

# Teacher Unions, school districts, universities, governments: Time to tango and promote convergence?

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## Changes in teachers' work and the challenges facing teacher unions

Howard Stevenson, Guest Editor

### ***Teacher Unions, school districts, universities, governments: Time to tango and promote convergence?***

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper considers 'convergence' as deliberate acts of will to achieve common goals within the context of the education service in general and school sector industrial relations in particular. Such language is unusual in the field of industrial relations, where assumptions are often based on notions of conflictual relationships. However, this paper argues that educational organizations, including ones where relationships might be considered adversarial, can move beyond occasional partnerships and collaboration towards a more systematic approach to joint working-convergence. This paper draws on the author's experience as a teacher union researcher in British Columbia involved in a number of innovative projects involving the teachers' union, school districts, and universities, to consider where common interests might occur and how such forms of working can be developed. A number of challenges to convergent working are identified, including notions of vested interests, issues of power and control, and system fragmentation resulting from site-based management. However, convergence is suggested as one way to reduce fragmentation in educational systems and as a way to build trust between governments, school districts, and teacher unions; providing essential building blocks to sustainable system improvement.

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In two earlier papers I have outlined examples of how teacher unions can work much more effectively with partner organizations elsewhere in the educational system. In these cases teacher unions moved into territory they have not traditionally occupied, and worked in ways that, to some extent, challenged traditional models of union activity and organization. The first paper (Naylor, 2005a) explored teachers' union support for professional development through external collaborations, while the second (Naylor, 2005b) contained an exploration of inclusion issues which included examples of collaboration with three school districts. Both of these papers explored acts of union collaboration with school districts and universities. However, they raise questions about the need to move beyond occasional partnership and identify the circumstances in which systemic, long-term, and sustainable joint working can be developed between organizations in K-12 public education systems. In short, they raise issues about the need for convergence.

This paper argues that occasional partnerships and collaborations involving organizations in education systems are important developments, but they are only preliminary (but necessary) steps before greater convergence of actions can occur. It further argues that convergence must be seen as the deepening and extending of collaboration in which collaborations and partnerships become systemic and perennial rather than fragmented and occasional. Such a process is inevitably difficult and tenuous, especially in contexts where relationships have a history of tension and hostility. The challenge lies in creating the conditions for convergent working in ways that reflect, and respect, the existing and legitimate interests of partner organizations. However, the existence of difference does not provide a basis to resist the development of convergent working. The challenge is to identify in K-12 public education areas where convergence between organizations (unions, school districts, governments, universities) is possible, beneficial, and might be considered.

This paper will first define and consider the concept of convergence before considering three factors likely to limit convergent actions: notions of vested interests, issues of power and control, and decentralization/site-based management. Finally, some first steps are proposed to initiate convergence.

### **Convergence-Clarifying a Concept**

In making the case for convergent working it is important to clarify the concept and distinguish it from other terms that are sometimes used synonymously but which I want to argue refer to different and more limited notions of joint working. The term 'convergence' is also widely used in a number of different fields and identifying its use elsewhere can provide some clues as to how it might be deployed in an educational context.

In economics, convergence theory refers to the link between economic development and economic performance and is used to describe the phenomena whereby the economies of different nation-states perform in increasingly similar ways. Trade cycles and other key economic indicators become increasingly synchronous-both cause and effect of the expanded and globalized world economy. Globalization can also account for ways in which societal experiences become homogenized in different countries, and arguably as liberalized trade and telecommunications develop, then the cultural dimensions of different societies look increasingly alike, a phenomena described by Ritzer (1993) as the "McDonaldization" of society. In group interaction, symbolic convergence theory is based on the concept that individuals in a group develop group cohesiveness through exchanging fantasies (Borman, 1985), a process, if not a result, known to many who participate in negotiations involving union and management in education! The term is also used in mathematics, and in the natural sciences. Within a political context there appears to be a growing propensity to adopt the language of convergence with a number of Latin political parties, for example in Catalonia, Portugal, and Mexico, possessing Convergence parties. All aspire to coalesce into some kind of nirvana where division will be replaced with cohesion and harmony.

In the field of education it is possible to discern two distinctive meanings of the term convergence. First is the well-established trend towards policy importation (Dimmock, 1998) whereby policies adopted in 'lead countries' then become widely adopted elsewhere. The growth of site-based management, so-called 'choice' (market) policies and the expansion of new forms of accountability and control provide an illustration of how education policies in different (sometimes, culturally, quite different) nation-states begin to look increasingly similar. McLaren (2005) argues that convergence in this sense is no more than culturally insensitive uniformity that fails to reflect national specificities: "...standardized tests are touted as the means to ensure that the educational system is aligned well with the global economy. There is also a movement to develop international standardized tests, creating pressures towards educational convergence and standardization among nations" (p. 28).

