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Democracy within democratic organizations: Why discussion and disagreement are necessary for progress in teacher unions

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Summary

Hayley Braden talks about the purposes, goals, and priorities of teacher unions. She explains how unions can work towards social justice goals by striving for more inclusive, authentic member involvement.

Hayley Braden habla acerca del propósito, las metas, y las prioridades de los sindicatos de maestras/os. Ella explica cómo los sindicatos pueden lograr metas de justicia social a través de una participación más inclusiva y auténtica de sus miembros

Keywords: unions; teachers; Denver; social justice



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Democracy within democratic organizations: Why discussion and disagreement are necessary for progress in teacher unions

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Across the country, teacher unions face decisions about democracy and their role which are both internal and external. Internal issues are those that primarily impact association members and must be addressed and resolved among members. Elections for office within teacher unions and the campaigns leading up to these elections are mainly internal affairs. External issues include those that are between teacher unions and one or more organizations or groups in society, such as parents, another labor union, or a school district's bargaining team. A current challenge for teacher unions (sometimes referred to as associations) throughout the country is learning how to navigate and balance both internal and external conflicts, discussions, and issues. The union for educators in Denver, Colorado (Denver Classroom Teachers' Association or DCTA) has been deliberating about and working through these internal as well as external points of contention for the past several years. A main challenge for union members as well as union leadership of DCTA is to determine which issues to prioritize. Should the union focus solely on its public image while ignoring conflicts between members because this current era is one that includes rising anti-teacher sentiment and the steady privatization of public schools? Or, should the union focus more on resolving differences of opinion among its members and leaders at the risk of losing its public image? Examining the issues facing educators in Denver and challenges regarding democracy within DCTA from 2015-2018 can help union members in other locals and members of the public throughout the country better understand the role of unions in our society and what being a productive, effective educator union means.

The 2017-2018 school year saw [teacher strikes, wildcat strikes, and walkouts](#) in multiple states which energized participants and drew nationwide attention to the issues of teacher pay and the importance of collective bargaining. Tens of thousands of teachers in West Virginia, Colorado, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Arizona and Kentucky participated in statewide actions (some were work stoppages and strikes; others were one-day walkouts) to draw attention to the decreasing wage competitiveness and declining working conditions for educators in these states. Following these actions, the U.S. Supreme Court decided in June 2018 that public employee unions could not compel workers to join their unions or pay partial dues, a harsh blow to teacher unions and public employee associations. While several states (including Colorado) are already "right to work" states in which public employees are not obligated to pay any dues towards union membership, the decision in [Janus v. AFSCME et al.](#) resulted in what is feared to be a [drop in union membership](#) in states in which public employees had previously been required to either be a union member or pay a reduced fee for the benefits they received from the union's work regardless of whether they were a member. The momentum and attention drawn to teacher unions by the

statewide actions of the school year and the *Janus* decision of the summer serve to raise several issues and questions related to what the roles of teacher unions are for current union members and for a democratic society. Against this backdrop of democratic deliberation within and among various educator unions, members within DCTA are working to make their union more democratic and focused on their goal of providing every student with an excellent education.

The Purposes, Goals, and Priorities of Teacher Unions

Both national educator unions, the [National Education Association](#) (NEA) and the [American Federation of Teachers](#) (AFT), have made renewed calls for their members to work for social justice in the past several years. To what extent are various locals and state associations within these unions truly working towards a more socially just society, and what can union members do to ensure their local association is working towards this priority? In order to work diligently towards these goals, local associations including DCTA need to work democratically and efficiently to make these values and goals a reality.

At the past several annual meetings of both the NEA and the AFT, delegates to these assemblies have often voted in favor of resolutions (statements of belief) that support more socially just, culturally responsive school environments for America's students. For example, at the 2018 Representative Assembly, the NEA voted in favor of [a resolution](#) that stated in part, "basic student rights include the right to safe and stable school environments; free inquiry and expression; freedom of the press; due process; gender equity; freedom of association; freedom of peaceful assembly and petition; . . . and equal educational opportunity." However, at this same Representative Assembly, the NEA also voted to support a [new business item](#) that promotes collaboration between the NEA and police unions to help police officers become more culturally competent. The rationale for this new business item was that in order to "change today's culture of police being seen as the enemy, NEA should lend support and assistance in promoting partnerships between education associations and law enforcement, help encourage training for community officers, and help build educator, police, and community relationships." However, this new business item that the NEA is now obligated to fund is in conflict with the desires of many social justice focused groups such as the nationwide group [Dignity In Schools](#). This organization, like many other education-related groups across the country, believes that rather than supporting police officers' continued presence in and around schools, more counselors and other resources should be provided to students to meet their social and emotional needs.

