

From Picket Line to Partnership

A Union, a District, and Their Thriving Schools



BY JENNIFER DUBIN

On October 21, 1993, the day before her members went on strike, Laura Rico experienced a swirl of emotions: anger, fear, nervousness. Her union, the ABC Federation of Teachers, and her district, ABC Unified, had reached an impasse in contract negotiations. The district wanted to cut teachers' pay and health benefits, and increase class size. A strike was Rico's choice of last resort. As union copresident, she had notified the district that a majority of her members had voted to walk out of their classrooms. The night before they did so, Rico never made it home. For 24 hours she and a colleague stayed in the union office answering the phone. Teachers called to ask questions and to show their support.

For eight days, tensions ran high, especially when a principal turned on her school's lawn sprinklers to soak striking teachers. The superintendent at the time, Larry Lucas, also protested. Each day of the strike, he would send Rico a Western Union telegram telling her the strike was illegal. Amused but not deterred, Rico posted each telegram in the hall of the union office so she and her staff could share a laugh.

Today in ABC,* teachers don't need to picket and the superintendent wouldn't dare communicate with the union president via telegram. In this district 20 miles southeast of Los Angeles,

there exists a successful labor-management partnership. Comprised of the cities of Artesia, Cerritos, and Hawaiian Gardens, as well as parts of Lakewood, Long Beach, and Norwalk, the district has its share of high-performing schools with affluent or middle-class students, as well as schools that have historically struggled with low-performing students, many of whom live in the district's impoverished South Side. Shortly after the strike, a new superintendent was hired and Rico extended an olive branch in an effort to end the hostilities. Since then she has partnered with successive superintendents to focus on improving teaching and learning—especially in the South Side.

Rico and the current superintendent, Gary Smuts, meet weekly. Their deputies meet monthly. And members of both the union's executive board and the superintendent's cabinet routinely call each other. The constant communication helps resolve problems and keep everyone's time, money, and attention focused on boosting student achievement. The union and the district also cosponsor parent nights and professional development conferences specifically for the South Side schools. Not surprisingly, those schools have thrived thanks to the increased support.

District and union leaders in ABC believe they can do more for their students if they work together. And so, they are taking their partnership a step further. They are fostering an atmosphere

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*The name ABC comes from the unification of Artesia, Bloomfield, and Carmenita school districts in 1965.

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of collaboration within the schools themselves. Principals and building representatives, districtwide, now meet anywhere from once a week to once a month to discuss ways to improve instruction.

Sure, some teachers and administrators are wary of all this cooperation, but Rico and Smuts are nudging them along. Both want the few remaining skeptics to follow their example. And they hope partnerships elsewhere will begin to catch on. “I am a better superintendent because I have a strong union president,” Smuts says. To some, that might sound like heresy. To him, it just makes sense. After all, he says, “we both want what’s best for kids.”

A Successful Strike

Given the turmoil of the strike, few could have predicted the goodwill that exists today. In 1993, the district claimed financial trouble. Because of the bad economic situation, the union compromised with the district and tentatively agreed to significant cuts in pay and health benefits. Soon after, the district found an extra \$1.8 million in its budget. The union then asked the district to spend that money on reinstating the things that teachers had given up. Teachers wanted the district to rescind the two furlough days, award them a 5 percent bonus, and eliminate increased medical copayments and larger class sizes. The superintendent and his cabinet, however, refused to negotiate. They wanted to save some of the \$1.8 million in case of an economic downturn. The rest they wanted to spend on new programs and pay increases for themselves.

On October 22, the union called a strike. Sixty percent of the district’s 1,200 teachers walked out that first day. Nearly 500 walked picket lines each of the strike’s eight days.

“The one thing the district didn’t count on was that the union knew the community,” says Rico, union co-president[†] at the time. She remembers how the city of Hawaiian Gardens, where the ABC Federation of Teachers’ office is located, passed an ordinance to allow teachers to park on the street and picket in front of schools without having their cars towed. Local churches held candlelight vigils for teacher marches. And parents brought lunches for striking teachers at the district’s 29 schools.

