

# All Hands on Deck

## Organizing for the Schools Saint Paul Children Deserve

*As an English teacher, I'm used to identifying the beginning, middle, and end of a story. And I enjoy letting others know when I have read a good one. I'm happy to share that the following two articles fall into this category. Both describe efforts that started during my time as president of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT) in Minnesota.*

*While the words written here by Eric S. Fought and Nick Faber of course must end, I like to think the story they tell about the power of partnership is far from over. Not only does a vibrant future of organizing educators and improving the lives of community members lie ahead of SPFT, but such promising work is in store for every local that learns from us or has taught us how to make common cause with the communities we serve.*

*I'm very proud of the work we started in Saint Paul, and I'm grateful for all the AFT members who support our efforts. I'm also honored that AFT President Randi Weingarten and Secretary-Treasurer Lorretta Johnson asked me to serve alongside them so together we can elevate the work our members do.*

*Educators face many challenges. For example, one of the things that concerned me when I began teaching in Saint Paul was parent-teacher conferences. My turnout was abysmal. In 2003, when I told my principal, "I've only been averaging 30 percent parent attendance," he was impressed. His reaction surprised me, given that I had more than 85 percent when I taught in Saint Cloud, a city in central Minnesota, about 75 miles away.*

*I reflected on the difference: in Saint Paul, many teachers didn't call home to invite families to conferences because of the language barrier. Like some teachers, I'm monolingual.*

*We were conducting these conferences the way they had been done for my parents 25 years earlier. So I started asking how we could change the process to better meet the needs of families. I was told not much could be done.*

*After I became president of SPFT in 2005, we brought ideas for improving our parent engagement to the bargaining table. We were told it could not be done. In 2010, SPFT leader Nick Faber shared his parent-engagement idea with me, and we made the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project our union's work.*

*It's work that any union can do. Please add to this partnership story by making it your own—and don't forget to tell me how it ends!*

—MARY CATHRYN RICKER,  
AFT EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT



BY ERIC S. FOUGHT

**O**n an unusually warm mid-February afternoon in Minnesota in 2014, members of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers gathered in front of the offices of Saint Paul Public Schools before the start of a school board meeting. Teachers, in the midst of a contentious contract fight and nearing a strike vote, were surrounded by hundreds of supporters—parents, students, elected officials, representatives from other unions, and community leaders.

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It's not unusual for members of a labor union to have others join them in solidarity in the midst of contract negotiations. However, it was clear to anyone at the rally that day that this wasn't just about a two-year contract. The very presence of those who trudged through the melting slush represented an emerging vision—not only for the union, but also for everyone with a stake in making sure that Saint Paul children have the teachers and the schools they deserve.

Two weeks later, after negotiating nearly 24 hours straight, the union reached an agreement that was ratified by an overwhelming 95 percent vote. The agreement included provisions for smaller class sizes, access to preschool, educating the whole child, family engagement, placing teaching before testing, wage and benefit increases, culturally relevant education, and high-quality professional development for teachers. It was a landmark contract.



But the story goes well beyond a successful contract campaign. This is the story of a group of dedicated educators who, in the midst of a constant barrage of attacks, dramatically changed the conversation. It is the story of a union that knew that, in order to bring about the transformation necessary for the betterment of the entire community, its members needed to transform the way in which they did business. It is a story of visionary and consistent leadership that built trust and delivered results. It is the story of parents, teachers, and community leaders coming together in partnership to find solutions.

This is the story of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers, how it won and how it will continue to win for the students and the community that its members serve.

### **From Pop Machines to Gym Memberships**

Mary Cathryn Ricker was elected SPFT president in 2005, a position she held until summer 2014, when she was elected executive vice president of the American Federation of Teachers. A middle school English language arts teacher, she brought to the job 13 years of classroom experience. She also brought a vision for the future.

