

HOW ONE UNION-DISTRICT PARTNERSHIP LAUNCHED AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE

BY PUBLIC IMPACT

How could an Opportunity Culture work in a unionized district? For many superintendents in collective bargaining districts, this question is at the top of their list. What should they and their district leaders do to work with their union in creating an Opportunity Culture?

Syracuse, N.Y., educators have some advice. Beginning in late 2013, four of the Syracuse City School District’s highest-need schools became the first in a unionized district to choose and tailor Opportunity Culture models to fit their schools, beginning to implement their new teaching roles in 2014–15.

Opportunity Culture models extend the reach of teachers who excel with students to more students, directly and by leading other teachers, for much higher pay that is funded by reallocating existing budgets. Teachers gain planning and collaboration time, and teachers in advanced roles are responsible for the outcomes of all the students they serve—as well as for the support, development, and success of their colleagues when they work in teams. In nearly all cases, instructional group sizes remain the same or even smaller.

“Opportunity Culture school models are specifically designed to help teachers, not just students,” notes Lucy Steiner, who is leading Public Impact’s work assisting districts in implementing an Opportunity Culture. “The chances to earn more for helping more students and other teachers, to lead while teaching and get more support and on-the-job development—these all benefit teachers first, who then share great teaching with their students. But the design *process* must also be right, engaging the people most affected in key decisions.”

How can collective bargaining districts make that process the best it can be? The strongest advice, from both union leaders and a former administrator: **Get the union involved from the very beginning, and keep it involved at every step of the way.**

A district’s aim should not be “how do we get the union to go along with this?” but “how can we both make this work and be partners in this?”

“Everyone has to be at the table every step of the way,” says Joan Brown, first vice president of the Syracuse Teachers Association. “It sounds simple, but it’s easy to let it go, and that’s where problems happen.”

Jason Edwards, senior associate at the American Federation of Teachers, which has been involved in the Syracuse work, agrees that districts should focus on a deep partnership.

“Engage early and often—but also, if this is a priority, make it the priority,” Edwards says. “If this is an important initiative for the district, convey that, and give staff the time and space to do this in a fruitful way.”

Jeremy Grant-Skinner, who was executive director of talent management in Syracuse at the time and brought the Opportunity Culture concept to the district, agrees. Working together created a genuine partnership, he says.

The district brought the union in shortly after deciding to launch an Opportunity Culture in several schools, getting their input and sign-off on a state grant application to cover the school design work and transition to whatever new models the schools would choose.

“We made one misstep right at the beginning,” Grant-Skinner says. After getting the grant, the district presented Opportunity Culture to a group of principals who had been invited because their schools seemed like good candidates. Each principal was asked to bring one teacher to the meeting—but the district did not invite anyone from the union to attend.

At this writing, Indianapolis Public Schools, or IPS, had just joined the Opportunity Culture initiative in summer 2015. The Indianapolis Education Association voted to include multiple Opportunity Culture roles and pay in its new contract with IPS, part of an ambitious IPS strategic plan that raises salaries across the board. Look for more about this alternative approach to union-district collaboration in future publications.

“If this [Opportunity Culture] is a priority, make it the priority... and give staff the time and space to do this”

—Jason Edwards, senior associate, American Federation of Teachers

“In hindsight, the right thing was to involve the union,” Grant-Skinner says. That exclusion created unnecessary mistrust that slowed the work temporarily, he says—but after that hiccup, the district included the union.

“I look back at this as one of the biggest successes of my time there, especially because it was an ongoing, real collaboration with the union,” he says. “I had, in the scope of my role, pretty constant meetings with the union, but this was the only thing that we met pretty much without fault every two weeks about, just to talk about this [Opportunity Culture] work.”

And, he says, “every design session we held, we created materials together with the union before the session and included them in the entire day—so literally three or four union reps would come for entire days, and come on school visits for initial feedback and support when they started to implement. Whenever we did something with a school, the union was involved in planning, and they were there.

“Eventually, they became a little less engaged—I think that represented that they had more faith that they didn’t need to be there every time.”

Only this early, ongoing, and often time-consuming engagement lets the parties create the necessary relationships to make this successful, all involved say.

“The way we included the union as a genuine partner helped build trust and make an even more genuine partnership over time,” Grant-Skinner says. Sometimes, that meant making compromises, but those were worth it to maintain the partnership.