At the time, the majority of the school board members supported the superintendent. Since teachers had gone on strike a little less than two weeks before the school board election, Rico and her colleagues saw an opportunity to have union members campaign for school board candidates and help elect a new board. Teachers canvassed neighborhoods and knocked on doors, asking parents of their students to vote for the union-backed candidates. “We were doing a strike and also running an election,” Rico recalls.

Both efforts paid off. On November 2, the union-endorsed candidates won the election, giving the union a majority of sympathetic school board members. The next day, the union called off the strike and teachers returned to work. The new school board directed the superintendent at the time, Larry Lucas, to return to the negotiating table with the ABC Federation of Teach-

ers (ABCFT). The talks failed. In January, the board fired him.

Because the union had helped elect like-minded school board members, the school board members in turn hired a like-minded superintendent. Tom Riley took the helm of ABC in 1995. Rico remembers being cautiously optimistic upon his appointment. “There was just so much bad feeling” across the district, she says. The strike had caused friends to lose friends. And teachers didn’t trust the district office. Still, she made the first move. “I stuck out my hand to the new superintendent and said ‘let’s work together.’”

Some school administrators also reached out to her. During the strike, Gary Smuts was principal of Cerritos High School. When it ended, he and another colleague met with Rico to see if she could ask Riley to rescind a rule, established by the former

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—GARY SMUTS

superintendent, that administrators could be fired for having philosophical differences from the superintendent. Smuts says that administrators at the time had no political power, but the union did. Rico agreed to their request and Riley listened to her. “To Tom’s credit,” Smuts says, “he told the board, ‘This is no longer an operating practice. We encourage debate.’”

Smuts is grateful for Rico’s help. In the traditional union-management relationship, a union president would want the superintendent to suppress principals, he says. That way, the union could foster its own disproportionate power. But principals can’t work effectively if they’re constantly afraid of losing their jobs, which Rico understands. Ultimately, the experience taught Smuts an important lesson about the union president: “I can rely on this person.”

Within a few months, relations between the union and the district had started to improve. While there was no partnership yet, both union leaders and district officials had begun working toward a more collegial relationship. By inviting both groups to meet with him together in his office, Riley had them talking again. “He had an ability to heal,” Rico says.

Then tragedy struck. In October of 1998, after only three years as superintendent, Riley died of leukemia. The next month, a school board member committed suicide. With the community reeling from two terrible losses and interim superintendents coming and going, the relationship between the union and the district stalled. Finally in 1999, the school board hired Ron Barnes.

Around that time, Rico, received a flier from the American Federation of Teachers, the national union with which ABCFT is affiliated, promoting a weeklong seminar at Harvard University on labor-management relations in public schools. Rico wanted to attend and asked Barnes to go too. Since the Harvard seminar started a week before Barnes was to begin his new job at ABC

[†]Laura Rico was co-president of ABC Federation of Teachers from 1991 to 1996. She became the sole president in 1996.



At left, students at Hawaiian Elementary hold “Rising Star” awards in recognition of their achievement on state assessments. Over the past several years, Hawaiian has greatly increased student achievement, largely thanks to support from the labor-management partnership.

Below left, ABC teachers and children wave picket signs during the 1993 strike that ultimately resulted in a new school board, a new superintendent, and a new partnership between the union and the district.



meetings, which they promised to keep confidential. Rico kept Barnes informed of people in the community who were sowing conflict or had an axe to grind or simply wanted to run for school board. She also would tell him of problems that teachers were having with principals. Barnes would share his concerns about certain schools. Rico says they did not discuss salaries, health benefits, transfers, or leaves of absence during these meetings. “In this partnership, things that are to be done at the [bargaining] table are done at the table.” Rico and Barnes also created 12 guiding principles (see box on page 19) that formed the basis of their professional relationship (and that Rico and current superintendent Smuts follow to this day). One of the most frequently mentioned by union members and

administrators is No. 11: “We don’t let each other fail.”

