DAVID E. ENGEL

Pittsburgh's Teacher-Administrator Partnership: A New Relationship

The creation of an instructional teacher leader position is the core of a cooperative effort between the district and the teachers' union to promote teacher professionalism.

In 1975 the school district of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, experienced a bitter 33-day strike. After its settlement, the district administration and the teachers' union were left in a posture of mutual suspicion, their relationship strained. But in the last few years, a new relationship has emerged between the union, the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, and the administration, one that could never have been envisioned 10 years ago.

The last two contracts for teachers (in 1985 and 1988) were settled on an "early-bird" basis, well before the termination of the previous contract. In 1985 the early settlement with the teachers included a memorandum of understanding that called for the district and the union to cooperate in a project to enhance the professional role of teachers. The emergence of this cooperation between teachers and administrators signals an important turnabout from the testy labor relations of the 1970s.

The Professionalism and Education Partnership

The change in labor relations within the Pittsburgh public schools is an interesting and instructive story.[1] In this century, the city has not been known for much besides its smokestack industries (and the resultant air pollution). Since the days of the ascendancy of Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick, the city's principal identity stemmed from its production of steel. Yet in the '80s, with steel no longer a significant factor in the economy, Pittsburgh was designated by Rand McNally as "America's Most Livable City."

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The city's transformation is a story too long to be told here. But a high degree of cooperation between industrial and civic leaders has been crucial in bringing the city through three renaissance waves and repositioning it as a high-tech financial, service, and educational center. In the course of that cooperation, the school district–teacher union professionalism effort, recently named the Professionalism and Education Partnership (PEP), emerged as an analogue to the business and industrial renaissance.

Instructional Teacher Leaders

While many of the partnership's programs are not unique to the Pittsburgh public schools, they have been mixed and merged in ways that have created new life and new direction in the system. The foremost of these initiatives has been the creation of the position of instructional teacher leader (ITL). While other districts have created lead teacher positions, the ITL role has become the centerpiece of

the Professionalism and Education Partnership and has brought definition to a role that, in other districts, has varied from coach to cheerleader to administrative flunky. The Pittsburgh ITL, typically a department head in a high school and a lead teacher in a middle or elementary school, is carefully selected. Only after completing an extensive training program do candidates gain school district internal certification for the position. Internal certification—not a state matter—is specific to the local district and controlled by it.

During discussions of the position, the partnership's Steering Committee encountered much controversy. For example, some teacher members balked at the stipulation that ITLs would be expected to provide evaluative input about other teachers to principals. They construed this as telling tales on colleagues. The committee deliberated the distinction between *formative* and *summative* evaluation. They came to see that evaluation by ITLs would be formative and that evaluation by principals would be summative. They also recognized that an ITL's formative evaluations over a period of time could serve as the basis for a principal's summative evaluation of a teacher as unsatisfactory or satisfactory.

Teachers who became ITLs would face a new role with new responsibilities. For example, they would need to give up some of the mutual protection colleagues usually afford one another. They could find themselves providing critical information for administrative judgments, and this role was not immediately comfortable. In fact, the union initially resisted an evaluative role for ITLs, and the partnership's Steering Committee came close to a stalemate over the issue. But over time, the ITL's contributing evaluative role has become accepted.

Compromises from Both Sides

Such progress has obviously demanded compromises from both sides. A particularly important moment of compromise occurred in the spring of 1987, when the PEP Steering Committee closeted itself in a local hotel for a day and a half to tackle a number of unresolved issues. The central problem was agreement over the selection process for instructional teacher leaders. As the committee approached its meeting in April, the lines were drawn. Teachers, if they backed a given selection, wanted the final word. Administrators, because they carried responsibility for each school's conduct, wanted the last say.

After some verbal sparring, each side caucused. Finally the district administration proposed a compromise: teachers would nominate; administrators would confirm. In cases where a dispute arose over the teachers' nominee, an arbitration panel would be formed, consisting of one representative from the central office department of school management, one relevant curriculum representative, one emissary from the personnel department, one principal from another school, and three delegates from the teachers' union. Their decision in any such disputes would be final. The Steering Committee accepted the compromise. To date, arbitration panels have been summoned for only two cases, and in each case the issues have been successfully resolved.

Without that compromise, the project's continuation could have been seriously jeopardized. But the overall objective of both the union and the district administrators to improve the professionalism of teachers required them to find a way to involve teachers in ITL selection without usurping administrative responsibility mandated by the state school code. So far, the *modus vivendi* has been successful, and this centerpiece of the partnership seems relatively stable.

Other Program Elements

Besides the instructional teacher leader position, other vital elements are incorporated into the district's efforts for teacher professionalism. One of the most important of these is the creation, in each school, of an instructional cabinet representing teachers, administrators, ITLs, and occasionally other professional personnel in the school. Frequently, in remarks to the Steering Committee and to various administrators' meetings, the superintendent has stressed the high value he places on "shared governance." In his words, cabinet members are to be "problem seekers and problem solvers." Thus, their leadership is defined in practice as a troubleshooting role, which involves monitoring student progress and classroom instruction.

Other components of Pittsburgh's program further define teacher professionalism. For example, the school schedule has been redesigned to include time during the week for teachers to meet on their own to plan instructional activities. Teachers from a high school department or from an elementary or middle school area regularly interact and plan how they can best go about their tasks and meet students' needs. Previously isolated teachers thus come together to develop cooperative strategies in each school.

Reform: Worth the Costs

The Professionalism and Education Partnership is a provocative example of educational reform. Teachers and administrators are now talking and planning together about instruction, student achievement, and growth; and the evaluation of these efforts includes teacher input. What's important in this regard is that, outside the structures of traditional collective bargaining in public schools, teachers and administrators are negotiating their roles in instructional development and have moved beyond simple concern for wages and hours.

But there are costs involved. Teachers' salaries continue to improve, and the ITL positions require added remuneration, which the school board is additionally burdened to maintain. The district has learned that reform is not cheap. But the alternative is a static school system or worse, diminished quality.□

[1]For more information, see *Teacher Labor Relations in Pennsylvania Public Schools*, (April 1987), (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Center for Labor Studies, School of Urban and Public Affairs, Carnegie Mellon University).

David E. Engel, a former President of the Pittsburgh Board of Education, is now Professor of Education and Assistant Chair of the Department of Administrative and Policy Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 5S01 Forbes Quadrangle, Pittsburgh, PA 15260.

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