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Cooperative Pathways: Insights from Teacher Experiences on Improving Union and District Cooperation

A Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

National College of Education

National Louis University

Whitney Fink

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Approved:

Angela Elkordy

Chair, Dissertation Committee

Cheryl D. Watkins

Member, Dissertation Committee

Carolyn Theriot-Griggs

Dean, National College of Education

Hampton Gibson

Program Director

Todd Price

Dean's Representative

6/19/2023

Date Approved

ABSTRACT

This study involved an evaluation of teacher experiences within their districts, schools, and unions across the United States. The primary research question was: How are teachers currently experiencing the relationship between their unions, districts, and administrators and what opportunities exist to improve cooperation and shared ownership between those groups? The study used a mixed methods approach by gathering quantitative data in the form of a survey and qualitative data through open-ended responses on the survey as well as interviews with seven teachers. The results formed a general understanding of the current state of teacher experiences that was then applied to better understand Chicago as a case study and the at times contentious relationship between the teachers union and district. Finally, recommendations were made for policy and leadership to promote cooperation and shared ownership among teachers, unions, principals, and district leaders, including trust building strategies, engagement efforts, and fiscal sustainability.

PREFACE

I began teaching in 2012 in a New York City public high school and was automatically enrolled in the teachers union. In one of my first school-level union meetings, the conversation centered on our teaching being 3 minutes over the contractual limit. As someone who generally liked our block schedule and did not want to see a disruptive midyear change, I could not really wrap my head around the importance of those 3 minutes and why the contract was so important to uphold. Over the next 8 years of my teaching career, I worked at another unionized school in Chicago and one non-unionized charter school. Tension between the principal and staff usually existed regardless of union status but manifested in union-based claims or goals to varying degrees.

In October of 2019, I participated in my first strike in Chicago and witnessed for the first time the conflict between the district and the union. This conflict felt completely removed from my experience but resulted in lost wages, students not attending school, and families grappling with a childcare crisis for over 2 weeks. I felt pressured by the union to go along with the majority opinion but felt that opinion lacked nuance. The challenges they addressed did not have simple solutions but the tone always made it sound as though the solutions were obvious—principals and district leaders just did not want to give in.

As an administrator, I experienced the other side of these conflicts, especially during the heightened COVID reopening conversations. Remote learning was not working. Students were not learning and families were under a lot of stress trying to work while caring for their children at home. Teachers, on the other hand, worried for their

lives and the lives of their families. Again, no simple solutions existed. In the end, we returned to work in person with a lot of mistrust and ill will harboring on both sides. In January of 2022, the union in Chicago voted to stop working in person during the Omicron surge of COVID. This resulted in 4 days of missed instruction and even more mistrust and conflict. This experience drove me to change my dissertation topic to study teachers unions as I saw that the work stoppage not only disrupted learning for 4 days but created so many negative feelings that the culture of the building suffered for weeks.

I wondered if I, as assistant principal, had an opportunity to repair the trust and center the focus on things we could control to improve our school community. I wondered if there was hope for the district, city, and union to cooperate. I wondered if other unions had less animosity in their relationships with their districts. The research gave me a lot of hope.

I learned that teachers see their priorities as in line with those of their districts as they do with their unions and that, in many contexts, teachers find value in their experiences with their districts. The union provides protection and benefits to its members, but teachers are largely not centering the union in their understanding of their experiences. A strong union does not imply that teachers stand in the way of progress or improvement of practices. Leaders have a lot of opportunities to change the reality of these relationships by increasing interactions, seeking feedback, and creating supportive professional learning. On the other hand, decreased interactions and anonymity lead to more disconnection and distrust. Teachers, unions, school leaders, and district leaders have many shared priorities and using those as a starting point offers a path toward increased cooperation.

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The utmost appreciation to the original strong woman in my life, my mother, Carolyn Gable, who taught me that whenever I am afraid to try something hard to ask “Why not?” and do it anyway.

DEDICATION

To the growing life inside of me that gave me the motivation to see this through.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Beginning in the 1970s in the United States, state legislatures passed laws permitting public employees to engage in collective bargaining, or the process through which an organized group of workers negotiates wages and working conditions. Prior to this, the belief was that public employees already had more power than private sector employees because they were able to vote for elected positions that influenced their working conditions, so they were withheld this right (Eberts, 2007, pp. 177–178). Teachers unions existed before these laws but they were largely professional organizations with little role in negotiating contracts (Lovenheim & Willen, 2019, p. 295). Two large national unions, the National Educators Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), advocated for collective bargaining during this time. The leader of the NEA said,

When we reinvented our association in the 1960s, we modeled it after traditional, industrial unions. Likewise, we accepted the industrial premise: Namely, that labor and management have distinct, conflicting roles and interests . . . that we are destined to clash . . . that the union-management relationship is inherently adversarial. (Eberts, 2007, p. 179)

According to Eberts (2007), the industrial setting saw employees as interchangeable as their work was largely narrowly defined and unskilled. Collective bargaining then became about protecting teachers from unrealistic demands from administrators and prioritized their interests as opposed to focusing on accountability for student outcomes (p. 179). The work of teaching is not mindless and specified and this model therefore

fails to acknowledge the complex dependency teachers, administrators, and district leaders have on one another when attempting to improve student outcomes.

Moreover, as Osborne-Lampkin et al. (2018) described, education is a unique setting. They stated schooling is turbulent:

Turbulence, in this context, refers to a system that is both pluralistic and cyclical in nature, where local school boards and superintendents try to juggle changing coalitions that form around diverse issues and operate across different levels of government—a system wherein both “everyone and no one is in charge.” (p. 156)

Schools are complicated places with competing perspectives, myriad challenges, and numerous stakeholders, which can make managing school organizations difficult.

From the industrial ideological basis and the context of turbulence, generations of adversarial union–district relationships were born. This is what Block (2009) referred to as a stuck community, which “says that citizens and employees are incapable of monitoring themselves and controlling each other, that more oversight, institutionally mandated and installed will build community and provide for the common good” (p. 40). Oversight and control cannot lead to shared ownership. In fact, adversarial relationships lead to decreased trust and increased collective actions like strikes that affect all stakeholders and only serve to heighten conflicts between unions and managers (Msila, 2021, p. 287). The solution is in building more belonging across stakeholders because to belong to a community is to act as a creator and co-owner of that community. What I consider mine I will build and nurture. The work, then, is to seek in our communities a wider and deeper sense of emotional ownership and communal ownership. (Block, 2009, p. xviii)

What would it look like to have a union that can solve problems alongside district and school leaders without needing to authorize strikes?

Purpose of the Program Evaluation

I designed my study to understand teachers' experiences of their unions, districts, and schools to better understand where there may be opportunities for greater support and collaboration among teachers, unions, and districts. I also aimed to disprove the notion that districts and unions are inherently at odds and to highlight the multitude of shared values teachers and leaders hold. With this information, my goal was to provide recommendations for school leaders in approaching their communities to create the context necessary for shared ownership and cooperation.

It makes more sense for unions and school managers to collaborate and protect one another rather than to betray one another (Msila, 2021, p. 291). It has been shown that in districts where there are high student outcomes, there are unusually high degrees of relational trust and cooperation between union and district leaders (Anrig, 2013–2014, pp. 5–6). The stronger the partnership between unions and managers, the greater the amount of teacher-to-teacher communication within a school, which leads to greater shared ownership and increased potential for the best solutions to be found (Rubinstein, 2013–2014, pp. 22–27). The fundamental purpose of schools is to improve academic outcomes for students and to prepare them to live independent successful lives after school. A commitment to move away from the contentious nature of many district–union relationships toward one of cooperation and collaboration will help all stakeholders.

Rationale

I began my teaching career at a small high school on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in New York City. About 6 months into my first year, I attended my first union meeting in which we discussed for over an hour that we were 3 minutes over our contractual teaching obligation under the current schedule. At the end of that year, the school received an F on the city-wide report card and we saw a 38% graduation rate. Over the next 4 years, a new principal came in with very specific pedagogical mandates for teachers to follow that brought the graduation rate up to 88% and earned the school the highest possible rating in all categories on the school's city-wide review. Throughout this time of reform, union representatives came to our school to push back against the mandates, teacher turnover was high, and relational trust between teachers was low. A core of teacher leaders pushed the reforms but an equally sized group of teachers pushed against the changes. The dissent group sought the support of the union and though they were not able to stop the changes, they did engage the principal in hours of arbitrations over teacher evaluations and recommendations for tenure. Even when the mandates proved successful, distrust was high. This raised questions for me about whether the union impeded change and innovation.

In 2016, I moved home to Chicago and entered Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in 2017. The 2019 Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) strike was my first time participating in a collective union action. Though I voted against the strike, I felt extremely uncomfortable asking questions or expressing my opinions in chapter meetings or with fellow teachers. It felt as though I was breaking an unspoken social agreement by not automatically being supportive of the strike and being frustrated with the district.

Questions were not met with open hostility, but it felt as though teachers checked out of conversations with me when I asked them out loud.

Throughout the strike, we were asked to hold a picket line in front of our school at 6:00 a.m. each day and then join city-wide actions each afternoon. If I did not show up at 6:00 a.m., teachers and representatives from other schools would question why I did not. This experience was extremely challenging. I did not trust the information the union was sharing because their rhetoric felt extreme and aimed to vilify the mayor and Chief Education Officer (CEO) of CPS in a way that felt inauthentic, but I also did not know what information I could trust from the district. The intense pressure to participate in the actions despite not really understanding what was happening was stressful. At the end of the strike, we had missed 11 days of instruction and though we had received a number of demands (e.g., structures to enforce limits on class size, more social workers, more nurses, etc.), the collective energy was low and distrustful and I remained distrustful of both sides.

I became an administrator in the Fall of 2020 and since then have witnessed the problematic way the union and district approach one another, holding students hostage in between. Though it can be assumed that leaders of the district and the union want to protect the health and safety of all staff and students, the negotiations at each pivot point of the pandemic showed an unwillingness to collaborate to solve some of the complex challenges within the field of education at the time. During the work stoppage of January 2022, the union and district were sharing conflicting accounts and information, leaving all stakeholders stressed and confused, once again producing a distrustful environment.

It is because of these experiences where I have interacted with unions in ways that have felt unproductive that I am committed to finding ways to increase the prospects of collaboration between leaders and union members to the benefit of all. School leaders, principals, and assistant principals, without much input, implemented the actions meted down from the district and were often the immediate faces of disappointment for constituencies. Parents with unstable childcare should not be asked to figure it out each time the union and district fail to understand one another. Students should not be asked to pause their education. Teachers should not get used to losing pay. We already have all of the gifts, intellect, and experiences within CPS necessary to solve any problem, we just need structures in place to bring the right ideas to the table.

Goals

The research conducted by Rubinstein and McCarthy (2014) showed collaborative positive relationships between unions and district leaders lead to greater outcomes for students. In this study, I identified key areas of opportunity for improving cooperation and collaboration across the district between the union and school leaders. By analyzing the current state of teacher organizational identification and trust and how relational trust within a school transfers to trust of the union and district, I was able to identify actions principals can take to transform adversarial relationships into positive ones. As Block (2009) noted, the small group is the unit of change and each gathering has the potential to be an example of the future we are striving for (p. 98). The school is a small group unit within the district and is where abstract conflicts can transform into challenges the group can work on solving.

Definition of Terms

Relational trust is the degree to which trust exists between social groups (e.g., teachers and teachers, teachers and administration, union leadership and district leadership, etc.).

I use the term management the way Rubinstein and McCarthy (2014) did to reflect school and district leadership, including principals, assistant principals, superintendents (or their equivalents), and boards of education. The term administrators describes school-level principals and assistant principals. Union–management cooperation means both entities collaborate well and value one another at the district and school level. Patterns of communication and actions demonstrate respect and productivity. When these relationships are cooperative, union members and administrators interact frequently and informally. I use the term informally to refer to interactions that are not necessarily scheduled, mandated, or out of compliance. Collaboration means both parties share ownership for the challenge at hand and work together to resolve problems.

Work stoppage is defined as a union-led action resulting in members refusing to work until a demand is met. A strike is a work stoppage that occurs after following an agreed upon protocol for authorizing the work stoppage.

Collective bargaining is when an organized group of employees engages in negotiations with their employer around working conditions and wages.

Research Questions

I designed my research to address the following question: How are teachers currently experiencing the relationships among their unions, districts, and administrators

and what opportunities exist to improve cooperation and shared ownership between those groups? To gain insight into this question, I studied the following subquestions:

1. How do teachers primarily interact with district and school administrators as well as their union?
2. To what degree do teachers identify as belonging to and expressing dissent within their school, district, or union and why?
3. How does this identification relate to the level of trust and interest in information shared from principals, unions, and districts?
4. What are teacher perceptions of union, principal, and district priorities and how do they align with their own priorities?
5. What factors led teachers to trust or distrust unions, administrators, or district leaders?
6. To what degree does the principal influence union–management cooperation?
7. How do these findings apply to the cooperation of CPS and the CTU?
8. What policies at the city, district, and federal level help or hinder union–management cooperation?

Question 1 through 6 are answered in Chapter 4, which presents the results of my study.

Question 7 is addressed in Chapters 5 and 6 and Question 8 is the focus of Chapter 6.

Conclusion

To begin understanding this topic, I conducted a thorough review of the literature, which included a historical understanding of teacher collective bargaining in the United States, the relationship between unions and student achievement, research on the effects of strong union–management partnerships, and finally, ideas on how to improve

collaboration between unions and districts. Understanding the research that has already been done and the historical context allowed me to engage in this research more intentionally.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The literature on union and district collaboration covers the history of collective bargaining in the United States and the genesis of teachers unions, the effects of unions on student achievement, the importance of union–management collaboration, and suggestions for building cooperation between districts and unions. The literature leaves open areas for further research, including what conflicts of interest, if any, exist between districts and unions and how to repair trust in historically contentious unionized districts.

The History of Teacher Collective Bargaining in the United States

Teachers unions in the United States were mostly professional organizations for networking and knowledge sharing and had little participation in contract negotiation during the 19th and early 20th centuries (Lovenheim & Willen, 2019, p. 295). As the AFT organized in 1916, another motivation arose, which was “to protect teachers from political meddling and preserve their independence of thought” (Kahlenberg, 2009, p. 35). This was largely in response to pushes to have teachers take loyalty oaths denouncing socialism and communism and the firing of teachers suspected of having communist ties during the red scare of the Cold War (Murphy, 1990, p. 56). Prominent 20th century teachers union organizer Al Shanker also pushed back on the “professional organization” model of unions and asked:

As a nonunionized “professional” teacher, does the principal ever mistreat you?

Do you make enough money? It was precisely because teachers were not

unionized that they were able to be treated unprofessionally. He told teachers: “A

professional is an expert and, by virtue of his or her expertise, is relatively

unsupervised. And you are constantly supervised and told what to do.”

(Kahlenberg, 2009, p. 43)

Union leaders were advocating for teachers to have more professional standards and autonomy.

The NEA was another teacher organization that focused more on discourse and professionalism as opposed to the direct action that was the focus of the AFT. A notable distinction of the NEA is that “although teachers constituted more than 90% of NEA members, more than 90% of the leadership and staff positions in the NEA were held by school administrators. Hardly militant, the NEA was known as a ‘tea and crumpets’ organization” (Kahlenberg, 2009, p. 35). The NEA also opposed teachers being included in collective bargaining until they realized the explosion of membership in the AFT (p. 5). These two organizations formed a rivalry that increased the energy around teacher unionism (Eberts, 2007, p. 178).

In addition to the question of professionalism, the early 19th century in education saw a push toward centralizing managerial control in schools by business elites for the sake of efficiency. Centralization led to teachers being under the strong control of the superintendent and being largely disconnected from the communities that traditionally had more input on nearby schools (Murphy, 1990, p. 23). Moreover, this movement to centralize schools created tax headaches as it brought together some bankrupt communities, which required city leaders to find ways to absorb costs. To resolve this issue, business leaders called on increasing homeowner taxes rather than business taxes (p. 56).

Teachers hoped to be included in the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, which granted employees the right to collectively bargain, but “the legislation limited collective-bargaining rights to the private sector, and labor’s champion, Franklin D. Roosevelt, opposed strikes by public employees” (Murphy, 1990, p. 41). Beginning in 1960, states started to pass public sector “duty-to-bargain” laws that required districts to negotiate in good faith with unions formed for the purpose of collective bargaining (Lovenheim & Willen, 2019, p. 295). Many thought duty-to-bargain laws for public employees would unfairly advantage them over private sector employees because they already had the ability to elect the leadership with whom they were negotiating (Eberts, 2007, p. 178). This change gave considerable power to unions. Kahlenberg (2009) described the change as follows:

Teachers were accustomed to being pushed around: they were poorly paid, forced to eat their lunches while supervising students, and told to bring a doctor’s note if they were out sick. Collective bargaining brought them higher salaries and also greater dignity. (p. 4)

He went on to highlight that after New York City teachers won a contract, it moved the educational system away from one of favoritism and rewards driven by the personal opinions of the principal to one of fairness (p. 50). By the late 1970s, collective bargaining had also given a voice to women and other formerly disenfranchised community members. Collective bargaining was no longer seen as a masculine pursuit (Murphy, 1990, p. 265).