South Side Support

There was a time, though, when the district was failing some of its students. In 1999, Rico remembers Margene Millette, a union member and former strike captain, storming into her office. “I can’t spend half a year reteaching because there’s a person next door who doesn’t know what the hell they’re doing,” Rico says Millette told her. “This is not fair. These kids need more help.”

“These kids” were Millette’s students at Hawaiian Elementary. One of six schools located on the South Side, the school then, as now, enrolled mostly Hispanic students from low-income families with limited English. In 2007-08, the school year for which most recent figures are available, 96 percent of the students who attended the 530-student school were Hispanic, 69 percent were English language learners, and 100 percent received free or reduced-price meals. Comparatively, only 20 percent of the district’s 20,860 students were English language learners and just 37 percent received free or reduced-price meals that year.

While some homes in the more affluent city of Cerritos sell for a million dollars, it’s not uncommon to have multiple families living in single-family homes in the city of Hawaiian Gardens.

and his former district would not release him early, he suggested Rico take others instead. She attended the seminar along with the district’s two human resources directors, four school board members, members of the ABCFT executive board, and the presidents of the district’s two other unions, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (which represents the district’s bus drivers, maintenance workers, painters, roofers, welders, and cafeteria workers) and the California School Employees Association (which represents support staff, including secretaries and paraprofessionals). The seminar helped jump-start the partnership. “Anyone can say, ‘Let’s work together,’” Rico says. “What does that really mean?”

It meant that members of the group had to listen and talk to each other. During the weeklong seminar, they learned about each other’s jobs and shared their ideas for improving their community. When they returned to the district, they met with Barnes, who had just started his job. Rico remembers that he was receptive to what they had learned. They both decided, though, that “we needed to really develop our relationship first.”

The following week, Rico and Barnes talked further. They decided to meet once a week. “At first, we thought we wouldn’t have anything to talk about every week,” Rico says. But they soon found they had more than enough to discuss in the closed-door



The union and the district formed the South Side Reading Collaborative, through which they jointly sponsored professional development conferences to improve instruction in reading.

Laurie Cordova, Hawaiian Elementary's principal for the last three years, says that many of her students grow up raising younger siblings or moving in and out of relatives' homes. "Their life is very inconsistent," she says. "The teachers here are their consistency." The neighborhood in which the school is located reflects that transience. A casino, two bingo halls, a Food 4 Less, a Coin Laundry, and The Way Out Ministries dot the strip-mall landscape.

When Millette first came to Hawaiian Elementary 16 years ago, she experienced a bit of culture shock. "I had a fifth-grade class," she says. "I couldn't even use my third-grade materials with them. They were academically behind." Millette had previously taught gifted and talented students at Mary Bragg Elementary in Cerritos. That experience had not prepared her for this one. At the time, many teachers at Hawaiian had emergency credentials, and the school was using a variety of reading programs.

Millette persuaded Rico, her union president, to do something about it. Rico talked to Barnes. "I said to him, 'This can't go on anymore. Don't hire anyone in this district without a credential.'" Barnes and the district's director of human resources met with Rico and her executive board. They discussed how for years the district had been forced to hire emergency credentialed teachers because of a teacher shortage. So together they devised ways to make ABC a more attractive place to work. It took a couple years to work out the details. During 2001 and 2002, the union and the district restructured the salary schedule to raise beginning teacher salaries from \$36,319 to \$40,225 (beginning salaries now start at just under \$45,000). The district also increased its years-of-service credit from 9 years to 12, meaning that if a teacher taught 15 years in another district then moved to ABC, the district would recognize 12 of those years in determining the teacher's salary.

The union and the district also beefed up recruiting in the South Side schools. Teachers received a \$5,000 signing bonus to work in any of the six schools. Also, "there were student teachers here that we wanted to nurture," Rico says. So district officials told student teachers in ABC that the district would pay for their last year of college if they agreed to work in a South Side school for at least two years.

