

Union Strong Before and After the Storm



Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.

BY ZEPH CAPO

In August 1992, I began my teaching career at an elementary school in South Florida. On that first day in the classroom, I felt both excited and nervous. I looked forward to a rewarding year in my new profession. But days later, Hurricane Andrew hit, closing schools and destroying my home. I lost everything I owned.

Twenty-five years later, another storm would play a defining role in my life. In August 2017, Hurricane Harvey hit Houston, where I serve as the president of the Houston Federation of Teachers (HFT).

For several days, the storm and its aftermath ravaged the Gulf Coast. Severe flooding took lives, destroyed homes, and closed

schools. This time, my own house was spared. Others were not so fortunate. The homes of many of the 6,000 teachers, school nurses, counselors, and other support professionals the HFT represents were damaged or destroyed; their lives were completely upended.

Immediately, our local began helping members in need. We coordinated volunteers who spent countless hours delivering food and bottled water as well as cleaning and repairing damaged homes. We showed that, together, we were stronger than the storm.

I truly believe that our strength resulted in part from the battles the HFT fought, and ultimately won, in recent years. These battles centered on hot-button issues such as teacher pay and evaluation. After more than three years without a salary increase, we launched a successful pay-raise campaign for our members. We also filed a federal lawsuit against the use of value-added measures (VAM), securing a victory for the right of educators in our school district to be fairly evaluated.

Zeph Capo is the president of the Houston Federation of Teachers (HFT), an AFT vice president, and a trustee for Houston Community College. A former middle school science teacher, he previously served as HFT vice president and legislative director.

It's no secret that organized labor and public education face a time of great uncertainty. Our country's current president and secretary of education have made clear their intent to support corporate greed at the expense of working people and their unions and to champion privatization schemes that undermine public schools. I hope that, by sharing the HFT's recent successes and our ongoing efforts to rebuild in the wake of Harvey, other local unions facing challenges just as daunting can apply what we've learned.

There's a long-standing joke in nonbargaining states, such as Texas, that we don't have collective bargaining—we have collective begging.

Although the HFT operates in a "right-to-work-for-less" environment, the success of our union still depends upon active and engaged members who are politically strong and savvy.

Despite not having a collectively bargained contract, most of the benefits you would find in one (the duty-free lunch period, the right to planning time within the school day, and due process rights) are found in our state law. In a sense, our state law really serves as our master contract.

As for salaries, state law sets a minimum salary schedule in each local school district, and then each district augments or sets its own salary schedule. Besides salaries, everything else not included in the master contract, such as our insurance provisions and our day-to-day work rules, is handled by local districts and school boards. Because we don't collectively bargain and contracts don't have expiration dates in the same way they do in the bargaining states, teachers have individual contracts ranging from one to five years, or they have what is traditionally known as the continuing contract, which is basically one that renews every year without an ending term.

Two years ago, the state legislature passed a law allowing school boards to waive, with a two-thirds vote of the board of trustees, many of our state law provisions. Such a vote could negate longheld teacher rights such as guaranteeing a planning period and duty-free lunch. As a result, it's become even more important to encourage our members and the wider community to stay abreast of school board activities, because district regulations could end up changing with each board election.

Every year, we negotiate with the district in terms of budgeting, and we fight a different battle. In 2016, our focus was on maintaining our members' jobs. Because of a provision in our school finance law called "recapture," the HFT went through a significant number of reductions in our teaching force. This was the first year that the Houston Independent School District (HISD) was considered a "property wealthy district," and the recapture provision meant the HISD had to send money back to the state of Texas for reapportionment. So we had less money in the budget, and the district began to cut jobs.

As a union, we focused hard on ensuring that all our members who were affected by reductions and wanted to maintain employment with the district could return to work. And we succeeded in

getting every one of these members back to work. Initially, around 400 people were going to be laid off; after some attrition of those who did not want to stay, we got to the point where no one was laid off.

Last year, we pushed to backstop insurance increases, since we were hit with a 7 percent increase in our insurance premium in 2016 and were expected to take a 14 percent increase over the next budget cycle.

In January 2017, we then moved into the salary-raise campaign to help stem the turnover rate in our district; around 25 percent of teachers had been leaving each year. Turnover of our new teachers was even higher, with nearly 50 percent leaving the district after one year.

For the campaign, we talked to teachers about what a raise would mean to them. Each week, we published online the stories of three of our members, and we printed hard copies to use in one-to-one conversations with our members, district officials, and school board members. We also shared them by e-mail and posted them on social media to engage parents and community members. We told roughly 160 stories in all.

We also included information comparing salaries in the HISD with those of neighboring school districts. The research clearly showed that our compensation lagged far behind.

Putting a face on the need for a salary increase was effective because these stories were not anonymous. They were about Sheryl Hogue, a teaching assistant, or Jackie Anderson, a special education teacher. Our members spoke to the school board, and they wrote op-ed pieces. It wasn't just me or the union. It was about individuals who make a difference every day telling their stories.

One particularly compelling story involved a teacher at Westside High School. She shared how she incorporated role play to make history come alive for her students. While she found her job extremely rewarding, she struggled to support her family on her salary. She also described how she had considered moving to a neighboring school district because it would give her a \$5,000 to \$6,000 raise. Her story helped parents and community members understand the hard choices teachers faced.