Political Bias in Teacher Unions

Should union leaders have politics that are more left-leaning, even radical? Or is there merit in aiming for a centrist position on some issues?

Educators across the country generally understand their roles as public employees and the limitations that places on where and when they may share their political views.

However, the levels of political involvement of teachers once their workday is over vary widely in activity levels as well as across the political spectrum. While some media outlets often paint teachers as die-hard liberals, [one 2017 survey](#) found that nearly 29 percent of the over 900 educators surveyed reported voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential election. While the majority of educators identify themselves as either Democrats or unaffiliated/independent, there remains a range of diversity of political affiliation that can often lead to disagreement and disunity within teacher unions, particularly at the local and state levels where the makeup of educators' political affiliations can vary widely from the national data. Both major political parties have elected officials who have supported policies that have harmed public school systems. One well-known example is Democratic Mayor of Chicago Rahm Emmanuel's support for [closing over 50 schools in Chicago in 2013](#). This mass closure impacted Chicago's black students the most by forcing students whose schools had been closed to travel farther to attend school, and most of the schools that remained open to those students were of no higher quality than the closed schools. Eve Ewing's 2018 book [Ghosts in the Schoolyard](#) gives excellent analysis of the impact that decisions by political leaders of all stripes can have on students.

Both major political parties have been involved and have led decision making that has harmed historically underserved student populations, but the Democratic party has overall been much more supportive of the rights of all students, particularly students from marginalized backgrounds. For example, the Democratic Obama administration's Department of Education issued new guidelines in 2016 for [stronger protections for LGBTQ+ students](#) which the Republican Trump administration promptly "rolled back" soon into Trump's time as president. Most educators are registered Democrats, but as explained previously, a significant portion identify as independent or Republican. This raises a question of whether teacher unions can and should work harder to support policies that are increasingly left-leaning. While teachers are largely white and female, the public school student population in the United States as well as in [Denver](#), Colorado is made up of at least [fifty percent students of color](#), and [over fifty percent of students qualify for free or reduced price school meals](#). Why, then, do many educators belong to a political party that has frequently supported policies that are detrimental to public school students? And, what implications does this have for teacher unions' policy priorities? According to both the [NEA](#) and the [AFT](#), one of the main purposes of educator unions is to support policies that will better serve all public school students, so even though many union members may vote Republican, it helps unions to serve students well when they support more social justice-focused policies such as increasing teacher pay, expanding equal access to quality education for all students, and protecting students from historically underserved backgrounds.

How Unions Can Works Towards Their Social Justice Goals

For those who want their union to be more anti-racist and social justice focused, is it productive to work towards more seats in the governing body and other efforts to transform the organization from within? Or might it be more productive to work for change from outside of the official leadership structure?

Since teacher unions have a variety of political affiliations within their memberships – and widely varying beliefs among even those who identify as part of the same party - some local and state associations have a more challenging time than others living up to the social justice ideals that the national organizations NEA and AFT set out for themselves. Over the past several decades, unions in some major cities have been pushed by their members to act more intentionally and quickly to promote social justice goals at the local level.

In Chicago, the Chicago Teachers Union ([CTU](#)) saw the rise and now dominance of a caucus within the union called Caucus of Rank and File Educators ([CORE](#)) which pushed CTU to be more proactive and engaged in Chicago education policy in addition to fighting for teacher pay and benefits. The current CTU president, Jesse Sharkey, had been an education activist in his school community [since the early 2000s](#), and was instrumental in helping CORE members to win seats in the governing body of CTU beginning with the union's 2010 election. The changes CTU has seen over the past decade have included a revitalization of the union's influence in the city of Chicago, and were successful in large part to organizing efforts of CORE members within CTU as well as organizing efforts among teachers, parents, and community leaders as well. The book [How to Jump Start Your Union](#) and the documentary film [Schoolidarity](#) both tell the story of changes to CTU and the union's ability to have a real impact on education policy in Chicago over the past decade. CORE members were able, over a period of several years of tough organizing work, to work within their union's existing organizational structure to win more seats in the governing body and then to make changes to the union's structure to increase democracy within the union.

In Denver, the teachers' union (DCTA) is facing turbulent times as well. The organization's leadership structure is traditional, with a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and a 16-member board of directors. Denver Public Schools is often known as a "reform capital" of the United States, with a massive increase in the number of charter schools, innovation schools, and its location in a right-to-work state. Over the past decade, the number of charter schools has steadily increased while the teacher turnover rate in Denver has reached 25%. One recently published [database found](#) that 31 percent of Denver Public Schools teachers were in their first three years on the job, compared with just 7 percent of teachers in the more affluent Boulder Valley School District. In response to these external issues facing Denver and to internal undemocratic practices by some DCTA leaders and members, several DCTA members came together in a member's home in fall of 2016 to form the Caucus of Today's Teachers. (I was one of these founding members, and

my current role is to do most of the communications, writing and research to inform our members of how education policy decisions impact our profession and our students).