When talking about the shift that occurred under Ricker's leadership, teachers and SPFT staff often employ an analogy. For

many years, the union operated as a pop machine—members put their money, or dues, in the machine, expecting the product they were thirsty for at the moment to fall near their feet. When you don't get what you want from a pop machine, you end up kicking it because you feel powerless. Buying an ice-cold pop also doesn't require you to do much; you simply put the money in the machine, expecting it to work for you.

Ricker and her colleagues who elected her saw another way. Instead of the pop machine model, they began to move the union to a model that represented more of a gym membership. Gym members pay a monthly membership fee, but results are only possible if they show up and do the work. Walking on the treadmill and lifting weights in the midst of a community of fellow fitness-seekers helps with motivation. Together, everyone celebrates the results they've accomplished.

The Saint Paul Federation of Teachers knew that its members needed to transform the way in which they did business.

Elected out of a desire to increase professionalism and return the union to its roots of social justice activism, Ricker took steps toward expanding leadership opportunities for her fellow officers and other members of the executive board. She also began to engage with community leaders and parents who shared concerns and hopes about the future of public education. Most importantly, she listened and, as a result, fundamentally changed the way SPFT does business.

Ricker became involved with the statewide advocacy organization TakeAction Minnesota, serving on its board of directors. In that role, she began to more fully understand the power of organizing. The union hired organizers such as Paul Rohlfling and Leah Lindeman, who brought about a new understanding of how to move the union from simply resolving conflicts and putting out fires to developing leaders and organizing for change.

Rohlfling recalls the environment when he joined the staff in 2008. "We had a very service-oriented union culture," he says. "The organizers were called 'business agents,' and the expectation was that you called our office when you had a problem."

Instead of "business agents," Rohlfling and Lindeman requested the title of "organizer." Stewards were trained to take many of the calls from members regarding concerns and grievances, freeing up the organizers' time to focus on organizing. And they started

working on two fronts—building leadership in the union around small-scale organizing and addressing building-specific issues. For example, the organizers mobilized folks in stopping cuts to the district’s music programs. To that end, they worked with music teachers in organizing a rally with parents and students playing instruments outside the school board before a meeting, turning a bunch of parents and allies out to those conversations.

The union also involved parents in discussions of the future of the profession and the schools in which teachers serve—important steps in finding common ground and cooperation. Nick Faber, an SPFT-elected officer and an elementary school science teacher, has led the union in many of its parent-engagement efforts, including an innovative SPFT parent-teacher home visit program, which he helped bring to Saint Paul. (For more about this program, see the article on page 24.)



Through these efforts, members saw powerful ways to engage. Their participation persuaded the union’s leadership to try to change district decision-making rather than just accept the district position as the “way it is going to be.” Instead, leaders encouraged members to organize. And the culture within the union began to shift.

### Changing the Conversation

Many factors contributed to the success of the 2014 contract campaign and the transformation that the union has experienced in recent years. However, in conversations with SPFT staff and leaders, members, parents, and community partners, it was clear that a concerted effort to fight back against attacks on public education was the catalyst for change.

You’ve likely heard the refrain: teachers don’t know how to teach and must be monitored and disciplined; anyone can learn to teach since the job requires little training; and teacher unions protect bad teachers, make unreasonable demands of the system, and hold educational reforms hostage.

Simply put, the goal of such nationwide campaigns against public education has been to undermine the powerful roles of teachers and their unions. These campaigns have used concern about legitimate challenges around inequity in schools to effectively build a coalition

with others who are generally pro-public education and pro-teacher. And for many years, teachers found themselves on the defensive—trapped and powerless in their attempts to respond.

When organizer Rohlfling joined the staff of SPFT in 2008, he came with a great deal of experience working with other labor unions and community organizations. In a previous role with a local of the Service Employees International Union in the Twin Cities, he worked on issues related to healthcare reform in Minnesota. It was through that work that he met Dave Mann, associate director of the Grassroots Policy Project, who was leading the coalition to shift the dominant narrative around healthcare reform.