However, the second meaning of convergence, and the one that is the focus of this paper, refers to the way in which organizations, sometimes quite different and with very different starting points choose to combine resources, define common priorities and work collectively towards these. This type of convergence promotes common agendas, but does so in a way that eschews standardization and uniformity.

Both the educational (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1997) and business literatures (Linden, 2002) contain many references to co-operation, collaboration, networks, and partnerships involving individuals or organizations. There is literature which defines and differentiates terms (Hopkins, 2003), provides advice on how to create partnerships, collaborations, and networks (Inkpen & Currall, 2004), how to manage them (OECD, 2003), and when to disband them. This focus on these ideas reflects the increasing use of these terms in education policy discourses as there is

growing evidence of a backlash, at a rhetorical level at least, to the overt language of the market and competition that dominated policy-speak in the 1980s and 1990s (Glatter, 2003). For the purpose of this paper, convergence is defined as two or more actions directed to the same end by different organizations. It results in actions that are overtly discussed and agreed on. Convergence involves explicit acts of will, initiated for a purpose rather than occurring accidentally or as a natural consequence of proximity or natural flows and forces which may be better defined as confluence. In education systems, convergence occurs when organizations agree on priorities, actions, and resource allocation from within their own organization which converge to address a given issue, approach, or initiative. In contrast to more fluid forms of working, such as those implied by networks and collaboratives, convergence is based on a more systematic, embedded, and longer term form of joint activity. Convergence might occur to address an issue such as bullying, where representatives of teachers, parents, and district officials may be concerned that bullying is becoming more pervasive and requires concerted action to reduce its prevalence in schools. Convergence of these groups reflects a common belief that a problem of bullying exists and that cross-organizational discussion and action might positively impact and reduce bullying in schools.

This paper seeks to argue that convergence involving teacher unions, school districts, universities, and government, is not only possible, but essential, to support systemic sustainable improvement. Political approaches that have polarized debates and created defensiveness have little prospect of mobilizing the support of partners necessary to secure significant change and development. Organizations that may be considered antagonistic need to find opportunities to work together. In this paper I make the case that it's time to tango and develop convergence, though we'll likely need some lessons and lots of practice. In particular there is a need to address fundamental issues that can hinder prospects for convergence, and which, if ignored, are likely to result in attempts to promote convergence being still-born.

### **Promoting Convergence-Addressing Issues**

A key theme of this paper is a recognition of the difficulties to be encountered in promoting convergent working. This occurs particularly in environments where organizations might be considered to have quite different objectives, and/or where past histories have been characterized by conflict and a lack of trust. In this paper I want to argue that three issues in particular require specific consideration when seeking to create the conditions required for convergent working-these are the significance of vested interests, issues of power and control, and the consequences of an educational environment characterized by fragmentation and increasing competition.

#### *Promoting convergence and the significance of 'vested interests.'*

Convergent working requires a coming together of different parties and a willingness to find common ground. Difficulties can arise when organizations are overly defensive about protecting the status quo and what are seen as existing privileges. However, what can be more of an obstacle is the differential and partial way in which 'vested interests' are portrayed. Critics of vested interests in situations linked to industrial relations often state that such interests are those of 'a few' (Shinn, 2004), who are blocking the will of the majority. It's a populist but glib critique, proclaiming selfishness and disrespect by one group for the rest of society without actually examining the merits of a group's claim in terms of justice or decency. Even when the few become the many, like the 42,000 teachers of British Columbia, the claim of vested interests then identifies teachers as a minority holding interests different to the majority of society. It is also common to suggest that a small number of 'activists' are unrepresentative of the majority, and are somehow manipulating or coercing their fellow members into action they do not support, as was argued by employers during the 2005 teachers' strike in British Columbia (Dobbin, n.d.).

In these cases 'vested interests' are presented pejoratively. Attempts are made to undermine the legitimacy of an organization's objectives by presenting it as lacking integrity. For example, if a teacher says there are insufficient books in the library, and she cannot do her job in teaching or in building literacy as well as she might with more books for children to read, she is often accused of having a vested interest. Would a firefighter without a hose, a police officer without handcuffs, or a doctor without a stethoscope have similar vested interests if they complained? Is the accusation of vested interests directed more at some professions or work than others, and are teachers more vulnerable to the accusation because they face less imminent danger, and save lives in less immediate ways? Perhaps the more explicit role teachers have in shaping the ideological framework in society makes them a more

vulnerable to being maligned in this way.

