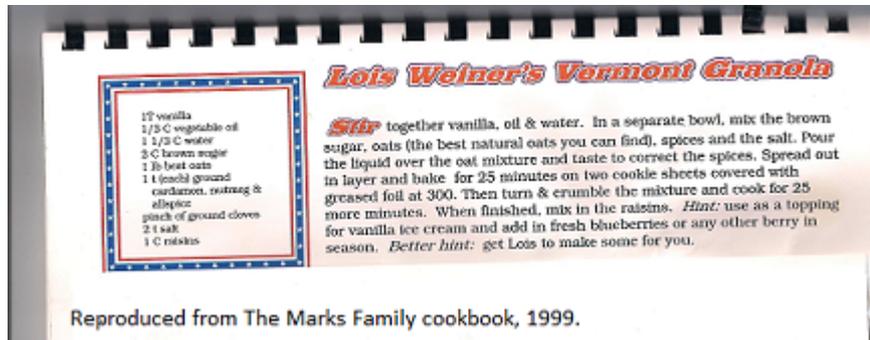


Essential ingredients versus recipes: social movement teachers unions and granola

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There's no single recipe for building the social movement we need to make public education what it should be, to nurture and protect democracy and kids' well-being. But we can see essential ingredients coming together in many different places.

In their contract talks, Portland teachers demanded what unions need to be advocating. Portland is an NEA affiliate (PAT) so it's significant that they borrowed from the Chicago Teachers Union in formulating their (excellent) program, which compares what they want from contract talks to what the school board and contract insist they negotiate. From what's on paper, it looks like the union leadership understands that their struggle has to have deep roots in the schools as wells as parents and community. To have a friend and ally, you have to be one. (At this writing, a tentative agreement had been reached between the union negotiators and the board. I'd be more reassured that members are running the show if the tentative agreement had been taken to members, as was done by the CTU.)

Elsewhere in the NEA, teachers in North Carolina have developed a grassroots organization, Organize2020 that aims to reinvigorate their state affiliate. The group is growing by leaps and bounds, allying itself with campaigns of Moral Mondays. A renewed civil rights coalition has developed, to push back against the overtly racist legislative and political attacks. Teacher activists, still somewhat isolated in locals, are using a state-wide strategy to support organizing in cities as well as suburbs.

In Colorado pushback comes mainly from activists who have organized to stop standardized testing by encouraging parents to "opt out" of the tests. They realize they must challenge both AFT and NEA, in their locals and state organizations. In Los Angeles, the Union Power slate in UTLA, a merged NEA/AFT organization, has learned from mistakes made when reformers first won office eight years ago and has developed a collective leadership, energizing the chapters. When the slate wins the upcoming election, officers will take leadership of a newly mobilized union.

In each situation, activists have adopted different strategies, based on their widely-varying histories, circumstances, and resources. There's been no recipe but they share this ingredient: A realization that the unions' failure won't be solved by electing a single strong leader or persuading existing union officials to act differently. Union members have to be educated and mobilized, in a social movement that develops mutually respectful alliances with parents and communities.

I've been told that I'm not realistic about the conditions in schools and I'm setting the bar too

high. I think what's happening nationally, which is under the radar of the media, disproves my critics. At the same time, I acknowledge that the ideas I'm advocating are not widely held and that teachers are frightened. Organizing under these conditions is not fun. We have to treat ourselves and one another well.

To me caring means food. Like movement-building, granola doesn't have a single recipe but it does have essential ingredients. Here's a recipe for granola, printed in a cookbook produced by family friends. I wish I could deliver a batch in person to Jackson Potter. He, his family, and the movement lost Pete Camarata recently. The granola I'd give to Jackson would contain nuts and other dried fruit, maybe cranberries, because my recipe is low cal but Jackson is not watching calories. When you add fruit and nuts, just wait until the granola has cooled. We need to take care of ourselves. We're going to see defeats as well as victories. Savor the victories and restore yourselves after a defeat with some granola.

I invite reader responses at drweinerlo@gmail.com. Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. You can follow me on twitter and Facebook, as well as my blog every Wednesday here at New Politics.