

Forging a New Partnership: The Story of Teacher Union and School District Collaboration in Pittsburgh

By Sean D. Hamill

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It was sometime in July 2009, that then-Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) Superintendent Mark Roosevelt and Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT) President John Tarka had some things to work out.

They were in yet another meeting in the midst of three months of incredibly intense work on a proposal to the Gates Foundation that would eventually win them \$40 million and national acclaim, and they decided to leave the room where they were meeting with staff.

When they didn't come back for much longer than expected, Rob Weil, director of field programs and educational issues for the American Federation of Teachers, who was visiting Pittsburgh and sitting in on the meetings, decided to go looking for them. He expected that maybe each had wandered away individually for a break.

Instead, he found them both in Roosevelt's office, huddled together overlooking some documents, deep into a conversation that obviously hadn't broken since they left 15 minutes earlier. "This is what needs to happen," he told them.

"I wish more places would do that: have an honest discussion about the issues," Weil says now, thinking back to that visit. "Mark and John already knew that the relationship with the district had to change for the future of the kids in Pittsburgh. They said that outright."

In some ways, this is a story about the individuals who put old ways aside to find new, more productive ways of working together. They did not follow a formula or a cookie-cutter approach, and other district and union leaders will have to create their own path to genuine collaboration. But there are important lessons to be learned from Pittsburgh's transformation from traditional, adversarial management-labor relations to the productive partnership that exists today. Several principles emerge from the Pittsburgh story that follows:

- **Communicate and collaborate on a wide range of topics to create shared understanding on substantive issues and a track record of constructive collaboration that supports contract negotiations.**
- **Demonstrate from the top of both the school system and the union a commitment to genuine dialogue and partnership, creating an example for others to emulate.**
- **Embrace uncertainty and commit to learning through design and implementation to support the pursuit of ambitious goals and to create joint ownership for developing solutions.**
- **Replace traditional negotiations with a problem-solving approach that defines priorities for the work of the district and its teachers first, and then drafts contract provisions to reflect the priorities. Consider ways to limit the role of lawyers and expand the role of practitioners.**



Pittsburgh Educational Leaders*

Pittsburgh Public Schools

Linda Lane, Superintendent (2010-present), former Deputy Superintendent
Mark Roosevelt, former Superintendent (2005-2010)
Jody Buchheit Spolar, Chief of Performance Management
Jerri Lippert, Chief Academic Officer

Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers

John Tarka, President
Nina Esposito-Visgitis, Vice President
Mary VanHorn, Vice President
Al Fondy, former President

Pittsburgh School Board

Theresa Colaizzi, President
Bill Isler, Second Vice President, former President

* This list reflects people who are mentioned multiple times in *Forging a New Partnership* and is offered to help orient readers; it is not intended to be a comprehensive list of Pittsburgh education leaders.

A Challenging Start

John Tarka didn't think much of Pittsburgh Public Schools' decision to hire Mark Roosevelt as its new superintendent on July 27, 2005.

"My initial reaction when I heard that he was being hired, and I heard about his background, was 'Oh blank!'" Tarka recalls, editing himself. "Just what we need. Someone with no educational background. Someone who never taught a basic education class, who never ran a school. 'Oh blank!'"

Had he not been primarily worried about the need to close schools right when he started, Roosevelt, a former Massachusetts state legislator only recently graduated from the Broad Superintendents Academy, might have thought something similarly profane about Tarka and the union. Tarka, a no-nonsense former high school English teacher and football coach, had also only recently been appointed to his post as PFT president, taking over two months earlier because the union's legendary leader, Al Fondy, had died after 38 years in the position.

The contract approval margin by teachers had been narrowing over the prior decade. Fondy's death emboldened a long simmering faction of teachers incensed with smaller and smaller salary increases. They were poised to challenge whoever took over from Fondy. And no one thought anything would change in dealing with the administration.

"We were in survival mode," Nina Esposito-Visgitis, a district speech-language teacher who is now a union vice president, said of the union's attitude in 2005. "It was reactive. We'd wait for the district to do something stupid and then we'd fight them."

And the difficult relationship with the union wasn't the half of it. By 2005, the district hadn't come close to achieving the federally-mandated Adequate Yearly Progress. The state threatened a takeover. The district was losing thousands of students a year to parents fleeing for the suburbs and charter schools, which left it with too many schools with too few students. Disputes over everything from test scores to proposed school closings resulted in a fractious nine-member board of public education.

"It was unbelievable," Bill Isler, former board president, said of the district's situation leading up to 2005. "It was a dysfunctional board and in many ways a dysfunctional district."

Roosevelt concedes he didn't fully appreciate what he had taken on.

"The first year was horrible. The school closings had to be done in the first six months. An expired union contract. A \$50 million budget deficit," he said, looking back. "Honestly, if I had to do it again, I couldn't."

But he did. And so did Tarka, the teachers union, school administration, school board, and the foundation and business community. What they have all done in Pittsburgh is take a floundering urban school district of 26,000 students and pull it from the academic abyss. In five short years it went from a possible state takeover to the forefront of educational reform, after winning a \$40 million Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant for its novel Empowering Effective Teachers proposal in 2009; winning a \$37.4 million federal grant to help fund the work; and agreeing on a ground-breaking, five-year contract with teachers that formalized what had first been proposed to the Gates Foundation.

Creating Conditions for Change

The district already has academic gains to show for its pre-Gates work – the district finally attained Adequate Yearly Progress in 2009 for the first time. But the most attention-getting steps have yet to be fully implemented. They include a new teacher evaluation system, a performance-pay system that has an opt-in for existing teachers, an alternative teacher certification program, new career ladder positions, and district-run teaching academies. Teachers and administrators now routinely talk about “collaboration,” not as a goal, but a daily reality.