Teachers have vested interests and their unions state most of these openly within two broad categories: salary increases/improved benefits for their members; and adequate working and learning conditions which support student learning and which make work manageable. However, other parties in the educational system also have 'vested interests,' although these are rarely presented in the sort of pejorative way reserved for teachers and their unions. Rather, it appears from some analyses that only unionized workers have vested interests, yet individuals, companies, industries, professions, and political parties all have vested interests, some exposed, attacked, and critiqued much more than others.

Prospects for convergence are not enhanced by denying the existence of vested interests, or suggesting that only certain types of organization have 'vested' interests. Rather the vested interests of all parties need to be recognized, acknowledged, and made overt. Recognizing vested interests supports convergence because acts of convergence are essentially pragmatic acts of will, coming to solutions that are workable, 'doable,' and acceptable to all parties. For organizations such as governments, school districts and teacher unions, a recognition of vested interests need not result in conflict but could support the development of broadly-supported policies and programs.

*Convergence and control-issues of power.*

*"Power is implicated in all educational visions, it is omnipresent in reform proposals, and it is visible in delineations of what constitutes an educated person" (Kincheloe, 2003).*

Convergence involves a coming together of a range of different parties. It is important to recognize that each of these parties has different sources and resources of power. Power in this sense can be considered by drawing on Lukes' (1974) three dimensions of power, namely the ability to compel others to take action they otherwise would choose not to, the ability to control agendas (to determine what can, and cannot, be considered for action), and finally the ability to shape how others think about issues. Although different parties have differential powers the problems for convergence arise when parties choose to exercise power in ways that may seem coercive and conflictual. In these circumstances defensive reactions are encouraged and convergence becomes more difficult.

For example, in British Columbia, during its first 4-year term, the provincial Liberal government arguably avoided efforts to find convergence with the teachers' union, and instead sought to use its resources of constitutional power to provoke a conflict with the teachers' union. They gutted teacher contracts, downloaded many costs onto school districts, and forced school districts to lay off over 2,500 teachers, over double the layoffs needed to offset declining enrolment. They built accountability structures which increasingly focused on narrowly-defined measures of student achievement. Evidence for these claims can be found in three government documents (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2004 and 2005; B.C. Ministry of Finance, 2005) which essentially direct school districts' compliance with central government goals. As the BC government increased centralized power it reduced the control of school districts because the districts were forced into compliance with government edicts and accountability measures, and now have minimal autonomy to make decisions of any significance. In a system of 'choice,' they have fewer choices left to make. Although the promotion of site-based management has been couched in the language of decentralization, the reality is that key elements of systemic power have been centralized in the hands of the provincial government. At the same time reforms have been driven through that have eschewed consensus and relied on state power for formal authority. However, the use of power in this way has generated conflict and resistance-undermining the prospects for convergence. In British Columbia the actions of the provincial government provoked a bitter and protracted dispute with the teachers' union, including a lengthy strike and a collapse in employer-employee relations.

Strikes, actions of last resort, reflect breakdowns in systemic relationships, the opposite of convergence. BC teachers' collective actions, culminating in the 2005 strike, won concessions from government which improved learning for students. Yet the concessions were paid out of money saved from teacher salaries, and may prove temporary. Strikes are akin to high-risk gambling, with no certainty about the end result, whether victory, defeat, or compromise. They take systems to an uncertain and generally unwelcome brink.

Promoting the notion of convergence, of finding more common ground, aims to reduce the brinkmanship and

confrontation that is associated with breakdowns in industrial relations. However, it is vital we better understand the nature of power and its use if convergence is to be promoted. The exercising of power in contested areas leads to division and possible conflict, making convergence impossible. The greater the unilateral exercise of power, the less likely is convergence to occur. Convergence becomes much more likely when those with power are less likely to use it coercively, but instead place greater emphasis on sharing power and securing consensus.

*Convergence and competition-the consequences of system fragmentation.*

In British Columbia, as elsewhere, a key emphasis in school sector policy has been a shift towards site-based management (SBM). SBM, as has been indicated, is largely presented in terms of 'system empowerment' by devolving decision-making to school level. However, in many respects this is not 'empowering,' but rather debilitating the system. SBM fragments the school system and introduces antagonistic relations that not only militate against convergence, but threaten to weaken the system's capacity for improvement. In particular I would highlight two ways in which SBM introduces systemic pressures that militate against convergent working. The first is in respect to internal school organization, and the second refers to the relationship between parents and 'choice' policies.