In addition to these laws, Eberts (2007) cited three additional reasons unions gained power in the 1960s and 1970s: (a) declining enrollment in public schools and

skyrocketing inflation that increased teacher discontent, (b) an increase in social awareness and militancy across society and changes in workforce demographics, and (c) a decline in private sector unionism and the perspective of union organizers that teachers were ripe for organizing as they had just recently earned the right to collectively bargain. This meant that in 1974, about 22% of public-school teachers were covered by collective bargaining, whereas in the mid-1980s that number rose to over 60% (pp. 178–179). Moreover, Shipps (2006) noted that in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the teaching population shifted to be more male and younger. This younger teaching force grew more militant. These men were less satisfied with lower salaries and therefore more likely to join unions (p. 220).

The increase in collective bargaining and militancy also led to an increase in teacher strikes. “Teacher strikes grew in number, from nine in 1964 to thirty in 1966 and 105 in 1967” (Kahlenberg, 2009, p. 54). These strikes occurred in spite of laws that restricted the right to strike. For example, the Condon-Wadlin Act in New York “provided that public employees who struck must—not may—be fired. If later restored to employment, employees could not receive a salary increase for at least three years” (Kahlenberg, 2009, p. 47). This, however, proved impossible to enforce when teachers in New York City voted to strike several times in the 1960s with the most notable occurring in 1968 over whether there should be Black-controlled school districts. The mayor allowed the Ocean-Hill Bronzeville school board, which was composed of six elementary and two middle schools, to be community run in an attempt to better serve students of color as this community was largely Black and Puerto Rican. The board then terminated 19 White educators, which incited a strike that lasted from early September to

mid-November. The result was to no longer allow community control of schools, which effectively reorganized the district, and to reinstate the teachers (Goldstein, 2014). At the end of the 1960s, the militant teachers union that had grown more closely tied to the centralized school system struggled to cooperate and connect with militant community organizing groups, resulting in the school system ultimately ignoring the community (Murphy, 1990, p. 231).

During the fight for school integration, the conflict between the AFT and NEA rose again. The AFT was firmly in support of integration and would not hold events in segregated cities. In the 1950s, many southern states had state laws that banned teachers from affiliating with organizations promoting integration. This, in turn, prevented many teachers from joining the AFT nationally (Murphy, 1990, p. 199). The NEA, on the other hand, did not publicly support *Brown v. Board of Education* until 1965 (Murphy, 1990, pp. 203–205) as the NEA sought to reinvent itself. NEA's President Bob Chase said,

When we reinvented our association in the 1960s, we modeled it after traditional, industrial unions. Likewise, we accepted the industrial premise: Namely, that labor and management have distinct, conflicting roles and interests. . . that we are destined to clash . . . that the union-management relationship is inherently adversarial. (Chase, 1997, para. 7)

This shift shaped the way unions operated and approached their work. The industrial model sees workers as interchangeable and values standardized practices. When applied to teaching, the industrial model sees instruction as uniform and dictated by the principal. As Shipps (2006) noted, negotiation becomes focused on protecting teachers from unrealistic demands of leadership and extracting the highest salaries possible. This

approach undermines teachers' hope to be seen as professionals and overemphasizes the role of district leaders and principals in controlling the workplace and teacher practice (Eberts, 2007, p. 179) and is in opposition to the standards of professionalism previously mentioned as attributed to organizer Al Shanker. As Shipps (2006) noted, unions can therefore be perceived as opposed to education reform because they are only interested in protecting their employment interests (p. 10).

Shanker also highlighted the balance of representing teachers and gaining public support. Early in his career, he has been noted as saying:

My view of the leader of the union was a fairly traditional view, that I was elected by the teachers, the members of the union, and my responsibility was to keep them happy, and it did not make any difference if the newspapers like me or parents liked me or if the public liked me or agreed with me or disagreed with me. (Kahlenberg, 2009, p. 125)

He doubled down on this approach in an exchange with a journalist who asked him whether strikes hurt children, to which he responded, "Listen, I don't represent children. I represent the teachers" (p. 125). Later in his career he reversed thought and said:

I became convinced that I had been dead wrong in believing that the public's opinion of me didn't matter. Public schools depend on public support. And the public was not likely to support the schools for long if they thought the teachers were led by a madman. (Kahlenberg, 2009, p. 137)

Though this is only one union leader's experience, it represents the challenge of union advocacy and balancing public perception with pursuing teacher interests.

Results of a Pew Research Center study from 2018 showed about 55% of Americans hold a favorable view of unions as opposed to 33% who do not favor unions. Only 10.7% of workers in 2017 belonged to unions, whereas in 1983 this figure was 20.1%. This decrease in union membership means fewer members of the general public can identify with and understand the experience of teachers in negotiations (Desilver, 2018).

Parents can feel left out of the conversation, especially when strikes and work stoppages occur (Burke & Koumpilova, 2022), forcing parents to bear the brunt of sudden loss of childcare. The public perception of unions is not always positive. Another challenge in garnering public union support is that most professions are no longer unionized and it is difficult for the general public to relate to the idea of strikes and work stoppages or collective bargaining in general. This perception can shape the public conversation around unions and the ways teachers feel represented or misrepresented.

This perception has led to legislation shifts and over the years, laws have grown increasingly restrictive toward unions.

For example, the U.S. Supreme Court's 2018 ruling in *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees*, which limits public unions' ability to recruit members and collect dues, broadened the scope of statewide right-to-work laws (i.e., right to work without having to participate in the union). (Dyke & Muckian Bates, 2019, p. 7)

Effects of Unions on Student Achievement

Unions have several avenues through which to affect student achievement. Lovenheim and Willen (2019) articulated these avenues as the union's ability to (a)

change the inputs to educational production, (a) influence teacher effort and effectiveness, and (c) alter who is in the teaching force. They went on to point out that using rent-seeking models that favor teacher experiences over student outcomes can cause these levers to decrease student achievement, whereas using teacher voice to empower them to advocate for changes that will improve the learning environment can increase achievement (p. 297).

Eberts (2007) described that unions can affect student achievement through how well they influence salary and benefit negotiations, class sizes, rules that govern teacher interactions with various stakeholders, and how well teachers are shielded from accountability for their performance. He found that, in general, union bargaining raises teacher salaries, strengthens teacher job security, and improves working conditions. These conditions, though, can be costly and raise the cost of public education in union versus non-union districts by upwards of 15%. The impact of these conditions on student achievement is mixed. Test scores of students in union districts are on average higher than those in non-union districts. This increase, though, is driven by students in the middle and students performing at the higher or lower ends of the spectrum actually perform worse in union districts. Moreover, union districts have been found to have a small increase in dropout rates over non-union districts. Eberts concluded that the increased cost is not justified by the minimal gains in average student achievement (pp. 175–185).

One of the reasons Eberts (2007) found that union districts have positive gains for middle of the road students over those who excel or are struggling is the union's tendency to standardize the workplace and to rely on traditional practices and modes of classroom

instruction. As a result, students in union schools spend on average less time with specialists, tutors, and independent studies, which does not support students who are at the tails of the bell curve (p. 179).

Osborne-Lapkin et al. (2018) focused on the limitations unions and contracts have in terms of flexibility that at times can prevent school leaders from fulfilling their missions. They found there is an inequitable distribution of teaching talent that is supported by unions favoring teachers with seniority and granting them greater transferring privileges (p. 157).

Marianno et al. (2021) echoed the criticism of collective bargaining agreements that “make operations inflexible to changing procedures that are inefficient and ineffective ways to run schools” (p. 1). This restrictiveness has a small negative effect on student achievement but an overall increase in spending. This increased spending may or may not coincide with resource allocation that has the highest benefit to student learning because these allocations are based on teacher preferences and not necessarily research-based best practices (p. 2). Specifically, they concluded the following from their data:

A district with average student proficiency rates (46% in math and 52% in ELA) and average student spending per pupil (US \$9,578) would be expected to spend roughly an additional US\$200 (2%) per pupil with no change in student achievement for a standard deviation increase in contract restrictiveness. (p. 11)

In contrast, Rubinstein (2013–2014) noted districts with high levels of collaboration with the union see increased student achievement and a greater willingness on the part of teachers and administrators to innovate and experiment around areas deemed

foundational to student success (p. 24). In these districts, leaders of schools, districts, and unions talk to each other more frequently and less formally (Rubinstein & McCarthy, 2014, p. 6). As Shipps (2006) described why this collaboration is important, she pointed out that it is easier to pass and implement policies that do not affect pedagogy and student performance because those that do require broad coalitions and numerous resources needing to be reassigned by those in power. These broad coalitions are difficult to build in times of mistrust (p. 2). In general, the existence of a union does not increase student achievement; rather, the quality of union–management engagement is what influences how strongly student achievement is positively affected.

The Importance of Union–Management Collaboration

Unions and district management are often painted in opposition to one another, but they have many more shared interests than not. Collaboration is essential to effective schools and when union and school managers act from their own interest rather than protecting one another, they only serve to undermine school progress (Msila, 2021, p. 291). For these reasons, it makes sense to advocate for a reformed way of bargaining that highlights the shared interests of management and labor and holds both parties responsible for school and district outcomes. Rather than advocating for rigid standardization across the district, both parties should seek opportunities for flexibility, shared ownership, and site-based decision making that reflects the needs of schools at a local level (Eberts, 2007, p. 185). Msila (2021) referred to this shift as professional unionism in which teachers and management work together. It is characterized by joint committees, peer review, and training and development (p. 285).

Rubinstein and McCarthy (2014) found schools with the highest levels of partnership between the union and management had, on average, almost twice the communication density between staff within the school than did schools with the lowest levels of partnership, which strongly supports that schools with high-quality union–management relationships experience more widespread collaboration throughout the school as a whole (p. 11). In contrast, when schools are in the midst of a teacher strike, cooperation is diminished because distrust is exacerbated (Msila, 2021, p. 287). Strong union–management partnerships lead to more frequent and less formal interactions between school and union leadership (Rubinstein, 2013–2014, p. 28). The increased collaboration throughout the school is partly because teachers have greater trust in their elected union leaders than they do in management (Rubinstein & McCarthy, 2014, p. 7), so when it appears union leaders and administrators are on the same page, there is more willingness on the part of teachers to participate.

Rubinstein (2013–2014) also found that not only were teachers collaborating more in these schools, but that their communication specifically centered “around student performance data; curriculum development, cross subject integration or grade-to-grade integration; sharing, advising or learning about instructional practices and giving or receiving mentoring” (p. 28). The impact of this kind of collaboration is significant. When systems are more collaborative, hierarchies break down, information and ideas are shared more freely, innovation is promoted, and there is greater responsiveness (Rubinstein & McCarthy, 2014, p. 5).

This aligns with what the University of Chicago’s Consortium on School Research found about highly effective schools. These schools had high levels of

relational trust and five organizational features: (a) a coherent instructional program with vertical alignment, materials, and teacher input; (b) effective systems for professional learning, including peer and consultant observations; (c) strong partnerships with parents and community; (d) a student-centered culture that aims to identify and respond to challenges students are facing; and (e) leadership focused on building the capacity of all stakeholders to share in the responsibility for the school's improvement (Anrig, 2013–2014, pp. 5–6). Each of these qualities requires high levels of collaboration and collective ownership, which are especially promoted when school and union leaders cultivate strong relationships.

As Anrig (2013–2014) highlighted, when districts are more collaborative, the best ideas on effective practice become more widely accessible and lead to tough-minded collaboration that is centered around students and not adult self-interest, which will elevate education, create shared ownership, and shift away from adversarial relationships (pp. 5–8). Rubinstein and McCarthy (2014) found that this shared ownership leads to positive results because “as employees are increasingly included in managerial planning, problem solving, and decision making, performance and productivity increases” (p. 5). A collaborative district is one in which teachers and leaders are better at finding solutions and are more primed to implement them. As Rubinstein (2013–2014) articulated, “The denser or stronger the network, the better the district can solve problems and implement new initiatives or programs rapidly and effectively with a great deal of support” (p. 24). When teachers, administrators, and district leadership are compartmentalized, effective change is challenging to enact.

Suggestions for Building Cooperation Between Unions and Districts

The main recommendation in the literature around improving union–management relationships is fairly consistent—increase communication between the two. As Msila (2021) highlighted, the greater the frequency of communication, the greater the chance for improved cooperation. The author stated long-term interactions build trust between even the strongest adversaries and people tend to behave more cooperatively when they know they will have to interact with the person later (p. 287). Rubinstein and McCarthy (2014) emphasized the idea of frequent interaction as well but went on to say that in districts with highly cooperative union–management relationships, the parties do not just interact more, those interactions are more informal than formal (p. 12). This means that when there are problems, they can be solved in the moment rather than waiting for a formal meeting where the issue may grow to be much more challenging (Rubinstein & McCarthy, 2014, p. 14). This increased interaction reflects the approach Dyke and Muckian Bates (2019) referred to as professionalism, which rejects the idea that unionism should focus on the structural differences between unions and employers but rather sees both parties as operating on the same team toward a common goal (p. 4). Unfortunately, when conflicts arise it may not feel as though both parties are on the same team and many leaders avoid interaction, which creates isolation. Upon isolating, both parties lose important perspectives and resources to create solutions and do not collaborate in the ways Anrig (2013–2014) found to benefit student outcomes.

The literature calls for effective school-based leadership to remedy this isolation. Msila (2021) qualified effective leadership as “dissonant.” Strong leaders need to experience the discomfort of knowing that how they see the world is not necessarily the

reality of the world. Msila asked that leaders communicate effectively and coordinate group action that challenges people to change their attitudes and behavior (p. 288).

Though this action may cause more conflict, it is through conflict that authentic collaboration, shared ownership, and problem solving can emerge. Leaders do this best by “magnifying the future” or articulating and bringing to life the vision for the school community. This vision, though, needs to be co-created and agreed upon. In doing so, the ability to distribute leadership and create shared ownership is strengthened. This also asks the school leader to develop maturity and leadership in their staff (p. 298).

Argon and Ekinici (2017) highlighted the importance of organizational support and psychological contracts in ensuring the tasks and responsibilities of education are upheld by teachers (p. 44). Organizational support is based on teacher perceptions of the school and district related to their experiences of feeling valued and cared for (p. 45). In addition to written contracts, people within an organization have psychological contracts, or assumptions by both parties that they will act in accordance with norms (p. 45). Teachers most often experience psychological contract violations in relation to pay and opportunity (i.e., not feeling satisfied with the financial rewards for their work or future growth opportunities; p. 51). What the authors found, though, is that teachers who experienced greater levels of perceived organizational support were less affected by psychological contract violations (p. 52). This means that when administrators “respect teachers’ personalities, display equal, objective and impartial behaviors, avoid negative, interfering, criticizing and distributive behaviors, and provide ongoing contributions to educational environments and are open and accountable” (p. 53), teachers will experience less psychological contract violation and be more cooperative toward the organization.

Rubinstein and McCarthy (2014) also called for district leadership to take an active role in promoting trust and valuing the union for the benefits it brings to the district as a whole (p. 24). Anrig (2013–2014) emphasized in his description of effective leadership the need for continuous efforts to build trust across the school community (p. 7). This requires leaders to look for and highlight the good in all stakeholders. From this trust, a model of shared governance can be formed in which it is the responsibility of both groups to collaborate on solving problems rather than blame one another (Rubinstein, 2013–2014, p. 24). Though these recommendations are optimistic, in cases where adversarial relationships were turned more collaborative, the catalyst for change was often a crisis or pivotal event (p. 23). This change will be uncomfortable and challenging for many districts and adversarial dynamics will likely not change without conditions that demand change.

Last, Fisher et al. (2011) made numerous recommendations for successful negotiations in their book, *Getting to Yes*. Their method, which they called principled negotiation, focuses on interests instead of positions and asks that all negotiations be based in jointly-determined objective criteria. Positions are the outcomes parties are arguing for, such as a specific wage increase, a specified number of evaluations, universal positions like nurses for every school, or some other outcome. Beneath those positions are interests: a living wage to make the teaching profession attractive and sustainable, autonomy and fairness, resources for student health. The positions may conflict on both sides, but it does not mean that the interests necessarily do (p. 44). They highlighted that the more attention that is paid to positions, the less attention is devoted to meeting the underlying concerns of the parties. Agreement becomes less likely. Any

agreement reached may reflect a mechanical splitting of the difference between final positions rather than a solution carefully crafted to meet the legitimate interests of the parties. The result is frequently an agreement less satisfactory to each side than it could have been, or no agreement at all, when a good agreement was possible. (p. 6)

This is a significant recommendation for leaders at the school and district level, whether they are negotiating small decisions or large contracts with teachers. By getting to the underlying interests, people can be separated from the challenges and it becomes possible for participants to “work side by side and attack the problem, not each other” (Fisher et al., 2011, p. 12). To get to this point, the authors encouraged people to listen to, mirror, and empathize with the perspective of the other side (p. 25). They also highlighted asking the other side for advice, getting their input early, and giving them credit for ideas (p. 30).