The “Excellence for All” instructional improvement agenda was the result of an agreement between the administration and union that they believe is borne out by research, that of all school-based factors, effective teachers make the biggest difference in student achievement.

Five years ago, “Pittsburgh wasn’t even part of the national conversation,” said Mike Casserly, executive director of the Council of Great City Schools. “It is now part of an emerging conversation on urban education reform, and it’s on the leading edge of it.”

How PPS and PFT ultimately got to their ground-breaking contract in June 2010 has its roots in the five previous years, with all of its ups and downs. Led primarily by core groups of leaders from the district and the union, but aided by a burgeoning committee system of teachers who were deeply involved in many of the changes that came before the contract was even proposed, the district found a way to change its culture.

It all really began a year before Roosevelt was hired.

By 2004, the board had been in internal mediation for a year in an attempt to get over its dysfunction, and by then seven of the nine board members reached an agreement to move in a new direction.

“We needed someone to change the culture of the district,” said Isler, who used to work for the late Fred Rogers, PBS’ Mr. Rogers and a Pittsburgh legend.

To the board majority, that meant bypassing the classically trained educational PhDs who applied for the job and going with a non-traditional superintendent. That wasn’t unusual anymore in urban districts elsewhere, but it had not yet been tried in Pittsburgh.

“It was absolutely a risky move,” said Isler.

When he showed up for his interview, Roosevelt came in confident and full of big ideas, and challenged the board, telling them: “If you’re looking for a traditional superintendent, I’m not who you need.”

“Once we met him and started talking to him, it was an easy choice,” said school board president, Theresa Colaizzi.

Teachers say the same was true of deciding to install Tarka. But if they thought they were getting a carbon copy of former PFT president Al Fondy, it quickly became obvious he was anything but. When it came time, for example, for negotiations – which were ongoing when Tarka assumed his post – “John involved us more as a team. Al’s situation was very autocratic,” said George Gensure, who was a high school math and computer science teacher in the district for 30 years before joining the union staff.

When Roosevelt officially started Aug. 29, 2005, he had a package of ideas ready to act on, all aimed at building a foundation for change, though even he couldn’t anticipate some inspiration that was about to come his way.

Two weeks after he started, Roosevelt sent the board a memo telling them that he had hired the Rand Corporation and assembled a panel of local non-school leaders to conduct a dispassionate study to determine which of the district’s 88

schools would be best to close, which elementary schools to turn into kindergarten through 8th grade schools, and which would become so-called “accelerated learning academies” with longer school days.

With some schools barely half-full, costing the district millions each year in inefficiency at a time the district was facing a \$50 million annual deficit, there was no question the district needed to close some. But past efforts to close a few schools each year inevitably got bogged down by individual board members’ and parents’ desires to keep specific schools open, no matter what. In November 2005, Roosevelt used the study to ask the board to turn nine schools into K-8 schools, turn eight more into accelerated learning academies, and close 20 schools, cutting about 8,400 of the district’s 13,700 empty seats and saving \$10.3 million annually. It wasn’t thought to be the smartest move politically for a new superintendent.

“I know there were people in this building, I’ve been told, who had bets on how long I’d last and the average bet was less than a year,” Roosevelt said.

But to the surprise of many, the recommendation, backed by the study, got support from teachers and principals, and both of their unions, and generated relatively little angst from ag-grieved parents. The proposal was even expanded to include closing two more schools and turning another building into a K-8 school.

“The new superintendent, he did the right thing by closing those schools,” said Mark Sammartino, a Carrick High School math teacher who has been with the district for 21 years, and who generally opposed the changes in the district under Roosevelt. “He did a good job from a framing standpoint. It was a change that needed to be done.”

The administration would initiate other significant base-building projects during the 2005-2006 school year: The district began standardizing its curriculum, which would result in considerable improvements in test scores in the next two years; a Teacher Incentive Fund grant would pay to begin evaluating the district’s principals, which

would lead to a new principal evaluation system and performance-pay package; and the Broad Foundation would study the district’s racial achievement gap, which seemed intractable.

But succeeding in closing so many schools all at once, with such little rancor, would become the signature project that first year, building cachet in the district.

“I think [closing so many schools at once] empowered us. We got it done and we got it done with relatively little BS,” Roosevelt said.

It wouldn’t be long before he would become much more well-known for something very different. On Nov. 10, 2005, the day after Roosevelt proposed closing so many schools, the country learned about the extraordinary offer by a group of anonymous benefactors in Kalamazoo, MI to give a college scholarship to every student who graduated from that struggling city’s troubled school district.

The idea seemed almost providential to Roosevelt. He had just proposed closing a quarter of his school buildings, and Pittsburgh and its public schools, like Kalamazoo and its schools, were losing residents and students at an astonishing rate – 1,700 students, or a 5.5 percent loss, in Roosevelt’s first year alone.

“Just from a management task, managing decline is the roughest management task you can have. And that’s what Pittsburgh’s been doing for awhile,” he said. “But if you think about really improving your schools, and having a college scholarship program such as Kalamazoo was exhibiting. Hmm, that might do it. That might stem the decline.”

Roosevelt announced the Pittsburgh Promise on Dec. 13, 2006, garnering renewed financial support from some of Pittsburgh’s biggest employers and foundations. The University of Pittsburgh Medical Center led the way, with a historic \$100 million, 10-year commitment.

Beyond the money, though, the mere idea of the Pittsburgh Promise became a guiding initiative for everyone in the district to rally around. To demonstrate its support, the teachers union made the first donation: \$10,000 – not a lot, but enough to make its point.