“What Dave helped our organizations do together was to talk about the idea of health in a totally different way,” Rohlfling says. “Dave saw that a lot of the time when we were talking, we were using terminology that had been expressly created to support a

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market-oriented approach to healthcare.”

Rohlfling saw a similar challenge in the way people in Saint Paul were talking about public education. Ricker had also worked with Mann while serving on the board of TakeAction Minnesota and decided to bring in Mann to rethink the narrative around public education that everyone was stuck in. It was important to Ricker, Rohlfling, and other leaders that the work not occur in isolation, so leaders from the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers were invited to join.

“I think once we began the process, we saw a critical need to help people find some hope and not just be in hunker-down defensive mode,” Mann says. “There was a need to do something that started to internally change the story about the union so that there would be more energy and more involvement, including both veteran and younger teachers. And there was a need—if they were going to flourish as teachers and as a union and have an active role—to make this shift to be thinking about power. I think that the understanding of power and the power it takes to win a real fight—as opposed to negotiate a settlement—was not clear for many people.”

With the Grassroots Policy Project’s help, the union took a fresh look at how members thought about issues and explained what they were fighting for.

## Asking Questions, Listening to Answers

In the spring of 2012, Ricker traveled to Finland as part of a delegation of U.S. education advocates, where she met Barnett Berry of the Center for Teaching Quality, author of *Teaching 2030: What We Must Do for Our Students and Our Public Schools*. Ricker had several conversations with Berry about the future of public education and became interested in the possibility of using his book to help continue the discussion that began with Mann in 2009.

At roughly the same time, teachers in Chicago went on strike. “We saw how Chicago teachers were making these connections in their communities,” says organizer Lindeman. “Mary Cathryn, Paul, and I made a trip to Chicago to talk to their leadership about what they were doing and what was working.”

Following both of these experiences, Ricker was inspired to engage these ideas in a new way as a contract campaign



approached. She notes, “I returned from Finland and this experience in Chicago, and I remember sitting down with Leah one day and saying, what if, before we even put together a bargaining team, we actually asked parents and the community what they want to see in our contract first?”

Based on Berry’s book and *The Schools Our Children Deserve* by Alfie Kohn, SPFT leaders proposed a series of group discussions. They asked an outside facilitator to lead the process.

Lindeman remembers folks asking, “What if we took this idea of having a book club or a study group and made it not just be about the books, but about what we really want in Saint Paul public schools? Let’s build a platform of ideas that we can start to work toward.” SPFT leaders began to write a document, ultimately titled “The Schools St. Paul Children Deserve,” that would serve this purpose.\* “The original idea of creating the document was not just about the contract campaign, it was about grounding ourselves to be sure that we were always working toward the same goals.”

The study groups began by grounding themselves in this new narrative. While the process included reading the books and discussing the ideas contained therein, a series of listening sessions

and an online member survey ensured broader participation from members, parents, and community representatives.

Participants were tasked with answering three questions with the ongoing contract negotiations in mind:

- What are the schools Saint Paul children deserve?
- Who are the teachers Saint Paul children deserve?
- What is the profession those teachers deserve?

Through this process and with the work of a researcher, the document was created. Parents, educators, students, and community leaders began advocating for the ideas contained in its pages.

Together, they came to believe that Saint Paul students and families deserve:

- An education for the whole child;
- Authentic family engagement;

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- Smaller class sizes;
- More teaching and less testing;
- Culturally relevant education;
- High-quality professional development for educators; and
- Better access to preschool.

The document wasn’t a set of ideas that the executive board or a group of members drafted behind closed doors. The entire community had a stake in the process, just as they have a stake in their schools.

## The Contract Campaign

Armed with this document that answered important questions, the union faced contract negotiations with greater energy and resolve than ever before.

