



Union-Backed Charter Develops Model Contract

ILLINOIS FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

■ OIL AND WATER. THEY MIX ABOUT AS WELL AS TEACHERS' unions and public charter schools, a pair cast as sworn enemies by documentary filmmakers and pundits in the ideological battles over school reform.

But something different is happening in an aging brick building in Chicago's impoverished West Garfield Park neighborhood. Thanks to the AFT Innovation Fund and the Service Employees International Union, a new public charter high school is struggling to give some of the area's highest-risk teens a chance at success, led by a group of dedicated young teachers empowered by their union.

"Unions can reform, not just protect," said Chad Adams, the assistant principal and a former English coach at Chicago Talent Development Charter High School.

At Chicago Talent, teachers sat down with school leaders and wrote their own contract. Teachers help oversee administration, instruction, hiring and reviews, and budget. Rather than a traditional salary scale based on seniority, teachers are divided into categories by expertise and merit.

The unconventional model creates "fresh energy around public schools," said Kirby Callam, the chief executive officer of Union Park High Schools, the umbrella organization running Chicago Talent Development.

The Illinois Federation of Teachers, which spearheaded the AFT Innovation Fund project, saw Chicago Talent Development as a way to change perceptions that "unionized teachers were part of the problem in public schools," said Ed Geppert Jr., the federation's president emeritus and a member of the school's advisory board. "We wanted to be able to demonstrate that the ideology of unions blocking charters was not there."

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Chicago Talent, in fact, is one of nine unionized public charter schools in Chicago, organized under the new, AFT-affiliated Chicago Alliance of Charter Teachers & Staff. State approval of three additional unionized charters is pending. But unlike the other schools, where teachers unionized after clashes with administration, Chicago Talent Development was conceived as a labor-management collaboration from the start.

Chicago Talent Development brought teachers and school leaders together to realize a shared vision for a school where an innovative curriculum would be taught by teachers who are also key decision-makers. The curriculum comes from Johns Hopkins University's Talent Development model, with 90-minute class periods to focus on math and reading and an emphasis on attendance, behavior, and course completion. Freshmen take a high school orientation course, and sophomores explore career opportunities. Community groups, including near-peer corps members from City Year, an organization that places young people in high-need schools to serve as mentors, help more than 200 9th and 10th graders in what amounts to an educational experiment. (The school is adding one freshman class at a time to build a full high school through grade 12.)

"In all big urban cities, they have this huge bureaucracy of a district and huge bureaucracy of a teachers' union ... and they create years of barriers and self-serving interests, and both have lost their sense of original intent as they evolved against each other," Callam said. "When you look at their shared goals and shared missions, they have an incredible amount in common ... If you find and support and grow great teaching within your district, that's the No. 1 way to impact student achievement."

Teachers and administrators spent weeks hammering out contract details with a process known as interest-based bargaining. Missing from the room:



lawyers. Instead, both sides were determined to create a school where teachers had a major say in nearly everything, said reading teacher Eli Argamaso, who is now the president of the school's union, the Union Park Federation of Teachers.

Teachers having input in the hiring of colleagues and the allocation of money is authority that simply does not exist in most public schools—charter or otherwise, said Kathy Shaevel, a field service director with the Illinois Federation of Teachers who led the school's union negotiation. Teachers help determine the start and end of the school day, the class schedule, and discipline policy, among other fundamental aspects of school operations.

Teachers at Chicago Talent Development “basically traded tenure for power,” an arrangement that fosters trust and engagement, said John Ayers, now the vice president and treasurer of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in Stanford, Calif., who helped shape the original plan for the school. And the contract is something most union agreements are not: short and simple. Yet that autonomy has at times overwhelmed a small staff of 11 or so teachers, most of whom are in their first or second year in the classroom.

“Being part of a start-up school is very stressful, because nothing's been in place before,” said Fil Torres, a physical education and driver's ed teacher and basketball coach in his second year at the school. “You have to come up with everything.” And yet, Torres also appreciates “the responsibility of being able to have a voice in how the school is designed.”

A blank slate means Torres and other campus leaders can draw from the best practices around the region. Now, the school is deciding whether to scrap an outcomes-based grading system for a standards-based system with traditional letter grades. Also under consideration is a move to a year-round calendar.

“We're building the ship as we're sailing,” said freshman English teacher Quinnetta Bellows.

Chicago Talent Development has struggled with more than its share of challenges, foremost finding a suitable permanent home. Now in its second year, the high school has already moved twice. Last year, it shared space in a dilapidated elementary school. For the 2010-11 school year, it has been housed in a former parochial school with a third floor condemned due to asbestos, mold in the basement, exposed wiring, and no gym, auditorium or parking lot. Moving from one inadequate facility to another has made it difficult to build strong connections between neighborhood families and the school, educators say.

Funding has been difficult to find. According to CEO Callam, due to the school's union affiliation, the Renaissance Schools Fund did not award Chicago Talent the \$250,000 start-up grant from businesses and philanthropists that other public charter schools across the city received under its Renaissance 2010 initiative; nor did Chicago Talent receive a similar grant from the Walton Family Foundation. And student behavior has proved a major problem with this year's freshman class, only 10 percent of whom can read at grade level.

“There's a lot of potential, but we're not there yet,” said math teacher Joe Sunshine, who is also a school union leader. “We have good students. We need to help them realize they are good students.”

The neighborhood, where African-American families struggle with poverty, addiction, and abuse, was once educationally underserved. Now, it is now home to a couple dozen public charter schools competing for students.

Eventually, school leaders hope the groundbreaking charter-union partnership could serve as a model for public charters sprouting up across Chicago and beyond.

“Until teachers make decisions at the lowest possible level, we're not going to change education one iota,” said Mike McNally, who helped facilitate the school's contract negotiations. “It's that simple.”



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