“I think when you start to shift from the sort of win-lose labor management kind of relations to one based on parties that both have the same mission, I think the Promise was a very important foundational piece in that,” said Jody Buchheit Spolar, the district’s labor relations chief and one of the few cabinet-level administrators who Roosevelt kept in place when he got to Pittsburgh.

“I talk about the Promise constantly with my kids,” said Leah Lipner, a 4th grade reading teacher at the district’s Helen S. Faison Arts Academy. “They understand that you’ll have the Promise to help you pay for college. And I use it at parent conferences, too, so they understand. They tell me, ‘Oh, yeah. I want to get that money.’”

A Traditional Labor-Management Context

From inspiration, to proposal, to funding, the Pittsburgh Promise’s creation came amidst a difficult labor backdrop. When both Tarka and Roosevelt took their posts in 2005, the district was already in the middle of negotiations on a contract that expired in June 2005. The two-year contract agreement reached in March 2006 was a standard offer and counter-offer process; opposing attorneys handled the typical issues of wages and other financial-related topics like health care.

For a riled-up opposition led by high school teachers, it was time to challenge Tarka and end a string of substandard contracts. In the first vote, at a still-infamous, raucous meeting of teachers in March 2006, the contract was voted down by about 100 votes.

Tarka, recognizing that the opposition faction had a disproportionate presence at the meeting, did an end-round. He held more informational meetings with a smaller group of teachers across the district and asked for another vote a month later, this time with mail ballots that attracted far more votes – almost 700 more. Almost all of the new votes were in favor of the contract, which was approved.

Since it took so long to reach a contract, there was barely a year left on the two-year deal, and negotiations on the next contract began shortly thereafter, again with the traditional process led by attorneys from each side making offers and counter-offers. But, even though they still weren’t yet dealing with the transformational issues that would get the district noticed in a few years, negotiations lagged.

By the end of October 2007, four months after the previous contract expired, Tarka, frustrated by a lack of movement, called for the district’s first strike authorization vote in decades in a district that hadn’t gone on strike since the 1975-76 school year. It passed resoundingly and teachers began building picket signs. The whole affair had the added benefit of shoring up Tarka’s street credibility with his teachers.

“With that first contract, John had just started. The teachers didn’t know him,” said Esposito-Visgitis, the union vice president. “But with the second contract, they saw John leading them.”

Three months later, after an all-night negotiation session with school board members, a contract was agreed to and easily approved by mail ballot by the union. The 2007 negotiations and strike authorization vote was a reminder that, despite all the good that was in the works, it wasn’t a perfectly rosy time in Pittsburgh, and the opportunity to establish productive collaboration all teetered precariously on a foundation not yet firmly established.

“We obviously hadn’t created an atmosphere that we have now,” Roosevelt said of the 2007 contract negotiations. “If they had struck, we certainly wouldn’t have been in the Gates competition. We certainly wouldn’t be anywhere where we are with them now. And we might be in an adversarial model.”

For Tarka, the incident contained another important lesson for both sides: No one cast aspersions on the other for the strike vote, or claimed victory over the other with the contract.

“We were ready to go on strike,” Tarka said. “But I didn’t say Mark Roosevelt, because he’s a

legislator from Massachusetts, he doesn’t have a goddamned clue what’s happening. And he didn’t say Tarka is an old, bald-headed union goon. We didn’t do that. We just didn’t do it. I don’t think there’s any magic to it, but I think it helped when we tried to sit down.”

A New Approach

One specific change that resulted from that dire time in 2007 was that both Tarka and Roosevelt were bothered by the contract negotiation process. Neither liked that at crucial points in negotiations, it was attorneys for both sides who were sitting alone in a room deciding the district’s near-future, not the two of them. They concluded this process wasn’t going to happen again.

“That was the old way of doing business,” Roosevelt says now.

While leaders of both the union and administration were learning to change their culture, several projects in the district were convincing teachers that real change was possible on the ground, too.

One of Roosevelt’s first project’s when he came to the district was to hire Kaplan K12 to rewrite most of the district’s curriculum at the same time the district was standardizing how and what students were taught across the district. But a year into Kaplan’s three-year project, teacher feedback committees were lambasting the first courses from the New York company.

“It was a bunch of outsiders coming in to write curriculum for our kids [who] they didn’t know,” said Sammartino, the longtime high school math teacher. “It was so bad they cancelled the contract.”

For Linda Lane, who was then the district’s deputy superintendent and now Roosevelt’s successor, it was obvious almost immediately when she joined the district in 2007 that teachers

weren’t happy with the curriculum Kaplan had been putting together for the district.

Lane helped convince Roosevelt that the district needed to go in a different direction, even though Kaplan still had almost two years left on its three-year contract. Though it was tough to let Kaplan go and, essentially, start all over, she said: “I’m a firm believer in that process: Continually reassess your position.”

The district decided to let the teachers write the curriculum, but train them first, and develop a better feedback structure to evaluate what they produced. Engaging teachers in such a big way was the idea of Jerri Lippert, the district’s chief academic officer, who realized, “it’s kind of foolish not to listen to [teachers].”

For the nearly 200 teachers directly involved in the training, writing, and feedback over two years, the process was transformational.

“Before this I was ready to quit. I was burned out and thinking of leaving teaching,” said Adam Deutsch, who teaches math at Allderdice High School and was a lead writer for the district’s Algebra I curriculum. “But this really reenergized me.”

The last time the district had involved teachers in revamping curriculum was 12 years earlier, he said, “but there was a long gap in between because the district was just not in that place where they were interested in having a teacher-developed curriculum. It was just textbook adoption” in more recent years.

