

The Bellevue Teachers Strike and its Implications for the Future of Post-Industrial
Reform Unionism

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On September 9, 2008, members of the Bellevue Teacher Association (BEA) walked out on a strike that would last nine days. The union defined pay, benefits and curriculum as their primary concerns. It was the curricular issue, however, that defined the strike and makes it worthy of national attention. Specifically, the union rebelled against a Gates Foundation supported initiative, the “Curriculum Web,” and specifically the blind conformity they believed it required. The Curriculum Web put daily lesson plans for each grade and subject on the internet for teachers to use. While some district administrators argued that the Web was a resource that teachers could modify, striking teachers complained that it had replaced professional competence with a “cookie cutter” approach to teaching. The nine-day strike ended only when the district and union reached agreement on a memorandum of understanding that formally recognized teacher authority to modify, supplement, or replace daily lessons and established a procedure to resolve teacher concerns over Curriculum Web lessons.

The strike speaks to tensions inherent in school accountability and teacher union reform efforts. In the early to mid 1990s, BEA Executive Director Mike Schoeppach had worked with Bellevue School District leaders to facilitate district decision-making that responded to local school conditions. The BEA was among the earliest unions to participate in the Teacher’s Union Reform Network (TURN). As opposed to the more adversarial union relations associated with the rise of school unions in the 1960s and 70s, TURN emphasized teacher professionalism in service of learning. In Bellevue, the district and union pursued collaborative efforts in curriculum, teacher improvement and site-based decisions.

As the accountability movement gained ground in the mid-nineties, Bellevue's School Board embraced the movement to raise test scores. When Mike Riley was hired as Bellevue superintendent in 1996, the School Board encouraged him in efforts to standardize curriculum and hold students and teachers to high expectations. Bellevue's schools were widely perceived as high performers. Being the 15th largest school district in the state and well-located in the relatively wealthy suburban area just across Lake Washington from Seattle, Bellevue was able to recruit highly qualified teachers. The union and District proved resourceful in securing relatively high wages despite Washington State's school equalization policies.

By 2008, however, the Bellevue Education Association's post-industrial, reform unionism had given way to more militant organizing. Union leaders said they were representing teachers' professional concerns regarding the Curriculum Web as well as on wage and benefits issues. Perhaps not surprisingly, some Bellevue District officials regarded the union's challenge to their prerogatives on the curriculum as a stalking horse for the more traditional union demands involving wages and benefits. Indeed, union President Michele Miller and her immediate predecessor, Steven Miller, insisted that both sets of issues were fundamental, and that without wide rank and file support for each there would not have been a strike. When the strike was over, the union had gained limited concessions on their bread and butter issues, but they were substantially more successful in addressing the curricular question.

In the paper that follows, we look more closely at the Bellevue strike to understand what it tells us about the issues of trust, teacher professionalism and union participation in school governance in an era in which school and teacher accountability have become

watchwords. Among other questions, we wish to understand how the new and seemingly neutral technology of the web came to be understood as the latest mechanism for teacher control rather than teacher empowerment. More importantly, we wish to examine what had happened to the once very strong impulse towards post-industrial reform unionism in the Puget Sound region. In the end, we ask whether the union's decision to marry economic demands with pedagogical concerns represents a successor to the model of post-industrial reform unionism.

Methods

To pursue these questions, it is necessary to trace district and union relations back to at least the 1990s. We conducted five interviews with union leaders and six with district leaders, including the lead union and district negotiators, district superintendent, district curriculum director, school board members, past and present union presidents, and past and present union executive directors. We began by interviewing the school board president and teacher union president and then pursued a snowball strategy to identify additional interviews. Each informant gave written consent to use their names and words after they had been reviewed for accuracy. Interviews generally lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured to understand individuals' perceptions of: 1) the issues involved in the strike, 2) how these issues were addressed, 3) the relationship between the union and district over time, and 4) the effects of the strike. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Our story largely coincides with the appointment of Mike Riley as superintendent of the Bellevue School District in July 1996 and his subsequent tenure. Although Riley resigned one year before the strike to take a position with the College Board in October

2007, his leadership framed the conflict that was to follow. We were not able to interview Riley because he died of a heart attack in October 2008 shortly after the strike's resolution. Consequently, we have done our best to reconstruct his perspective by listening carefully to his supporters.

We also analyzed notes from fifteen meetings conducted by members of the Bellevue school board with groups of ten to thirty teachers during spring 2008, just months before the strike. Approximately 400 (of 1,200) teachers participated in these meetings. Results from an on-line, anonymous survey of teachers conducted by the Bellevue School District in the spring of 2008, were also examined. Approximately 600 teachers participated in the survey. The survey included 24 forced response questions focused on the common curriculum, including questions about curricular goals, objectives, assessments, and daily lesson plans, as well as questions about the process for changing the common curriculum. Several hundred open-ended teacher responses provided additional insights. Teacher survey data and teaching meeting notes were acquired through public records requests from the Bellevue School District.

Additionally, to provide a context for the issues surrounding the strike, we reviewed data on Bellevue student performance and teacher turnover. Bellevue student performance records and demographic data were synthesized from data publicly reported by the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Teacher turnover rates and trends were acquired through the University of Washington's Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession. Finally, we examined Memoranda of Understanding, contracts, and bargaining alerts provided by the Bellevue Education Association.

The Theory and Practice of Post-Industrial Reform Unionism

To comprehend the 2008 strike and the union's demands for teacher participation in curricular governance, it is important to consider this skirmish in the context of reform unionism. In 1993, at the behest of then-Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, the Dunlop Commission issued its report on the Future of Labor Management Relations in the United States. The report sought greater management-employee collaboration and its most controversial finding called for an exemption from unfair labor practices when that collaboration incidentally dealt with compensation or working conditions.

Secretary Reich sought reforms to what was then perceived to be the U.S.'s failing industrial labor relations system. Organized labor in the United States was increasingly perceived as too adversarial, and incapable of supporting the productivity measures necessary to enable competition with the nation's major economic rivals at that time, Japan and Germany. Although Japan had already begun the bitter descent into its "lost decade," in 1993 it was still widely regarded as the greatest challenge to US economic hegemony. Economic and management researchers argued Japan's enterprise unions and employment systems were better adapted to the realities of the labor market than those in the US. Hashimoto (1981) was one of the first to link Japan's lifetime employment system with heavy investments in firm specific human capital. Koike (1987) advanced this argument by suggesting that frontline workers in Japan had been "white-collarized," solidifying their loyalty to their large firms and reinforcing their willingness to make positive contributions to the production process. Japan's institutional arrangements were understood as an accommodation designed to subdue militant union activity in the post-war period.