To spread the word that ABC wanted to hire top-notch teachers, the district bought time at local movie theaters and adver-

tised an upcoming job fair on movie trailers. Moviegoers paid attention. At that first job fair, 2,000 people stood in line to apply for roughly 60 positions. Since then, ABC job fairs have attracted 700 to 800 applicants each year for approximately 35 jobs. Rico and her colleagues in administration point out that the district made having highly qualified teachers in every school a priority before No Child Left Behind, the federal education law, did.

Carol Hansen, the assistant superintendent of human resources, notes that 99 percent of ABC's 2,000 teachers are fully credentialed. In the district's South Side schools, 100 percent of teachers are fully credentialed. And just as important, on average, teachers in the South Side schools have 13 years of experience. Districtwide, on average, teachers have 16 years. Although the district no longer offers the \$5,000 signing bonus for working in the South Side schools, both Hansen and Rico say teachers still want to work in them and few ever leave. "It's because they're well taken care of," Hansen says. "There's support."

The union and the district did more than strengthen teacher recruitment in the South Side schools. They also focused on improving the curriculum. "If you don't know how to read, that's a death sentence, especially if you can't speak English very well," Rico says. So the union and the district formed the South Side Reading Collaborative, through which they jointly sponsored professional development conferences to improve instruction in reading. The schools also received additional funds to purchase a reading program of their choice. The superintendent's only requirement was that it be research based. Thanks to support from the American Federation of Teachers, district administrators and building representatives visited Houston, Texas, in 2001 to observe research-based programs. Teachers and administrators at Hawaiian Elementary chose Success for All, which the school still uses today. Other South Side schools chose Houghton Mifflin Reading.

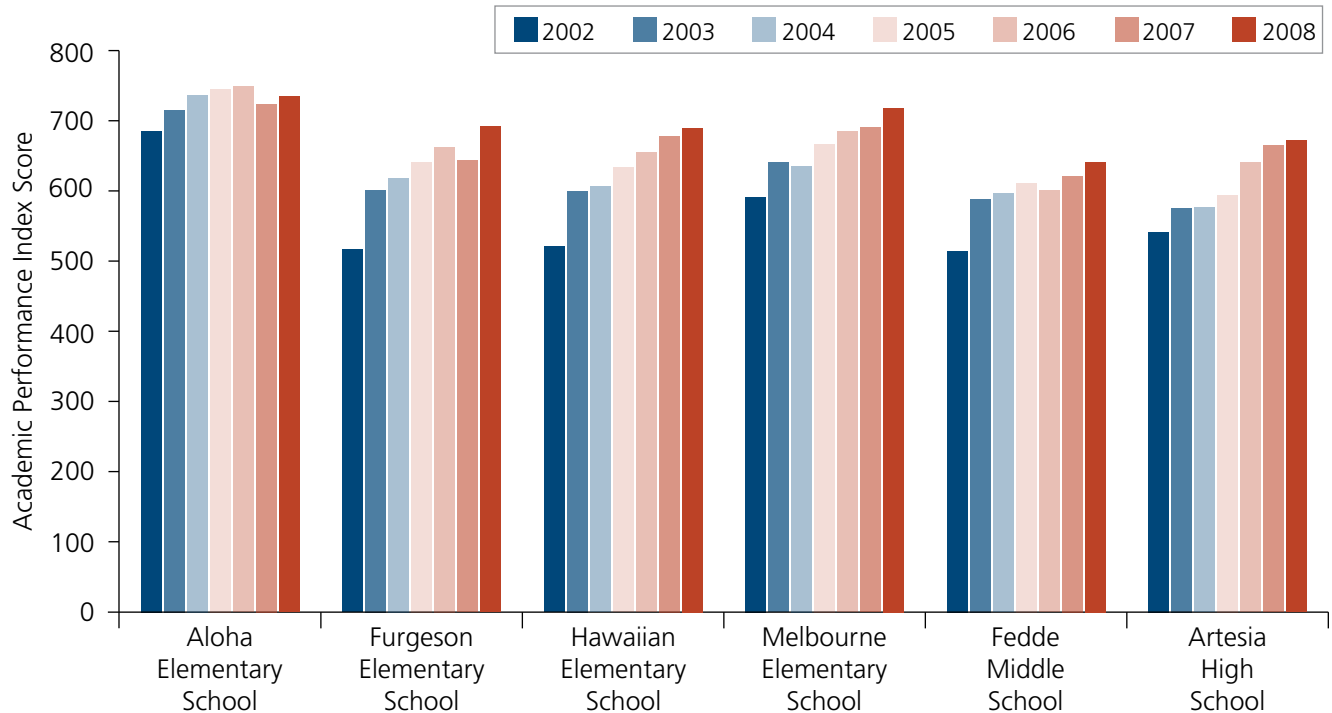
Millette, who served as a building representative at that time, appreciates that teachers had the freedom to pick a program. And she values the consistency that having the same program throughout her school provides. In South Side schools, like Hawaiian, teachers can now discuss ways to improve instruction across grade levels. Besides fostering a more collaborative environment, the partnership has ultimately allowed for better teaching, which in turn has led to better student results (see the chart on page 18).