School trustees in BC have been largely compliant with provincial government policy with regard to SBM, steadily watching their powers reduced with little apparent concern, and arguably participating in processes destined to build administrator control at school sites and reduce district governance capacity. The BC School Trustees Association's current involvement in the 'Educational Leadership Council' is an example of their curious and arguably naïve participation in processes likely to reduce their powers further. This Council, generously funded by the provincial government, appears to promote school-based management by improving the status and control of school administrators. The rhetoric of 'leader shortages' implies the need for training and support, but masks the agenda of increased administrator power as managers within a site-based system, perhaps accompanied by a Board of Administrators parallel to the province's College of Teachers. Such an agenda inevitably reduces or removes the power of the democratically-elected school boards while increasing the power and managerial control of school administrators.

There are significant implications in site-based approaches for district administration. With the two largest BC school districts reporting a total of 163 district personnel earning over \$100,000 (Global TV news online), the savings from removing most of these personnel from those districts alone would likely remove up to \$20 million from district expenditures. This money might result in savings to government and payoffs in increased salaries to school administrators. Government could redirect money currently spent on district administration to site-based schools while also removing substantial amounts from education budgets.

Decentralized but tightly controlled systems have been traditionally opposed by teacher unions, and there have been critiques of unions' approaches (Hoxby, 2002; Moe, 2003) in these as in almost any area of union involvement or interests. Such critiques largely argue that teacher unions often do not reflect rank and file views, or that unions are surprisingly resistant to changes forced upon them. While considering union vested interests, they ignore the interests of others and do not consider issues of power and control, unless explaining why in their view union power should be curtailed.

If school-based leadership occurs, decisions will not be made closest to students, as is often claimed, because then they would be made by teachers. In a site-based management system they will be made by the managers-the Principals-who may or may not choose to adopt inclusive approaches to management. School organizations increasingly reflect a hierarchical notion of control at the school site in which Principals will become managers not leaders, while the corporate ethos of 'choice' is promoted in the provision of schooling. Power and control accrues to Principals in site-based systems, yet this fact is masked by the rhetoric of enabling language used by those promoting site-based approaches. Evidence from New Zealand (Fiske & Ladde, 2000) indicated the shift towards 'choice' and corporate cultures of competition between schools where site-based leadership is a euphemism, not for leadership but for control.

In the case of site-based management, I would argue that both power and control issues, as well as the vested interests of central government and school administrators, are not recognized or discussed, but deliberately masked

by a rhetoric which studiously avoids mentioning the key interests or dominant ideologies served by the proposal. By shifting the locus of control to site managers, systemic convergence becomes less possible.

Similar issues are discernible when the issue of SBM is linked to wider questions of parental choice. The Canadian examples discussed above connect to an international literature on decentralization and the relationship between SBM and the operation of quasi-markets in education. In Spain, Bernal (2005) and in New Zealand Lauder and Hughes (1999) argued that site-based schools essentially serve some middle-class interests and limit genuine and universally-accessible choice. Lauder and Hughes argue that: "The problem is that education markets, subject to limited financing, will never be able to provide the variety of schools demanded. Consequently, schools are rationed according to social class" (p. 81).

A study of Alberta's 'choice' system (Bosetti, 2004) found that few working class families were able to exercise choice in terms of their children's education: "School choice does not appear to enhance the educational achievement or experience of all children. Rather it appears to be limited to children of middle-upper class families" (p. 401).

The danger with SBM, and especially with systems of SBM where the introduction of market forces are a key feature, is that parents are compelled to compete for what is best for their child. In a world of rationed opportunities parents are forced to adopt an individualistic approach to school choice. Rather than a concern for systemic improvement, parents acting as rational consumers will only be concerned with ensuring that their child secures access to what are perceived as the 'best' schools. This system then reinforces privilege as those from middle class communities find it most easy to access the elite schools, whilst so-called 'failing' schools are overwhelmingly located in urban and poor areas. Advantaged by their economic, social and cultural capital the middle class are able to retain their status in an increasingly hierarchical and individualized system.

Again the problem is that the systemic fragmentation flowing from SBM militates against the convergence required to mobilize support for real, system-wide improvement. Parents are not encouraged to think in terms of the system, and of the rights of all children, but only in terms of securing the best within the system for their own child(ren). Collective responsibility is absolved as individual gain is esteemed. This may bring significant benefits to individual children (overwhelmingly drawn from the middle class), but it does little to lever up quality across the piece. System improvement is undermined and inequalities are increased.