By contrast, the accommodations reached by U.S. industry and unions appeared less productive (Gordon, Edwards, & Reich, 1982). The National Labor Relations sharply distinguished managers and workers and this pre-empted many forms of participatory labor. U.S. firms conceded high wages, but insisted upon managerial prerogatives in areas the law deemed as non-mandatory in collective bargaining. This pattern tended to create reliance upon low or semi-skilled workers paid high wages who were to submit to management decisions (Atleson, 1983). In the 1990s, however, reformers within labor gained ground. Former UAW Vice President Irving Bluestone and his son called for a new “enterprise compact” between labor and management loosely patterned after the Japanese industrial relations (Bluestone & Bluestone, 1992).

That compact called for a move away from adversarial unionism and towards labor participation and collaboration with management across a broad domain of decisions. The approach was test-driven by the UAW and GM at the Tennessee Saturn plant, whose first car was rolled off the line in 1990. The Bluestones’ “compact” involved “a cooperative document, providing for a mutual vision and joint system for achieving common goals that foster the general well being of all stakeholders in a given endeavor” (p. 24). As such, it is similar to the trust agreements under discussion by reformist public school unionists.

Reform and Post-Industrial Unionism in Education

Within education, some teacher unions saw the comparisons with Japan and calls for a new compact as an opportunity to create collaborative relations. Many other research and business groups, however, focused on differences between our educational systems that they believed could not be bridged as long as strong unions persisted in protecting

member interests. Though these opposing camps often spoke of similar educational reforms, one camp, largely business leaders, placed accountability first, while the other camp, largely educators, argued that an empowered professional teacher corps offered the best prospects for educational and economic success.

Xerox Chairman David Kearns, who subsequently became Deputy Secretary for Labor under George Bush, outlined a plan in 1988 for “Winning the Brain Race, a plan to make out nations schools competitive” in which he argued both for greater school choice as well as greater teacher participation in school decision making. Kearns appeared to work well with fellow Rochesterian, Adam Urbanski, who to this day remains a leader in the Teacher Reform Union Network. While Kearns and Urbanski may have been able to work together, progressive scholars Berliner and Biddle (1995) argued that conservative reformers were busy manufacturing a crisis atmosphere intended to create more fundamental change. They saw a movement coalescing around a “profound mistrust of both educators and students,” that could only be overcome through greater accountability.

For students, accountability meant exams. For teachers, it generally involved rewarding productivity based on their students’ exams. During the late 1980s and early 1990s states were encouraged to adopt high standards and test students to reinforce them. Nationally, the accountability movement reached fruition at the federal level with the testing regimes required under President Bush’s 2001 No Child Left Behind initiative (Ravitch, 2010).

Through this two-decade long period, the two national teacher unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), survived. In part this was through adaptation, and in part, because the threats to U.S. economic

hegemony became much less fearsome in the 1990s. With the Japan and Germany in retreat, the US regained economic stature in the decade before the new Chinese miracle was widely recognized. Unions justified themselves as agents providing a much need voice for workers (Freeman and Medoff, 1982).¹

Our concern resides in understanding the possibilities that seemed open to teacher unions. The new teacher reform union movement sought survival in its embrace of accountability. These reformers would have their profession understood as the public schools' stewards. In 1997, Kerchner, Koppich and Weeres called upon teachers and their unions to put aside adversarial industrial unionism, with its focus on bread and butter issues, and instead mobilize around quality learning for students, acceptance of responsibility for school management, and the organization of external labor markets that would enable teachers to transfer across schools and advance their own careers. They envisioned a union of professionals who policed of their own ranks, while simultaneously creating opportunities for those who excelled to take on new roles as mentors or master teachers assisting in the peer evaluation and professional development of their fellow teachers. Within schools teams of teachers would meet, discuss, and evaluate school progress. The purpose was not merely accountability, which the authors argued for, but also teacher improvement and, with that, greater student success.

Reform unionists, such as Urbanski and Kerchner, Koppich, and Weeres, deemphasized teacher rights. Teachers would be part of a profession that internalized a code of ethics to fulfill its central function. The labor contracts that would support this

¹ Voice allows workers to raise collective concerns that, if not addressed, would go unaddressed, and which therefore threaten productivity. When exit as opposed to bargaining are is the only choice for workers or bosses, both sides face losses if the only viable option are quits or dismissal when dissatisfactions arise.

new post-industrial or reform unionism were envisioned as more modest documents that encouraged greater flexibility and cooperation as teachers, in collaboration with administration, governed themselves.

Just as advocates of post-industrial unions outside education had found, school union reformers had their critics who argued that teachers would be asked to do the job of management. From this critical perspective (Webb, 1987), post-industrial unionism is a sophisticated new form of managerialism, one that weakens class solidarity by having each member take it upon him or herself to monitor others. In the 1990s this perspective fed skepticism about the dawning information age. Rather than seeing the new information technologies as tools to empower workers to make decisions for themselves, Zuboff (1990) and others entertained the possibility that technology, like the Roman God Janus, possessed two faces. While one face might smile upon efforts to empower labor, the second face kept its eyes on trained on workers to monitor and control their performance. Through their embrace of testing technologies and other information-based tools of self-discipline and self-improvement, teacher union reformers, like union reformers elsewhere, tread into risky territory by calling for an end to adversarial relations with management while faithfully assuming that transformative new tools would not become weapons to be used against them. Particularly was this so in light of their embrace of 'thin' contracts based upon 'trust,' which would put them in a weak position should trust prove not to be warranted.

Union and Administrative Changes in Bellevue

During in the 1990s Bellevue Education Association, Executive Director Mike Schoeppach aligned his organization with the Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN)

that championed post-industrial unionism emphasizing student learning as an inherent responsibility of teachers' professional organization. That movement had been gaining steam, and achieved notable successes in diverse places, like Rochester, NY and Toledo, Ohio, among others. Roger Erskine, who presided over the neighboring Seattle Educational Association, was also involved. Schoeppach was attracted by TURN's emphasis upon quality and "making a difference in student learning." Schoeppach found Bellevue's former Superintendent receptive to many of these ideas.

Schoeppach began to understand his union as "focusing on how to make the schools work, as opposed to the traditional union stuff." He saw himself and his union as operating within a "guild tradition" where unions' took responsibility "to ensure that what went on in the classroom was quality work." To do that, professional teachers required "reasonable control over, or at least involvement in, the decisions that are made at the building level that have a direct impact, on, on their ability to do their job effectively." By the summer of 1997, the union and the district seemed to be in accord on this strategy.

