

Give Teachers a Voice in Education Reform

Four principles for a more robust public education system

By Adam Urbanski, Tom Alves & Ellen Bernstein

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In the cluttered world of education ideas, often the most strident or well-funded voices get the most attention. Over the last two decades, the national education reform debate has largely been cast as a battle between two extremes: On one side are "education reformers" who offer top-down, market-based solutions to fixing systemic problems, while the alleged "defenders of the status quo"—teachers and their unions—are on the other side.

This false dichotomy of reform versus status quo fails to capture the rich perspectives of teachers who believe in education improvements that are grounded both in research and in their own experiences with successful student learning.

More than 20 years ago, we founded the National Teacher Union Reform Network—a coalition of teachers and teachers' union leaders—to promote responsible change in education and in teacher unionism that was responsive to the needs of students. As co-leaders of this effort, we convened classroom teachers and teacher leaders from 30 union affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association for open discussions. At conferences over the next two decades, we asked participants: How can public education once again become the great equalizer to benefit all students, not just the



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lucky few? How can teachers use their collective wisdom to strengthen the field? And how must teachers and their unions adapt to become the leaders of education improvements?

Now, with the nation fixated on privatizing public education, the time is ripe for a new vision based on the collective wisdom of the real experts: teachers. The definition of reform has shifted in recent years to often exclude teachers' perspectives, but teachers have always been open to improving our education system in ways that lead to better teaching and learning. We firmly believe that top-down attempts at education reform are doomed to continue to fail without input from the teachers who work with students every day.

The **vision of our network's teachers**—outlined in a report that the three of us co-authored and released last month—is grounded in the original purpose of public schools: to advance the common good and strengthen democracy. At their best, public schools are designed to unite students from all races, religions, nationalities, and economic circumstances around common democratic values and give them an equal opportunity to develop their talents.

To create a more robust conception of education reform, we propose four pillars of equal importance upon which our public education system should rest. Teachers and unions in school districts across the nation are already putting these pillars into practice, and each one can be facilitated by policymaking at the federal, state, and local levels.

1. Promote learner-centered schools. If schools are going to prepare students to be college-and-career ready, as well as thoughtful citizens, then they should be safe, learner-centered spaces focused on serving the needs of each individual student.

2. Professionalize teaching. If teachers are the most important in-school determinant of student learning, then teaching must be celebrated as an important profession rather than denigrated. Accordingly, our teachers have worked for the widespread adoption of peer-assistance and -review procedures that reflect

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this importance—in which accomplished teachers are recognized as the best people to assist struggling teachers, provide support, and ensure quality within the teaching profession.

3. Promote equity alongside excellence. If schools are going to tap into the talents of all students, then education initiatives must be inclusive. Any changes in education must be accompanied by changes in other systems that affect students' lives, including health care, juvenile justice, job training, and housing.

4. Support agreements between district leaders and teachers' unions to improve student learning. Contrary to the notion that collective bargaining is a hindrance to improvement, labor-management agreements are a fruitful way to make promising ideas a reality. In addition to focusing on traditional bread-and-butter issues, the scope of collective bargaining should be expanded to include instructional and educational issues that enhance opportunities for student learning, such as smaller class sizes, fewer standardized tests, and the hiring of more librarians, nurses, social workers, and counselors. Some of the network's unions have also pushed for the creation of "teacher powered" schools and other innovative school structures that help local communities meet a diversity of needs.

The perspectives of progressive teacher leaders can help rejuvenate today's stale policy debates and counter oft-heard stereotypes of teachers' unions. By listening to the collective wisdom of teachers and by embracing research-based policies that teachers know work in practice, schools can refocus on achieving the goals of public education on which our pluralistic democracy depends.

Adam Urbanski was the founding director of the Teacher Union Reform Network, an independent coalition of teachers and union leaders. Tom Alves and Ellen Bernstein served as co-directors of the network, which now continues within a group of several regional networks facilitated by the Consortium for Educational Change in Lombard, Ill.

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