Many teachers appreciated the chance to contribute as professionals and became “advocates in our schools and outspoken about reform

efforts,” when that wasn’t necessarily the case before, according to Deutsch.

Tackling the Toughest Issues

Late in the summer of 2008, at about the time the first year of the teacher-led curriculum project was underway, Lippert called her counterpart at the union, Mary VanHorn, who worked on teacher professional development, but was considering retirement, and told her, “You’re not allowed to retire yet. We have to work on this new teacher evaluation system together.”

In the two short years since Lippert came to her post in the administration, she and VanHorn had developed an effective relationship, so much so that VanHorn said, “If Jerri Lippert were to leave the district, I’d retire right away.”

The new evaluation system they were about to work on didn’t even have a name yet. It came to be known as the Research Based Inclusive System of Evaluation, or RISE, and it is based on educational consultant Charlotte Danielson’s Framework for Teaching.

Revamping the district’s evaluation system had been something both the administration and union leaders long sought. Roosevelt made changing the way the district evaluated and hired its principals a primary project when he started. This approach would contribute to nearly half of the district’s principals changing during his tenure. His goal was to get principals to see themselves not merely as building managers whose most important job was to serve hot food and get the buses out on time, but as the professional development leaders in their schools. He saw RISE, then, as a natural second step in changing the way the district managed its employees.

Lippert, who had been a principal and vice principal in two of the district’s high schools, saw first hand why the district needed to change its system.

“When I was a building administrator, I had teachers tell me, ‘You’re the first administrator who sat down and talked to me about growth,’” she said.

The old evaluation system was often based on as little as one classroom visit by a principal – “and they might not even stay for one whole class if they thought you were good already,” Tarka said from his years as a teacher in the district. From that and a few other factors, a teacher would receive a simple “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory” annual grade from their principal. It was seen, at best, as unhelpful; at worst, as simply an onerous way of meting out discipline; and, more typically, as worthless.

“So many of our teachers would say, ‘It’s not fair. This teacher next store doesn’t do what I do, doesn’t work as hard, but she gets a satisfactory evaluation like I do,’” said VanHorn, who started as an elementary teacher with the district 44 years ago.

The early work on RISE was done by a core team of Lippert, Buchheit Spolar, whose formal title now is chief human resources officer, VanHorn, and Esposito-Visgitis. They began hammering out the framework and process in the fall of 2008, capped by a one-day retreat in December 2008 at the union’s office, where “we locked ourselves in a room and just worked through issues,” Lippert said.

They worked out the parameters of the program, but then took it to leadership teams of teachers and administrators at all of the district’s schools starting in the spring of 2009. They sent out a teacher survey in April to get feedback on the emerging proposals. Then in a one-day retreat, they showed representatives from each school –

nearly 200 people in all – what they thought RISE might look like.

With that system in hand, the district asked for schools to volunteer to pilot RISE in the 2009–2010 school year. They expected to get perhaps a handful of brave schools. In the end, instructional leadership teams of teachers and administrators at 28 schools – nearly half the district – agreed to pilot the program. Representatives from those schools formed the core of the RISE leadership team that over the summer of 2009 drew up the fine print of what RISE would entail. It began with a four-day retreat with the entire team, a setting that was a revelation to those involved.

“What I loved was that all the power players on this were in the room together – the union, the school district, teachers, principals – hammering out the details for the framework for RISE,” said Cindy Haigh, a middle school health and physical education teacher for 13 years in the district who was part of the process. “And that’s not been typical in my experience. Usually it’s us against them – teachers versus the administration.”

What they developed was a system where the teacher actively engages in his or her evaluation with an administrator, with both collecting evidence of four teaching domains across the school year: classroom environment; planning and preparation; professional responsibilities; and teaching and learning.

Classroom visits by an administrator are preceded and followed by discussion about the lessons be-

ing taught. The teacher provides a self-evaluation before the lesson using 24 rubric components, and the discussions between them focus on areas where there are disagreements. After each observation, the administrator and teacher meet again to review what was observed and agree on plans for improvement, which are revisited throughout the year and in a final evaluation.

At the end of the year, rather than the final “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory” finding, teachers are assessed at one of four levels – distinguished, proficient, basic or unsatisfactory – for each of the four domains and the 24 rubrics in each domain.

“The picture that’s given of my performance now is much more fair,” Haigh said.

But another part of the RISE process was perhaps just as important to Tarka, who saw the number of schools willing to pilot RISE as a vote of confidence in the direction the district was headed.

“Districts all over the place say ‘Here’s a new system of teacher evaluation,’ and they institute it unilaterally. That’s one way to do it,” he said. “The second way to do it is do it the way it was done in Pittsburgh where they brought classroom teachers with years of experience, they brought union representatives, they brought school principals, they brought central administrators to hammer out this collaborative approach to teacher evaluation so teachers simply wouldn’t get ‘satisfactory’ or ‘unsatisfactory.’ That helped set a tone of working together that was very important.”

Building on Momentum to Accelerate Reform

The district would need that tone to be in place more than it knew not long after RISE was rolled out to the district in April 2009. That was because a few months earlier, in mid-January 2009, Roosevelt got a call he had hoped for, but did not expect.

John Deasy, then-deputy director of education for the Gates Foundation, whom Roosevelt knew well because they had both been through the

Broad Academy, though not in the same class, called to say the foundation was taking a close look at the district to see if it could assist its efforts with a grant.

“I did certainly want to move Pittsburgh into the realm of being the kind of district that would get the attention of the Gates Foundation – that was deliberate,” Roosevelt said.

Though he initially hoped the nuts-and-bolts reform work would do that, when the Promise got funding, Roosevelt said he thought: “How do you get the attention of someone like Gates when literally we’re not in the 100 largest school districts in the country anymore? I think the Promise could help do that to a large degree.”