The Bellevue district and teacher union had jointly launched their Teacher Assistance and Review Program (PAR), which included peer evaluation. The union and district also collaborated to create school based decision-making councils, Program Delivery Councils (PDCs). The PDCs involved parents, teachers, administrators and, at high schools, some students in joint-decision making. The councils were originally designed to address issues and priorities related to school program delivery. The union, as a separate entity, was only directly involved through their oversight PDC Support Team, which was composed of one representative each from the union, administration and parents. The

Advisory Committee was tasked to resolve any difficulties at local PDCs. In short, the union empowered the teachers to play their role outside of the union structure through joint decision-making bodies. Only if these became stuck would union administration representatives need to become involved.

Board member Judy Bushnell saw BEA Executive Director Schoeppach as a “visionary leader” and credited him with bringing teacher peer assistance and evaluation to Bellevue. Bushnell called Schoeppach “fabulous” saying, “he worked alongside of us” and “helped us,” placing students first, before teacher’s job rights.

At the same time, during the 1996-97 school year, Bellevue piloted the first Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). While the District performed substantially better than the rest of the state, it certainly was far from able to claim uniform success. Only 35% of District students had met the state’s new math standard, while 59% and 65% reached standard in writing and reading. These results were roughly one third better than the average across the state. The shock from this first administration was felt everywhere, and schools across Washington focused more intently on preparing for the exams. Schools statewide soon adjusted the exam, and two years later pass rates were substantially higher almost everywhere. After that, Bellevue’s progress, like the rest of the state, was decidedly more modest.

For a district that saw itself as a leader in student learning, Bellevue’s results simply were not good enough. This was especially so because the district had invested heavily in professional development in math, a fact which was painfully not evident in their pilot WASL scores. Bellevue’s School Board strengthened its resolve and sought a strong leader who would enforce high expectations across all its schools. In particular, the

Board sought a leader able to respond to the challenges they saw as integrally linked to its changing demographic profile.

By the mid-1990s, the Bellevue School District (BSD) was no longer an exclusive enclave of white privilege as substantially more minority students attended its schools. Socioeconomically, Bellevue students continued to come from middle or upper class families. From 1996 to 2008, the numbers of students receiving free or reduced lunch (a commonly used proxy for family income) remained relatively constant at 16 to 18% of all students. In 2008, Bellevue ranked 61 among the 71 school districts in the state enrolling more than 4000 students in its percentage of students who received free or reduced lunch. Racially and linguistically, however, Bellevue schools were becoming more diverse. According to the Washington Office of Public Instruction, the percentage of white students in the BSD fell from 72% in 1996 to 55% in 2008, while the percentages of Asian students increased from 18% to 26% and Hispanic students increased from 5% to 8% over the same period. The district also publicized the 42 different languages spoken in its schools (Lindblom, 1998). Concentrations of minority populations within a subset of schools further added to the thinking that uniformity across schools was needed.

The school board decided to hire the charismatic Mike Riley as its superintendent because of the promise he demonstrated in focusing on raising expectations for students. That promise could not be obtained without shaking the boat, and Riley had the stomach for that. By all accounts, Superintendent Riley focused on closing the racial achievement gap by raising expectations for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. A 1998 *Seattle Times* article quoted Riley explaining why he saw no reason why students from all backgrounds couldn't achieve at the same levels: "I don't think I've met any teachers

here that have a racist attitude, but I do think educators have what I would call ‘enabling behaviors’; they accept less than what the child could give” (quoted in Lindblom, 1998).

School board member Judy Bushnell, who voted to hire Riley as superintendent, remembered:

“[Riley’s] core belief was that the reason that we have so many failing students was that we’re not consistent in what we were expecting them to achieve. So we can’t really hold ourselves accountable if we can’t really specify what we are expecting them to know. So when kids go through a system, there are huge gaps and repetitions all through because no one has determined what a student should know in 8th grade science. So teachers teach the best they can whatever they determine and it may or may not be what that student needs to know for next year depending on what that teacher determines.”

Riley envisioned curriculum as the central building block to link high expectations to student performance. He relied upon three central pillars to create change: 1) clarity of expectations about the rigor required of students, 2) making the district’s practice transparent and subject to discussion, and 3) leverage of external knowledge (Dana Center, 2008). Increasingly, Riley’s pursuit of these pillars took place outside Schoeppach’s earlier framework of joint union-administration collaboration.

Initially, it seemed as though union-administration collaboration would continue. In his first bargain with Riley as superintendent, Schoeppach achieved what he thought was his best contract. Patterned after Seattle’s system, the 1997 contract contained a peer-evaluation and assistance program aimed at improving individual instruction, but which encouraged teachers to take collective responsibility for policing their own ranks.

In the summer of 1997, the district and union signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signaling their joint intent to reach a written “trust” agreement by

December 1997, which would define “the principles upon which the District and the Association base their relationship, their mutual interests.”

However, December 1997 came and went without a formal union-district trust agreement. One likely reason was after 18 years in his position, Schoeppach himself was now preparing to take a position as Labor Relations Director under Seattle Mayor Schell’s new administration. More fundamentally, however, the school board’s emerging agenda sought greater accountability through standardization. Empowering teachers was not seen as an effective way to create consistent expectations and lessons for students.

Riley and Schoeppach did have a common dedication to student learning, but what kept them apart was their different understanding of how teachers were to be involved in its achievement. Bushnell described Superintendent Riley as “really passionate and highly intelligent, and really in a lot of ways was ten steps ahead of anyone. When you have a leader like that, they become impatient with the processes that are necessary in order to keep people with you.” Bushnell explained that Riley felt student learning, particularly the need to address gaps and deficiencies that would serve children, was too important to allow it to be slowed down by procedural concerns. Unionists saw this impatience less favorably. A pattern was set in place that would persist through the development of Curriculum Web. Bushnell commented, “Teachers wanted to be involved [in the development of the Curriculum Web], but there was a determination made that we needed to get stuff out there quickly. And to start with that and then tweak it as it goes.” Bushnell saw more and more teachers involved over time in developing standards, but recognized that widespread participation was difficult because of the time commitment and other obstacles that stood in the way.

When Schoepach's successor, Kathleen Heiman, arrived in Bellevue in April of 1998, she entered into a much less collaborative environment than Schoepach enjoyed a year earlier. A lawyer, Heiman had worked with several unions. Three things attracted her to the new post in Bellevue. First the district had a "blue chip reputation" as a "great" district. Second, Heiman saw this as an opportunity to return to the work she had done earlier with teachers. Finally, of special interest for her was the opportunity to expand upon the initiatives she had undertaken with the National Treasury Employees Union implementing Clinton mandated trust agreements and shared decision-making. Bellevue's commitment towards joint decision-making in teacher evaluation and curriculum, and its MOU to form a trust agreement attracted her.

