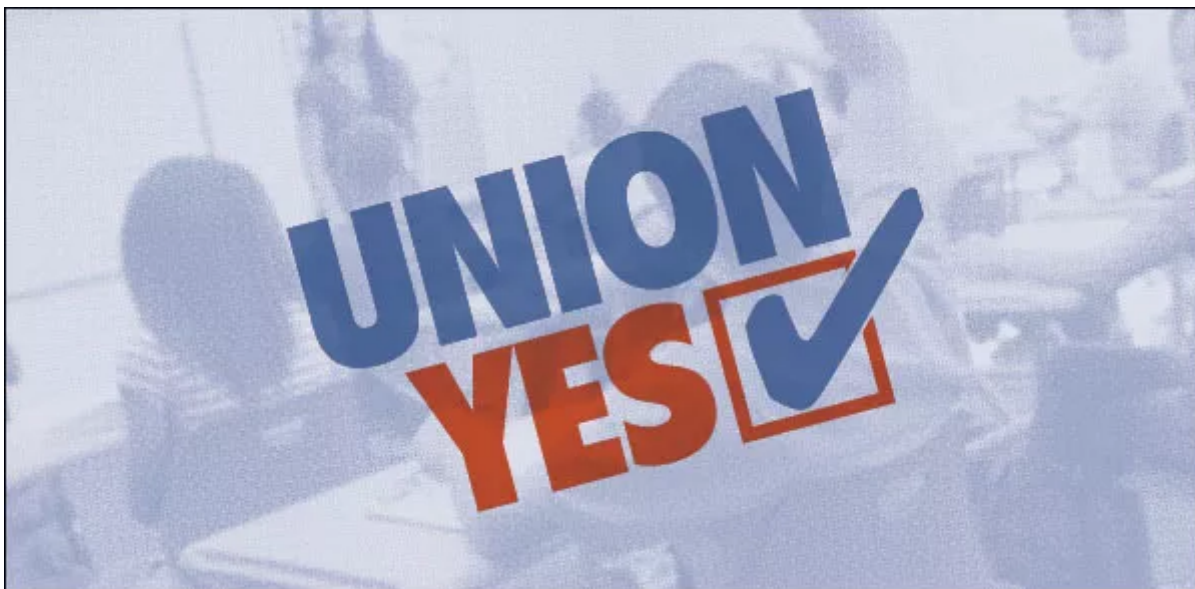




## Teacher Leadership Is the Union

## The Future of



By Kathleen Melville

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Ben wants to integrate more projects into his biology curriculum, but the administrators at his school insist that he prepare students for standardized tests.

Megan notices that math classes at her school are segregated—white students in higher-level classes and black students in lower-level classes—and sees the need for intervention. No one in her school’s leadership is interested in taking action.

Anna knows that the oppressive heat in her school’s aging building makes it difficult for students to learn. She starts a letter-writing campaign to alert local politicians, but her principal tells her she is in violation of the school district’s code of conduct for teachers.



These are stories of teacher-leaders that I know and admire. They are teachers who have taken on responsibility—whether in an official capacity or simply in their own practice—for improving their classrooms, their schools, and our education system as a whole. They are bringing their vast experience and hard-earned wisdom to bear on some of education’s thorniest problems. And for the most part, they are being shut down.

The challenges these teachers face are not technical. They know their craft, and they know how schools operate. As experienced teachers, they know what’s best for their students.

Their challenges are political. They have the expertise, but they lack the *power* to make the changes they want to see in their schools. And that’s why the future of teacher leadership is the union.

For a long time, I tried to solve education’s problems by myself. As an overconfident young teacher, I thought that if I worked hard enough, taught well enough, and shared my ideas, I could make real changes in my school and my city. I spoke with my principal; I spoke with politicians; I even started an advocacy group. What I learned is that I couldn’t affect much change by myself. We have to do it together.

Although many people see teachers’ unions as slow-moving bureaucracies, I have come to see them as our best and only way to make real changes in our education system. As teacher-leaders, we can reclaim our unions as powerful forces for positive change. Instead of relegating unions to the limited role of defending teacher salaries and benefits, we can use our collective power to build the schools our students deserve.

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In Philadelphia, a group of teacher-leaders is doing just that. **The Caucus of Working Educators (WE)** is a group within our union that is inviting teachers to push for the changes we know will benefit our school communities. Recently, for example, teachers noticed that immigrant students were stressed and missing school due to fear that they would be apprehended and deported. In the face of this enormous political problem, an individual teacher might feel powerless to help her students. But together, members of WE formed an immigrant justice committee, built alliances with community groups like **Juntos** and the **Education Law Center**, and recommended that the school district offer training in immigrant rights to all school personnel. The committee hosted study groups, circulated a petition, participated in rallies and protests, and testified at school board meetings. Because WE organized and applied political pressure, the school district **implemented a mandatory training** on immigrant rights at the beginning of the school year. Using our collective power, WE made our immigrant students' safety a districtwide priority.

If we work together, our power to make changes in our schools is immense. But right now, we are only harnessing a small fraction of that power. Many teachers see "the union" as an entity that is largely removed from the day-to-day realities of the classroom, as an institution that matters only when it's time to negotiate a new contract. Our union could be so much more, but only if many more of us become actively involved.

What does it mean to be actively involved in our union? It means talking to our students and our co-workers so we can identify the problems that we share. It means working together to generate possible solutions and strategize about how to make them a reality. It means building relationships with all the people who care about our students—their family members, community groups, and all supporters of public education—and asking them for their support in making the changes we seek. And if your teachers' union is not already engaging in this important work, it could mean starting your own caucus in order to bring about change within the union. As teacher-leaders, we are often our students' most important advocates. By engaging in our union, we amplify our voices and demand a say in the policy decisions that affect our classrooms every day.

Our unions, which have long ensured basic protections for both teachers and students, are in dire straits. **Teachers' unions are shrinking**, which means our political power is shrinking along with them. With an upcoming **Supreme Court case** on compulsory union fees that could decimate all public sector unions, we will need to work harder than ever to engage our members and advocate for our students and our profession. The only way forward is a new vision for our union—one that invites us all into the fight for the schools our students deserve.

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