Deasy, now superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, said the Promise definitely helped get Gates’ attention. But so did the progress on the ground academically and systemically the district was making.

“What we were trying to figure out was how did it turn around so fast,” Deasy said.

What Gates found during its evaluation from that first call to April 2009, when Pittsburgh was told it was one of the 10 finalists invited to craft funding proposals, was basic, but essential, Deasy said: “There was persistence through conversation, with absolute honesty between leadership. No one gave up when the going got tough, and they were truly working for the kids.”

Roosevelt thought the timing of Deasy’s call was perfect.

“We were so ready because we’d done the precursor work,” he said. “We’d done the work on curriculum and the work on principals, and we were working on RISE. If we hadn’t done the work on curriculum or the work on principals, or started RISE, we wouldn’t have been ready. So, the timing was really, really good for us.”

Starting with a kickoff gathering of all 10 finalists in Atlanta the last week of April, the district was given three months to bring Gates a proposal demonstrating how it would change itself, ending with a final presentation on August 5th in Seattle.

In May, central administration and union core leadership – typically six people each, including Roosevelt and Tarka – plus several consultants paid for by Gates, and later two dozen more people as part of a subcommittee structure, began meeting several times a week and nearly daily during that last month. Compared to most of the district’s prior reform work – on RISE and rewriting the curriculum – the Gates proposal was intentionally done with a concentrated core.

“It was on a tight timeline, with a big goal, making it incredibly intense. It had to be a smaller group,” said Linda Lane, Roosevelt’s successor (Roosevelt left the district in December 2010 to lead the creation of Antioch College in Ohio).

Other than board reports and a regular weekly meeting between Roosevelt, Buchheit Spolar, and then-board president Colaizzi updating her on the group’s work, there was little direct board involvement beyond supporting the direction in which they were headed.

“There’s always that question of micro-management. Past boards had done that,” said Thomas H. Sumpter Jr., a retired federal community planning and development specialist who joined the board in 2005. “We had to caution board members not do that and remind them we are a policy-setting body, not management.”

To the dismay of everyone, though, the Gates process started out like so many prior negotiations, from things as basic as both sides sitting in union and administration groups on opposite sides of the table, to the general attitude.

“It was a lot of people just working out of old paradigms. If I think I wanted 1,000 of something, I’ll ask for 1,200 so I’ll end up where I want to be,” said Buchheit Spolar, who came to the district in 1986 after working in labor relations in the steel industry. “It’s hard to break out of that thinking.”

This included Buchheit Spolar, who been through 23 years of union negotiations by then, and who admittedly had to reshape her own thinking.

That was hastened by a decision by Roosevelt to put her in charge of the Gates project – a decision that seemed quizzical to some on the union side who had been in on some of those tense negotiations with her over the years.

But Roosevelt said he realized from the beginning if the Gates proposal was to be funded, it would have to be written into contract form, and no one in the district knew more about union contracts than Buchheit Spolar, whom he trusted to change with the times at hand.

“She had both the individual skill set and individual responsibility to fit the role,” he said.



Early on, Tarka and Roosevelt began meeting privately to talk about specific issues, and they agreed to push their cabinets on both sides to deal with each other in a new way.

“We said, ‘What if we pretend none of us have any affiliation other than we’re involved in education here. We want to improve outcomes here. You guys are union guys, we’re management guys, but let’s forget that. Let’s just start putting up problems on the wall. Alright. We’ve made a lot of progress in K-8. We’ve made none in high schools. That’s pretty crappy. And we’re embarrassed by that and we should be embarrassed. So, let’s just put something up like high school diplomas. Let’s leave our swords and shields outside the room. Let’s agree everything’s private, no one’s gonna be held accountable and let’s talk. What would you do? What would I do?’” Roosevelt recalled.

“For whatever reason, it really worked. Now, I can think of the reasons. One, we had gone further than everyone had realized. Two, we wanted to win,” he said.

If there was any magic that happened in Pittsburgh from 2005 to 2010 that truly turned some of the nuts-and-bolts ideals on the ground into real, honest attitude change, leaders on both sides say it was during those three months working on the Gates proposal almost daily, in close quarters, in search of a common goal.

Linda Lane noted that working on the Gates proposal built on prior collaborative work and also strengthened the relationships at the same time. “Doing something really hard together really builds trust,” Lane said while reflecting on the intense work during the summer of 2009.

“We were talking like a family then,” said Lisa Fischetti, Roosevelt’s chief of staff and part of the core group working on the Gates proposal. “We were really working shoulder-to-shoulder, problem solving, where you really didn’t even see the pecking order.”

In awarding \$40 million for the district’s Empowering Effective Teachers proposal in November 2009, Gates told the district it believed that relationships had truly changed.

“One of the really striking things about Pittsburgh has been the deep level of trust on both sides,” said Lynn Olson, who was the lead program officer in Pittsburgh for Gates during the proposal process. “And I think Pittsburgh had a sense of urgency and it has maintained that sense of urgency to ensure more kids are graduating and college-ready.”

What the district proposed was a plan based on three priorities it hoped to impact in the district: 1) increase the number of highly effective teachers; 2) put more highly effective teachers in front of high-need students; 3) create environments that promote college-readiness for all students.