Fisher et al. (2011) emphasized the importance of having objective criteria to assess the merits of a deal to reach a conclusion instead of reaching an end of negotiation because of power, pressure, or compromise. The list of criteria can be created together to ensure the deal can be effective and sustainable (p. 89). If it is challenging to come to an agreement, a third party can assist in reviewing the criteria, because if they are really objective, they should be sensible to a lot of people (p. 91). Examples of objective criteria could be related to financial resources, impacts on students, sustainability, scalability, and more. Using these two recommendations (i.e., focusing on interests, not positions and negotiating on principle, not pressure) could have a major impact on teacher perceptions of organizational support and union–management relationships.

Conclusion

Much has been written on the history of teacher collective bargaining in the United States as well as the potential to use collaborative union–management relationships to lead to increased outcomes for students. More research, though, is required to understand the role of trust and structures of communication in laying the groundwork for making an adversarial relationship more cooperative. The following chapter outlines my methodology for studying teachers’ experiences of trust, communication, comfort with dissent, belonging, and values with their schools, districts, and unions.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

To learn more about teacher perspectives and experiences with union and district relationships, I conducted my study using a mixed methods design. Reflecting on the data teachers provided highlighted possibilities for administrators at the school and district levels to create more cooperative relationships with unions. I applied these recommendations to the context of Chicago.

Research Design Overview

This study is what Patton (2012) referred to as a knowledge focus or lessons learned study in which the central question is, “What lessons can be learned from this program’s experiences and results to inform future efforts?” (p. 185). Learning how teachers are experiencing the intersection of principals, districts, and unions may help name the “undiscussable” as there is much silence around unions as well as many assumptions that go unspoken—teacher and administrator priorities are competing, administrators should be feared, teachers are out for their own self-interest, and more. Patton suggested successful evaluation targets these unspoken assumptions.

Much of evaluation is framed as finding out what is not known or filling the knowledge gap. But deeper problems go beyond what is not known to what is known but not true (false assumptions) or known to be untrue, at least by some, but not openly talked about (undiscussable). (p. 178)

I designed my study to answer the central research question: How are teachers currently experiencing the relationships among their unions, districts, and administrators and what opportunities exist to improve cooperation and shared ownership between those

groups? Patton (2012) stated “good questions are those that can be answered” (p. 170).

The following subquestions helped make the central question answerable:

1. How do teachers primarily interact with district and school administrators as well as their union?
2. To what degree do teachers identify as belonging to and expressing dissent within their school, district, or union and why?
3. How does this identification relate to the level of trust and interest in information shared from principals, unions, and districts?
4. What are teacher perceptions of union, principal, and district priorities and how do they align with their own priorities?
5. What factors led teachers to trust or distrust unions, administrators, or district leaders?
6. To what degree does the principal influence union–management cooperation?
7. How do these findings apply to the cooperation of CPS and the CTU?
8. What policies at the city, district, and federal level help or hinder union–management cooperation?

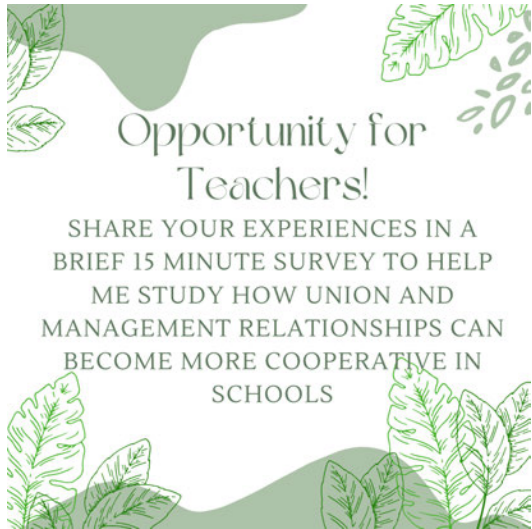
The most effective way to answer the research questions was a mixed methods study; that is, one that included quantitative data from closed-response survey questions and qualitative data from open-ended survey questions and extended interviews.

Quantitative data focus on information that can be counted, but can limit what can be discovered and, moreover, what can even be asked (Patton, 2012, pp. 289–291). Using quantitative analysis allowed me to include more participants as trends can be discovered in less time. The quantitative questions provided a big picture of how much trust,

belonging, and comfort in expressing dissent respondents had as well as how often they communicated with their union, district, and administration. The quantitative data, though, did not give insight into the nuance and depth of their perspectives. Patton (2012) highlighted that “qualitative data in program evaluation are aimed at letting people in program express their reactions in their own terms rather than impose upon them a preconceived set of limited response categories” (p. 290). As this evaluation was knowledge focused, it was important to allow teachers to share their experience in their own words to get a sense for the diversity and divergence of opinions in the field. The quantitative portion allowed the study to cast a larger net of experiences and the qualitative portion allowed participants to name the depths of those experiences.

Participants

The survey targeted teachers as their experience of unions and leadership can often go unexplored. They also make up a significant part of the equation in union and district relationships because of their size. I shared the survey on LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook through public postings and private messages over a 4-month period from July 2022 to October 2022 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1*Recruitment Post*

The survey was open to teachers in any context and had 48 respondents, four of whom worked at non-unionized schools and therefore only answered questions about their school and district administration. Ninety percent of the survey respondents had over 5 years of experience. Sixty percent of the respondents were from urban districts, 25% rural, and 15% suburban. There was a fairly even split between elementary and high school teachers. About 75% of the survey takers identified as female and 70% identified as White. This was a limitation on the diversity of experiences represented by the survey in terms of race and gender.

The interview participants were all teachers with experience as union members. Survey respondents had the option of opting into interviews on the last slide of the survey, which directed them to a separate form where they could share their contact information. All respondents except for one were from urban districts. Their experiences are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1*Interview Respondents*

Interview (Names have been changed)	Locations	Current union status	Number of districts served	Number of schools served	Number of principals served
Alix	Chicago	Member	1	1	4
Ava	Chicago	Member	1	1	2
Rory	Chicago	Member, former delegate	1	2	3
Ryan	Chicago	Delegate	1	2	3
Carolyn	New York	Member	1	2	2
Kelly	Iowa and Chicago Suburb	Member	2	2	2
Jenny	Chicago, New York, Miami	Opted out of union membership	3	3	3

Having teachers who served different districts, schools, and principals allowed them to reflect on factors that led to differences in their experiences as well as gave a broader view into teacher experiences.

Data Gathering Techniques

I used a mixed methods analysis for my study by surveying teachers to observe quantitative trends in their responses and interviewing seven of those participants to give

more context to their responses, identify what factors led to those responses, and to share experiences not considered prior to the survey design. Some of the survey questions offered open-ended space for teachers to add qualitative data as well. As Patton (2012) highlighted, “Quantitative data facilitate comparisons because all program participants respond to the same questions on standardized scales within predetermined response categories” (p. 289). I was able to compare levels of trust, belonging, comfort expressing dissent, quantity of communication, and perceived priorities easily through the quantitative survey questions. Patton went on to add that “qualitative data capture personal meaning and capture the diversity of ways people express themselves” (p. 289). which allowed more insights into leadership actions that can promote ideal or less than ideal responses to the above questions. Using both methods gave the best insight into not just what teachers were experiencing, but what opportunities exist for improving the collective experience.

Teacher Survey

The survey (see Appendix A) consisted of 18 questions designed to identify trends in how teachers were experiencing their union, district, and administration in the areas of communication, belonging, trust, and comfort expressing dissent. The goal was to find differences and similarities within their responses to build an understanding of their experiences. The survey asked teachers to specify whether their district was union, non-union, urban, suburban, rural, charter, or non-charter. Teachers responding non-union had union-specific questions removed from the remainder of the survey, as they skipped the union section and were directed to the district and school sections. To evaluate organization identification, the survey asked teachers to respond on a 5-point Likert scale

to the degree in which they felt as though they belonged to their union, district, or school. Next, teachers described their comfort expressing dissent, level of trust in communications, and types of communications from unions, schools, and districts. Teachers also indicated how collaborative teachers were at their schools. Last, they ranked the following priorities for themselves and how they perceived them for the union, school administration, and district: student achievement, resource allocation, protecting teachers, class size, curriculum and instruction, equity, and social justice issues. The survey took about 15 minutes to complete.

Interviews

The final survey question asked respondents if they would be interested in an interview. If they were, they were directed to another form that collected their consent to participate as well as their contact information. The interview participants were selected from those who opted in from the survey and then responded to the request to participate in the interview. Interview participants represented a range of perspectives on teachers unions from one who recently opted out of participating in the union to one who was a very active delegate. Of the people who consented to participate in the interview portion of the study, I personally knew most of them so I could select individuals who would be able to provide a range of perspectives. All interview participants had at least 8 years of experience, which allowed them to speak to how their conditions and perspectives had evolved over time. Interviews were held over Zoom, Google Meet, and over the phone based on the participant's preference, and the audio was recorded and then transcribed using Temi software.

The seven interviewed teachers answered the following questions, which are also listed in Appendix B:

1. How did you first become aware of the union in your district? Describe your initial interactions with the union. Has your relationship to the union changed over time? If so, describe how.
2. What do you think is the role of the union? Should it be different?
3. What do you think is the role of the district? Should it be different?
4. How has your principal created or hindered trust?
5. In what ways does the district interact with you? How does the district affect your day to day experience?
6. How has your district leadership created or hindered trust?
7. How has your union created or hindered trust?
8. What do you think are the factors keeping the union and district from being collaborative?
9. What is your principal's perspective on union activity? How do you know?
10. How has union activity impacted the climate of your staff?

As the interviewees were responding, other topics occasionally came up and I asked follow-up questions to clarify meaning. I chose to use interviews rather than focus groups because of the sensitivity of discussing union topics. Unions emphasize solidarity in certain contexts that may influence responses when members are grouped together. Interviews were completed in approximately 30 minutes.

Public Documents

Wagner et al. (2006) emphasized systems thinking, which encourages leaders to “keep the ‘whole’ in mind, even while working on the various parts” (p. 97). One part of the whole is what he referred to as context, which includes the “social, historical and economic” (p. 104) factors that influence the other parts of the system. This includes the political factors. To better understand the “whole” state of Chicago, I analyzed news articles, press releases, and public statements that demonstrated the state of cooperation between the union and district. Within the survey and interview data, many respondents mentioned the political aspect of education adding tension to union relationships. Observing how the CTU, CPS, and the mayor publicly described one another in the media helped provide context for these data.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative Analysis

I used descriptive statistics to analyze the quantitative data from the survey responses. Observing frequencies of responses helped me determine the overall trends in teacher experiences. For the priorities questions, responses were given a score. The first most important priority was given 7 points, the second was given 6, the third was given 5, and so on. I then calculated the mean, median, and mode for each priority to gather a summary of which priorities generally appeared at the top for each group. All three measures of central tendency showed the same order of priorities. Last, I calculated Pearson r -values for all quantitative variables using Google Sheets calculators to see whether there were correlations between each of the questions. R -values above 0 indicated a positive correlation and those below 0 indicated a negative correlation.

R-values closer to 1 and -1 indicated a stronger correlation and exposed possible causation that would require further investigation. The quantitative analysis made clear the general experiences of teachers with their unions, districts, and schools.

Qualitative Analysis

I transcribed and cleaned the interviews by eliminating fillers such as “um, like, I mean,” deleting repetitions, and fixing when words were transcribed incorrectly. From these transcripts and the open-ended survey responses, I coded segments line by line according to the underlying meaning of participants’ statements. There were 685 coded segments in the interviews and qualitative survey responses. These fell into 74 code categories. I then coded these into 22 larger themes based on similarity. Finally, I considered the larger themes that connected those groups. I was left with five major themes from the data. Frequency of codes helped determine the most common factors that led to trust in unions, districts, and administrators and the factors that formed teachers’ experiences and relationships with each. Triangulating the trends from the qualitative data with the quantitative data gave me a stronger understanding of the findings. I added the public statements and news articles to provide examples of the larger political struggles teachers referred to in their responses.

Ethical Considerations

There were no known risks or benefits to the participants. The information gained from this study contributes to the body of knowledge around creating healthy union–management relationships and can be used to help leaders make informed decisions. I obtained informed consent from all individuals who participated in an interview or survey (see Appendix C). The first slide of the survey reviewed the informed

consent and asked respondents to agree or disagree with the terms. If respondents disagreed, their survey was immediately submitted and no further questions were asked. Participants in the interview received their consents via email and had an opportunity to go over the form before the interview began in person. I used the social media platforms Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn to share the survey and recruit interview subjects.

Respondents were able to participate voluntarily. No identifying characteristics were included in the survey that would undermine anonymity and confidentiality. Responses were stored in Google Forms and are not publicly available at the individual level. Responses will be deleted at the conclusion of the project.

Though I did not currently work with any of the interview participants, I had worked with four of them in the past at varying locations. This may have had an impact on the level of vulnerability and openness the participants expressed. Some participants may have shared more because they trusted me personally and some may have shared less because I knew some of the individuals about whom they were talking. As a result, it was extremely important to not only protect their identities and data in my record keeping and writing, but also in my informal discussions of my research.

Conclusion

To answer the research questions, I used a mixed methods approach to survey and interview teachers. The study was knowledge focused and designed to understand how teachers understand union and district relationships through their own experiences. The quantitative data showed comparisons and the qualitative data added insights that the closed-response questions did not allow. Respondents came from a range of contexts, which added further depth to the data. By carefully noting comparisons in the quantitative

data as well as trends in the qualitative data, my understanding of the current state of teacher experiences became more clear, which I describe in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Wagner et al. (2006) offered a diagnostic framework with which to assess an organization's effectiveness known as the 4Cs: competencies, conditions, culture, and context (p. 98). The data from the study informed an understanding of each of these components for the teachers' experience of schools, districts, and unions as well as how they worked together to create the larger system of teacher experiences with their districts, unions, and schools. Wagner et al. highlighted the importance of systems thinking in that it "recognizes that simple, linear cause-and-effect explanations sometimes miss the fact that today's effect may in turn be tomorrow's cause, influencing some other part of the system" (p. 97). In this way, the complexities of the data I collected allowed for a greater understanding of opportunities for unions, districts, and schools to work more effectively together.

Results from the qualitative and quantitative portions of the study are woven throughout this chapter as appropriate. Forty-eight teachers responded to the survey and seven teachers participated in interviews. Ninety-two percent of the respondents worked in public schools, with the remaining working in charter schools. Over half of the respondents had over 10 years of experience and 30% had between 5 and 10 years. Sixty percent of the respondents taught in urban, 25% in rural, and 15% in suburban settings. Over 90% of the teachers surveyed worked in unionized districts.

The interview respondents are referred to using pseudonyms: Carolyn, Rory, Jenny, Ryan, Ava, Alix, and Kelly. The interpretation section summarizes the answers to the research questions that were gleaned from the results as well as articulates the major

themes: connection, disconnection, perceived union benefits, and the setting of education. These general results are applied to the context of Chicago specifically in the following chapter. The major themes from the qualitative data were connection, disconnection, leadership, and impactful conditions. Some of the challenges and opportunities for improved relationships emerged through teachers' descriptions of times teachers, unions, districts, and schools have alignment and times they do not.

Context

Context refers to the social, historical, and economic aspects of a system, including the political (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 104). Understanding the political and historical conditions outside of the school building and system help situate the current reality teachers experience. Teachers referenced the challenges of legislation, limited union power, elected officials, competing political forces, and COVID-19 as influencing their reality. Outside factors made up 40.4% of the coded segments for the larger theme that described the setting of education (see Figure 2).