Expecting to build out the trust agreement, Heiman took her position as Executive Director of the Bellevue Education Association. On her first day on the job, she accompanied the BEA union president to an arbitration hearing they filed to require the administration to adhere to an MOU the District had signed. The newly hired executive director saw it as an ill omen that the district had broken faith on a jointly reached settlement. As Heiman understood it, refusal to honor their joint agreements did not bode well for the BEA to take the District at its word, and thus strained the potential to attain a bona fide trust agreement. Strained labor relations were further foreshadowed when, at their first meeting, Riley defined his understanding of Heiman by telling her, "So you are a litigator." That was not the role she would have chosen to explain why she had come to Bellevue.

While union and district continued to work together, observers on both the sides acknowledged the frost that had settled upon their relationship. Their signature reforms,

the PAR and also the site based PDC continued for some years, though in attenuated forms. The PDC Advisory Committee remained operational only for the first four years after Heiman took up her position as Executive Director, and the district made little use of PDCs as an instrument for school reform. Two years after his arrival, Superintendent Riley removed budgetary and instructional powers from the PDCs.

Centralization was not a bar to all district and union innovation, however. In the 2000 contract, Bellevue adopted a new plan that provided early release for district-wide early release for professional development. The union may also have become persuaded that some elements of centralized planning were helpful. Executive Director Heiman described it this way,

“Mike Riley really believed in, and he articulated a vision for an articulated, K-12 central curriculum and not having this school doing this thing and that school doing that thing, ... and ... everyone I spoke to supported that. They liked the idea of the left hand knowing what right hand was doing, so to speak, that there be articulation, that there be real thought and connectedness built into the system. The real problem... was taking away that ability to make a professional judgment call about what this kid needs or this class needs and not the doing a lock-step approach to what happens in a classroom, or what happens in a classroom over time, in a month or in a year. And so the people that were telling me that, yeah, I support an articulated curriculum, yeah, I support higher expectations for kids, were the same people who were telling me, this is not the answer. This has become something very, very different.”

By 2002, the district-union relationship had further deteriorated. Debby Nissen, President of the BEA, threatened a walkout over compensation. During the 2002 bargaining session, there was a definite turn towards the kind of positional bargaining typically associated with adversarial unionism. Nevertheless, that year negotiators agreed to an innovative new “lesson study” program that encouraged teachers to work in collegial groups to create and refine lessons to improve teaching and learning. One

observer called the district's performance "schizophrenic," in its capacity for teacher reforms coupled with increasing standardization and centralization.

After Schoeppach left as BEA executive director, the union was largely locked out of Riley's inner circle in which curriculum was developed and policy discussed, and the union focus shifted to compensation. Bellevue strove to keep its teachers well paid within the state, though the state equalization law made it difficult to raise salaries far out of line with other Washington Districts. Increased compensation typically had to be justified as compensation for non-classroom duties. Pay was a significant issue in Bellevue as teachers complained they couldn't afford the houses within the district in which they taught. On this issue, Riley seemed more often to seek accommodation.

The Development of the Common Curriculum and Curriculum Web in Bellevue

Although curriculum was formally and legally in the hands of the district, Riley continued to believe it was being administered inconsistently. Test results failed to improve as dramatically as he hoped, and this only deepened his resolve to push harder. As shown in Figures 1 and 2 below, the District's results on its fourth grade math test results closely tracked those of the state. More problematic, however, was the fact that the investment made by the district to improve student performance by creating consistent and high expectations through its uniform curriculum had done nothing to separate it from the rest of the state with regards to its increasingly diverse, especially Hispanic, student population.

Figure 1: Comparison of Bellevue School District and Average State Proficiency Rates on Fourth Grade Math WASL

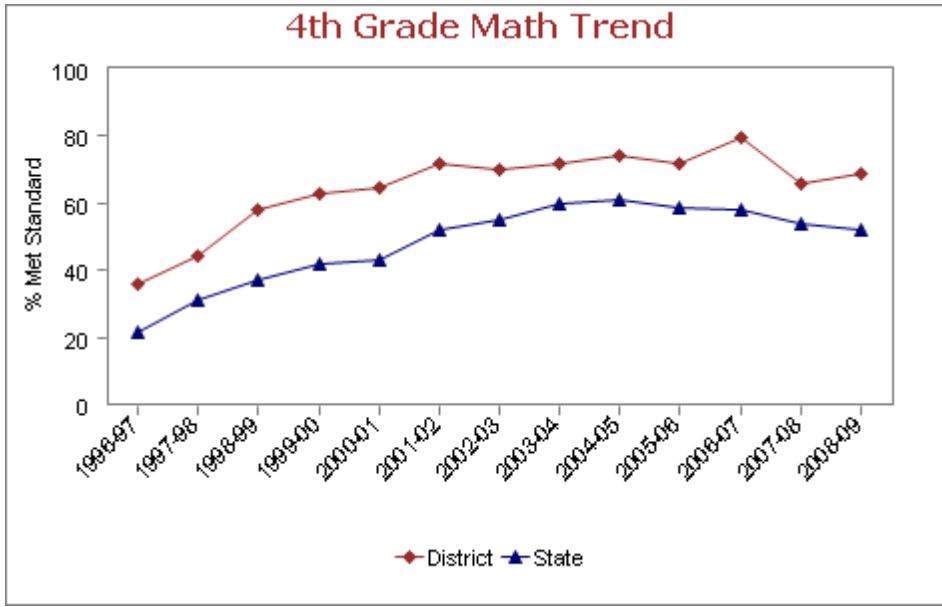
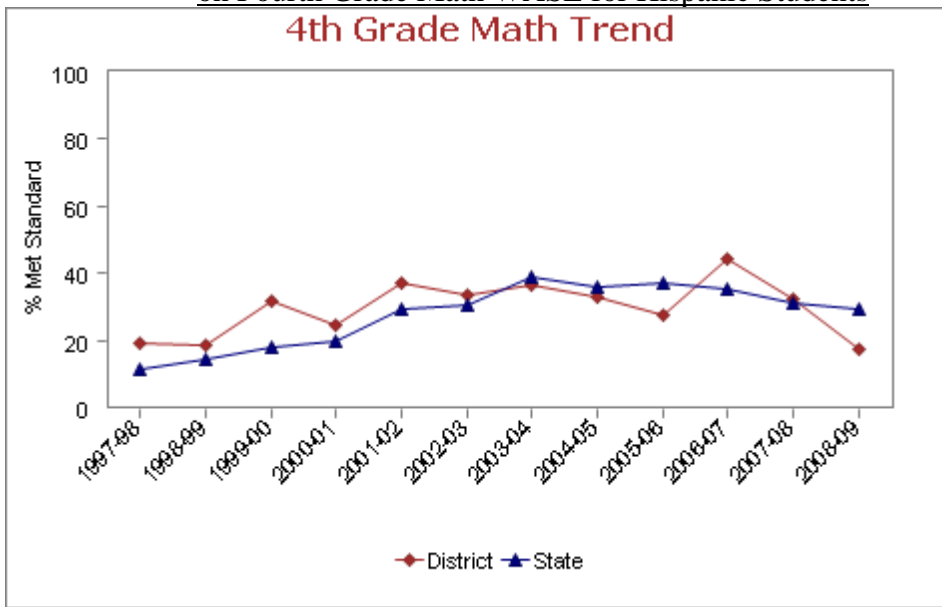