The district said it would pursue those priorities with seven initiatives:

1. Create a Promise-Readiness Corps of highly-effective teachers who stay with the same students (also called “looping”) in 9th and 10th grades – the time frame when the district loses the greatest percentage of its dropouts – with a goal of getting them to 11th grade ready for college, or “Promise-Ready” as the district now refers to it;
2. Refinement of RISE and implementation of a project to assess who is a highly effective teacher;
3. Improve teacher recruitment, hire new teachers earlier, and create an alternative certification program;
4. Foster a positive teaching and learning environment in every classroom for teachers and students;
5. Create a teacher academy to shepherd new teachers and provide professional development for experienced teachers;

6. Create a new performance-pay and career ladder system that links performance to the opportunity for new, higher-paying jobs with expanded responsibilities, and also seeks to put more effective teachers in front of high-needs students;
7. Create a new technology system that gives teachers more tools to be highly effective.

The day the board approved acceptance of the grant “was a very good day,” Sumpter said. He thought back to when he joined the school board in 2005, hoping that things would improve in the district, “But I never dreamed they’d improve as much as they have and will.”

As exhilarating as winning that grant and making bold proposals was, it all still needed to be put into a new contract, with the old one about to expire in June 2010.

“The fact that we had put ideas into the Gates process was important because it helped establish the framework for collective bargaining,” Tarka said.

Sealing the Deal

After the 2009 year-end holidays, Roosevelt and Tarka talked about the upcoming negotiations, and both agreed they wouldn’t use any attorneys in direct talks – though attorneys would review what they agreed to – and there would be no board members engaged in the negotiations. Neither wanted to go back to the 2007 negotiation when, led by attorneys on both sides, there was “a great deal of time wasted, great deal of money wasted, a lot of posturing and crossing Ts and dotting Is,” said Tarka.

Doing negotiations without an attorney, “I think it should be an objective,” Tarka said. “There’s real security in having attorneys, you know? You’re one step removed. And there’s a different kind of accountability.”

It was a startling move, thought risky by some, with so many new contract components having to be drawn up from scratch. “You’d really need a

strong, pretty sophisticated representation,” said Buchheit Spolar, “because negotiating an agreement is pretty sophisticated no matter what.”

But with all the other changes the two sides would make in crafting this new contract, as Buchheit Spolar put it, “the entire collective bargaining process was turned on its head anyway.”

Among the biggest changes was the first negotiating session in January 2010. The attendees were just Roosevelt and Buchheit Spolar for the administration, and Tarka and George Gensure for the union.

“I put a one-page paper on the table and said, ‘I think this is the outline of our settlement,’ and everyone more or less agreed,” Buchheit Spolar said. “We spent the next four months defining that one-page settlement.”

But after starting with just a two-person team, after a month's worth of meetings, in March, Tarka decided he needed to bring in most of his core leaders, adding four people to the meetings.

"I told them I was not going to try to explain to my key staff every time we had a meeting. Because then I was doubling the work. And also they were being second-hand recipients," said Tarka.

In addition, he already knew the faction of teachers who had first challenged him in 2005 was still brewing discontent over the provisions of the Gates grant proposal and how it was going to be worked into the new contract – the performance-pay package in particular. Tarka needed multiple voices to be first-hand accounts of exactly what was happening to spread the truth far-and-wide through the union. He wanted VanHorn, Esposito-Visgitis, then-PFT Secretary Sylvia Wilson, and Bill Hileman, who played an integral role throughout the Gates proposal process, to be participants in the bargaining.

In years past, Roosevelt might have countered the increase in negotiating staff with additional district representatives, but he chose not to. "It was a purposeful decision to let them outnumber us," Roosevelt said, "so they'd feel more comfortable."

From there, the two groups worked in concert together, drawing up specific definitions for those areas it had proposed to Gates, but leaving some of them open-ended, to be worked out in one- and two-year-long committee structures within the district, such as how the Promise-Readiness Corps functioned. As Buchheit Spolar said, this was not negotiating like the district had ever done before. It was really an extension of the methods and process the two groups had developed during the Gates grant work, which Roosevelt liked to say was simply "adults solving problems together."

One of the areas where they worked the hardest was the performance-pay package. Tarka – in a contrarian move like Roosevelt appointing Buchheit Spolar to head the Gates grant project – asked Esposito-Visgitis to head up, and eventually write, that portion of the contract.

"I loathed the idea," she said. "I don't think it's fair. I haven't seen it done fairly and we're trying to make it work fairly. But John made me write it, because I'm the RISE queen and worked so much on that with Mary [VanHorn]."

Tarka said it was specifically because she knew the objections to performance pay so well that he chose her. "She would anticipate what members would object to, because the concerns she had were very legitimate concerns."

There were two main objections: the district's teachers had worked under the current experience-based, step-salary system for decades and asking them to vote to scrap that would never fly; and there simply was no proof anyone could find that performance-pay systems worked well.

"You can approach these things a couple different ways," Tarka said. "You can approach it with a bludgeon and impose it on everyone. It's easy to find performance-pay plans like that that haven't worked and are viewed negatively in many school districts. We got feedback on one performance-pay plan where teachers regarded it as 'winning the lottery' because they had no idea what they did to earn it."

"But it appeared apparent if you provide, as we did, a number of career ladder positions, for which people apply and have to show their eligibility, that's a key way to get performance pay in place that might work," he said. "We've also done work so that school-wide performance can be recognized, district-wide performance can be recognized. A couple of the plans do recognize student achievement, but rather than do some of the negative things that some traditional performance-pay plans have done in terms of divide and alienate, it's more based on a school working together and a district working together to try to raise student achievement overall."

The six new career ladder positions from teacher leaders and mentors, to Promise-Readiness Corps teachers, to instructors at the new teachers academies, will pay more – \$9,300 to \$13,300 annually – to eligible teachers who will work longer days and a longer school year.