One major catalyst for the formation of the Caucus of Today's Teachers is that through all these challenges, DCTA has had the same union president for nearly a decade due to a lack of term limits for the union president written into the union [bylaws](#) (all other offices within DCTA are term-limited). The current union president is now nearing the end of his fifth consecutive two-year term (next election is in April 2019). In spring 2017, the [newly formed Caucus of Today's Teachers](#) ran a slate of candidates for President, Vice President, and several seats on the union's board of directors. This was an attempt to turn over control of the union to more progressive, anti-racist, social justice focused educators who saw president Henry Roman's lack of action on key issues as a sign that the union was becoming stagnant and not truly serving the best interests of students or educators in Denver. The [outcome](#) of the spring 2017 election was mixed. After a highly contentious campaign season, the election for DCTA President resulted in a difference of fewer than 50 votes triggered an automatic vote [recount](#) between the incumbent and his Caucus-supported challenger, Tommie Shimrock. The Caucus of Today's Teachers' candidate for Vice President, Christina Medina, beat her incumbent challenger by nearly 150 votes. While the incumbent president Henry Roman won in the end, his small margin of victory was a sign that nearly half of DCTA's over 3,000 members were either highly dissatisfied with Mr. Roman's leadership or simply thought that it was time for change in what had been eight years of the same president. The following spring, the Caucus of Today's Teachers successfully elected three more of its educators onto the DCTA Board of Directors, and now holds the office of Vice President, as well as nearly half of board seats. Caucus members who sit on the DCTA Board of Directors have a major goal and responsibility to promote more democratic decision-making processes and to encourage deliberation (rather than complacency) about important issues in Denver schools. However, the effects of these changes to the governing body have not yet resulted in lasting change within DCTA or in DCTA's actions in Denver Public Schools.

While DCTA membership has grown slightly in the past year (up to 52% from 50% from 2017 to 2018), Colorado's status as a right-to-work state and the relative stagnation of DCTA's reputation in the community over the past decade has caused many Denver educators to either refrain from joining the union completely, or to join the union but work for social justice through channels that bypass or exclude the union. While CORE was successful over several years of effort in changing the leadership of their union, but thus far, the Caucus of Today's Teachers has not seen the same success level yet. Perhaps this is due to various challenges in organizing support to grow the Caucus of Today's Teachers, but low membership (just over 50%) when compared to [CTU \(nearly all teachers\)](#) were members of CTU prior to the *Janus* ruling) possibly plays a role on stifling momentum as well. When membership is common across a school district, working within the union to make change is the first choice of educators.

Navigating Disagreements and Conflict within Teacher Unions

Across the country, the teaching profession and educator unions face regular public scrutiny and criticism. When dilemmas or disagreements arise within a union, to what extent is it beneficial to union members and the students they serve for the organization's leadership to turn a blind eye to - or worse, to completely deny - disagreements in the name of protecting the union's public image?

As Keith Catone states in his recent book *The Pedagogy of Teacher Activism*, "historically, the most recognized way for teachers to act collectively has been to organize through their unions" (Catone, 2017, p. 10). However, teachers in many places throughout the country, including in Denver, sometimes feel that deep disagreements with their fellow union members over whether and how to make change within and outside of the union is nearly as substantial a challenge as contract bargaining with the school district. In this era of [disrespect](#) towards teachers and their unions, union members of all opinions must decide how much effort to devote to working for change they believe is necessary within their union and change in education policy in their communities outside the union. For teachers unions in today's climate, particularly unions with low membership like DCTA, it's a risk to let disagreements and conflicts within the union become public knowledge. However, it's also a risk to the long-term health of the union to continually ignore or brush off the concerns and disagreements that arise among members.

Teacher unions such as DCTA should work to make changes to their structure and priorities despite risking public opinion. In the long run, a union that functions in a more democratic way and makes room for more authentic member involvement can better work towards the social justice ideals laid out by the NEA and AFT. In DCTA, the facts that the president is not term limited and that committee chairs are appointed by the president are far from inclusive and democratic. According to philosopher Amy Gutmann, policies that stifle disagreement within a supposedly democratic organization or create an uneven playing field for members within the organization are policies that should be changed (Gutmann, 2004). If DCTA and other teacher unions want to be examples of what inclusive, democratic, openly deliberative organizations can be and can accomplish, it's up to members as well as organization leaders to work together to grow membership, revisit and revise undemocratic policies and bylaws, and ensure the practices they support are good for all students, educators, families, and community members.

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