

The Role of Teachers Unions in School Governance during COVID-19

When COVID-19 forced a set of extraordinary challenges upon the U.S. education system in March 2020, risk and uncertainty were constant. Many stakeholders sought to weigh in on the endless choices confronting school leaders, including the teachers who would implement those decisions. In speaking with teachers union and association leaders across the country, we found that, more often than not, they described collaborative relationships with district leaders. What we learned highlights critical practices sustaining these relationships, and we believe state leaders have the power to both model and encourage many such practices in school governance.

Our analysis suggests that relations between district leaders and teacher membership organizations need not be contentious and adversarial.¹ Rather, under the right circumstances, these relationships can incorporate conflict and negotiation alongside collaboration and mutual respect in a way that can strengthen decision making and policy implementation.

This complicates the dominant narrative. Journalists and scholars have largely focused on districts' contentious relationships with teachers unions and the unions' influence on forestalling or resuming in-person learning.² Certainly, quantitative analyses do suggest that places with stronger teachers unions were more likely to start the fall of 2020 in virtual learning as well as to remain in that modality throughout that first part of that school year.³

And research on teachers unions has typically framed them as a powerful special interest, concerned more with adult economic interests than the diverse needs of their students.⁴ But this narrative often focuses on a narrow subset of

organizations and places, ignores activities that cannot be easily quantified, fails to describe important variation in unions' and associations' work, and dismisses evidence that unions and associations also have the potential to magnify the concerns of students, families, and communities, with whom they are in close contact.⁵

Likewise, whether or not to deliver instruction virtually was but one choice facing schools. From the onset of the pandemic, leaders of large and small districts alike had to weigh health risks, social-psychological harms, learning loss, community anxieties, political pressure, and myriad logistical challenges. As fall 2020 approached, leaders had to determine what circumstances would allow them to reopen, invent safety protocols, develop hybrid learning schedules, and strengthen communication with families and communities. When vaccines became available in early 2021, district leaders confronted yet another set of thorny choices surrounding vaccine access, employee mandates, reopening timelines, and how to safely serve students who were unable to return whether due to medical vulnerability or parents' fears. At each juncture, unions and associations had the potential to shape many decisions, and their membership bore the responsibility for translating new protocols into daily practice.

Teachers' Voice in Governance

Inclusive decision making can be especially important in public governance. For programs and policies to be faithfully enacted, they must be viewed as legitimate by the many groups that have an interest in how schools function. Consequently, teachers or their

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membership organizations should be involved, whether that involvement is legally prescribed, necessitated by collective bargaining, or less formally structured.⁶ Indeed, some prior research suggests that in crisis situations in particular, unions can help districts to adapt and innovate.⁷

Teachers unions and associations are important participants in governance not only because they have formal collective bargaining rights in many states but also simply because most teachers belong to them. Approximately 70 percent of America's teachers report that they are affiliated with an employee union or association.⁸ As the pandemic progressed, federal and state public health guidance for local schools was constantly shifting and incomplete. Teacher leaders could be cut out of decision making in the name of expedience or tapped to supplement district leaders' need for extra support, manpower, and expertise. In our study, we found instances of both.

Collaboration and Contention

To understand the role teachers unions and associations played in decision making during the pandemic, we began reaching out in May 2020 to union and association leaders across the country in urban, suburban, and rural communities; a range of political environments with respect to both partisanship and the strength of public-sector unions; and varying levels of pandemic severity.⁹ We interviewed local and state leaders working in 45 school districts across 14 states, with a primary focus on local teacher leaders.¹⁰

We observed that their relationships with district leaders ranged from extremely contentious at nearly every crucial decision point to highly and consistently collaborative. In more collaborative school districts, local union leaders provided specific examples in which they had worked alongside district leaders to communicate with families, develop plans for online learning, deliver laptops or hotspots, and make sure students had access to meals.