Also, in a move designed to get what they knew would be hard votes anyway, the contract provides an opt-in provision to the general performance-pay package for regular classroom teachers. That is, existing teachers can stay on the standard payment schedule if they choose to, and still earn more money under the contract, including \$1,500 more per year if a teacher is already at the top of the scale.

New teachers hired after July 1, 2010, who also will need four years to earn tenure instead of three, are required to be part of the performance-pay system.

"I don't know if it was a break-through," Esposito-Visgitis said of the opt-in provision. "But I know a lot of us wouldn't have voted for it without it."

New teachers in core subjects will spend a year in the new teacher academy as part of their four-year process of earning tenure. Tightening up tenure requirements is something Roosevelt began emphasizing when he first delved into principal evaluations and training in his first year. He reminded them that, though schools rightly get blamed for having too many bad, tenured teachers, state law leaves granting tenure up to the district; it's not a negotiated right. And awarding tenure inevitably falls on the principals who evaluate the teachers.

"So principals who complain to me all the time about these teachers, I say: 'Did you tenure that teacher?' 'Well, I guess I did.'" Roosevelt said. "So now we're going to take a photo of every principal and every teacher that they tenured. And we're going to put that photo in their file, so you own that teacher. You decided they were good enough."

Details of exactly how teachers would be measured under the new contract that will qualify them for higher pay were left to a committee structure to work out over the next two years. The same is true for components of the Promise-Readiness Corps, which were intentionally left unwritten in the contract – a decision Tarka said has been confusing, but was necessary.

Tarka was visiting with teachers in December 2010 when he was asked, yet again, about the lack of specifics on teacher effectiveness measures and career ladders: "Why wasn't this all worked out before we passed the contract?"

He said he told that teacher, as he has told others, "We didn't want to work it all out before we passed the contract and bring you a deal that said, 'Here's what it is.' Instead we're more interested in working on it together, getting practitioner input... and how we determine how effective it is."

In the end, as ground-breaking as it is, and as vague as some worried it remains, teachers approved a five-year contract – the longest in the union's history – by more than a 2-1 margin. The board approved it 8-0 with one abstention (because of cost concerns).

"It was exactly what we needed to help our kids," said Deutsch, who helped write the district's Algebra I curriculum.

Many of the 537 teachers who opposed it, though, remain troubled by the contract.

"I voted no for it. I don't think it was a contract in my benefit," Sammartino said. "I don't need an extra \$2,000 to make me teach harder. I already teach hard."

The no votes notwithstanding, the district was elated when the contract was approved with little rancor in June 2010, and then doubly so three months later when the federal government finally approved a \$37.4 million grant to help fund the new programs.

"It was nerve-wracking all summer" waiting for the grant, said Buchheit Spolar. "We could still have the programs, but it would have been difficult on half of the funding."

Conclusion

So how did it all happen? Roosevelt pegs it to one change that evolved over the last two years of his tenure in particular.

“I don’t go many days without talking to John. I ask him for advice on everything. If I have a decision to make that seemingly has nothing to do with him, I’m gonna call John and ask his advice,” he said. “It’s not shared governance, but it’s approaching some version of shared governance. And I think it gets you a lot.”

Tarka, with his long history through the ups and downs of the last four decades in the district, sees the successes in historic scope.

“This last chapter of this story began in 2005 when [former superintendent] John Thompson was pushed out, when Al Fondy died, when Mark Roosevelt came in,” said Tarka. “When we were at one of the lowest points we had been as a school district. There were efforts by some to destroy the union because they saw Al’s demise as a time of great weakness, and it was. We were really rock bottom. There were many, many nights when I woke up at 3 a.m. and didn’t get back to sleep. And I’m sure Roosevelt did too. But you fight and you grapple and you get through the process and you realize perhaps if we treat each other fairly, perhaps we can make some real changes here.”



Lessons to Share

The story of PPS and PFT's landmark collaboration on behalf of children is compelling because it offers a sense of possibility for what school systems and unions can accomplish together in a time when the national conversation is more focused on the division that exists between the two parties. Exploring the themes from the PPS-PFT partnership and understanding how they can inform work in other communities provides strategies that any school system or teachers union can pursue. And so it is worth revisiting these principles in more depth.

- 1. Communicate and collaborate on a wide range of topics to create shared understanding on substantive issues and a track record of constructive collaboration that supports contract negotiations.**

Successful, innovative, contract negotiations came at the end of the Pittsburgh story. The story of district-union collaboration began four years earlier when the district partnered with teachers to write curriculum. This was followed by a partnership of top district and union leaders to create a new teacher evaluation system; an intense collaboration to earn the Empowering Effective Teachers grant that would afford the system the chance to address longstanding challenges; and then, finally, a five-year contract that introduced pay-for-performance and teacher leadership opportunities tied to the system's greatest needs and highest priorities. These points of collaboration spanned the full range of responsibilities a school system faces – including: curriculum, evaluation, raising external funds, and compensation – several of which are seldom perceived to be within the purview of the teachers' union. Yet each successful collaboration laid the foundation on which the next collaboration could be built.

The PPS-PFT experience suggests that strong partnerships can be built through a series of collaborations that progress from less-controversial issues related to teaching and learning to more contentious issues

where each partner needs to relinquish some control and look beyond individual interests. The respect demonstrated to teachers when the system asked for help with curriculum development created a foundation of trust that the design of the evaluation system would respect teachers and their work. The success of those partnerships brought both leadership teams to the table to authentically problem-solve about the most intractable issues the system faced. And in that work, the seeds for a landmark contract were sown.

- 2. Demonstrate from the top of both the school system and the union a commitment to genuine dialogue and partnership, creating an example for others to emulate.**

In a short three years the relationship between PPS and PFT evolved from a strike vote to the superintendent and union president poring over data to figure out the best thing to do for students and strategizing about how they would each push their leadership teams to function in new ways. The two parties went from sitting across the table from one another and seeing the other as the problem, to sitting on the same side of the table working together to solve problems they both identified as critical.