Figure 2: Comparison of Bellevue School District and Average State Proficiency Rates on Fourth Grade Math WASL for Hispanic Students



More broadly, test results from the five Bellevue elementary schools whose free and reduced lunch populations were above 40% continued to lag substantially behind the rest of the schools in the district. Figure 3 shows the district-wide test score gap in fourth

grade math. Uniform curriculum had not produced uniform results. Comparing the size of the gap between Bellevue middle class and low-income students' test scores (Figure 3) with the size of the same gap statewide (Figure 4), it is clear the BSD has not been unusually successful in reducing the size of the socioeconomic achievement gap. While Bellevue's test results were not worse than the rest of the state, there is scant evidence that its curricular efforts were more effective than those of other districts. Overall, the District's test scores have been higher than the rest of the state, but much of that is likely to be accounted for by its higher socioeconomic student population.

Figure 3: Comparison of Bellevue School District on Fourth Grade Math WASL for Low Income and Non-Low Income Students

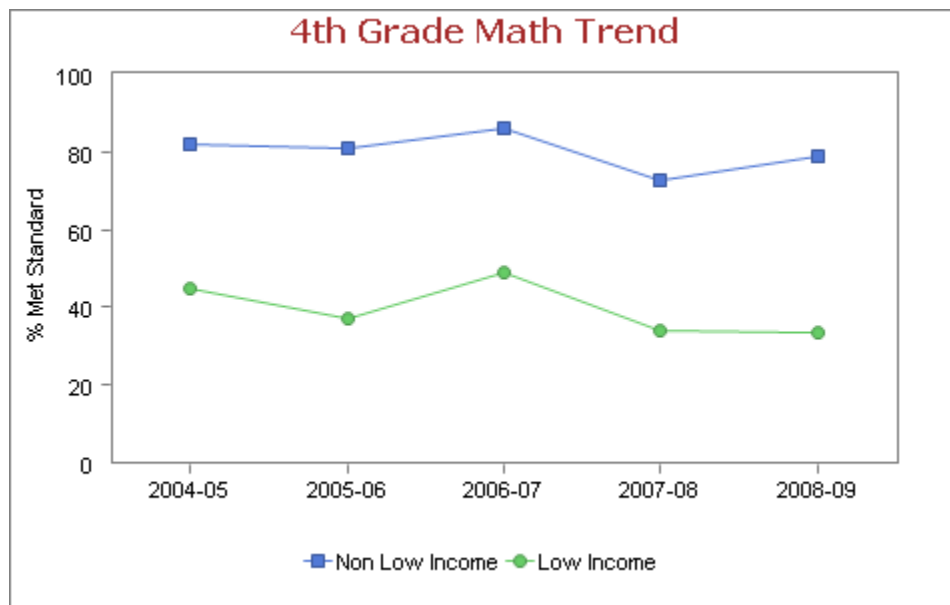
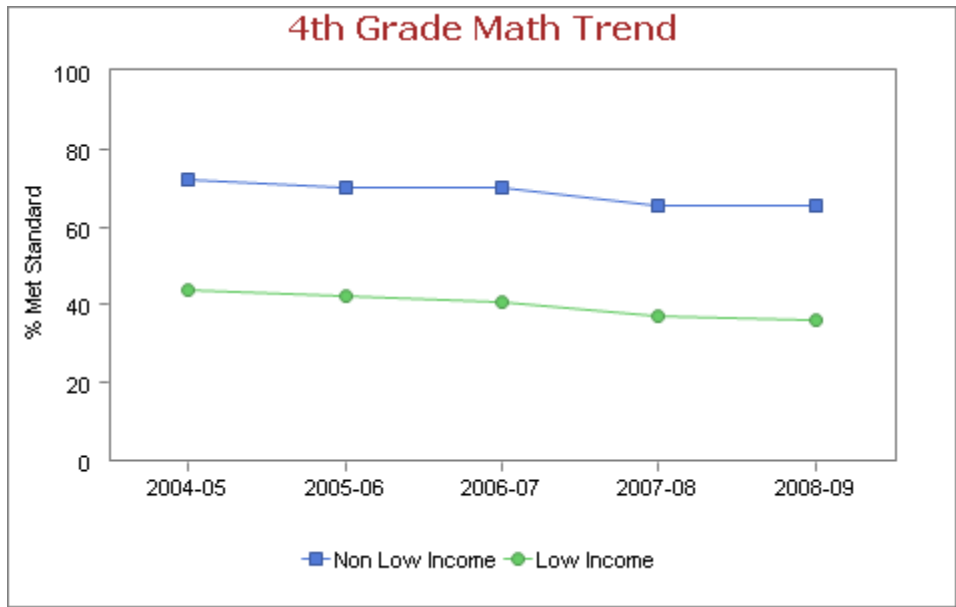


Figure 4: Comparison of State Averages on Fourth Grade Math WASL for Low Income and Non-Low Income Students



One area for which Riley gained broad kudos involved his plan to open up Advanced Placement and other honors classes to every student. The point was to encourage all students to strive harder, not to lock out some students from the most challenging classes offered. The Bellevue District was extremely proud of the percentage of its students taking advanced coursework. Unfortunately, as indicated above, test score evidence suggests this had little effect among low-income students.

To ensure consistency of expectations, Riley and the district pressed for more exacting and frequent reviews of teachers based upon results from their assessments of students. These made the otherwise private work of teachers public and were used to prod adherence to the curriculum. He consulted widely with outside experts and academic centers, especially the University of Washington, the TIMSS (Trends in International Math and Science Study), the College Board, the Charles Dana Center and set up a powerful Advisory Committee known as the Partnership. On their advice he sought to build out his singular mission with external funding. He turned first to the

Boeing Foundation in 2004, and then to the Gates Foundation in 2006 and used those funds to underwrite new curriculum based on TIMMS and other assessment efforts. One unique feature of this initiative was that the results were to be posted to the web where they were at once both visible both a resource and as an indication of administrative expectations.