In more contentious school districts, local union leaders described fractious relationships with district leaders and provided examples in which they were rebuffed when they asked questions, sought representation on planning

committees, or offered to collaborate on program rollouts. In several cases, union and association leaders felt it necessary to resort to confrontation to obtain basic information about COVID-19 response plans or described having to comply with a top-down policy only to discover it unworkable and find it abandoned shortly thereafter.

Though it may come as a surprise to some, across the 45 districts, collaboration emerged as the most common pattern. Local union and association leader comments, in combination with supplementary documents, suggested a broadly positive, constructive relationship in 25 districts (more than half of our sample). In another 9 districts, those same data suggested a relationship that included elements of both collaboration and contention over the course of the school year. In just 11 districts, the relationship appeared to be primarily contentious.

Notably, while partisan politics was cited in several cases as a source of strain, we found no consistent relationship between the collaborative or contentious nature of the relationship and partisanship. Likewise, we could find no association between the strength of unions in state law and the quality of the relationship between administrators and union/association leaders. Both findings suggest that district and teacher leaders have considerable room to set the tone in their communities.

To describe the character of those interactions in more depth, we identified four dimensions that distinguished collaborative from contentious relationships:

- the presence of good will and trust (or distrust) between local teachers and district leaders;
- the degree to which their relationship was characterized by consistent communication and information sharing;
- the extent to which planning processes included or excluded teacher voices and union or association input; and
- whether public comments were mutually supportive or exploited opportunities for blame shifting.

Union and association leaders' comments regularly touched on these themes, and though some overlapped and reinforced one another, we

believe the distinctions are useful for reflecting on ways in which productive partnerships can be built and sustained or undermined.

Goodwill and Trust (or Distrust)

Districts where local union and association leaders described a more collaborative type of relationship did not necessarily escape the stresses or politicization of the pandemic, but the leaders described a sense of goodwill and mutual trust between themselves and district leadership. A shared sense of priorities—most often commitment to community and to students—and a personal connection between leaders undergirded this trust.

This goodwill bred a willingness to tolerate differences as well as a sense that parties were negotiating and communicating in good faith, making it easier to make concessions when necessary. In one small-city district in the West, the local union leader emphasized that the hard-won relationship they had built with the superintendent, after decades of conflict, was worth protecting. Thus when budgets were uncertain during the summer of 2020, the union was prepared to negotiate furloughs without a fight if the district deemed them necessary.

Interviewees often emphasized the time and care necessary to build trusting, mutually beneficial relationships. In a large, suburban district in the South, the local association leader described the tone of respect set in her first meeting with the district superintendent years before the pandemic. The two had built on that relationship, and the local association leader felt it had carried them through the first wave of the pandemic and the planning for fall 2020.

Union and association leaders in more contentious environments frequently highlighted interactions tinged with suspicion and distrust. These leaders expressed frustration, anxiety, and a reticence to act on information the district administration provided or plans proposed by them. The local union president in a small, rural district in the Midwest described outright hostility toward his efforts to start conversations about COVID safety. Administrators regularly shared misinformation, dismissed the concerns of teachers with health conditions, and refused to let teachers work from home despite operating in distance learning as a result of state-issued

guidelines. The local president in a midsized Western city said that teachers' distrust stemmed from what they perceived as district leadership's refusal to provide clear information about COVID exposures.

Communication and Information Sharing

In many instances, the presence or absence of trust appeared closely connected to the quality of communication and information sharing. Districts where union and association leaders described a more collaborative relationship also tended to describe an environment of frequent and open communication, information sharing, and an ethic of transparency. This openness could be facilitated through scheduled meetings or in less formal, but still frequent emails, phone calls, and text messages. Regular communication allowed union and association leaders to learn about district plans in advance so they could set expectations with members or raise concerns before major decisions were publicly announced. It also facilitated preparation among teachers and a willingness to compromise when union or association leaders disagreed with the proposed plan. Communication flowed in the other direction too; districts often had access to surveys and communications from teachers providing information, expressing concerns, and highlighting problems or potential conflicts.

