PACE

COMMENTARY

Becoming Unionized in a Charter School

Teacher Experiences and the Promise of Choice

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In over 20 years since the first charter law (*Laws of Minnesota 1991*, chapter 265, article 9, section 3) was signed in Minnesota, states and districts, particularly in large urban centers, have restructured public schools. School choice proponents argue that parents deserve to have a choice in their children's education. Several studies have documented that out of the different restructured spaces, charter schools have been the least supportive in providing teachers with sustainable working conditions and employee rights. Even though charter schools were founded as places where autonomy and innovation would flourish, the flexibility granted to charter school operators has not automatically been extended to its teaching force. Teachers in many charter schools have had no guarantees about the nature of their workplace and whether it would be fair, responsive, and supportive.

This study focused on the experiences of teachers in a Los Angeles charter school organization (Hope Charter School) where, in 2005, teachers voted to form a union, independent of the local district union. My research asks, "*How did the promise of choice create an environment that led teachers to seek unionization?*" The findings come from a larger study on the experiences of one group of teachers who worked at various school sites within one charter school organization from 2005 to 2012. Seventeen teachers participated, including former and current teachers, all of whom were members and/or leaders of the teachers' union. The teachers in this study described an environment where they were motivated to work on behalf of parents, students and their peers, yet the flexibility desired by the governing board was in conflict with the ability of teachers to collectively influence decision-making.

Teachers at this Los Angeles school described an environment that was "professionally alive" and full of "positivity and productivity" yet they realized that keeping this level of commitment was not sustainable in the long term. Teachers participating in the study described a "culture of exhaustion" where they were at-will employees, working one month longer than the local district, with the same pay and no job security. Before unionization, teachers and their school leaders worked together and teachers even had a representative on the governing board. Yet, teachers felt that they were not being heard when it came to their working conditions. Some saw unionization as the next step in creating sustainable working conditions. Others saw unionization as an opportunity to create parity with their employer. The teachers worked together, and gave everyone a voice and choice to join. Over 60% of the teaching force voted in favor of a union, independent from United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), where they formed a bargaining team of representatives seeking to collaborate with the school's leadership.

Teachers voted to unionize against the wishes of the governing board. Study participants described the governing board as "big business corporate people who didn't understand what [we] were trying to do because that's not their model." For example, the teachers wanted the negotiations process to be collaborative, even choosing not to unionize with UTLA, the local district union whose contract included strict tenure laws; however, board members still described the union as a "third party entity."

As the collective bargaining process proceeded, the experience of the teachers was that true choice existed only for the governing board which used the need for "flexibility" as an excuse to not give teachers what they were fighting for.

The experiences of teachers presented in this article offer many implications for the teachers and management of charter schools. Charter schools have long struggled to retain teachers in order to create continuity and community. In cities like Los Angeles, where charter schools continue to flourish, it is especially important to begin looking at the lasting effects of teacher burn out and teacher turnover particularly in areas where students are in most need of continuity and support.

In the last year, teachers at Alliance College-Ready Public Schools in Los Angeles voted to unionize with UTLA. This marks the first time that a charter management organization with over 25 schools votes to unionize with the local public district union. In December 2015, a local judge issued an injunction against Alliance's labor law violations after the union filed a complaint with the California Public Employment Relations Board (PERB). Understanding the experiences of teachers in charter schools continues to be relevant and timely within the public school reform movement. Ultimately these teachers will not remain in the charter organization to build the momentum that will achieve true reform.

The full study is in Elizabeth Montaño (2015) Becoming Unionized in a Charter School: Teacher: Experiences and the Promise of Choice, Equity & Excellence in Education, 48:1, 87-104, Published online: 11 Feb 2015.

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