Several things made this shift possible. First, the superintendent and union president never let things get personal and were always respectful of one another. During times of disagreement, the disagreement was about substance – not people, and not politics. Second, the partners focused their efforts on meaningful work that was the lifeblood of the school system and its ability to serve students well rather than getting bogged down early in contract language and counting chits. Third, just as the superintendent and union president worked in tandem, the CAO partnered with her counterpart at the union to drive the teacher evaluation work. As the stakes rose with each subsequent collaboration and the teams became more invested

in the work, both the superintendent and the union president pushed their senior leaders to stretch in ways that were unfamiliar, challenging, and necessary.

3. Embrace uncertainty and commit to learning through design and implementation to support the pursuit of ambitious goals and to create joint ownership for developing solutions.

The 2010 agreement between PPS and PFT reflects a nascent trend in contract reform in which broad commitments are established but details of design and implementation are left to district-union committees. The agreement set the vision and the parameters for teacher compensation, delegating the details for how the vision would be realized to workgroups that included PPS and PFT staff and practitioners. The contract did not micromanage details but, instead, empowered teachers and others closer to the actual work to figure out the details based on their experience and expertise, guided by the contract's vision.

This approach minimized the posturing and horse-trading that is reflected in many contract negotiations. In honoring the complexity of the work, the contract didn't offer easy solutions. For teachers who had come to rely on the contract to lay everything out, it was disorienting that strategies and structures were expected to be dynamic and evolve over time based on learning. What the partners offered in the place of certainty was the opportunity for teachers to participate in designing the work.

Weaning everyone from the expectation that the contract will lay everything out asks teachers and system administrators to trade certainty for opportunity. Such an approach expects and demands trust and good-faith to be successful. Providing teachers experiences where the uncertainty leads to exciting opportunities and outcomes for students and themselves makes this shift in approach more appealing. This can be most effectively accomplished by engaging the most dynamic, visionary and pragmatic teachers in sorting out the details, knowing they will both

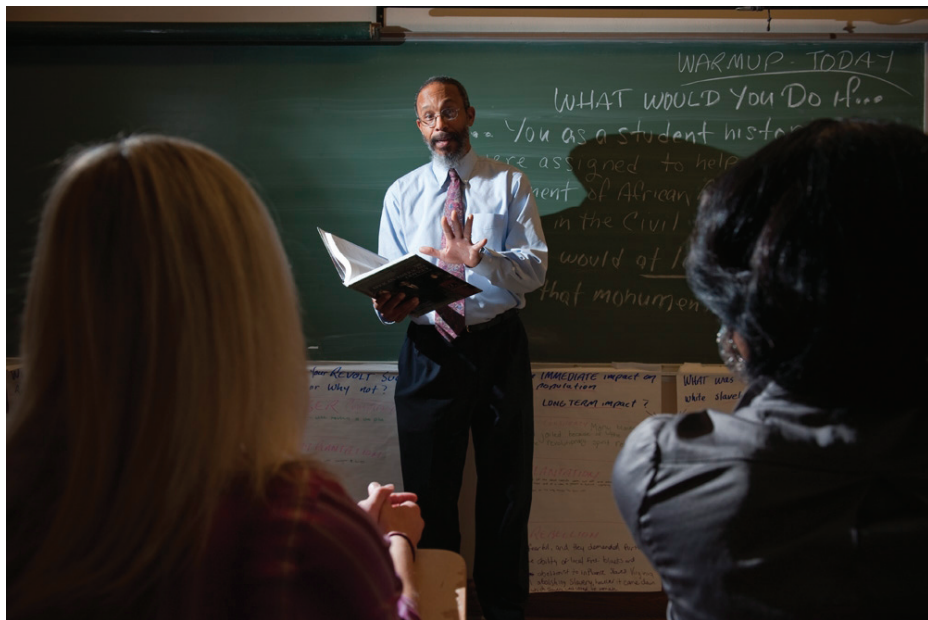
sort them out thoughtfully and serve as emissaries to their colleagues.

4. Replace traditional negotiations with a problem-solving approach that defines priorities for the work of the district and its teachers first and then draft contract provisions to reflect the priorities. Consider ways to limit the role of lawyers and expand the role of practitioners.

One of the most unusual things about the 2010 PPS-PFT contract is that district and union leaders laid out the framework for it as they collaboratively imagined how they might solve the most challenging problems the system faced. They approached these problems as opportunities to think creatively and build joint ownership of the solutions.

The absence of lawyers and the involvement of more practitioners combined with the trust established between the district and the union allowed for a shift from positional bargaining to problem-solving that then guided the contract. While it is true that the possibility of a large grant from the Gates Foundation incentivized this work, the simple acts of changing who is at the table and the focus of conversation are things that any district-union partnership can pursue. In making these changes to how negotiations are done, success hinges on: (1) correctly identifying the most pressing issues in the system and (2) engaging expert, highly-respected practitioners who are able to simultaneously hold the big picture and work out the details.

The story of the partnership of the Pittsburgh Public Schools and the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers offers a powerful counterpoint to the current rhetoric about district-union relations. At its core, the story is deceptively simple. District-union leadership modeled a new way of partnering. Successive, successful collaborations on issues that grew in complexity built trust, capacity, and a sense of possibility. A commitment to focus on vision and problem-solving created space for creativity. And engaging teachers at every step in the work built ownership, leveraged expertise, and led to better results for teachers, the system, the union, and, most importantly, for students and their learning.





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About the Author

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