

Chicago and NYC school reform: Creating possibilities versus surrendering without a struggle

February 19, 2012

As I write, the Brian Piccolo Specialty School in Humboldt Park, Chicago is occupied by parents, teachers, and students, with Occupy Chicago and others camped outside the school in solidarity. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) is building this movement, with a wonderful wholeheartedness and passion. Bravo! The union is showing both brawn and brains. In another sign of its commitment to fight hard for the education low-income kids deserve, the CTU has released an excellent report on what we should demand of politicians who say they want to improve the schools. Another part of the Chicago strategy is using the courts. Parents are the backbone here but as a long-time community organizer in Chicago wrote me, "Honestly, we could not have done this without a progressive union leadership."

In contrast, the New York State teachers union (NYSUT) has signed an agreement that is an abject surrender of teachers' professional dignity and tightens the stranglehold of standardized tests. Let us hope - and mobilize - so that this Faustian agreement does not become the "national model" that NYSUT (and NYC) teachers union leaders would like it to be. Consider that NYSUT applauded this agreement that allows up to 40% of teachers' evaluations to be based on their students' progress on standardized tests. Yet, according to NYSUT's own poll conducted in January, two-thirds of parents "believe there is too much emphasis on state testing in public schools." Public opposition to testing has been organized by parent and teacher groups independent of the national unions, which are fearful of angering the corporate media and its political friends. Is there a principle for which the NYC and NY state teachers unions will really fight? Hmmm... maybe the right to collect dues?

We have a tale of school systems in two cities being demolished with the same policies of privatization, school closure, and deprofessionalization of teaching. In Chicago, the teachers union has mobilized with parents and activists to turn the tide. In New York, the teachers union signs and applauds a deal that endangers the job security of teachers who want to use their creativity, skill, and knowledge to teach in ways that are meaningful to kids. Chicago shows us resistance can be mobilized, if a union leadership has the heart and vision, knows how to empower its members, and can work respectfully with parents.