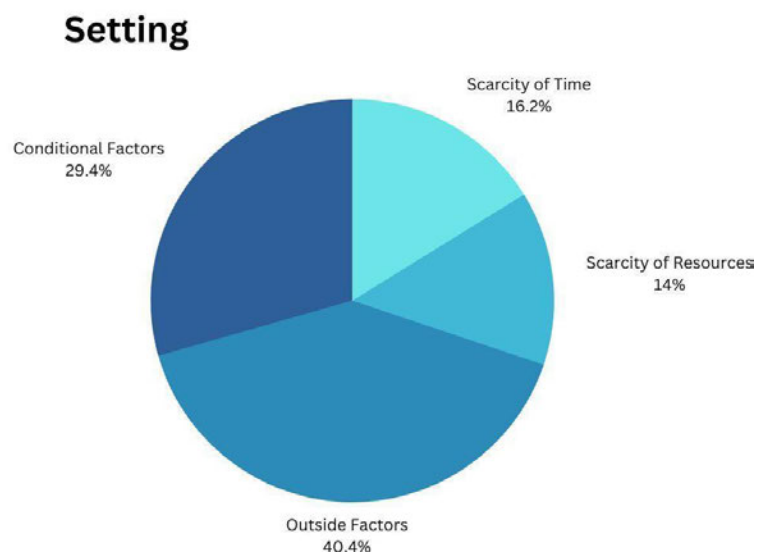
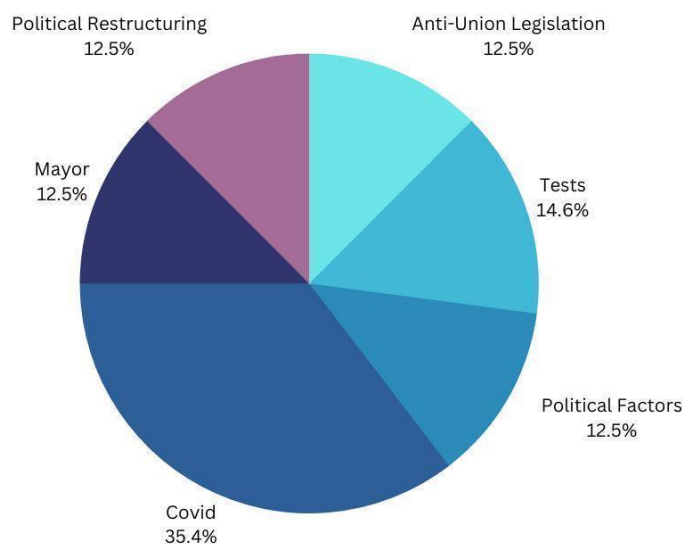
Figure 2*Setting of Education*

Figure 3 shows the distribution of coded segments according to outside factors that influence union and district cooperation that are covered in this section. Conditional factors refer to factors that influenced the experience, such as length of time in the district or size of the district. Scarcity of time and resources refer to comments that reflected a feeling of not having enough time, materials, space, or money to fulfill job duties effectively. Outside factors are elaborated below.

Figure 3*Outside Factors That Influence Union and District Relationships***Outside Factors*****Anti-Union Legislation***

Since the early 2000s, teachers unions have faced unique challenges. In addition to the political forces promoting school accountability and choice, unions specifically began facing opposition rooted in free market ideologies. Prior to 2018, the union was able to collect fees from employees whether they joined the union or not. In *Janus v. AFSCME*, the Supreme Court mandated an end to this practice for public sector employees, which hurt the power of the union by reducing the amount of available funds. This case was funded by conservative groups hoping to limit the power of unions that traditionally support democratic candidates (Feigenbaum & Hertel-Fernandez, 2018). Jenny, an interview respondent who lives in Florida, which is a right to work state for

public and private sector employees, discussed her hesitancy to pay union dues in her interview:

They couldn't really say what their leverage was. They would just say, "But if we don't have the funds, then we can't do the good work that we need to." Like, guiltin' it into you. That and, and I don't remember, I can look it up, but it's a good chunk of your paycheck. It's not cheap, the union dues down here. And I was just like, "Look, I'd rather spend that money directly on my students and improving directly what's impacting my students at my school than you all."

Given the choice, some teachers chose not to pay dues, which limited the resources unions had and in turn lessened their power in some places. Overall, membership in teachers unions has declined by almost 10% since the Janus ruling (Max, 2022).

Certain states have passed their own legislation limiting union power as well. Wisconsin, for example, passed Act 10 in 2011. This legislation limited the rights unions could bargain for, made paying union dues optional, and required unions to have a recertification vote annually, which proved logistically challenging (Johnson, 2021). Respondents mentioned the waning power of unions in their qualitative responses, indicating that for some teachers, these laws are shaping their experiences of their unions:

- Anonymous Survey: "Act 10 has hurt any strength or power teachers have to expect any change."
- Anonymous Survey: "I try to stay involved, but it's hard with everyday increasing demands of our jobs as well as having less and less rights to negotiate anything."

- Anonymous Survey: “I feel that our union does what they can within the bounds of what is ‘legal’ in our state, but are somewhat afraid of taking more severe action in the face of stalled contract negotiations or other instances of antagonization of the labor force.”
- Anonymous Survey: “I don’t feel that they always represent what the teachers truly want and we are unable to strike in Missouri.”
- Anonymous Survey: “We have less rights to negotiate anything.”
- Jenny: “Down here in Florida, we’re a right to work state and there’s no leverage. And so that’s been a lot of the conversation. My first years when the union would come and try to get me to join, I was like, ‘Well, what’s your leverage?’”

Teacher Perceptions of Political Factors and the Mayor

In many of the interviews, the teachers discussed the ways in which the political atmosphere affects teachers. Politics as a detriment to union cooperation appeared in the data as related to the influence of wealthy people, the impact of political agendas, how school boards are chosen, changing political regimes at the city level, and the power of the mayor. Together these made up 37.5% of the outside factors teachers in the study cited as affecting their experiences.

- Alix: “[The union does not] like that the [board] is not elected. I think that would probably be a big help. I think that . . . they’re just people that the mayor gets to pick.”

- Rory: “So a lot of times what the district has to say stems from whoever the mayor is. And so there’s where the struggle is most of the time. It’s a power struggle.”
- Rory: “And it’s whatever the mayor feels like, [they] will show that they are not weak. And so unfortunately they don’t give in. . . . If I’m the mayor and I say, this is what needs to happen. That’s why it takes such a long time for things to get resolved. And that’s why the union keeps saying that they want an [elected board of education].”
- Ava: “I feel like the CEO is trying to be a little more cohesive, but maybe the mayor [is the biggest obstacle to cooperation], honestly. I think she is a factor of why they don’t jive so well.”
- Ryan: “And I think many people in the central office are great people who are doing great work but I think from a policy standpoint, when there have been critiques for years about [how schools are evaluated] and student-based budgeting for years and charter proliferation, and about outside influence of the high stake standardized testing industry for years. And, I mean, though, I think that those critiques of those policies have been fought tooth and nail by the board.”
- Ryan: “I mean the Board of Ed is like I just think like it, the Board of Ed is handpicked by the mayor and I think so there’s a whole, that whole dimension to it. Like they’re not democratically accountable. And even in schools that do have an elected school board, like LA they spend, I don’t know what to call it. Like the capitalist class, spend millions of dollars to run, kind of like pro

school reform, like chartered people, like for the board of ed, just like any other election, you know what I mean? I think with the example of school reopening, maybe this is a bit reductive, but not saying anything original, some of the most vocal proponents of immediate school reopening and revocation of mask mandates, I think there's a lot of research to back this up, um, or at least reporting by journalists that they're overwhelmingly like wealthier people. . . . like who is the district gonna listen to? Like they wanna appease the, the tax base, like the more that the wealthy people take their children out of the school district, which they are already being siphoned into private schools, or moving to the suburbs, or what have you like the less money then under student-based budgeting that there is for the school district, they're taking a tax money and like the same thing with COVID response. Like getting everyone back to work is going to take a higher priority than is rent relief. Because the city needs to appease the tax base, it's more expensive to take care of working class people than it is to appease the wealthiest people."

- Ryan: "I think it's gotta be like both and like all the way, all the way up. Like from the school level, all the way just beyond CPS, but even you can argue about who's in the state, who's in the municipal legislature who's in the state legislature. Yeah. Who's the city, who's the mayor of the city just because it's in a large city, especially Chicago, it's all of those, those things are like intertwined."

- Carolyn: “Something that was super strange is we actually, our district leadership has been pretty consistent that our mayor and chancellor were different starting in January. Yeah. So that actually is super strange. So . . . my superintendent has been deputy super. He was deputy superintendent starting in say 2018. I wanna say maybe early 2018. He was deputy maybe 2017. So he was already part of the district leadership. Then when, yeah, that superintendent retired, he quickly became the superintendent in 2018 full time in the fall and he’s been consistent through COVID, through everything. He’s kind of been the leader that has been wonderful, I really appreciate, and now Eric Adams and appoints Steven Banks and they decide that they’re getting rid of all the superintendents. They’re gonna put out a national search and they’re gonna take this man’s job away. And at first he doesn’t even get invited to interview. So they have a big community board thing and they invite, I don’t wanna name names cuz I don’t even remember cuz I was just like so full CLEs throughout the whole day. I’m like, Oh my God, this man has had his job and been doing well. And they’re like, Thank you so much for your time. We’re a new mayor and chancellor and we are gonna take you out. Okay. Let’s interview this person from another state. So he thought his last day was like June 30th of this year, and by some miracle, I think it was parent push, possibly he gets invited to interview for his current job and he kills the interview. Like he kills the community board thing. He does amazing. He’s an amazing man, whatever. And gets his job, gets to keep his job. Wow. So, I mean, talk about lack of trust. Like how can you, how could you trust your

new chancellor when he's like, like, what are you doing? So that's the only, that's an example of just, I feel like city politics interfering with district."

Schools exist within a political system at the community, city, state, and federal levels and are integral to those systems. Changes in municipal, state, and federal leadership affect their inner functioning. Though the majority of the experiences the teachers in the research talked about and thought about in their interviews related to the inner workings of their schools, they acknowledged the power these larger forces had to determine the conditions in their buildings.

COVID-19

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 increased tensions between unions and districts especially from 2020–2022. Survey and interview respondents represented urban, suburban, and rural contexts and COVID was mentioned as impactful in each region. The unions had an interest in keeping their members away from COVID exposure and the districts had an interest in offering in-person learning to increase achievement for students and provide childcare for parents. The pandemic exacerbated challenging relationships between unions and districts as it created a new reality no current contract or agreement had considered. Rather than planning for the challenges together, in many places both sides blamed the other for either not respecting the safety of teachers or abandoning children.

Many of the survey and interview responses pointed to COVID as a source of increased tension between teachers and the union. This theme made up 35.4% of the outside factors affecting their experiences. As Carolyn shared, "COVID is an example when [teacher, district, and parent priorities] didn't align. A lot of parents wanted their

kids in school and a lot of teachers didn't wanna go in there, the alignment was off." One survey respondent indicated they "felt forced to join [the union] to protect [themselves] during the pandemic situation." Another respondent pointed to the pandemic as having "broken a lot of trust" between himself and the district. In the Fall of 2022, most of the interviewees referred to this challenge in the past tense, which indicated the acute tensions from the pandemic had passed.

Testing

At first glance, testing may not seem to be an outside factor influencing current relations. The responses, though, referred specifically to the impact of mandated assessments or pressures from the standardized testing industry on their experience as teachers. Jenny and Ava discussed how assessments were used as a compliance mechanism from the district, with Jenny stating, "You wanna be able to do whatever you want in your classroom. You need to get X amount of, you need to focus on these bubble kids. Get them to pass and then we won't bother you." Ryan stated the following about the standardized testing industry: "I think like from a policy standpoint, when there have been critiques for years about [school evaluation measurements] and student-based budgeting and about charter proliferation, and about like outside influence of the high stake standardized testing industry." The commonality is that the testing referred to was not about instruction or student learning, but rather a system to navigate. These made up 14.6% of the coded sections for outside influence.

Competencies

Competencies refer to the "repertoire of skills and knowledge" (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 99) and include the skills, knowledge, leadership, organization, and

communication of an organization. The competencies of the school-based union leader as well as the ways teachers were accessing communications from their union, district, and principal were affecting teachers' experience and understanding of the union's role.

School-Based Union Leader

Each interview respondent had elected a union member at their school to represent the teachers and help mediate issues between teachers and the principal at the school level. These individuals also liaised between the school and the union at large. They had different names depending on the district (e.g., chapter leader, delegate, etc.). For clarity, the term delegate is used to refer to this individual.

Three of the seven interview subjects referred to the benefits of strong collaboration between the union delegate and school administrator and the benefits appeared in the survey responses as well. One of the major themes from the qualitative portion of the study was the perceived benefits and strengths of the union. Delegate effectiveness accounted for 25% of the coded segments related to union power, indicating this is one of the main ways teachers in the study experienced the strength of their union. The competencies they cited for the delegate in these settings were being level-headed, able to hear information from multiple perspectives, solution-oriented, and helping teachers and administrators de-escalate when either side felt frustrated. As Carolyn shared, her delegate was "super compassionate and a really great peacemaker between all the different parties." This asset can have significant merits for a school community.

Alix shared how she had seen different iterations of this dynamic with different principals and delegates. The current principal and delegate were collaborative and she highlighted that the delegate met with her more but she said, "I don't know whether that's

on [the principal] being more open to meeting with them or him being just a more active delegate. I don't know." The interactions in these meetings, though, built trust with the principal as she shared, "I don't think that [the principal] is like fighting him on anything. I think that she is like, 'I'm listening and like here to hear the complaints about whatever it is. And, I guess help implement solutions'." She reiterated that she was not sure if it was the quality of the delegate or the principal that made these interactions positive:

We've had so many principals. I don't know if it's like [the principal] just being more willing to meet and help with that process or if it was versus someone else that maybe would've been like, I don't wanna hear about it or if it's [the delegate] just being super pushy.

Principals being fearful, avoidant, or explicitly hostile toward union interactions emerged in the qualitative data. Ava described how this looked in her school when she shared that the staff

want to kind of do a survey and they're gonna do it as a staff first because they know or feel that he will shut down if they approach it as a union versus a staff. Does that make sense? So they wanna approach it in a different way because they know the feelings regarding the union and then they feel like he will shut down and not provide the information.

In schools like these, references to the union or the contract can stifle collaboration.

In Ryan's interview, he shared that his union president said the "job of the delegate was to make the principal less defensive" and fearful of the union:

I really do think that, [administration] not viewing the union as an antagonistic vehicle, but really as truly a body that is representative of the teachers and

engaging with it, like with that in mind and saying, okay, you wanna have a [Professional Problems Committee] meeting? We wanna maybe do a [Professional Personnel Leadership Committee] to have more of a discussion around the curriculum or being cooperative with votes and whatnot. I really just do think that I haven't like truly lived that yet. I really do think that would go a long way.

Respondents reflected positive experiences when collaboration between the school-based union representative and principal was strong and hoped to see this expanded.

Some respondents reported negative experiences with their delegates as well.

Carolyn mentioned a previous school where the delegate and principal were close and the delegate would report any issues to the principal:

If you ever tried to file a grievance, the chapter leader's office was next to my principal's office. She would just go over to his office and just be like, just to let you know, so and so just filed a grievance. [This is] completely not the way that [it is] now that I'm at school with a better situation. So there was no way, my classes were out of compliance and I was overworked and teaching too many periods and I wasn't getting the right amount of prep, there was no way I was ever grieving anything because that was not the culture of the school. And I'm not saying you're supposed to grieve every 5 minutes, it's just there should be a trustworthy chapter leader that has a relationship with the principal that's professional and they can go to the principal with this genuine concern, whatever. But the way it was done was terrifying.

A strong delegate is one who is trustworthy, capable of collaborating and problem solving, strong in integrity, and available. Teachers in the study found these competencies to be beneficial for the school community.

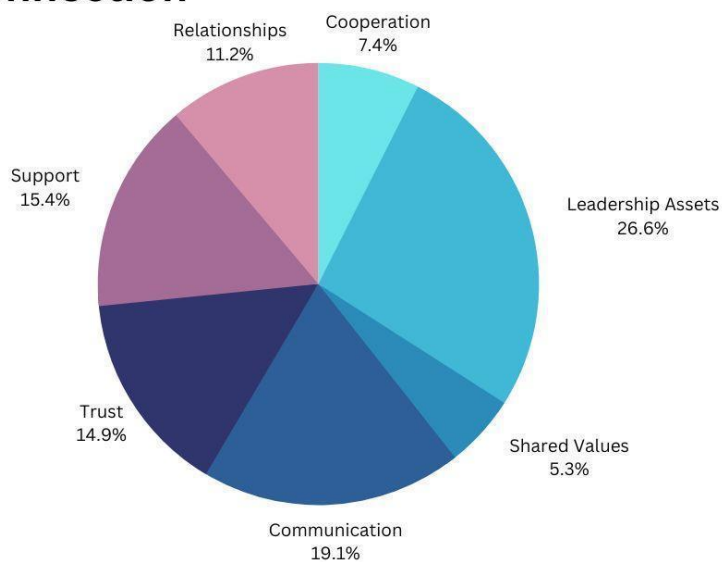
Leadership

As a part of the major theme of connection, leadership assets accounted for 26.6% of the coded responses (see Figure 4).