When Lindeman joined the staff as an organizer in 2011, she brought extensive experience with “open bargaining” in other local unions, with contract negotiations open to the public. “The nature of open contract negotiations, everyone being able to witness and see, is that they are transparent,” Lindeman explains. “You can say whatever you want about what you saw or heard at the bargaining session. It is all out there. That transparency goes a long way in building members’ confidence in their union, trust

\*An electronic version of “The Schools St. Paul Children Deserve” is available on the SPFT website, [www.spft.org](http://www.spft.org).

in their bargaining team, and motivation to be involved in the process.”

That trust turned into training, as members became part of Contract Action Teams (CATs). The teams are composed of a set of leaders who cover every building in the district and who have a dual responsibility as two-way communicators—it is their job to bring information about negotiations and actions in support of negotiations back to their members, and it’s their responsibility to collect feedback, questions, and concerns from their coworkers and report them back to their union. Besides acting as the communications hubs, team members became leaders in their buildings. Union staff showed them how to mobilize their coworkers, hold effective workplace conversations, and answer tough questions.

CAT members also actively participated in the open negotiations, a shift from previous contract negotiations where bargaining

ing sessions. The union took the stance that issues often considered “management rights” belong in negotiations. Teachers requested smaller class sizes and less standardized testing, along with the hiring of additional librarians, nurses, social workers, and counselors. These requests were placed directly on the negotiating table as members advocated for the issues as central to their working conditions and overall effectiveness in the classroom.

In September 2013, the district walked away from open negotiations and filed for mediation. Negotiators claimed that the issues the union brought to the table did not belong in the bargaining process. In response, teachers amped up their outreach and engagement with parents and the broader community. When negotiations were scheduled to continue, members went door to door to share their vision for Saint Paul Public Schools. On November 12, SPFT members and parents packed the school board meeting.



Breaking the mold of traditional collective bargaining, the union put forward proposals far beyond wages and benefits.

team members were alone in the room with district representatives. This move was, at times, controversial. Current SPFT President Denise Rodriguez, who at the time was a middle school Spanish teacher and the union’s vice president, has been a part of the past five contract negotiations as a member of the bargaining team. “Bringing the CAT members into the room was a very different way of doing things that left me unsettled,” Rodriguez says. “I felt powerless. Maybe the bargaining team wasn’t as valuable as we thought we were.”

But then Rohlfiing put another metaphor into the mix. He encouraged both the bargaining team and CAT members to see breaks in the negotiations like time-outs on the basketball court. In a time-out, coaches huddle to decide next steps. Then they present their plan to the team. In the context of bargaining, the bargaining team members were the coaches, while members of the CAT were the athletes about to head back to the court.

“I watched how the process turned out, and I became a believer,” Rodriguez admits. “Our members saw that it was working, and it was.”

Breaking the mold of traditional collective bargaining, the union put forward proposals far beyond wages and benefits, based on the recommendations from the study groups and listen-

ing sessions. Board members received packets containing signatures from 4,000 people who had signed a petition in support of the bargaining teams. Another 2,000 signatures were collected after the meeting.

SPFT partnered with Minnesota 2020, a progressive, nonpartisan new media think tank, to produce videos highlighting high-priority bargaining proposals. Each Monday, a new video was released publicly,\* in a sense continuing the open negotiations, with or without the district. Minnesota 2020 had approached the union seeking ways to help, encouraged by the collaborative process and vision outlined by the teachers.

In January 2014, hundreds of educators and parents met outside of dozens of Saint Paul public schools in the midst of a Minnesota blizzard for a nontraditional “walk-in.” At each school location, a member briefly spoke to the crowd, emphasizing the priorities outlined by teachers, parents, and the community, and the need for all parties to return to the bargaining table. As parents stood with teachers and children, it was a visible reminder of the power of the community. Rather than walking out, everyone walked in to school to start the day.

\*The videos are available on the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers YouTube channel at [www.bit.ly/1Us2bsh](http://www.bit.ly/1Us2bsh).