Supported with Gates Foundation money, teacher developers were recruited to write curriculum plans for the web. The union received no special entitlement to participate in the developer selection process. Nor were the PDCs recognized as important contributors or sounding boards. Superintendent Riley had, instead, built up and relied upon his own internal core of principals and curriculum specialists. The school board saw Riley's principals as a major strength, though others expressed more skepticism.

District officials seemed to recognize that the principals filtered the news Riley heard regarding implementation of the Curriculum Web. Sour news was increasingly blamed upon the union "machine" which was perceived as inflaming dissatisfactions, rather than as an ally in pursuit of good education.

BEA President Steven Miller, indeed, was no fan of the district's administration. Incidents on both sides were interpreted as acts of bad faith, making productive conversations difficult. One top district administrator would later comment that the roots of the strike were largely a manifestation of issues between the President of the Union and Superintendent Riley. Yet teachers increasingly expressed concerns over the content of the lessons on the web, the district's assessments, and their implementation from the top-down. One board member commented that distrust led Riley to "separate out teachers from the union."

By 2007, increasing numbers of teachers were speaking plainly about feeling disrespected. Union leaders asserted that the increasing curricular centralization alienated many teachers, including several excellent, highly professional teachers. Former Bellevue teachers also provided anecdotal evidence of unusual teacher turnover in Bellevue.

One measure of teacher concern with teaching conditions in the Bellevue School District is in the teacher turnover rate. Research by the University of Washington's Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (CSTP) indicates that despite some of the highest supplemental pay levels in the state, the Bellevue School District's teacher retention rates are lower compared with other districts of similar size and demography. A comprehensive 2009 CSTP study, *Taking Stock of Washington's Teacher Workforce*, revealed that of 863 Bellevue teachers in 2003, 52% stayed until 2007, as opposed to the State average of 58% over the same five-year period (Elfers & Plecki, 2009, p. 22). The study concluded "mobility rates are particularly high in districts where the majority of students are low-income" (p. 14). However, the BSD's population of low-income students during this period averaged 18%, whereas the state's overall low-income student population averaged nearly 37%. Bellevue's retention rates for beginning teachers are even more surprising. According to the CSTP's 2003 report *Who's Teaching Washington's Children?*:

"Bellevue provides an example of a district in which a significant portion of beginning teachers did not remain five years later. In 2000, 60 percent of the original cohort either had exited the Washington education system (41.5 percent), transferred to other districts (15.4 percent) or moved to private schools (3.1 percent) (Plecki et al, 2003, p. 52-53)."

Deputy Superintendent Clark, who would succeed Riley as interim Superintendent in 2008, and others told themselves the dissent was not truly representative of the majority of the teachers. Clark likened the central role of curriculum in Bellevue to the necessity of following designs when building planes:

“You can’t work at Boeing and build an Airbus...That was the heart of our work. So, yes it was mandatory that you used our curriculum, it was mandatory that you followed a sequence of lessons. Could you alter the sequence, the timing, spend more time, use supplementary materials? Yes, but the basic curriculum housed on the web was the district curriculum.”

The ability to bend or alter the curriculum, however, was either not real or not clearly communicated. Board member Judy Bushnell knew Riley to insist that teachers had flexibility in administering the curriculum, but she was not satisfied teachers heard or believed this. She asked Riley directly, “What would you have done if someone asked you to teach a curriculum that was not very good?” To which Riley responded, “I’d shut the door and teach what I thought should be taught.” In this response, Bushnell understood Riley to recognize the importance of teacher discretion. But Bushnell also recognized district had a problem in that “if you’re doing that behind closed doors a lot teachers feel tension that they are disobeying or that’s not good.”

Commissioned to seek out information for the board and for Superintendent Riley, Bushnell became the school board member most knowledgeable of teacher concerns with the district’s curriculum. In 2007 when Bushnell held fact-finding meetings with teachers she found that “about 60% of the teachers raised their hands and said, ‘I have flexibility’ and some would raise their hand and say ‘I don’t.’” For Bushnell, and for others on the administration side, it was a matter of communication and perception. As she understood it, the original intent for the curriculum web was that it be like Wikipedia,

a resource that teachers would constantly update and improve. However, as with Wikipedia itself, the owners felt central controls were essential. Bushnell suggested that teachers be encouraged to rate content on the web, but Riley and curriculum developers rejected that approach. Rather than broadly empower teachers to alter the web, a recurring complaint was that curriculum developers consulted only among a relatively small number of individual teachers. Thus insulated, the developers left distressed teachers to deal with their web materials as best they could. All the while mixed messages abounded about the desirability for curricular consistency and how much authority teachers had to modify content.

Reflecting back on the implementation of the Curriculum Web, several individuals within the Bellevue district administration acknowledged that messages were not consistent. Some principals used the web to discipline teachers whom they thought needed tighter control, while others protected teachers who modified lessons. The principals were themselves under pressure not merely to raise test scores, but also to demonstrate that they were conducting demanding evaluations. The web and teachers' assessments constituted the evaluation starting points for many principals.

After her investigations, board member Bushnell says she told Riley, "OK Mike, I'm a board member and a teacher and I don't think I get it." Perhaps teachers did have some discretion in classroom, but if so she could not get Riley to precisely define its limits. She pressed him whether she would have the right to modify a lesson, to modify it for three straight days, to use supplementary materials more in line with her perceptions as a teacher of her student's ability? When Riley responded, "It depends.," she told him, "It's grey, it's a judgment call" so that ultimately he was going to have to allow for teacher

judgments. It couldn't be a one-way conversation. Unfortunately, by that point the district had few good mechanisms to conduct two-way conversations with teachers.

After Riley left the Bellevue district in 2007, two contradictory beliefs with regard to the common curriculum coexisted within the district's leadership. One was that the web would be a "repository," of best practices among veteran teachers, while the other was that it was to be a living and interactive document allowing for constant revision. Neither of these visions was fully realized. The lessons on the Curriculum Web were highly uneven, and Board President Peter Bentley acknowledged that some lessons weren't very good. At the same time, the lessons were not living and interactive documents those empowered teachers.

In 2008, teachers rallied under the union banner where there was greater protection for dissenters. One common perception was that district leadership "intimidated" dissenters, labeling them "whiners." Speaking of teacher development, union director Kathleen Heiman explained, "continuous improvement of teaching is contingent on the need to create a safe environment where you can examine your practice and find a place for improvement. And that's what we lost in Bellevue, the safe environment." Where the union had once envisioned itself in a central role taking responsibility for student success, it was now positioned to assume that role by making explicit the case for teacher involvement in curriculum.