South Side Schools Show Steady Gains

The labor-management partnership between the ABC Federation of Teachers and the ABC Unified School District has allowed teachers and administrators

to focus on boosting academic achievement, especially in the six historically low-performing schools on the district's South Side. The chart below shows that

student achievement in these six schools has been increasing for many years, due in part to initiatives like the South Side Reading Collaborative.



The Academic Performance Index (API) is a numeric index used by the state of California to measure the academic performance and growth of schools (as well as student subgroups and school districts). It ranges from a low of 200 to a high of 1,000. Although the statewide performance target for all

schools is 800, each year a growth target—of, for example, 5 points—is set for each school. The API is calculated using results from the California High School Exit Examination and from the Statewide Testing and Reporting Program, which together test English language arts, mathematics, science, and

history-social science. (To learn more about the API, see www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/documents/infoguide07b.pdf. School data for the chart were drawn from www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/apireports.asp.)

The Partnership Grows

Student achievement has continued to climb and the partnership has continued to grow despite changes in district leadership. When Ron Barnes retired in 2005, the school board hired Gary Smuts, then the deputy superintendent. “They wanted somebody who would foster the relationship” between the union and the district, Smuts says. Upon his appointment, he pledged to continue the initiatives that Barnes and Rico had started. One of those was the partnership’s leadership team.

In 1999, ABCFT had a retreat for building representatives and Barnes asked if ABC principals could join them for the part that focused on the district’s budget and the union contract. Rico and the union executive board said that principals were welcome to attend. At the retreat, which Barnes and Rico dubbed “Partnership with Administration and Labor” (P.A.L.), the union’s chief negotiator and the district’s human resources director did a joint presentation. “It went so well we decided we’d plan our next P.A.L. retreat together,” Rico says.

Of course, there was resistance at first because the strike was still fresh in principals’ minds. Laurie Cordova, who at the time

of the retreat was principal of Benito Juarez Elementary, says that many principals did not want to attend. “They can shove us together all they want. This won’t work,” she remembers some of the principals saying to each other. Neither building representatives nor principals especially liked the retreat’s assigned seating: building representatives had to sit with their principals, an arrangement that exists today. “There was still some animosity,” says Margene Millette, who was then the building representative at Hawaiian. “You’re thinking, ‘I don’t even like my principal.’”