### **Making the Case for Convergence-What is to be Done?**

The BC education system exemplifies a situation where trust between governments, school districts and teacher unions has all but disappeared. The ideological battleground of education in BC has not produced positive and creative tensions of the kind where partners discuss differences but then get on with building a better education system. Divisions in BC have diverted public and union resources towards conflict between organizations rather than constructive improvements to improve educational provision supported by both union and government. The BCTF has spent large amounts in campaigns against the BC Liberal government. The BC Liberal government in turn spends large amounts of money advertising its claimed funding achievements and class size data rather than spending the same money on systemic improvements. This conflict is counter-productive and wasteful. Resources that could be channeled into improvement are instead deployed in defending established positions. There is an urgent need in the province of BC to reduce the degree of conflict, and to build trust between organizations in the public education system. Convergence is one way to do so.

However, all is not doom and gloom as examples exist of where genuine collaboration is taking place, creating the conditions in which more embedded convergence may develop. For example, on a very small scale, the union and school districts have agreed to focus on providing mentoring support, and have developed a pilot project initiated by the BCTF and co-funded by the union and three school districts. In this project, lessons have been learned about collaborative inquiry, how understanding is extended through conversation, and how peers might offer support in group mentoring approaches. While documentation on this project is incomplete, additional information is available from the BC Teachers' Federation Web site. The example of collaboration demonstrated in these mentoring projects shows promise, but more initiatives are needed to build systemic and convergent approaches towards building a more genuinely convergent system. One interesting question is why successful convergence is not being extended or

even examined in BC. Why, with success demonstrated, and clear payoffs to school district and union alike, is there so little interest locally and provincially in positive convergent approaches within union and management circles? Perhaps we have lived too long in conflict, and are suspicious of changing our approaches. Perhaps governments, school districts, and unions have built edifices and internal structures that create obstacles to collaboration and potential convergence.

A more deliberative search for convergence involving teacher unions, school districts, government, and other organizations is worth exploring. There are many educational issues where there is ample room for cohesive and collaborative action to build system capacity, yet none are likely to emerge while deep differences remain, and where, in BC for example, marginalization of the union has become the only art form perfected by the current government. Union demonization of government may also need to be tempered if convergence is to occur. University faculty might offer supportive, facilitative and, critical input to collaborations reflecting convergence.

The key issue is that convergence will not occur in any significant area when battle lines are drawn and constant; the key sources of anger and irritation must be addressed. There are a few bets that such constructive actions will occur in BC, a province that appears to thrive if not prosper on conflict and division. While there are signs of greater pragmatism in some BC government Ministers, there is no evidence that the British Columbia government has any desire to seek consensus which includes the teachers' union. Yet there are Canadian examples where convergence appears to be producing positive results, notably in post-Harris Ontario where government, teacher unions, and school districts have clearly bought into a convergent model, with teacher unions receiving \$22 million to provide professional development for teachers (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

The first steps are simple. Look for areas of common interest where resources, financial and human, might be directed to support student learning and teachers' work. Start there. Take small steps, and build collective experiences that will become convergent, allowing for differences and debate. Develop roles which use the strength of personnel from school districts, unions, government, and universities and make participants inter-dependent in contributing the complementary pieces to the complex puzzle of learning and teaching. Use the literature, but use also the experience and wisdom of teachers, engage and become 'critical friends' and share the knowledge generated in ways that work for teachers and for all those participating and observing. Share the work, and make it more public. It's not new, even if it's been rechristened as convergence, but we've forgotten just how it works.

As a society we depend too much in educational debate on a discourse which purports to be civil but which is constantly confrontational and ideological. We need to understand more about the exercise of power, and consider some alternative approaches to the use of power, especially forms of devolution which are acceptable to all stakeholders and which better meet all students' needs. We need more collective efforts to make things possible and workable for teachers, which in turn supports the learning of students. We need to build more rapprochements with parents who want the best for their children. We need to add a touch more whimsy and have a lot more fun. Idealism is not naïve if we find pragmatic ways to get the best from the human resources we have. Education is all about relationships, and as organizations we have collectively failed this most basic of educative lessons. Building better organizational relationships might be a precursor to or a result of building convergence, but improved relationships are crucial to building more areas of convergence. Convergence reflects a greater focus and emphasis on idealism, a more genuine desire to make education work for students with less individual or organizational aggrandizement but, and perhaps contradictorily, greater recognition of organizational needs, and of valid and universal vested interests .

It's time to tango and promote convergence. Does anyone want to dance?

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