In one small Western city, the union successfully urged the superintendent to hold town hall meetings at which district leaders could listen and share current rationales. Communication became more consistent and expansive as the school year went on. In a rural Southern district, one local president shared member survey information with the district to facilitate the immediate transition to distance learning and then planning for the 2020–21 school year. Later, when the governor pressed this district to return to in-person learning, the local union communicated constantly with district leaders about what that return would look like. A “lengthy call” with the superintendent about outbreaks, testing, and quarantine protocols also fostered goodwill.

A lack of communication strained relationships that were otherwise collaborative—or at least not contentious. In a Western urban district, the union leader said the pandemic interrupted regularly scheduled meetings

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with the superintendent and other district leaders. Consequently, he was caught off guard by announcements made at trainings or staff forums and frustrated by the need to respond in an ad hoc manner.

And where relationships were already contentious, lack of information sharing complicated an already difficult decision-making environment. In one urban district in the Midwest, a newly elected president emphasized how little anyone outside a small group of administrators knew and how much difficulty that created. She said their reticence created a Catch-22 for reopening to in-person learning, where the district needed to know how many students were returning, but parents hesitated to commit when they did not know the plan for returning. Moreover, it was impossible to consult with educators about feasibility since leadership did not want information circulating prematurely.

Inclusive (or Exclusive) Planning

Local union and association leaders who described a more collaborative relationship emphasized that they were invited into planning processes early, allowed to weigh in on key decisions about implementation, and genuinely listened to. Collaborative decision making facilitated troubleshooting challenges in implementation but also built teachers' buy-in and confidence. More than just good communication, a consistent seat at the table with an ability to influence key decisions marked cooperative planning during the pandemic.

In several instances, union or association leaders recalled superintendents inviting them early on to join planning meetings. This inclusive process early on also cultivated understanding when district leaders wanted to create smaller, more nimble committees. In one instance where the union was not included, the union president expressed some empathy and understanding for the district's position. A local president in another district described how their district's inclusive model of decision making created space for union and district leaders to negotiate different perspectives, build understanding, and achieve the consensus needed to back up major decisions.

Conversely, union leaders elsewhere were shut out of planning, fought to gain entry, or

were notified of decisions well after they had been made. We observed this in districts that had a history of contentious relationships pre-pandemic but also in some where teacher leaders described the working relationship before the pandemic as cooperative. In one such district, the superintendent's announcement that secondary school students would be returning to in-person learning in several weeks caught teachers completely off guard and set off a series of confrontations.

Public Support or Blame Shifting

We identified public representations as an added dimension of collaborative relationships. As conflicts over safety, workloads, and learning modality became increasingly politicized, union and district leaders alike had to choose whether to express mutual support or take advantage of strategic opportunities for shifting blame to redirect public ire. These public representations could reinforce or disrupt goodwill and reinforce or remove incentives to work collaboratively.

In a large urban community in the West, the superintendent and the local union president gave a joint press conference announcing the decisions to temporarily close schools. The local president continued to disseminate information between schools and the central office, saying she felt her role "was to be [as] collaborative as possible to create...the best, most aligned outcome for everyone." A union leader in a rural Southern district emphasized feeling it was both strange and important to stand publicly in solidarity with the superintendent and the board to defend difficult choices.

Conversely, a local leader in a Midwest district said the superintendent habitually and publicly misrepresented union positions, including on budget cuts. The leader said the union's offer to help ensure that the district made the most effective cuts possible was rebuffed: "They... made those decisions unilaterally." Later in the year, he said, principals mischaracterized union positions on social media, and when an early dismissal because of inadequate ventilation during a warm day created chaos, the superintendent implied in a public interview that the union's contract was the cause. Administrators in another district adopted a policy to let

students complete courses pass/fail and encouraged teachers to focus on socioemotional well-being, but then criticized teachers for the subsequent lack of learning.

Conclusions

While the first wave of educators' responses to the pandemic were met with grateful praise, by the fall of 2020 the pandemic had become bitterly politicized. Conspiracy theories proliferated. Demands for, and protests against, masking intensified. And teachers unions and associations especially found themselves regularly castigated for raising concerns about safety, in-person learning, or overwork. We cannot claim our sample is representative, but our study reveals greater nuance in teachers unions and associations' participation in decision making than has been commonly portrayed. There was tremendous variation in the character of union-district relationships across different environments.

