Community Schools Will Help Unions and Education

written by Dylan Craig | January 30, 2021

As various forms of community schools gain ground throughout the country as a way to address the challenges faced by low-income school districts, they also provide a unique opportunity to create bottom-up, democratically controlled school governance, giving stakeholders a voice about allotment of funds and programs. Community schools aren't a panacea for inequality—education alone can't solve that. However we can rethink control and power in our school system by combining the renewed interest in community schools with two other promising developments in union negotiations—open bargaining and "bargaining for the common good"—together winning back the community control that was long fought for in communities of color.

Today's version of community schools promotes parent involvement and "wrap-around services" in the school, such as health care and counseling, based on specific community needs. The history of community schools actually highlights education unionism's past of alienating and disenfranchising communities of color.[1] The idea of community schools has been tried before to give power to marginalized communities within already existing public structures. Such was the case for the infamous struggle in 1968 in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood of New York.[2] Seeing no progress in integration, the majority African American and Puerto Rican neighborhood decided to create a school where the community held power in the decision-making process, including hiring decisions. After the removal of teachers who were opposed to the community-control philosophy, the United Federation of Teachers disputed the legality of the firings, ultimately resulting in a strike, as the union claimed due process was not followed.

The bitter strike, pitting marginalized communities who wanted a voice and self-determination against the city's powerful teachers union, had a lasting effect in supporting the view of education unions as only protecting the teachers and focusing on pay and tenure.[3] As schools in communities of color produced poor results, unions were seen as keeping badly performing schools open with unqualified teachers. Proponents of neoliberalism have exploited this situation, notably in the 2012 Supreme Court case *Vergara v. California*, in which the Court ruled that "permanent employment" violates the rights of students. Moreover, education unions often continued to ignore the issue of a majority white teacher population in urban areas. As an attempt to gain a voice in the education process, many parents embraced market-based solutions that focused on "parent trigger laws" and "parent choice," where parents and students could apply to various schools, including charters, while poorly performing schools lost funding and enrollment or were transformed into charters if a petition got enough parent signatures.[4] Actually, charter schools were originally envisioned as something similar to community schools, with a focus on teacher-run administrations, but were quickly co-opted by corporations and their political allies in both parties.[5]

The 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike challenged this history of antagonisms by organizing with

community allies for contract demands that moved beyond pay and tenure. This form of organizing began to spread to other education unions, as contract negotiations took a new form.[6] The term and idea for "Bargaining for the Common Good" was solidified in 2014, when Georgetown University's Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor hosted a conference by that name.[7]

Community schools are really an extension of the bargaining-for-the-common-good philosophy, and this is one of the reasons we see a reemergence of interest and support for them. However, we can only turn them into truly democratic institutions if we implement a second change in contract negotiations: open bargaining, which allows all union and community members to join negotiations rather than bargaining in the usual manner of closed sessions reserved for the board, union negotiators, staffers, and lawyers. Like bargaining for the common good, demands are formed within the union and larger school community through various coalitions, but now the community and all union members can show up to the actual negotiating sessions, though voting rights are often still reserved to traditional parties. With open bargaining, union members and the public are aware of the negotiating process at every step. In the weakest forms of open bargaining, all union members and the public are allowed to attend negotiating sessions, but in the most democratic forms, public discussion is a regular feature and coalitions are formed to help draft and negotiate specific areas of the contract, all of which are then voted upon as a whole. Ideally, very little negotiating is done away from the public forum. Opponents of the process believe open bargaining makes it difficult to make strategic concessions and constrains productive conversations for the sake of public perception and fear of legal repercussions. But these complaints seem hollow when we consider that it should be up to the public to decide what is considered "productive conversation" and a "strategic concession," especially when dealing with public funds. Open bargaining is a process of expanding and vitalizing democracy, allowing stakeholders to play a role and feel a sense of ownership and say in their public institutions. It builds on the rationale that is leading many school districts to change to elected boards—democracy should be spread; power should go to those in the community that the institutions serve, not simply technocrats appointed by a central office. It can be a messy process, but it creates parent and community investment.

Today's proposals for community schools look much less radical than what was demanded by communities in the 1960s, as the focus is on adding nontraditional school facilities, such as health and community resources, with a limited focus on democratic community control. Still, advocates are pushing for more than just a rhetorical commitment to community input and partnerships, embodied by the "community school coordinator." For most proposals, including those outlined by the Coalition of Community Schools, a coordinator assesses the needs of the school and acts as a liaison among the school, community, parents, and resources that will be a part of the wrap-around services the school provides. The Coalition of Community Schools even describes this position as a "community organizer."[8] If done well, this helps navigate the relationships necessary for a strong community school.