The district did not know how to respond to the union representing teachers' concerns with the district's curriculum. District leaders distrusted the union leaders, preferring to believe that the coming battle was actually about pay and compensation. They lacked faith that the union would meet them halfway if they tried to resolve the curriculum

dispute. Though the union had been registering teacher concerns about curriculum at least since 2002, it was only with the threat of a strike looming the district aggressively sought out its own information.

In addition to fifteen meetings involving approximately 400 teachers that Bushnell and other school board members conducted in early 2008, the district conducted an on-line, anonymous survey of teachers in May 2008. Approximately 600 teachers, or half of all Bellevue teachers, participated in the survey. The survey included questions on the common curriculum, including questions about curricular goals, objectives, assessments, and daily lesson plans, as well as questions about the process for changing the Curriculum Web. Several hundred open-ended teacher responses provided additional insights. According to the Bellevue School District's own summary of the spring 2008 teacher meetings and survey, teachers felt "disconnected from district decision-making, felt intimidated, felt a lack of respect for their skill and training, and expressed concern about not being listened to" (Bellevue School District, 2008). While teachers supported the vision of an excellent curriculum for all students, they were not invested in the Curriculum Web. Only as the strike deadline approached did district leaders accept that teachers had legitimate problems with the Curriculum Web and that something had to be done.

The 2008 Strike

In June 2008, teacher union members voted by more than 90% to allow their leaders to take them out on strike. In August, shortly before the contract expiration date, district administrators worked out a plan with their principals to provide greater clarity for teachers in implementing the curriculum. What they did not do, however, was to discuss

their plan with the union. They understood that union president Miller was philosophically opposed to centrally directed curriculum and saw Heiman as too focused on teacher rights to be able to understand the issue from their point of view, which they understood to be, “what’s best for the kids.” When it learned of the training, the BEA threatened an Unfair Labor Practice if the district implemented its training plan outside the bargaining process. The district delayed the training and saw the union’s failure to respond positively as proof that its chief objective was pay, and a not sincere belief that professional autonomy was in the interests of their kids.

By 2008, the union leadership was distrustful of the district. After signing their 2006 contract, union leaders felt that they had been misled because the district later ended the year indicating it had unspent funds that needed to be used, when during negotiations they had pleaded poverty. As early as 2007, BEA President Steven Miller and his successor, Michele Miller, predicted that situation would only be resolved by a strike, and planned accordingly. Moving into their 2008 negotiations, the BEA mobilized for a better contract. To do better this time, as they saw it, they needed two strong issues. Based upon what their members were telling them, they felt they had three: 1) pay, 2) administrative take backs on health care, and 3) the curriculum issue.

In their 2006 negotiations, the curriculum issue had not been well formulated. In part this was because the Curriculum Web was only then beginning to be implemented. At that point, the issues that had been percolating were about the district’s prerogatives for the curriculum. Mike Schoeppach’s earlier plans for union and teacher involvement in curriculum through school based planning had long ago been abandoned. The

administration had seized firm control of curriculum reform, even though its implementation was challenged as heavy handed.

Without a signed trust agreement recognizing teacher voice or teacher rights with respect to curriculum development, labor law did not force negotiations in this “non-mandatory” bargaining subject. To make it one, the union had to prepare the ground. The WEA association’s Uniserve Director, Greg Alarid suggested cross-grade meeting with teachers to discuss contract language. BEA President Stephen Miller language, a history teacher who believes that unions are the vehicles which create teacher power and establish their rights to decision-making, zealously pursued this path.

The BEA leadership thus entered the bargaining process for the 2008 contract having worked hard to organize teachers, especially around their professional concerns over the Curriculum Web. Because Heiman was unavailable for health reasons, the Washington Education Association detailed Greg Alarid in January of 2008 to help the BEA prepare for its contract negotiations. Alarid quickly reached the conclusion that conflict was on a collision course, and that damage because of teachers’ disinvestment in a curriculum that they had not participated in engineering was already taking its toll.

Alarid’s challenge was to negotiate this non-mandatory subject. As he framed it, the “question becomes, to what degree is an employer willing, to what degree is a union insistent on addressing issues that may to this point have been seen as permissive subjects of bargaining, but are inextricably linked to how people do their work and what the outcome is.”

The nearly unanimous June strike authorization vote meant that teachers could bargain from a position of strength. They expected their issues would be addressed in

negotiations. When they got to the table, Alarid pursued a unilateral course to ensure interest based bargaining. He did not simply enunciate teachers concerns, but also worked to help the Bellevue District articulate its own interests. “It’s a blind spot for them, because they don’t think the union is capable of understanding the employer’s interests and/or they may not understand their own interests.” If he were able to have the district define its interest in terms of a high quality curriculum that was effectively delivered by teachers invested in its success, then the union would have constructed a genuine basis for dialogue.

The district, for its part, approached the negotiations differently. Among its first moves was to offer up a new trust agreement patterned after a contract in nearby Edmonds School District. The union no longer occupied the same mental space it had in 1997 when it led the charge for an MOU to draw up such an agreement. Too many teachers simply did not trust the administration any longer. As if to emphasize the point, the union received a copy of a memo to administrators that had been written by Curriculum Director Jan Zuber declaring that teachers failure to follow the curriculum constituted a violation of professional standards. The memo contradicted the public position of the Bellevue School Board, which was that teachers had some autonomy in implementing the curriculum. District negotiators appeared split on these lines, complicating the bargaining process.

However, BSD leaders continued to engage the union in dialogue on both wages and curricular issues. Even though curriculum was a non-mandatory subject of bargaining, the insights gained from teacher meetings and surveys encouraged district administrators and school board members to take union concerns with the Curriculum Web seriously.

The district's desire to maintain a positive working relationship with teachers and their union continued even after teachers went on strike. District leaders chose not to file a legal injunction against striking teachers, though it was within their rights under Washington law, because they feared the negative impact on future teacher union-district relations.

During bargaining negotiations, Alarid ultimately pursued contract language that acknowledged the district and teacher union's "mutual interest in obtaining, developing and delivering high quality curriculum." The important point, as it would be expressed in their final agreement, was that, "Teachers will exercise professional judgment in determining when and how to modify, supplement or replace lessons and to achieve unit and lesson objectives." The district held fast to their position that this was not to be part of the contract, but after nine days with schools closed, they did agree to a memorandum of understanding.