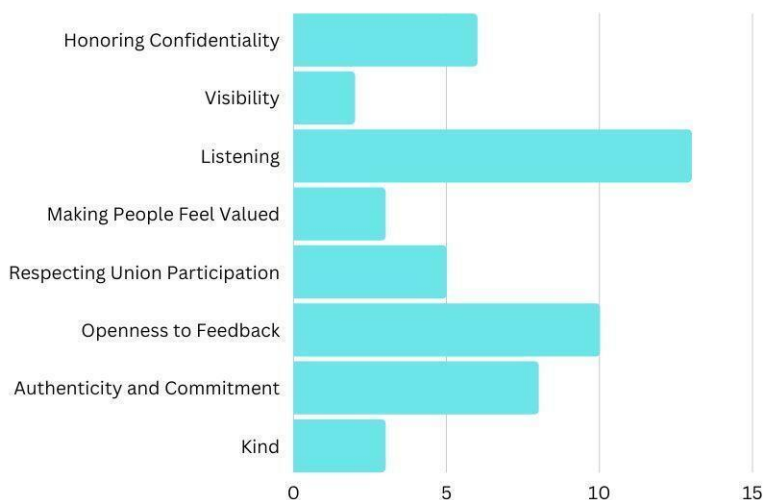
Figure 4

Connection

Connection

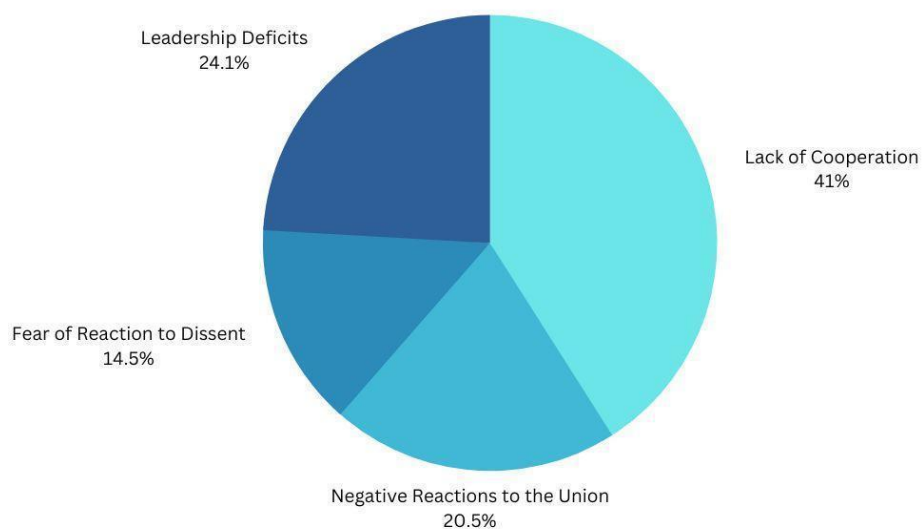


These assets were described as shown in Figure 5.

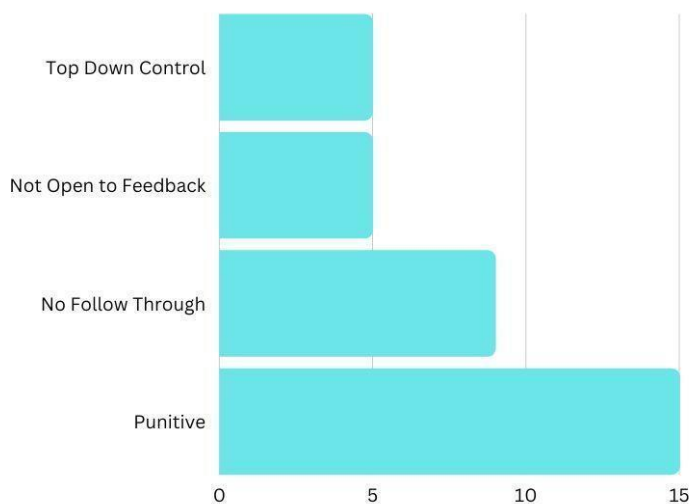
Figure 5*Leadership Assets***Leadership Assets**

These assets referenced union, school, and district leaders and resulted in greater connection and cooperation in their contexts. Listening and being open to feedback were referenced most frequently. Many of these assets can be seen in the ways the teachers described positive experiences of union delegates: listening, making people feel valued, honoring confidentiality, openness to feedback, and authenticity and commitment. Having these assets improved the cooperative functions of their schools.

By contrast, leadership deficits made up 24.1% of the coded responses related to the theme of disconnection (see Figure 6).

Figure 6*Disconnection***Disconnection**

These deficits were described as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7*Leadership Deficits***Leadership Deficits**

Interesting to note is the lack of variation in responses related to deficits, though the number of coded responses for assets and deficits were almost equal. There are fewer bad ways to lead than there are good. Being punitive was overwhelmingly a factor of negative leadership and it had negative impacts on cooperation, trust, and comfort with dissent. Examples of how this was experienced are referenced later as they relate specifically to districts and principals. Important, though, is that leadership made up about a quarter of the responses related to connection and disconnection, supporting the importance of leader actions.

Communication

The data from the quantitative survey showed the teachers were interacting with information most often from their schools and least often from their unions as shown in Table 2. Teachers in the study indicated they mostly interacted with their unions when

they communicated around contract negotiations and collective actions, which occurred less frequently than day-to-day school operations. A majority of these communications were through email with all three groups, as can be observed in Figure 8. The district, though, has the fewest opportunities to share information in person and directly. Teachers in the survey described union communications as informative (75.6%), relevant (64.4%), helpful (46.7%), and factual (44.4%) and most teachers in their interviews described the communications as informative.

Table 2

How Often are Teachers Interacting With Information From Unions, Districts, and Schools?

	Union	District	School
Daily	6.7%	14.6%	47.9%
Weekly	33.3%	47.9%	43.8%
Monthly	44.4%	20.8%	4.2%
Quarterly	8.9%	6.3%	2.1%
Less than quarterly	4.4%	6.3%	0%

Figure 8*Top Three Sources of Information From Unions, Districts, and Schools*

Union	District	School
Emails (97.8%)	Emails (95.8%)	Emails (100%)
Conversations with the rep (67.7%)	Colleagues (66.7%)	Meetings (83.3%)
Meetings (62.2%)	Meetings (47.9%)	Conversations with administration (83.3%)

Interview respondents confirmed that many teachers were not engaging with union communications that regularly. They expressed a hesitancy over attending union meetings due to a lack of time or frustrations with meeting organization. Ava described her union interactions as “back to minimal [after a work stoppage], I do try to log on to some meetings if it pertains to me, honestly, it got heightened during the strike and then went back back down.” Kelly shared that she would “often not go [to union meetings] and get the notes and . . . glance at them, but again, . . . find nothing of value to it.” Ryan spoke at length of the importance of engaging teachers regularly to make sure all voices are heard. It is possible that the union is not a large part of most teachers’ experiences but some do find it valuable, this is affected by the time constraints of the profession as well.

Conditions

Conditions are the “tangible arrangements of time, space and resources” (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 101), including the external architecture. Time and scarcity of resources appeared in the data as important conditions for shaping teacher experiences.

Time

Time causes challenges beyond negotiations. Time made up about 16% of the responses related to the setting of education. As mentioned above, teachers in the study referenced a hesitancy over engaging in union meetings. This was partially due to how the meetings were structured and feeling like they were not useful, but Ryan shared his experience as a delegate with time as the challenge preventing administration collaboration with the union:

Because I understand that like, if you are in an administration or a part of a small group of people making decisions . . . I understand that sometimes you might feel like, look like no one wants to go to a million meetings. Like, democracy is great, but we don't need a series of endless meetings. No one wants that. . . . in order to get anything done, we are gonna have to make decisions like sometimes less heads in the room is helpful. Yeah. And I totally understand that. And I think teachers do too. But I also think that sometimes when that's the case for 10 plus years asking questions and looking for clarification can feel like, "you know, wait, whoa, whoa."

The tension he was describing was not wanting endless meetings but also having enough questioning and dialogue regularly so it did not feel aggressive or adversarial when questions did come up. A hesitancy around engaging in more meetings was echoed in four of the seven interviews.

Scarcity of Resources

In addition to time being a limited resource in schools, interview respondents mentioned limited salaries, classroom space, and budgets for positions as troubling. A

scarcity of resources represented 14% of the responses related to setting and were given as reasons that contributed to their current relationship to their schools, unions, and districts.

- Carolyn: “Because when you’re working in schools, everything’s scarce. There’s not enough paper, there’s not enough teachers, there’s too many kids, there’s like not enough heat, you know what I’m saying? Like if you’re used to everything being scarce and so it can get superheated super quick.”
- Jenny: “[My school was] low socioeconomic, We did not have all the resources. It was an old building. Right. Some windows open, some windows don’t. So when we think about like, well, what is, what is the union doing for us? It made sure that we got paid, right? Which I appreciate, but like not good enough. The fact that like, it’s making sure that I get paid. But I think as a new teacher, within my first 4 years of teaching, I didn’t necessarily see a benefit of what the union was doing.”
- Ryan: “It was said like, ‘oh, your enrollment is declining. Like, you know, um, therefore you have to cut these positions’ and like at our school the decision was made, which I totally respect and understand like that. Like, well, we don’t want to lay anyone off. We wanna keep these jobs. So we’re gonna take money from the classroom budgets in order to keep people. And then people have less money to spend on their classrooms, which they need and I think that’s like a horrible position for people to be put in. Like, it’s just not fair because it’s absurd.”

- Ryan: “The way that the funding formula works with student-based budgeting is it can really negatively impact your day-to-day experiences.”
- Anonymous Survey: “Underfunding, understaffing, corporate influence, systemic inequality, hostility towards teachers and working class parents, criminalization of marginalized students.”
- Anonymous Survey: “I have to add that morale has been super low this year in general. While I’ve been really happy with the support I’ve gotten as a teacher, the feeling is shared among few teachers at the school due to low resources, low staffing, burnout after COVID, changes in mayor/chancellor, budget cuts and more.”

Survey respondents indicated their biggest motivation for supporting the union was a lack of funding for school resources followed by poor wages for teachers. Resource allocation, though, ranked second to lowest on their list of overall priorities. They reconciled this with their passion for teaching. Jenny shared:

Teaching has never been about the money, right? If it was about the money, I would’ve gone and become an accountant and made a ton of money doing some mathematical job that pays a lot more. So it’s never been about making a crazy amount of salary, but it’s been about providing quality education.

Carolyn said:

I’m very self-aware that my relationship with my job is more of a vocation than other people. Like, I feel like teaching is, it’s just my vocation, it’s my calling. And so I feel like I, there might be something contractually that might be murky or gray and I might say something like, I have it so good, I love my job, you

know? Let's pick a bigger battle when something's really egregious or when someone's really suffering.

Though resource scarcity motivated their union support, it did not paint the whole picture of their priorities, which is explored more later on.

Culture

Culture is the “shared values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations and behaviors” (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 102) as well as the quality of the relationships of the union, district, school leaders, and teachers. This section explores teachers' experiences of belonging and their comfort with dissent, as well as their trust in unions, districts, and principals. The major themes of connection, disconnection, and union power appear in this section as well.

Belonging and Dissent

When asked to what degree respondents felt a sense of belonging in their union, district, and school, the highest ratings of belonging corresponded to their school and then their union with the district offering the least feelings of belonging (see Table 3).

Table 3

To What Degree do Teachers Feel a Sense of Belonging and Community Within Their Unions, Districts, and Schools?

	Union	District	School
Very much so	42.2%	31.3%	50%
Somewhat	35.6%	43.8%	43.8%
Neutral	11.1%	8.3%	4.2%
Not very much	11.1%	14.6%	2.1%
Not at all	0%	2.1%	0%

This correlated with the degree to which respondents felt comfortable expressing dissent in each—the more belonging they felt, the more comfort they felt expressing dissent. However, all of the ratings for expressing dissent were lower than feeling belonging, suggesting this is a harder condition to establish than feelings of belonging (see Table 4).

Table 4

To What Degree do Teachers Feel Comfortable Expressing Dissent Within Their Unions, Districts, and Schools?

	Union	District	School
Very much so	31.1%	12.5%	29.2%
Somewhat	35.6%	41.7%	45.8%
Neutral	15.6%	10.4%	12.5%
Not very much	15.6%	31.3%	12.5%
Not at all	2.2%	12.5%	0%

Trust

Survey respondents indicated the highest degree of trust in communication from their union and had no negative responses. They trusted information least from their district and had a generally positive trusting relationship with communication from school administration (see Table 5).

Table 5

To What Degree do Teachers Trust Information From Their Unions, Districts, and Schools?

	Union	District	School
Very much so	44.4%	14.6%	29.2%
Somewhat	48.9%	50%	56.3%
Neutral	6.7%	22.9%	10.4%
Not very much	0%	10.4%	4.2%
Not at all	0%	2.1%	0%

What is interesting is that though 44.4% of the respondents said they very much so trusted communication from their union, only 26.7% very much so agreed that their union had their best interests in mind. There was also a drop off in comfort in expressing dissent within their union with only 31.1% of respondents very much so agreeing, which indicates trust does not necessarily mean sharing dissent (see Table 6).

Table 6

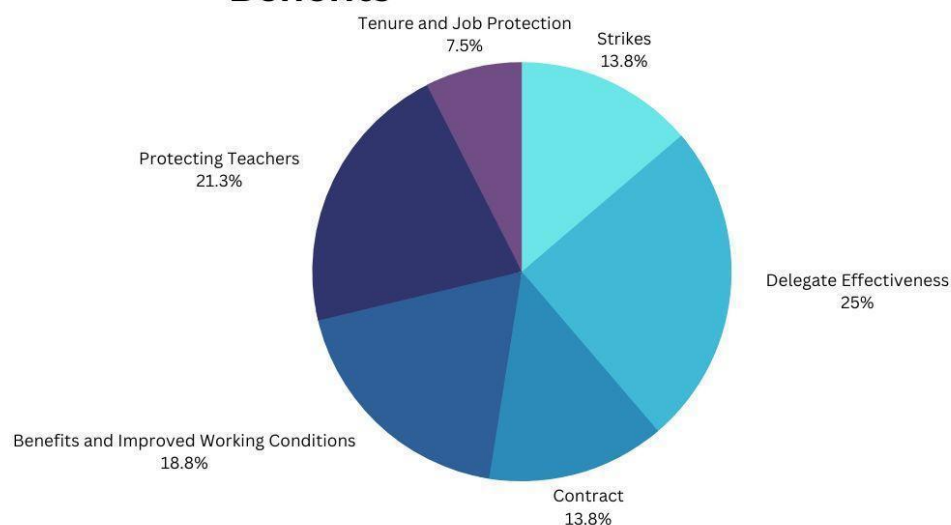
To What Degree do Teachers Agree That Their Union has Their Best Interests in Mind?

	Union
Very much so	27.6%
Somewhat	55.6%
Neutral	15.6%
Not very much	2.2%
Not at all	0%

Union. Over 90% of the teachers in the study indicated a positive response for trust in the union, and the qualitative data pointed to some possible reasons for this feeling. At the baseline, respondents identified that the union was made up of teachers. As Kelly said, “At the end of the day they’re educators too, you know, like they’re in the same position. I am just like, why would they wanna screw us over when they’re one of us?” Another good place to find reasons for their high levels of trust in the union was their view of what the union was for. One of the major themes from the qualitative data was perceived union strengths and benefits (see Figure 9).

Figure 9*Perceived Union Strengths and Benefits*

Perceived Union Strengths and Benefits



The union being trustworthy because of its ability to earn benefits for and protect its members appeared often in the responses. The most common responses were negotiating the greatest benefits for its members, ensuring the contract was enforced, representing members if they were accused of something, and reducing class sizes. These were materially beneficial to teachers and therefore contributed to trust.

- Jenny: “The majority of what it’s doing is ensuring that our workspace is healthy, safe workspaces and that we’re being compensated for the work that we do in a meaningful way and we’re being quote unquote taken care of.”
- Alix: “I think what they’re supposed to do, which is make sure that the contract that is being followed, like that’s what I think the union’s job is.”

- Alix: “Well, I think the union’s job is to protect teachers. That’s what the union does. That’s what the union should do is to make sure that the contract is being honored. That’s what I think the union is supposed to do. That’s what all unions do. It’s to protect the workers. So for the union, I don’t think that student achievement is really, should really even be on their radar. Cause that’s not what the union’s for. . . . I guess I’m just thinking about what’s a plumber’s union? They’re not like, ‘and we gotta make sure that pipes stay clean.’ Like, no it’s about making sure that plumbers don’t get [taken advantage of] and that everyone gets paid about the same. And nobody’s like over or underselling stuff, which messes up the whole system for other people. That’s what unions are for.”
- Alix: “I’m grateful for all of the work that they do because they have done a lot of stuff for us with like our class sizes the past 2 years. And, I know that when people need their help, they’re like, gungho but it doesn’t feel completely neutral all the time.”
- Carolyn: “The role of the union is to negotiate the best rights for its members. The union exists for its members’ well-being first and foremost. So whenever there’s a decision made and someone will say like, ‘Oh, I can’t believe [the union president] did that, why would he do that? And tarnish his relationship with such a, such a politician or whatever, or it’s not for the kids, you know, the kids should have been in school this whole time learning.’ His job as the union president of the UFT is to negotiate the best rights for its members. Do I agree with him all of the time? [No.] But do I understand where he is coming

from? [Yes.] He is an advocate, his whole job is to keep his union members happy. He's an elected official by us. So again, like I get it, that's his point. Sometimes their goals align, sometimes what kids want and what teachers want align. We all want smaller class sizes so we can learn better. That's an example of when it aligned. COVID is an example when it didn't align. A lot of parents wanted their kids in school and we, you know, a lot of teachers didn't wanna go in there, the alignment was off."