However, integrating community resources and pushing for more parent involvement will not necessarily translate to creating schools that fully serve students and communities as public institutions, where stakeholders feel heard, valued, and part of the resource allotment and development. This is done when the community school coordinator position moves into a community organizer role, using the methods of bargaining for the common good and the fully democratic form of open bargaining. The organizer could work with the unions as well as other stakeholders to coordinate demands. Each group of stakeholders may elect leaders or spokespeople to share and defend demands. Experts, such as those in the health field, would also be consulted in order to help with negotiations and service implementation.

Once the groups of stakeholders have decided their demands, they would present them to the other

working groups and the community in sessions open to the public, where available funds, resources, and initiatives are discussed and debated. From the start, there would be transparency in funds and allotment potentials that would be up for debate among all stakeholders, with proposals on funding allotments and program development that could be openly debated and developed further. While the process could get messy, debates could be prolonged, and tensions could build, in the end our schools could be transformed in a bottom-up democratic process that makes all feel a part of one of the most important public institutions in the community, while also creating an invaluable learning opportunity for students as they play a role in the governance of their own school.

Ideally, this discussion would lead to a finalized allotment of funds, and within a larger bureaucratic school system, these demands would go to the larger board and then be negotiated further, ideally in the same open-bargaining fashion. This may also include the entire community coming together to request additional funding from the larger school board, similar to what teachers unions and communities already do at budget hearings. Again, a very similar process to what was just outlined is already in place where unions use the open bargaining format for contract negotiations; it would just be a matter of bringing the process down to an even more local level.

Such public participation may avert another danger common in community school creation and education in high-poverty areas—that of privatization and predatory partnerships, including schools that partner with private organizations or universities to implement programs with little actual community oversight, or organizations dangling funds in front of the school if they agree to show "data" that the school is successful, thus providing more funds to a software company that capitalizes on student data collection and private information. One software vendor, inBloom, by the Gates Foundation, partnered with eight states and districts and collected extensive data before shutting down after parent and activist resistance to the data sharing.[9]

When these decisions have been made for schools, they have been made at the discretion of administrators or politicians, often with vested interests, usually financial, and removed from community members, teachers, and students. While there is no way to promise these types of predatory partnerships would not be introduced during discussions, there would be community oversight to expose the harmful conditions and exploitative manners under which these partnerships operate, and the community could move toward more reciprocal community partnerships.

Even the ideal forms of community schools are not a panacea for the social and economic ills we face. No sort of education reform could solve these problems, even though reformers, politicians, and pundits often claim that education is "the great equalizer." We need a vast redistribution of wealth, and social programs that address the inequalities of our economic and material realities. Community schools address nonacademic needs with which students come to school, but these problems have roots in capitalism and require larger systematic change. While I see the creation of the most radically democratic community schools as a step in the right direction, it is only a small step in the full redistribution of wealth and power, the rest being beyond the scope of this essay.

Still, we can use the systems for community schools currently being developed to create schools that are truly built *with* and *for* the community they serve and that become areas of resistance to exploitation. These methods can continue to grow as community schools move beyond areas of concentrated poverty and into every neighborhood, as most proponents of the design hope they will. Local unions and communities can build the solidarity to realize what was lost in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood, and through this creation, we will have stakeholders who feel invested in the process and heard through democratic action, all working with the common goal of helping students and neighborhoods to the best of their abilities. These goals are ambitious, but the seeds are there, and it is what our students and communities deserve.

Notes

1. Michelle Fine and Michael Fabricant, “What It Takes to Unite Teachers Unions and Communities of Color,” *The Nation*, 24 Sept. 24, 2014.

2. Mike Stivers, “Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Fifty Years Later,” *Jacobin*, 9 Dec. 9, 2018.

3. Bob Peterson, “Which Side Are You On?” *Rethinking Schools* (Vol. 8, No. 1, Fall 1993).

4. Josh Cunningham., “Parent Trigger Laws in the States.,” *National Conference of State Legislatures*, 15 Oct. 15, 2013.

5. Stan Karp, “Charter Schools and the Future of Public Education,” *Rethinking Schools.*

6. Joseph A. McCartin, “Bargaining for the Common Good,” *Dissent Magazine*, Spring 2016.

7. “Bargaining for the Common Good,” *Georgetown University Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor.*

8. Coalition for Community Schools, “Community School Coordinator,” *Coalition for Community Schools.*

9. Parent Coalition for Student Privacy, “InBloom Background,” *Parent Coalition for Student Privacy.*