Gradually, those hard feelings began to soften, as the union and the district held a P.A.L. retreat for building representatives and principals every year at a local hotel. As partners, the union and the district split the cost. They also invite a keynote speaker each year. One year early on in the partnership, the speaker was Linda Kaboolian, who taught the labor-management seminar at Harvard that the ABC group attended; she provided some initial guidance for the partnership. Last year, Saul Rubinstein, professor of labor studies and employment relations at Rutgers University, spoke about the factors that help sustain partnerships over the long term. Rubinstein also spoke at the 2007 P.A.L.



At the retreats, principals and building representatives discuss ways to improve their relationships with each other and strategies for improving student achievement.

retreat, where he discussed the history of union-management partnerships in the United States, how the union and the district could plan initiatives for school improvement together, and how to take the partnership deeper into schools.

At the retreats, principals and building representatives discuss their strengths and weaknesses as a team and ways to improve their relationships with each other. They also discuss strategies for improving student achievement, which remains the focus of every P.A.L. retreat.

To strengthen the retreat and the partnership, in 2005 Smuts and Rico created a P.A.L. leadership team, which meets at least two to three times a year. The team is made up of 21 people: the superintendent and his cabinet, and the union president and her executive board. Ray Gaer, the union's vice-president at large, is the union's point person, and Mary Sieu, ABC's deputy superintendent, is the district's point person. Both Gaer and Sieu set the agenda for each P.A.L. retreat.

Members of the team often call each other or meet in person to discuss problems. For example, Rico and Hansen, the assistant superintendent of human resources, enjoy a rapport that allows both women to politely raise red flags. Given California's budget crisis this year, Hansen's office recently reorganized staff-

ing ratios. Declining enrollment in the district meant that schools needed fewer special education teachers. This year, there were more teacher openings in regular education. So the human resources office, with the union's help, asked for teachers from special education to volunteer for regular education positions. "The union helped us paint it as an opportunity," Hansen says. Rather than just sending the teachers a memo about changes in their teaching assignments, Hansen met with Rico first and they devised this plan.

Filtering that kind of collaboration down into the schools was the focus of this year's P.A.L. retreat. "The partnership improves the more it begins to spread out," Smuts says.

For instance, students at Haskell Middle School in Cerritos have benefited from improved relations between administrators and teachers. Leonore Bello, a math teacher and a building representative there, enjoyed a good working relationship with the school's former principal, Susan Hixson. Hixson, who recently became director of human resources at the district level, says as soon as Bello became the building representative, the two discussed their goals and objectives. "We wanted to see every student be successful."

At one of their weekly meetings four years ago, Hixson and Bello decided the school needed an intervention program for students having trouble in math. So Bello wrote a grant for state funding of a program where teachers earn extra money to help students outside of class three days a week—before, during, and after school. Bello has run the program ever since. Before Bello won the grant, Hixson had tried to establish an intervention program, but only two teachers participated. With Bello running the program, about 20 teachers now commit to staying after school.

Bello also helped Hixson with another project: changing the school's start date. Only seventh- and eighth-graders attend Haskell, and for years Hixson and several teachers wanted seventh-graders to start a day earlier to help them adjust. The contract requires a school to have 100 percent teacher support for any change in start times. "For several years, we couldn't get it passed," Bello says. Finally, she persuaded her colleagues to approve the change. Bello says she gladly worked with her principal "because if the teachers aren't happy, nothing's going to fly." Hixson says she appreciated Bello's ability to work with everyone at the school. "Her strength is that she has a really good

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Guiding Principles

Laura Rico, ABC Federation of Teachers president, and Gary Smuts, ABC superintendent, adhere to these 12 principles to help strengthen the district's labor-management partnership.

1. We will work hard to understand the core of each other's job.
2. We will respect each other.
3. We will be honest with each other.
4. We will not "sugar coat" difficult issues.
5. We will disagree without being disagreeable.
6. We will reflect on each other's comments, suggestions, and concerns.
7. We will seek clarification until we understand.
8. We will maintain confidentiality.
9. We will both "own the contract."
10. We solve problems rather than win arguments.
11. We don't let each other fail.
12. We will laugh at ourselves and with each other.