We also produced some video clips, including one of a teaching assistant in a special education classroom. The teacher herself has a disability: she's hard of hearing. She has spent her career working with students she can relate to. As a teaching assistant, she not only works with these children but also mentors the teachers who have come through her classroom over the years. She helps them understand what the classroom processes are, what they need to do, and how they can best help the students. She is the backbone of the classroom. Stories like hers showed that she and her colleagues are not just helping the teacher grade papers. Instead, they are professionals who must be fairly compensated for their work.

We campaigned for a 5 percent raise. The amount was nominal; it would not close the gap with teacher salaries in some of the surrounding districts. But it would be a healthy enough figure to help us move forward.

We ended up coming close to our goal. We won a 4 percent increase for our most experienced teachers, those with more than 16 years. And we won a 3.5 percent increase for teachers with 11 to 15 years of experience, 3 percent for teachers with six to 10 years of experience, and 2 percent for teachers with five years of experience or less. About 80 percent of our members have taught for at least



five years. School nurses are on the same salary schedule as teachers and received the same increases, and paraprofessionals received a 2 percent increase.

As a union, we are very pleased with what we negotiated. The salary increases will help the district decrease turnover among experienced educators, whom we need to mentor novices. We know that it's vitally important in a teacher's development to learn from seasoned veterans. Ultimately, the increases validated the fact that experience matters. It matters in stabilizing schools and in creating a culture that can acclimate and induct new teachers into the profession.

What helped set the stage for the salary fight—and the first real indicator the district wanted to partner with us in changing the culture—happened a few years ago. In 2015, the school board voted down the renewal of the teacher evaluation contract for a program called Education Value-Added Assessment. It was a draconian system that used a student's performance on standardized tests to predict academic growth and make decisions about teacher evaluation, bonuses, and termination.

The second major sign of the district's willingness to collaborate was the decision to choose Richard Carranza as superintendent. The HFT spearheaded a successful series of town hall meetings with parents and community leaders to decide together what type of leader would best meet the needs of our district. These town halls provided an important exchange of ideas among stakeholders so that they could better understand each other and begin to build trust. It was a beautiful thing to see educators, parents, and community leaders go into the official district search meetings speaking with one voice.

But before that collaboration, the union took the lead on defeating value-added assessment. In May 2014, the HFT and seven of our members filed a federal lawsuit to end the policy. And in October 2017, the school district agreed in a settlement not to use value-added scores to terminate teachers. It also agreed to create an instructional consultation subcommittee focused on teacher evaluation. The panel, made up of representatives from the district and the teacher workforce, will make recommendations to improve the district's teacher appraisal process. The settlement also required the district to pay \$237,000 for expenses, such as attorneys' fees, related to the lawsuit.

It's funny, but before becoming an educator, I wanted to be a lawyer, and I maintained an interest in legal issues after I began teaching. That interest has helped in my work as union president. I moved from South Florida to Texas in 1997, because, unlike Florida (at the time), Texas had several public law schools. Tuition there would be cheaper than at private law schools, so I established residency to defray costs.

Before applying to law school, though, I decided to teach high school biology in Austin. While the cost of living was less than in South Florida, the salary was too. I had done a lot of financial calculations before making this move, but I hadn't factored in that, in Texas, I would need to pay for my own insurance and supplement my retirement.

I started going broke really fast. So I moved to Houston and took a job as a union organizer recruiting and representing members for the HFT. I worked my way up to management positions, and in

2015, after longtime HFT President Gayle Fallon retired, I was elected union president.

Before Gayle stepped down, the Leadership Education and Development (LEAD) program, run by the AFT's Union Leadership Institute, was crucial in helping our union think through the leadership transition. The program enabled the union's executive board to engage with our members to set goals and create the buy-in needed for achieving them.

Well before her retirement, Gayle and I focused on increasing our political strength around school board elections and researching value-added measures. Our eventual victories didn't happen overnight. We worked closely with Audrey Amrein-Beardsley, a professor at Arizona State University who studies teacher evaluation. I had read a peer-reviewed journal article she had written that was among the first critiques of value-added measures. As soon as I read the article, I e-mailed her and said, "We're living through this stuff." Then I called her, and we talked about how she could partner with the union on this issue. She was happy to have access to the teachers and the district staff to continue her work. I knew I was going to make district officials a little nervous, but we gathered focus groups with our teachers in certain areas where we were seeing impacts and helped do large-scale survey work.

Amrein-Beardsley published her findings on the inherent flaws of value-added measures in *Educational Leadership*, a magazine put out by ASCD (formerly the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), and she incorporated her research from the HISD into her presentations before the U.S. Senate. Her work, and that of others such as Linda Darling-Hammond, eventually led the American Statistical Association to caution school districts against the use of VAM.

In recent years, our union's work on multiple fronts—from research on testing and evaluation to engaging members in campaigns—has helped to change the narrative around public education. In November, that work resulted in the election of two school board members whom the union endorsed because of their support for frontline educators and community-driven solutions for strengthening schools.

In the wake of Hurricane Harvey, we are continuing to advocate for our students. We have asked state education officials to cancel this year's standardized tests and spend the money that would have gone toward implementing them on rebuilding damaged schools instead.

Nothing we do in education happens in a vacuum. Our students are part of our cities and our neighborhoods—structures that go far beyond the schoolhouse walls. And so we must continue to engage families and community members and forge the partnerships necessary to ensure that together we can weather whatever storms may come. □

The success of our union still depends upon active and engaged members who are politically strong and savvy.