining agreements.

At the 1996 AFT convention, the late Albert Shanker reminded the assembled teacher unionists that “it is no less the responsibility of a teachers union to preserve public education than to negotiate good contracts.” To achieve this, teacher unions will have to change their traditional orientation. They will have to not only protect the job-related interests of their members but also ensure the success of the education industry. They will have to recognize that teachers will do well only if their students do well — and that no community will tolerate teachers' doing well while students do not.

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