“Trust is the key thing, and that’s not something that’s going to be created because somebody says something nice in one meeting,” says Brown of the Syracuse Teachers Association. “It takes time and interactions to build trust. So, maybe a couple of years down the road, there’ll be more swift movement on initiatives, but until then, all these meetings, time, and interactions have to take place.”

“This was the only thing that we [district and union leaders] met pretty much without fault every two weeks about, just to talk about this work.”

—Jeremy Grant-Skinner, former district executive director of talent management

Initially, Brown and Edwards say, a district must demonstrate several things:

- * Its ability and capacity to create an Opportunity Culture in its schools.
- * That the central focus is on benefitting students and teachers.
- * That the district will not only accept but repeatedly request feedback from union representatives, based on what they hear from their members.
- * That the district will not just tell the union what’s happening, but run everything—from major decisions to minor professional development materials—past it for input.
 - It’s the little things that matter: include the union’s logo on the letterhead of any communications about Opportunity Culture work. Have them check all materials for points of disagreement or concern.
- * That this will be a “no surprises” relationship.

“Throughout the process, the biggest thing I would say I learned is that more often than not, the union seemed to want to ensure there were no surprises, and allay fears that the district was going to do something crazy or terrible,” Grant-Skinner says. “There was fear on both sides—from the district side, that the union was going to put up all these barriers to something we think is really important for kids, and from the union side, is the district going to do something that is really bad for our members.

“But the partnership and our work together got rid of most of those fears and let it move forward.”

From the union perspective, Edwards and Brown also pinpoint some critical moments along the way that other districts should watch for:

- * **Initial contacts with schools and teachers:** Nothing should be shared with schools and teachers until the union and district agree on both what is being presented and the language used to present it. If possible, allow a union member to present it. It’s crucial, Edwards says, that the union and district speak with one voice. “That means the district and union need to come together beforehand and make sure they’ve gotten that language together, so people get the message that there is nothing to be afraid of here,” he says. “Make sure you’re creating that messaging early on.” Districts should work with both the national and local levels of their union at this time. If a third party is involved, such as consultants helping the district and schools with the transition to their new models, consider holding a meeting between just the consultants and the union, providing a safe space for the union to air any concerns.

- * **Recruiting schools to create an Opportunity Culture:** Union leaders say they may be better at identifying schools strong enough to take this work on—identifying which have the best principals for this work, and the best morale for trying something new.
- * **School design team meetings:** Whenever a school design team, made up of teachers and administrators, meets to begin selecting and adapting school models, and throughout the process of planning and scheduling, union representatives should be invited to attend.
- * **Selecting teachers to take leadership roles:** Involving and informing the union along the way may prevent misunderstandings or hard feelings. For example, it may help union representatives understand why a multi-classroom leader is hired from outside rather than being promoted from within, or why an outstanding, experienced-but-younger teacher who is trusted by her colleagues may better help a teaching team leap to excellence than another teacher with more years of experience.
- * **Schedule planning:** Don't keep faculty members in the dark as schedule changes are planned, Brown says. The district needs to ensure that principals keep teachers informed, and that the union is present as often as possible at planning meetings. Schedule changes are essential to give teachers in advanced roles and their team members more time to plan, co-teach, coach/learn, and improve instruction every week based on student data.
- * **When considering having more schools create an Opportunity Culture:** As the district considers moving from a few pilot schools to many, strong union involvement must continue. And only with the previous involvement can the partners hold realistic conversations about allowing more schools to let teacher-principal teams control their own budgets to raise more teachers' pay as the initiative expands.
- * **Documenting progress:** Districts should include union representatives on school visits to document and assess progress.

Other helpful actions the district took, Edwards notes, included connecting Syracuse design team members and union representatives with multi-classroom leaders in districts that already had experience with Opportunity Culture implementation. Likewise, bringing those multi-classroom leaders to Syracuse to help with summer professional learning sessions for new Syracuse multi-classroom leaders proved valuable, Brown says.

And Grant-Skinner notes one other key piece: the full support of the superintendent. An Opportunity Culture came to Syracuse after he pitched the idea of Opportunity Culture pilots to Superintendent Sharon Contreras.

“It was so important that the superintendent was open to having such a collaborative partnership with the union. Her direction was to have that relationship—which we ended up having on this initiative—to make it work that really set the tone to make this a success.”

By creating a true partnership—and one that relies not on the engagement and enthusiasm of one union or district leader, but of many leaders and members—the district can ensure long-term support for its Opportunity Culture work.

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