ABC Partnership

(Continued from page 19)

connection with the entire staff, and so she was able to work with the staff and then work with me.”

Bello now has a new principal to work with, Camille Lewis. One of 11 new principals in the district (many retired last year or, like Hixson, moved to the district office), Lewis had worked in previous districts without a formal labor-management partnership. So when union president Rico attended a new principal’s meeting over the summer, “I went ‘wow!’” Lewis recalls. “It was impressive that Laura takes the time to meet with us.” While Lewis has pledged to continue the partnership, she wonders how one aspect of it will work: the P.A.L. assessment.

A Relationship Takes Work

ABC’s labor-management partnership has matured enough that teachers and administrators can evaluate it. They realize the relationship is a work in progress, but they also see that it is well worth the effort. One struggle involves a longtime evaluation of school administrators by teachers. For more than 20 years, the union has administered an assessment of district principals. Teachers anonymously rated their principals and wrote comments. The assessment was “something they could rip the principals apart with, quite frankly, and the principals would see it,” Rico says. Teachers mailed the completed assessments to the union office and then Rico sent them to the principals to review. Teachers never saw the assessments and the superintendent did not use them in principal evaluations. Still, some of the comments hurt.

At a meeting with the principals last year, Smuts says, he asked, “What is the greatest challenge that remains in moving the labor-management partnership into the schools?” The principals said it was the union’s assessment. So the P.A.L. leadership team established a subcommittee of union officers and administrators to create a new assessment. That committee devised an instrument that has widespread support. It still allows teachers to assess their principals, and it has a comment section for recommendations. It also measures the effectiveness of the district’s

labor-management partnership, and will ultimately be used as a tool for school improvement. (The superintendent has said that he will not use the assessment to evaluate principals.)

To remind everyone of the partnership’s purpose, the first page of the P.A.L. assessment includes the ABCFT and district mission statement: “The ABC Partnership is a collaborative effort to improve student achievement and to enhance the teaching and working environment for faculty, staff, and administration through the institutional partnering of colleagues in the ABC Unified School District and the ABC Federation of Teachers. Faculty and administration should have a voice in those decisions that reflect the collaborative efforts and goals of the partnership emphasizing a common understanding of the issues, joint research, sharing of information, mutual respect, and working together to ensure each other’s success.”

The assessment provides a scale—needs improvement, inconsistent, satisfactory, excellent, and not enough information—to use in answering the survey. Questions are divided into three categories: districtwide, schoolwide, and partnership. Some statements that respondents are asked to assess include the following:

- “The partnership creates an environment where one feels free to question decisions or policies without fear of reprisal.”
- “Teaching assignments and room assignments are established in a fair and equitable manner with meaningful staff input to maximize student achievement.”
- “The principal and ABCFT representative(s) are working collaboratively to promote and ensure the success of all members of the partnership.”

The assessments were distributed to teachers in the middle of January. The principal and building representatives at each school were to review the results and decide how to release them (except for the comments, which only the principal and building representatives see) to the school staff. At press time, assessment results were scheduled to be delivered to school staffs in early March. In January, Smuts

said that any problems would be resolved before the results’ release. “If it’s not a positive experience for the school, then we’ll do something about it together.”

Both Rico and Smuts are determined to look forward. They refuse to let the district revert to the conflicts of the past. That’s why they plan to write the partnership into a memorandum of understanding between the union and the district and present it to the school board in March. Rico and Smuts can’t lead forever; one day they’ll retire. But they want to ensure that student achievement remains the focus of the partnership they helped establish. “Leadership is critical here,” says Saul Rubinstein, the Rutgers professor who spoke at last year’s P.A.L. retreat. “The depth of leadership is important for sustaining the partnership into the future.”

David Montgomery, a longtime school board member, believes leaders who want to work as partners won’t be hard to find. “People will be clamoring to lead us,” he says. “We’re a model as to what can happen when you work together.” □

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