- Rory: "So the role of the union, I'm like we have unions in order for them to step in if we need assistance. Like if we're being wrongly accused at work, or if a situation comes up at work and you feel like it's not the truth about you, then a field rep will come in and represent you."
- Ava: "So I think they protect the teachers. They protect working conditions, which are student conditions also I don't think it should be different. I think maybe some of the way they do things should be different, but not like what they are doing. Right. Like the teachers and making sure they're heard and that things are getting done or pushed."
- Ryan: "Like, I, I can see now through what, like CORE is doing with CTU and the strike, like this is a way to help make society better. I mean, beyond just like, obviously you're serving Chicago as like children and families, like you're educating the next generation, but I think the idea that by being involved with the union, like you have special leverage being able to see all these different things that are walking through your school, classroom door, you have a more visceral connection to like what working families are going

through and you can use your power to advocate for things that they need, like expanded social services.”

- Kelly: “It’s more of stepping in in extreme situations such as if there’s like legal issues with the teacher or if there’s like an issue with health and the teacher needs extra days off, it’s from my understanding, more like that. And it’s just a way of protecting your rights as a teacher.”
- Carolyn: “Because when you’re working in schools, everything’s scarce. There’s not enough paper, there’s not enough teachers, there’s too many kids, there’s like not enough heat, you know what I’m saying? Like if you’re used to everything being scarce and so it can get super heated super quick. And so that, I think the relationship between the chapter leader and your principal is so important to make sure that everybody’s like, Okay, take a beat.”
- Carolyn: “We also have really great medical, dental, vision, and prescription benefits. The welfare fund also provides us with a gracious parental leave policy. While others express dissent with some of the political functionings of our union, as a mom and the health insurance holder for my whole family, I’m satisfied with the benefits and the raises they fight for on our behalf.”

An important distinction, though, is that unions need to actually win these things to lead to greater trust, and the respondents said as much. Jenny, who recently decided to leave her union, works in Florida which is a right to work states, which means no teacher can be forced to pay union dues even before the *Janus* decision. In her view, this made her union weak and led her to wonder:

So you claim you're fighting for this, this, and this, but yet I'm still making a measly amount and I live in Miami. I cannot afford to buy a home . . . there are certain things that I cannot do based on my salary. So what else are you doing? Right? Like, what other rights are you, you help me with? . . . what's your leverage?

In addition to financial benefits, Jenny wondered how the union was supporting defending quality instruction as the state had moved to be testing driven and compliance focused. As she did not see the union working to improve conditions, her trust had waned. The theme of unions having a lack of efficacy only occurred in responses from outside of CPS.

District. Districts are larger organizations and are where teachers from the research experienced the least trust, belonging, and comfort with expressing dissent. A common reason given for this was fear of retaliation or punishment for disagreeing publicly, which is a result of the most frequent leadership deficit as shown in Figure 7. Respondents referred to monitored social media as one place this occurred. Punishments referred to were worse evaluations and losing positions.

- Anonymous Survey: “District level individuals I interact with have no idea what’s going on, there are always boxes to check and criteria to meet that the district has decided are meaningful but aren’t, I can’t express these things to other teachers without fear of punishment.”
- Anonymous Survey: “Leadership does not seem to listen to concerns and when concerns are shared, the people who share those concerns are often ‘blacklisted’.”

- Anonymous Survey: “I do not trust the district because of how they treated my husband. If they want you out, they will get you out.”
- Anonymous Survey: “Not allowed to post dissent on social media, people that do post negatively about the district or union have posts screen-shotted and are targeted, emails are responded to in a biased way and with a snotty tone.”
- Anonymous Survey: “I am new to the school. Positions are fairly competitive in this district so I am hesitant to speak out without tenure/strong union protection.”
- Anonymous Survey: “When disagreeing positions are stated, oftentimes they are met with some form of retaliation.”
- Anonymous Survey: “The district is large and it is hard to feel a sense of belonging or to know what repercussions will happen with sharing your dissent since it is kind of faceless and most communication is electronic or virtual.”
- Ryan: “I think, look the other way to the fact that very often these like more punitive evaluating measures are used to silence troublemaker and are used in a way that, that I think it is not fair right for workers.”

One of the interview questions that may help shed light on teacher relationships to their district was, “How do you interact with your district?” Positive responses indicated strong professional learning and curriculum development collaboration with teachers from other schools. Three of the seven interview respondents experienced these factors. The respondents, though, who did not experience this professional learning support and

one who did all indicated that they experienced the district largely as a compliance mechanism.

- Jenny: “So the district would come in and say, certain things need to happen. You need to be using certain textbooks. Here’s the pacing guide. The teachers need to be on this page on this date. Um, they need to be on this topic by number, by standard. Right. They’re looking, when they do their, their instructional review, they’re looking for the check boxes. They’re not really looking at, well, what’s happening and what type of learning. Does it look like there’s learning happening? Like, can we put on the facade, then we get to check all the boxes off, right? Yeah. But no one’s doing a real deep dive into like, well, what’s actually happening and, and how are students actually achieving?”
- Jenny: “If you teach Algebra II or anything higher or a retake class for seniors, no one walks through, no one interacts with you, no one cares what you are doing. So that was part of, I ended up teaching some of the higher-level classes because it just kept district out. But if you’re in the tested subjects, because that’s all they cared about, they were. There is a a CSS curriculum, something specialists. . . . There’s also a math coach in the school that is a teacher, but they are in a coaching position and they communicate directly with the CSS. And then twice a year there are district walkthroughs. Depending on your school, there may be other informal walkthroughs but there are two formal walkthroughs during a school year instructional reviews

as they call them. And so the CSS though is the one who's really saying you need to be on 3.4 on Thursday."

- Jenny: "I once had a conversation, I think it was like year three or four with not the CSS, but someone just above it who, he basically said to me, he goes, 'You wanna be able to do whatever you want in your classroom. You need to get X amount of, you need to focus on these bubble kids. Get them to pass and then we won't bother you.' Um, and I was like, and he like highlighted names, like, these are the kids that and that, and they're still doing it. So the teacher that I, um, am an interventionist with this year, uh, he was telling me that in their planning meeting, there's another interventionist that they're hired and he was telling me that they, with the CSS there was like, we're gonna put in with the bubble kids because this year we don't get learning gains. This year we only get points for proficiency. So the district is purposely doing things that seem to be only for data purposes and not for the caring of actually educating young people to be successful. Yeah. Uh, and so yeah, there's been very little trust that I have from the district."
- Alix: "And that's really my interaction with the district [laugh] is like waiting for the person above me to get information from a person above them so that they can tell me what they need me to do. I don't know anything that's coming to mind when I think about the district. It isn't like a good thing, like good feelings. I don't, I wouldn't say that I'm like I have super negative feelings or hatred, but um, when I think when I think of the district, I think of like having to fill out that COVID thing before I went to work every single day, I think

about having to take all of those like online seminars that I just like press play and walk away. You know what I mean? I think about like that, the like kind of little annoyances about my job that I have to do, like clocking it, like doing my own timecard things that I'm like, Ugh, do I think I should have to do this? No. Do I understand why I'm doing it? Yes. But it just, sometimes I'm like, this just feels like I could be spending my time better."

- Rory: "I have deadlines that are mandated by the district. Usually after the beginning of the year, I don't feel like it's . . . day to day, until like admin says, 'Hey, by the way, you know, we're having a walkthrough in October.' And so then I feel like it comes circles back around to, okay. What is it that, you know, they're looking for?"
- Ava: "There's all the assessments, the mandated assessments that I have to do, the new policies that I have to make sure I have to know. Cause then I'm getting asked all the questions and expect to know all the answers right now. So every time there's a new policy, I better know it. I think I, right now, currently I would say it's more based around like the policy . . . and all the mandates and beginning of year mandates, and organizing a lot of things, making sure we're like in compliance for things also."
- Ava: "Um, to tell me what to do. [laugh] well, it is to like keep people accountable. Right? Here's the things that we have to do. Here's uh, like initiatives, here's what you have to do."
- Ryan: "I totally hear the need for accountability for lack of a better word mechanisms. Like I understand, we wanna make sure that schools are like our

places where everyone is respected, like where staff are respected, where students are respected, where we make sure that teachers are really teaching, like at a high-quality level. I think that it is really hard, I think on some level, like if you are burnt out and you are a person who it's evident, like you see it in people's practice, like when they're burnt out. And like, you know, even if there's someone that I think like, man, they probably could serve the district in a better capacity."

- Ryan: "I like some things, I guess it depends like what it is. Like, I think very often, like we don't have time to like, read their emails, like honestly, like I think like it's like an open secret slash not so much secret that like no one watches the mandatory trainings, like yeah. And I think, I think you can even make a case as to like, why it's a good move to not [laugh] just because like, people that they, especially this year, they like piled them on and on and on. And like, I think that sucks cuz like, I think there's some really good stuff in there."

Though the respondents understood the need for accountability, experiencing the district only through checkboxes and accountability limited the potential for belonging and trust. This may have ramifications when it comes time for the union and district to negotiate with one another as it creates a feeling of disconnection.

Teachers in the study also pointed to the size of the district as an indicator of their levels of trust. Larger districts tend to breed less trust as the district becomes faceless and teachers do not often know who the individuals are at the district level and therefore what supports they might be able to offer.

Principal. As mentioned above, respondents indicated high levels of belonging in their schools and higher levels of trust and comfort expressing dissent than in their districts. Teachers spend the most time inside of their schools. Positive social relationships within a school were noted as contributing to higher ratings of trust and belonging. Relationships made up 11% of the coded segments related to connection as shown in Figure 4.

Respondents also shared about how their principal shaped their experiences in their schools. The following traits appeared in the data as indicators of positive trust in principals: authenticity, commitment to the school community, integrity, showing that they valued the teachers, and being respectful. The largest indicator of trust, though, was a principal who was open to feedback. These are leadership assets as represented in Figure 5. In contrast, respondents pointed to principals who do not act on feedback as a detriment as shown in Figure 7. An outside factor that contributed to trust was time spent within their schools. The more time teachers spent in their schools, the more trust they expressed in their surveys. This is not necessarily causation as they may have just chosen to leave schools where there were lower levels of trust.

A common challenge referenced was school leaders who were too top-down. Kelly remembered about her principal that “she was very opinionated and wanted things to look a certain way. It just brought about a ton of change in a really short amount of time. And so trust was not there.” Ryan shared,

She can be kind of intimidating and like I know that at that school, when she was first hired, she was really kind of like by the book, like she used to work at like a charter network [and] kind of had sort of more of like a sort of like rigid

perspective on like how to manage people almost like straight out of . . . like a management textbook is like, [like] demanding respect.

Most respondents left schools with administrators like these.

Respondents referred often to feeling surveilled as a major underminer of trust as well. This appeared in four of the seven interviews. As Alix shared,

It was like, someone is tattling. There's like a rat, in our department who's telling admin stuff and then somehow it's coming back to us and then it was like, who's on whose side kind of thing. Because at the time we had people in our department that very vocally did not like [the principal] and did not like what they were doing. And people that did like him and like the lawyer drama and some of the other teachers in our department it felt like they were getting like taken out like, like snipers, things like one of our teachers had a dual certification in English and he just like decided that she was gonna teach English the next year because they wanted her gone.

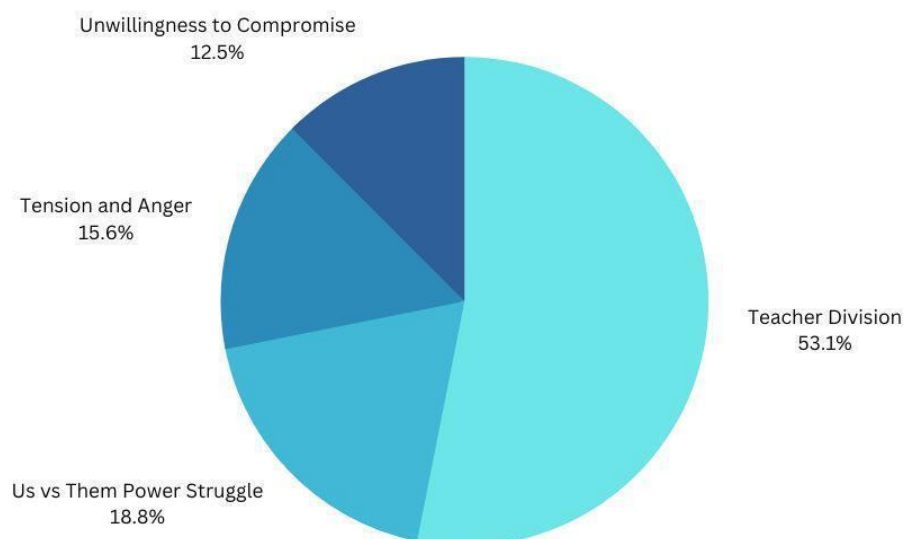
This shows that not only did teachers in the study often see principals as surveillance mechanisms, they noted they can create distrust between teachers as well. Four of the seven interview respondents mentioned dynamics in their previous schools or administrations where it felt as though certain teachers were favored who would feed information to administration about teachers who would then face punishment. In Carolyn's experience, this favored teacher was actually the union delegate who would feed information to the principal, including when grievances were going to be filed. Punishments included changing schedules and teaching assignments, lower evaluations, or giving feedback that felt personal or not constructive.

These experiences were part of the larger theme of disconnection. Lack of cooperation represented 40% of the responses as shown in Figure 6. The responses are best represented in Figure 10.

Figure 10

Lack of Cooperation

Lack of Cooperation



These teacher divisions, which were shown to be the result of principal actions at times, make up more than half of teachers' experiences of a lack of cooperation. Tempting as it may be to see the union as a homogenous group, it is made up of diverse individuals with varying experiences and perspectives. Sometimes the tensions created by scarce resources and leadership turn this diversity into division.

More often than not, interview and survey respondents indicated an understanding that principals were in a hard place being between the union and district. Teachers

emphasizing that the principal had to comply with the district appeared in four of the seven interviews.

- Anonymous Survey: “As much as I was heard, there was sometimes little teachers could do. Administration hands were tied by the network or district.”
- Jenny: “It is not a high-performing school. And so our principal was a puppet to the district. So the district would come in and say, certain things need to happen. You need to be using certain textbooks. Here’s the pacing guide. The teachers need to be on this page on this date. They need to be on this topic by number, by standard. Right. They’re looking, when they do their instructional review, they’re looking for the check boxes. Right. Like, and they’re not really looking at, well, what’s happening and what type of learning. Yeah. Does it look like there’s learning happening? Like, can we put on the facade, then we get to check all the boxes off, right? Yeah. But no one’s doing a real deep dive into like, well, what’s actually happening and, and how are students actually achieving?”
- Rory: “I feel like the principals are caught in the middle. I, I just feel like [laugh], I feel like they don’t have say, so they’re just instructed from CPS. This is what you have to do. Or these are the emails that you have to send out if, you know this happens.”
- Ryan: “What is needed in order for them to actually be run? Then people who at the top are under pressure, just spend less and less money. That applies from all the way up at the top, like as well, all the way down and I do think like, administrators, I think like at the school level, like they’re caught in like

a hard place, [laugh] that's the thing is like, I think that teachers are well aware too that like, like, you know, that, that bosses like are under pressure from their bosses.”

- Alix: “I wish I could think of like specific examples, but you know, there's stuff that you know, will ask, ask for something or ask a question about something or clarification about something to admin. And the response is like we have to hear from the district.”

Respondents also pointed to the principal's relationship to the union. Ryan referred to an incident where the principal was very vocally anti-union and mentioned this inhibited trust and was “deeply offensive to many people.” Everyone else, though, mentioned that though the principal may exhibit some fear or hesitancy in interacting with the union, they thought their principals understood where teachers were coming from and put a well intentioned effort in interacting with the school delegate. As Rory put it, “He respects his teachers. He understands that, you know, the union and the teachers are going to sometimes make decisions that impact the schools. However, he's respectful of whatever decision teachers have.” This was shown in Figure 5, which illustrated leadership assets.

Shared Priorities

Survey respondents were asked to rank their priorities and then to rank how they perceived those priorities for their union, district, and school administrator (see Table 7). They perceived the priorities of their district and administrator as the same with the exception of one switch for their sixth and seventh priorities, placing protecting teachers as the least important for the district and class size as the least important for school

administrators. The largest difference was in how they saw the priorities of their district and school compared to those of their union. The middle priorities were somewhat the same, but protecting teachers was number one for the union and at the very bottom of the list for their districts. Equity appeared in the top three for all groups. Teachers from the survey had priorities that aligned with both the union and their school and district. Protecting teachers appeared as their number two priority but curriculum and instruction and student achievement followed right behind. In this way, respondents saw themselves as having shared values with each institution. Though it may seem that a union is representative of teacher priorities, the data show some teachers do not necessarily see their priorities as the same as the union. This is a possible explanation for why respondents had high ratings of trusting their union but less agreement with the statement, “My union has my best interests in mind.”

Important to note is that though the literature showed an increasing movement to focus teachers union organizing around social justice concerns, teachers themselves may not be seeing that trend as respondents placed it as least important for themselves and fifth important for their union.