In the more collaborative relationships, local union leaders described working alongside and in partnership with district leaders, strengthening educational governance by helping to anticipate challenges, support implementation of pandemic plans, and ensure teacher buy-in at a time when demands were ever-changing. School leaders today face a new set of urgent duties: ameliorating learning loss; supporting students who missed out on friendships, suffered anxiety, and experienced the death of friends or family; and serving a public that is in many ways more polarized than at the pandemics' outset. They should take a note from the districts that built productive relationships before, and maintained them during, the pandemic. ■

¹A version of this analysis was presented at the 2021 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. Lesley Lavery and Sara Dahill-Brown, "Collectively Confronting COVID-19: Teachers Unions Respond to a Global Pandemic," presentation to APSA, September 2021.

²For example, Howard Blume and Laura Newberry, "California Teacher Unions Fight Calls to Reopen Schools," *Los Angeles Times*. October 16, 2020.

³Matt Grossmann et al., "All States Close but Red Districts Reopen: The Politics of In-Person Schooling during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Educational Researcher* 50, no. 9 (December 1, 2021): 637–48; Michael T. Hartney and Leslie K. Finger, "Politics, Markets, and Pandemics: Public Education's Response to COVID-19," *Perspectives on Politics* 20, no. 2 (June 2022): 457–73;

Bradley D. Marianno et al., "Power in a Pandemic: Teachers' Unions and Their Responses to School

Reopening," *AERA Open* 8 (January 1, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584221074337>.

⁴Terry M. Moe, *Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America's Public Schools* (Brookings Institution Press, 2011).

⁵Joshua M. Cowen and Katharine O. Strunk, "The Impact of Teachers' Unions on Educational Outcomes: What We Know and What We Need to Learn," *Economics of Education Review* 48 (October 1, 2015): 208–23; Richard D. Kahlenberg and Moshe Zvi Marvit, *Why Labor Organizing Should Be a Civil Right: Rebuilding a Middle-Class Democracy by Enhancing Worker Voice* (Century Foundation Press, 2012); Lesley Lavery, *A Collective Pursuit: Teachers' Unions and Education Reform* (Temple University Press, 2020).

⁶Teachers can possess formal authority at both state and local levels. For example, the chief state school officer of Arkansas is required to have 10 years of teaching experience and hold a current teaching license. State teachers of the year occupy seats on the state board of education in Michigan and North Carolina (though in neither instance can they vote). Where collective bargaining exists, teachers unions can exercise substantial control over policy issues. But teachers are also intrinsically important: Their experience and expertise in combination with the organizations that represent them often ensure a measure of informal influence. See chapter 1 in Sara E. Dahill-Brown, *Education, Equity, and the States: How Variations in State Governance Make or Break Reform* (Harvard Education Press, 2019).

⁷Anthony S. Bryk et al., *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* (University of Chicago Press, 2010); Dan Jacoby, "Teacher Unionization in School Governance," *Educational Policy* 25, no. 5 (September 1, 2011): 762–83; Saul A. Rubinstein and John E. McCarthy, "Public School Reform through Union-Management Collaboration." In David Lewin and Paul J. Gollan, eds., *Advances in Industrial and Labor Relations* 20 (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2012); Saul A. Rubinstein and John E. McCarthy, "Teachers Unions and Management Partnerships: How Working Together Improves Student Achievement" (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, March 2014).

⁸Refer to the National Center for Education Statistics *National Teacher and Principal Survey* for 2017–18 to view more precise estimates by type of school and/or state: https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/tables_list.asp.

⁹This later criterion, pandemic severity, proved to be not terribly significant given that the pandemic reached all regions and communities fairly quickly.

¹⁰For all but 6 of those 45, we spoke with local leaders at least twice during the pandemic. We promised confidentiality, and whenever possible we collected local news, district communications, social media, and COVID planning documents to validate and fill out stories they shared with us.

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