Increasingly, members were prepared to strike. On February 10, the SPFT executive board voted to authorize a strike vote to take place on February 24. With this announcement, the campaign encountered a turning point. Parents became even more engaged, creating their own Facebook group to show solidarity and to discuss ways in which they could support teachers and students if a strike happened. The group became a space for parents to publicly vent and work through disagreements. Other labor unions publicly supported the teachers. For the first time since 1989, steps were taken in Saint Paul to prepare for a possible strike.

Finally, in a marathon bargaining session from February 20 to 21, the district agreed to negotiate on all the issues the union had put on the table. A strike was averted. A historic contract was agreed to and ratified. (For lessons that SPFT learned from this campaign, see the box on the right.)

## Connecting with the broader community inside and outside of contract campaigns became a top priority.

Generally, media coverage of teacher contracts fails to include any information outside of the dollars and cents and other agreed-upon details. That was the case with reporters covering previous SPFT contract resolutions.

However, in their coverage of this contract, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and other news outlets included stories about the broader wins for teachers and students, including many of the priorities outlined in “The Schools St. Paul Children Deserve” and highlighted in every step of the campaign. In a story titled “St. Paul Teacher Deal Goes beyond Wages and Class Size,” reporter Mila Koumpilova wrote, “Taxpayers wondered about wages and benefits. But in more than 60 pages of new or revised agreements were also innovative ideas that drew little attention. A rethinking of the traditional parent-teacher conference, an avenue for educators to make over their schools, new support for novice teachers—those are just a few among potentially consequential changes to the contract.”

### Prioritizing Community Partnerships

Connecting with the broader community inside and outside of contract campaigns became a top priority for SPFT President Ricker and her team. This included ongoing conversations and relationships with elected officials and other community leaders. And it

meant continuing a long tradition of Saint Paul teachers fighting for what is right—especially in matters of social justice. That long tradition includes being home to the first organized teachers’ strike in the United States. Female members of Local 28 conducted that strike, which began in Saint Paul on November 25, 1946.

“There is a deep historical precedent in this local of lots of community activism that, the more I learned about, the more I got excited,” Ricker says. “It wasn’t just the 1946 strike, although that was obviously something that really captured my attention. Generally, teaching doesn’t really attract firebrands, although I think teachers are more militant than we give ourselves credit for.”

In recent years, those “firebrand” members of SPFT have played a pivotal role as activists on important issues at the local, state, and national levels, partnering with other labor unions and the broader progressive community. In 2006, SPFT members called on the Minnesota legislature to pass the Cover All Kids bill, which cut in half the number of children who didn’t have access to basic healthcare in the state. In 2012, the union successfully engaged its members in campaigns to defeat two divisive constitutional amendments that were on the ballot in Minnesota. In 2014, members were active in campaigns to raise the state’s minimum wage and in national efforts to reform our country’s broken immigration system.

For Ricker and others, engagement in issues affecting the broader community, rather than a sole focus on improving professional conditions, is fundamental for unions. “It has to be both,” she says. “We have to be assertively and aggressively working on community-benefit issues, and we have to be the voice for teaching and learning quality in our field at the same time.” □

## Lessons Learned

- Grounding in values and beliefs is powerful. Speaking and acting out of your own story is critical to building strong relationships with members and with the community.
- Transparency is key. Keeping the process open and available to the public allows everyone to see what you are fighting for and to join with you.
- Intentionally make space for all perspectives to be heard. This is true internally (e.g., for the bargaining team) and in public spaces (e.g., meetings with community members).
- Start early—there are no shortcuts to good organizing. Building ownership, leadership, and involvement of members, parents, and people in the community takes time and resources.
- Don’t just play defense. Get everyone involved in thinking about how to improve public education grounded in shared values, beliefs, and experiences.
- Be bold. Expand beyond issues “typically” addressed in contract negotiations.
- Expect and prepare for some pushback. When you change how the union acts, there will be pushback both internally and externally. Be open to it, but don’t get trapped by it.
- When you do all this, parents will have your backs, and it will energize your members.