The agreement also contained provisions for a curriculum improvement process that encouraged teachers to initiate a formal process when they believed a unit should be revised or replaced. Once initiated, both district staff and teachers participate in making recommendations. The new arrangements for amending curriculum reflect the centralization that the district sought in order to achieve consistency. Teachers may propose amendments and concerned parties across the district are brought into the discussion. This typically is done through e-mail. While local contexts can be discussed, the emphasis upon a common curriculum mandates consensus by all who are affected. The extent to which this inhibits local adaptations is yet to be fully tested.

After more than 10 years of a common district curriculum, teacher responsibility within that curriculum framework was formally recognized. In the past, procedures for peer review and joint decision-making were enacted, and with the 2008 MOU, teachers won the right to use their professional judgment to respond to their students learning needs in ways they deemed appropriate. With these agreements in place, Bellevue continues its efforts to achieve a consistent curriculum that contributes to high expectations for all.

Union and district leaders have both spoken about the salutary effects of the strike, and most seem to agree that the Bellevue School District is actually stronger for it. Coming out of the strike, there seemed to be greater resolve to deal with issues more directly and not to let ill-feelings fester. The BSD also successfully concluded its search for a new superintendent. The national financial collapse, which was just becoming visible as the strike approached, came to a head before the end of 2008. Finance became a more pressing issue, resulting in staff layoffs that required difficult collaboration between the union and the district.

Moving forward, the Bellevue District's hope is that teachers will feel that the curriculum is not imposed upon them but an integral part of their work. The extent of uniformity that can be achieved in the face of differences in school populations will, no doubt, be tested. If that is found wanting, Bellevue is better positioned to receive the considered ideas of its teachers as it works with them to improve learning.

Conclusion

In their call for new post-industrial union teacher unions, Kerchner, Koppich and Weeres (1997) argued that teacher unions needed to occupy new spaces within the larger

educational enterprise. Not only did unions need to create an environment that encouraged teachers to advance careers through movements across districts, they also needed simultaneously to focus on fuller participation in making individual school decisions that improved education. As they put it, “school flexibility—the ability to adapt to the diverse and changing needs of students—is critical to improved educational achievement” (p. 134). What they were far less clear about, and what appears to be part of the lasting legacy of the reform movement, is the role that the unions play in constructing curriculum at the school level.

While the teacher union reform movement accepts aspects of accountability and standards, so far no clear blueprint that encourages school-level adaptations to address local context has emerged. Assuming that teachers have professional knowledge, they must have the “right” to exercise that professional knowledge. Many of the notable standards-based transformations achieved during the 1990s and early 2000s in districts as far apart as New York City and San Diego proceeded as if teachers were obstacles to change (Ravitch, 2010). The desire for consistently high expectations dictated that decisions on curriculum and accountability occurred at relatively high administrative levels where teacher involvement was attenuated. The quality of interactions between teachers who had to implement high-level mandates at the school level and the central decision makers became critical. Teacher knowledge of local conditions could have been understood as an asset, but often it was instead perceived as a roadblock.

Union roles in channeling information from the classroom and school to administration are crucial. When Mike Schoeppach was the union’s executive director in Bellevue in the mid-1990s, the schools Program Development Councils were articulated

as information channels. Mike Riley took over as Bellevue's superintendent at the same time that the state's new learning assessment tests were being adopted. Differential progress across schools was interpreted to mean that low-performing schools operated in ways that did not involve the same expectations of their students, and thus those schools needed oversight. We cannot know what would have happened if the same investment that went into uniform curriculum, assessment and staff development had been made in supporting school discussions at the local level.

Instead, as happened elsewhere, policy makers became more prescriptive and less willing to tap local information to modify plans. In Bellevue, where the BEA had sought and accepted responsibility for mentoring and counseling out weak teachers, distrust over the plan's implementation by the superintendent appears to have sidetracked a planned Trust Agreement between the union and the district. Leadership at the union may have been able to do more to support the initiatives created under Schoeppach, but the tide towards common, consistent and exacting standards created its own dynamic. Given the failure to advance the MOU for a Trust Agreement, the disassembling of PDC authority in curriculum, and the fracas over teacher dismissals, the union's turn towards compensation and job protection is understandable. That retreat, however, opened the door for greater district unilateralism with regard to curriculum and instruction.

To be fair, the union felt it did communicate teacher concerns over assessments and curriculum. However, during the early millennium years, these concerns had not yet risen to the level that put them at the forefront of bargaining. The relatively high teacher turnover rate, however, provides some evidence that teacher disaffection was becoming a problem. Seeking better pay was an easy way to grapple with that disaffection for both

union and district leaders. Since the district showed little interest when the union voiced protests over curriculum, it came to see the unions as not supportive of the real needs of students. Not only was there no trust agreement, increasingly there was little common ground upon which one might have been based.

Riley turned to his principals, his board, and his external experts for direction. They, in turn, looked at test scores and other measures and determined that curricular standards had to be either more exacting or consistent. Indeed, after a brief test score fillip in the first two years of WASL administration, gains among most of the lower income schools in Bellevue largely plateau. For all its efforts, Bellevue's success in reducing the size of the test score gap among students of different races or family incomes was not substantially better than the progress made to reduce such test score gaps statewide. Bellevue students' test scores were higher than the state average, but so too was the socioeconomic status of its students. One might conclude that this was because the teachers were not sufficiently aligned to the curriculum, or one might argue that the curriculum was not sufficiently aligned to its students. Each conclusion creates its own imperative.

What the Bellevue strike accomplished was to alter the District's trajectory, which was effectively based upon the first conclusion. The teacher union asserted professional control over their daily lessons and professional oversight over the lessons posted on the Curriculum Web. They won the right to modify, supplement or replace lessons on the Curriculum Web. They also gained rights to a "collaborative process" to resolve complaints with lesson plans posted on the Curriculum Web. Although collective bargaining sometimes results in clauses defining academic freedom, these new provisions

in Bellevue carve out job rights that have major implications. They represent an advance on early reform unionism by articulating professional claims over class content.

It is hard to derive firm lessons from a single case study. Nonetheless, the Bellevue Strike does appear to provide some insight into the future of reform unionism. The growing pressures upon schools a significant number of administrators act as though it is necessary to act unilaterally to respond to state and community mandates. The Bellevue Strike suggest that it is likely premature for teachers to adopt a reform unionism that means they would abandon militant or adversarial tactics. That strike is a strong indication that acceptance of teacher's professional rights and authority sometimes requires industrial style union activity. The paradox of reform unionism is that achievement of its goals is from assured when the basis for trust is not secure.

Unfortunately, the era of accountability makes trust more difficult. Those seeking results frequently come to view teachers and their unions as obstacles to be circumvented rather than partners whose interests must be negotiated and whose understandings must be tapped in the quest for better schooling.

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