Table 7*Priorities in Order of Importance*

	Self	Union	District	School administrators
1st	Equity	Protecting teachers	Student achievement	Student achievement
2nd	Protecting teachers	Resource allocation	Curriculum and instruction	Curriculum and instruction
3rd	Curriculum and instruction	Equity	Equity	Equity
4th	Student achievement	Class size	Resource allocation	Resource allocation
5th	Class size	Social justice concerns	Social justice concerns	Social justice concerns
6th	Resource allocation	Student achievement	Class size	Protecting teachers
7th	Social justice concerns	Curriculum and instruction	Protecting teachers	Class size

This alignment of priorities was reflected in the interview responses as well. Most respondents pointed to the purpose of the union being to protect working conditions for teachers but highlighted that when those conditions were improved, it was better for students and learning as well. Respondents often did not see themselves as being in opposition to the goals of their districts or administrators but for the most part felt like the union helped advocate for necessary improvements. Having shared values comprised 5% of the segments coded for connection as shown in Figure 4.

- Alix: “If teachers were happier and felt supported, then could they then be more supportive to students or if students were more supported and have the resources and things that they needed, then would that take a burden off of teachers that like get put on us that are outside of things that, you know, are maybe in our contract or whatever like asking teachers to volunteer, to like take on a failing student or whatever, which plenty of people are happy to do, but that’s our job as well. Maybe if one thing was better, wouldn’t it make the other one better? Like, I don’t know how to prioritize one over the other. Cause I think that the tide raises all ships in that situation.”
- Ava: “[The union] protects working conditions, which are student conditions also . . . some of those teacher protections I think do affect the kids too at the same time. Like, they will also be the beneficiaries of whatever was decided.”
- Ava: “Like class size for like a ratio of class size. . . . On the student side, they’re more likely to get the support that they need. . . . The assessments are the assessments, right? Like the teachers are not made to do more than what’s required, but we need them again in order to support our students and know where they’re at.”
- Ryan: “I really do think that ideally everyone has a shared interest, like administrators and educators, I think do have a shared interest. They can sometimes seem structurally opposed. . . . But I think everyone wants the same thing. Everyone wants the school to be better. I think that the more mechanisms for making the school run more democratically that are in place, the better it is for everyone.”

- Kelly: “I still don’t get the difference though, between [having a union and not] cause I’m like, you know, at what point, if they’re at a school that you really respect and you have a good rapport with, they usually are on your side and they are standing up with you and backing you up as a professional. And so I don’t quite understand where that stops and the union begins.”
- Ava: “I hope a bunch of them see that we’re all on the same team. I know there’s different priorities for them, but the toxic relationship can’t keep going on.”

The teachers did go on to mention times where it felt like the priorities did not align:

- Ryan: “What is needed in order for them to actually be run? Well like then people who at the top are under pressure to spend less and less money. That applies from like all the way up at the top, like as well, all the way down and I do think administrators, I think like at the school level, like they’re caught in like a hard place, [laugh] that’s the thing is like, I think that teachers are well aware too that like, like, you know, that, that bosses like are under pressure from their bosses.”
- Ryan: “We historically were a standalone early childhood center and everyone knew the preschool enrollment was going to decline over the pandemic and it did. And then our boss’ bosses told them, well, look, you have all these underenrolled preschool classrooms. So therefore, as well as it, wasn’t just a problem, unique to preschool, but like, you know, your enrollment’s down, you have less money and, um, it’s just not fair. Like, you know, like, so, and I think teachers are aware of that, but I think that given those kind of dynamics,

yeah, it's important for there to be an organization where teachers can come together and kind of like, um, share what they're going through, share their perspective on what is really needed, because I think administrators in the same breath also have so many other things. Um, they're not just only under pressure from their boss, but they have so many other things that they have to attend to."

- Ryan: "I think when the teachers union was saying like, look, this is not enough. We also need to really address other issues, like staffing and why can we just not have opt out testing? like the charter networks and the schools and the suburbs are having, like, who, who is the district gonna listen to? Like, you know, like they, they wanna appease the, the tax base, like, you know, like the more that the wealthy people take their children out of the school district, which they are already being siphoned into like private schools, like, or moving to the suburbs, or what have you like the less money then under student-based budgeting that there is like for the school district, like they're, they're taking a tax money and like the same thing with like COVID response. Like, um, you know, like getting everyone back to work is going to take a higher priority than rent relief. Like, you know, like, um, it's like, because the city once needs to appease the tax base, like it's more expensive to take care of working class people than it is to appease the wealthiest people in the city. So I, yeah, it's a mess."
- Alix: "Well, I think the union's job is to protect teachers. That's what the union does. That's what the union should do is to make sure that the contract

is being, um, honored. That's what I think the union is supposed to do. That's what all unions do. Is to protect the workers. So for the union, I don't think that student achievement is really, should really even be on their radar. Cause that's not what the union's for. . . . And I'm saying that out loud for the first time. Maybe, maybe I don't mean that. I don't know. Maybe it's horrible. I guess I'm just thinking about, what's a plumber's union? They're not like, 'and we gotta make sure that pipes stay clean.' Like, no it's about making sure that plumbers don't get, you know, and that everyone gets paid about the same. And nobody's like, nobody's like over or undersell stuff, which messes up the whole system for other people. That's what unions are for."

- Carolyn: "Sometimes their goals align, sometimes what kids want and what teachers want align. We all want smaller class sizes so we can learn better. That's an example of when it aligned. COVID is an example when it didn't align. A lot of parents wanted their kids in school and we, you know, a lot of teachers didn't wanna go in. Their alignment was off."
- Carolyn: "I feel like sometimes, um, a school leader, an administrator will come up with some kind of initiative that's meant to really create community and foster a more ownership over the school. So for example, my principal's like, okay, instead of PD the last Wednesday of every month, which is a union mandated a certain number of times a month, instead of that Wednesday, we're all gonna join committees and one is gonna be this school the school recruitment committee, and one is gonna be getting such a parent and one's gonna be in equity curriculum or whatever they, and sometimes they'll

meet at this time and sometimes they gonna this time, but you're gonna get this comp period. People are like, 'You can't do that. I don't wanna be on a committee. She can't make us.' And you know, if you read the fine lines, basically there has to be a provision that people can still meet during that PD time if they want. There's ways around it, but there are cases where it hinders the creativity of some school leaders. And it does, um, even like one of the committees was academic support for kids, For kids who needed academic support, you could sign up for that committee. And if we don't do these committees, there might not be enough teachers to support kids after hours, so if that was an example of the kind of people touting their union rights and being like, you can't make us do this."

- Carolyn: "So yeah, I think it's a cordial relationship. We've been able to negotiate, you know, paid parental leave, salary increases, we have very nice medical, I mean whatever. So yes. . . . Because they again have different agendas. Like the [Department of Education] has all those other stakeholders where the unions like our members are underpaid and overworked. Like, what are you gonna do for us today."

Important to remember is that teachers are not always aligned with one another.

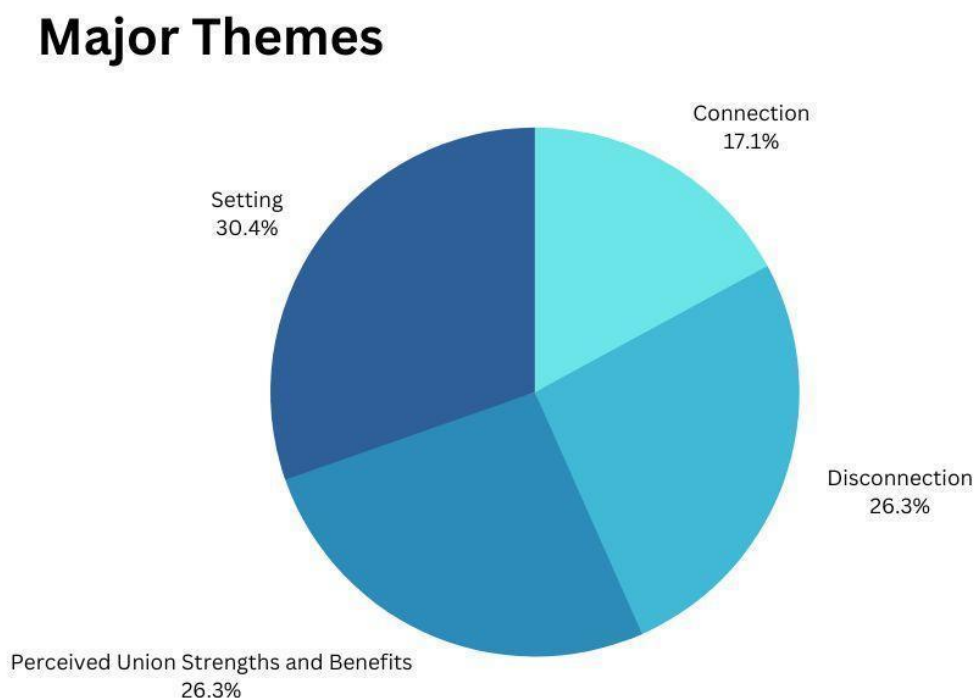
Ryan pointed to an instance of trying to work as a chapter to change a lesson plan demand but some of the teachers found value in it and building consensus was not possible. This points to an important distinction—these groups are still made up of individual people with unique perspectives and experiences. When an us versus them dynamic is solidified, it can be challenging to remember that.

Interpretation

The major themes of the qualitative analysis were connection, disconnection, perceived union power and benefits, and setting (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

Major Themes



Connection was represented in Figure 4 and highlighted relationships, communication, trust, strong leadership traits, and shared values. Disconnection, as represented in Figure 6, covered the themes that prevented communication and cooperation, such as fear of the union and reactions to dissent, teacher division, power struggles, and negative leadership attributes. Respondents described disconnection more than they described connection, and that disconnection did not only represent the divide

between the union and the district but the divide between teachers as well. Also important to note is that leadership has the ability to build both connection and disconnection.

The setting refers to the outside factors and conditions of schools that shape teachers' experiences, like the political influences, funding challenges, time constraints, and size of the district. These were shown in Figure 3 with time constraints and length of time in the organization represented as conditional factors. COVID was the largest component of this theme in the study but its importance has waned since 2022.

Teacher respondents referred frequently to the perceived strength and benefits of the union, which led to it being a major theme of the study. They appreciated the ways the union protected teachers and tenure, provided helpful delegates, won rights in strikes, and fought for improved benefits and working conditions. These were shown in Figure 9. Though their priorities and values did not always align with those of the union, these assets made the union a desirable entity to most of the teacher respondents. When the union was unable to provide these benefits, respondents felt less inclined toward the union.

I found the answers to my research questions through this study. My first question asked how teachers were primarily interacting with their unions, principals, and districts. I found that they interacted most often with all three through email and most frequently with their principals. They interacted with their unions least frequently. Many respondents pointed to a hesitancy to engage in meetings at the school, district, or union level because of time constraints. I also wondered to what degree teachers found belonging and comfort expressing dissent in each organization. In line with the most frequent interactions, teachers in the study found the most belonging and comfort

expressing dissent at their schools. This was followed, though, by their unions and then the district in spite of the union being the organization they interacted with the least. Dissent was rated lower than the level of belonging, indicating this is a more difficult condition to establish.

The next question was whether this level of belonging correlated to the level of trust the teachers had for unions, districts, and principals. This is where the results shifted a little. They trusted communication from their union the most, followed by the principal and then the district. This indicates there was not a strong relationship between feelings of belonging and level of trust. For the school and union, there was a correlation coefficient of .5 for feelings of belonging and trust but for the district it was .3. These all indicate a positive correlation, but not a strong one.

If not belonging, then what does lead to trust or distrust of a union, principal, or district? Table 8 summarizes the teacher responses.

Table 8*Factors of Trust and Distrust*

	Union	District	Principal
Factors leading to trust	They are teachers too Earning benefits for its members Protecting members	Strong professional learning	Open to feedback Strong social relationships Cooperative relationship with the union Authenticity Valuing teachers Commitment to the school community
Factors leading to distrust	Not earning benefits for teachers Hindering or not promoting strong instruction	Being too top-down Focusing only on compliance Punishing teachers Surveillance	Surveillance Having an “inner circle” Being top down Punishing teachers

I considered these responses when developing some of the recommendations for CPS and the CTU that are presented in Chapter 5.

The responses gave some insight into the role the principal plays in union–management relationships. Many respondents stated they saw the principal as somewhat caught in the middle of the union and district and not necessarily an active participant in those relations. They did also mention, though, that principals having strong cooperative relationships with the union delegate led to improved working

conditions and increased trust at their schools. Last, principals can create divisions in their teaching staff that lead to disconnection and a lack of cooperation.

I wanted to better understand how teachers perceived the priorities of their union, district, and principal and how those aligned or did not align with their own. I found that respondents' priorities aligned with both their unions and their districts and principals. They also saw their districts and principals as being very aligned in priorities. They saw the union prioritizing protecting teachers over everything and the district and principal valuing curriculum and instruction first.

In terms of how this study informs policy recommendations, more is said in Chapter 6; however, teachers in the research pointed to frustration with limited union power as a result of legislative measures. Respondents also mentioned how a scarcity of resources hinders cooperation in schools, which calls for policies that will ensure schools are well resourced. It was clear from the study that the policies around COVID-19 hindered union–management relationships and though much of that conversation is less applicable today, it does show how moments where the district and union have diametrically opposed stances (i.e., in-person learning vs. remote) can have negative effects on teacher experiences.

Conclusion

The current state of teacher experiences in unions, schools, and districts is characterized by challenges, limited resources, and a lack of trust. It is important to note, though, the diversity of perspectives especially within the teaching workforce. By embracing those differences and avoiding the “two sides” narrative, a path toward a more cooperative relationship can be forged. The following chapter fully expands on the

research question of this study to provide insights and recommendations to the current functioning of the union and district in Chicago.

CHAPTER FIVE

Chicago and the Chicago Teachers Union

The results from this research are applied in this chapter to analyze parts of the current reality in Chicago as a case study. Using the 4 Cs again, I used a more specific “As Is” reality of CPS and the CTU to inform an ideal “To Be” state. I then used this to guide the strategies, actions, and policy recommendations presented in the next chapter. The Chicago case study shows how layered contexts of federal policy, state legislation, and city leadership create conditions that can lead to division and an unproductive working relationship. My research indicates how the teachers in the study often did not define their experiences according to these larger scale battles led by the union. Leveraging the complex experience of teachers may offer an opportunity to move away from the us versus them dynamic that currently controls the union–district relationship in Chicago.

As Is

Context

Chicago represents an interesting case study as it reflects how the goals and strategies of teachers unions have evolved over time. Though Chicago received its charter in 1837, its first schools opened in 1830. Since then, the district has continuously struggled with segregation, a lack of resources, teacher shortages, and overcrowding. The union has struggled with efficacy, community relations, and competition with business elites. In 1897, the Chicago Teachers Federation was formed to advocate for a uniform pay scale, pensions, and better conditions (Rury, 2005). They also studied the legal system in order to understand possibilities for reform (Murphy, 1990, p. 62). Though not

able to collectively bargain, the Chicago Teachers Federation advocated for universal kindergarten and opportunities for children of all social strata in the early 20th century (Shipps, 2006, p. 29).

The first strike occurred in 1902 and was led by students but was the result of the conflict between teachers and the district administration regarding moving toward centralized control of schools. To make matters more tense, the inciting schools' water supply had been condemned by the board of health amid a typhoid epidemic (Murphy, 1990, p. 7). These strikes represented a bonding between teachers, students, and communities. This bonding, though, was criticized as unprofessional and teachers were encouraged to keep a distance from the community by teachers pushing for professionalism. Though at this time teachers were criticized for being too close, 60 years later they would be criticized for being too disconnected (p. 21).

Leaders of Chicago schools have consistently felt a large influence from business leaders who have pushed for a managerial approach to schools focusing on accountability, compliance, and reproducibility (Shipps, 2006, p. 14). In the early 20th century, teachers and business leaders clashed because teachers were not granted a raise while numerous corporate tax notes went unpaid (Shipps, 2006, p. 36). This meant teachers became the watchdogs for urban corruption in the early 19th century (Murphy, 1990, p. 66). At one point, conflicts between teachers and bankers escalated into a riot in which teachers broke windows and destroyed property downtown in 1933 after a period of not being paid (p. 139). Early 20th century unionists saw education as a way to restructure the class system and challenge capitalism, whereas business elites saw it as a

way to harmonize industrial needs and ensure economic stability or strengthen the status quo (Shipps, 2006, p. 47).

The CTU was formed in 1937. In 1944, the NEA conducted a study at the request of Chicago teachers and found massive corruption and mismanagement, including patronage and a lack of professional accountability within the school system (Shipps, 2006, p. 56). Managerialism again was heralded by business leaders as the solution when numerous educational regimes resulted in corruption (p. 44).

In addition to corruption, Chicago faced significant challenges with racial segregation. There was an influx of Black migration from 1915 through the end of WWII but the new arrivals were funneled into the “black belt” where class sizes were larger, buildings older, and resources more scarce (Shipps, 2006, p. 3). This was only made worse by massive White flight in the late 1950s, which resulted in Black students making up 48% of Chicago’s student population. In 1964, the University of Chicago released a report showing 85% of students attended segregated schools with massive overcrowding in the Black schools (Shipps, 2006, pp. 65–67). Desegregation policies lacked favor publicly even after the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education*, and instead business leaders pushed for decentralization of the schools to give schools the ability to be responsive to local concerns (Shipps, 2006, p. 75). The CTU was initially not supportive of desegregation either (p. 87). Though there were some pushes for desegregation, another financial crisis at the end of the 1970s put those policies on the back burner again (p. 91)

The CTU received collective bargaining rights in 1966. Two years later, a group of activists for Black civil rights protested the systemic racism against teachers in CPS

that manifested as “certification and testing requirements designed to keep blacks on the rolls as substitutes but effectively barred from full-time teaching positions” (McAlevey, 2016, p. 103). These teachers engaged in a “wildcat strike” (i.e., a strike that failed to get the majority approval from the union) for less biased hiring practices and working conditions (Bouleanu, 2019). At this time, the union was led by the United Progressive Caucus (UPC), which was started by a coalition of Irish American teachers and Black substitutes (McAlevey, 2016, p. 103). They organized eight strikes from 1969–1987 during the time of national increased teachers union militancy.

The strikes in the 1980s resulted from a fiscal crisis occurring at the end of the 1970s. As a way to avoid strikes, then-mayor Richard Daley promised money the city did not have to keep schools open (Shipps, 2006, pp. 91–92). This, however, resulted in times throughout the 1980s when teachers were not paid on time, which led to strikes in 1980, 1983, and 1984, and a month-long strike in 1987 (p. 113). After the strike, a coalition of community organizations, business leaders, parents, the teachers union, city politicians, and CPS leadership participated in a reform summit in 1988 to talk through educational issues from budgeting, to principal and teacher evaluation. It was a first of its kind (p. 118).

As a result of this summit, local school councils (LSCs) were created through legislation that included a three to one representation of parents to school members and represented a push toward decentralization. LSCs were responsible for hiring and firing principals, setting the curricular focus, and managing the school’s budget (Shipps, 2006, p. 123). The strike and overpowering of parents in LSCs led to tension between parents and teachers (p. 141). The district positioned itself in conflict to LSCs. Schools and the

central office clashed in ways that sometimes meant resources were withheld from schools. It is still unclear whether this slow down in the system for approving spending was willful punishment or general incompetence, but either way the transition was rocky (Payne, 2008, pp. 130–131). The LSCs, furthermore, quickly lost public interest and election turn out and candidates shrank each year after people discovered the amount of work it entailed (p. 143), but this organization still exists today.

The union did not strike again until 2012. McAleve (2016) described the time period from 1988–2012 as “CTU’s steady decline from a once mighty and militant union to a weak, concession-prone union-in-name-only” (p. 104). Paul Vallas became CEO of CPS in the mid-1990s and was a controversial figure, even in the literature.

Shipp (2006) described Paul Vallas as able to win over public and media opinion and someone who was generally trusted in everything he said. He did this by hiding the negative outcomes of some of his policies like retaining students who were unable to meet minimum test scores. He led what was called a “good news campaign” that was wildly successful until he left office and the public found the data were not as positive as they were led to believe (p. 155). Shipp pointed out that the increased accountability practices did not work, though they led to increased dropout rates and stagnating test scores (p. 168).

In contrast, Payne (2008) described Paul Vallas as a cheerleader of the business community and favored by the mayor. He focused on how Vallas quickly remedied the city’s financial woes; expanded after school, preschool, and tutoring programs; found ways to purchase eye glasses for thousands of kids while removing principals perceived as low performing; and ended social promotion and put lower performing schools on

probation (p. 11). Payne also said Vallas was better than most politicians in his outreach to Black and Hispanic communities and helping them feel included in his reform agenda (p. 132).

Regardless of whether Vallas was a complete success or operated in smoke in mirrors, he was able to build public trust in CPS. This gave the mayor, Richard Daley Jr., the ability to limit the union's bargaining power and to give control of the superintendency and school board to himself (Payne, 2008, p. 11). As a result, giving mayoral control of a school system is now known as the "Chicago Model" (Shipps, 2006, p. 1). A series of laws were put in place during this time that limited Chicago teachers' ability to strike over class size, length of the school day, and schedules (McAlevey, 2016, p. 106). Another result of this trust in Daley and Vallas's leadership was Daley's ability to negotiate two 4-year contracts with 2%–3% teacher salary raises without threats of strikes or school closures (p. 161). From Shipps's (2006) perspective, in the 1990s, the CTU enjoyed a cooperative relationship with the mayor but only because it toed the mayor's line and limited bargaining to the short-term material benefits with which the mayor was comfortable (p. 203).

During this time, the organizational structure, practices, and leadership of CPS reflected more of a business model echoing the managerial push from early district policy, educational experience no longer served as a requirement for its positions, and the mayor attempted to make strikes illegal (McAlevey, 2016, p. 106). Following Vallas, Arne Duncan became the CEO of CPS despite having no managerial or educational leadership background. A desire to have a strong business mind over an experienced

educator resulted in more scripted curriculum, less autonomy, and more stringent practices that did not result in increased student achievement (Shipps, 2006, p. 166).

A series of policies in the late 1990s and early 2000s, under the CPS leadership of Vallas and Duncan, was designed to remove teachers from schools that were not performing and to reopen new schools within the same buildings. This policy of Arne Duncan's became known as Renaissance 2010 and involved the "creation of 100 new charter schools. The plan would be paid for by the closure of twenty of the twenty-two schools [that were closed] on Chicago's south side" (Shipps, 2006, p. 110). Despite all of this policy change threatening teachers and schools, the union did not protest.

By 2012, CPS had closed over 100 schools, and a large majority of the students served by these schools were low-income Black and Latino students. At the same time, they opened almost 100 charters and 35 turnaround schools free from LSC control and teachers union participation. Plans were announced to close an additional 120 schools. These school closures also contributed to a decline in the number of Black teachers in CPS from 40% in 2002 to 27% in 2012 (Gutstein & Lipman, 2013).

In 2007, a group of CTU teachers created study groups that learned about and documented the school closures from this time period (McAlevey, 2016, p. 110). This group formalized in 2008 as the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE). As each school closing served to radicalize CORE members, they sought guidance from the British Columbia Teaching Federation, which had just won a strike based on the concept of investing time in "developing mass support among community-based groups before they walked off the job" (p. 112). CORE was elected to be the leadership party of the CTU in 2010 (Brogan, 2014, pp. 148–149).

CORE sought to transform the way the union operated and was formed in strict opposition to the old way of doing things—top-down leadership committed to centralization or organizing just to elect officials who may lobby for union interests. Instead, they focused their attention on expanding the bargaining team and organizing the whole of the union membership by increasing communication. They also invested energy in building coalitions with other activist organizations and making parents part of the organizing process. Messaging was explicitly social justice-oriented and connected workplace conditions to the larger inequities occurring in the community (Brogan, 2014, p. 151). As Gutstein and Lipman (2013) noted, teachers became seen as heroes by the public.

With CORE in leadership, the union published a number of principles entitled “The Schools our Children Deserve.” The document laid out the demands of the union at the time: smaller class sizes, more arts, healthy food, social workers, psychologists, nurses, librarians, more preschool, equitable resources across schools, programs targeting bilingual and special needs students, well-kept facilities, more funding, and better partnerships with families (CTU, 2012, p. iv). Brogan (2014) described the publication as an alternative urban policy that puts the values of social justice, equity and democracy at the center of its proposals. In this sense, it offers an alternative to the neoliberal policy framework of austerity, competitiveness, and market solutions to the real and imagined failings of the public sector (pp. 145–146). In this way, the union became a force for social justice activism and union members saw themselves as capable of changing neoliberal policies that challenged their classrooms and students’ lives (Brogan, 2014, pp. 155–156).

Dyke and Muckian Bates (2019) described this new approach to organizing as social movement unionism where “power is the product of organized relationships and the resource sharing of those most directly affected by white supremacy, colonialism, heteropatriarchy, border imperialism, and capitalism (e.g. students, communities, the rank-and-file)” (pp. 3–4). Proponents of social movement unionism are interested in the dismantling of the carceral state and school-to-prison pipeline and promoting instruction that honors multiple ways of knowing as well as decolonial studies (p. 9).

As the union was becoming more social movement-oriented, the mayor at the time, Rahm Emmanuel, advocated for school closures and a series of legislative measures, including Senate Bill 7 (SB7), which made it easier to fire teachers and extended the school day and year. It also required any union in a district in Illinois with a population greater than 500,000 to agree to arbitration and get a 75% approval vote before they were allowed to strike, which at the time was believed to be impossible and only affected CPS. These policies specifically targeted and agitated the CTU (Brogan, 2014, p. 151). The board also rescinded the 4% raise it had agreed to in the previous contract and further legislation made it impossible for teachers to collectively bargain over their schedules (McAlevey, 2016, p. 128).

The mayor played a major role in shaping the perceptions and popularity of the union. In his famous first interaction with Karen Lewis, CTU president at the time, Emmanuel said, “Well what the fuck do you want?” Lewis responded, “More than you’ve fucking got.” This combative stance would dominate future interactions. According to McAlevey (2016), this interaction

pitted the image of Emanuel, snarky white male graduate of a rich suburban school, against that of Lewis, strong, confident, black, female teacher and student from the same inner city schools, Lewis had used her national board–certified pedagogical expertise to turn all of Chicago into her classroom and teach her entire community the ABCs of what was really happening to the city’s school system. She had created a master narrative, issuing daily press releases that the media were gobbling up. (p. 132)

The personalities and backgrounds of these two political leaders played a role in shaping public perception of the city government and teachers union as organizations.

Amid all of these shifting leaders and legislation, the contract was due to be renegotiated. The union began planning to strike at the beginning of the 2012 school year. This strike lasted 7 days. This new unionism emphasized democratic principles in union operations. When the strike was called off, for example, Lewis had all members review the terms of the deal and vote on whether they should end the strike (McAlevey, 2016, p. 137). Polls indicated two-thirds of parents supported the strike despite the hardships it caused (Gutstein & Lipman, 2013). In the end, Emmanuel won a longer school day, but the union won a pay raise, defeated merit-based pay, and maintained tenure protections (McAlevey, 2016, p. 138).

The union published more demands in “The Schools our Children Deserve 2.0” in 2018. This new document echoed the demands from the first version but now included a whole section on non-school issues that affect education, such as poverty, healthcare, and stable housing. It also called for an end to segregation and punitive discipline, in addition to upgrades to facilities (Caref et al., 2018). The more demands a union has that are

outside of the district's control, the harder negotiations will be and the greater the likelihood of striking. In fact, from the language of the union, it seems that striking is an inevitable tool in achieving their goals. Potter and Inouye (2021) described creating communication systems and education to mobilize toward a strike well before the contract expired in the lead up to the 2019 strike. The 2019 strike lasted 15 days and resulted in more nurses and social workers, stronger mechanisms for enforcing class size, and a pay increase (Bouleanu, 2019). This strike involved newly-elected mayor Lori Lightfoot and began an adversarial relationship with her that is covered in more detail later. One of the reasons teachers in my study gave for trusting unions was their ability to win better conditions for teachers—they largely did this in 2012 and 2019.

This was followed, though, by highly contentious negotiations around bringing students back to in-person learning during the 2020–2021 school year. Chicago confirmed what the research showed about COVID contributing to a lack of cooperation between unions and districts. In January of 2022, teachers in Chicago stopped reporting in person amid a surge in cases, which was an unauthorized work stoppage as under current laws they were not allowed to strike over this condition. They were demanding a 2-week remote learning period after the surge from holiday travel. The district and city were wary of returning to remote instruction as it proved ineffective in helping students make academic progress and burdened the economy as parents struggled to find childcare. They resumed working in person 4 days later after coming to an agreement with the district, which the district then violated 2 months later when it made masking optional (Issa, 2022). This was the first union action since 2012 that did not win its members better conditions.

In addition to conflicts with teachers, the contention over resuming in-person learning led to a disconnect with parents. As one parent stated, “My mistrust is with CTU because I see the misleading information that they throw out there — the scare tactics and fear-mongering” (Cardona-Maguidad, 2021, para. 21).. However, this is not the only perspective, as other parents still saw CTU in the hero light, fighting for better conditions for their students. Though COVID increased some distrust in union leadership among parents, largely, the union still had public support as it won back its collective bargaining rights that it lost in 1995 in the 2020 state election (Cardona-Maguidad, 2021).

Another indication of public support for CTU was during the mayoral election held in February of 2023 in which Lightfoot did not earn enough votes to make the runoff. Paul Vallas of the Renaissance 2010 initiative mentioned earlier ran against Brandon Johnson in the runoff. Johnson was endorsed by the teachers union; in fact, the CTU and other labor organizations provided the majority of his funding (Masterson, 2023). He ran on a progressive platform of ensuring all schools have a baseline of funding and resourcing whereas Vallas ran on a platform of continuing student-based budgeting in which the funding follows the number of students with no baseline. Vallas emphasized decentralized control of the district, giving more autonomy to principals and local contexts as well as increased testing and higher standards for students to be promoted to the next grade (Issa & Karp, 2023). These platforms earned Johnson the teachers union endorsement and he narrowly won the runoff in April 2023.

Though only in office a short time, in May of 2023, Johnson, the CTU president, and the CEO of CPS traveled to the state capital together to advocate for increased

funding for CPS communities. This type of collaboration has not been seen in recent Chicago history and possibly points to a more cooperative future (Masterson, 2023).

This historical context shows how Chicago has seen times of heightened and calmer interactions between the union and district. Though there was a long period of relaxed relations from 1988 until the early 2000s, shifting political interests and policies as well as explicit attempts to limit CTU's power, scheduled raises, and teacher job protections kicked off a new phase. Recent history has been marked by adversarial relationships between conserving costs from the city's perspective and overcoming systemic inequity inside and outside the school buildings from the union's perspective. The union has achieved many gains, such as raises; continuing tenure protections; staffing more nurses, social workers, and librarians; protections for over the limit class sizes; and more.

Conditions

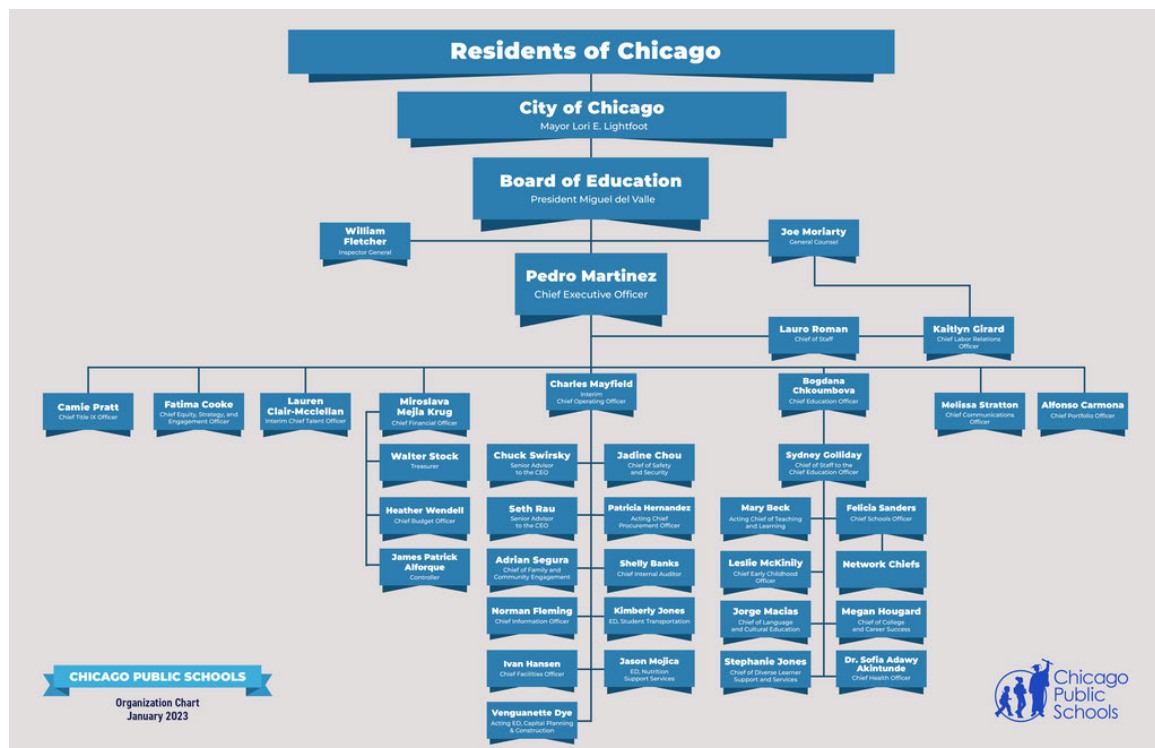
The organization of CPS and CTU as well as the financial reality facing CPS have significant impacts on the functioning and cooperation between both parties.

CPS Organization. The CPS organizational chart (see Figure 12; CPS, n.d.-a) begins with the city residents at the top, then the city government led by the mayor, and then the CEO, inspector general, and chief general counsel. Below that level is the chief of staff and chief labor relationships officer. Next, the organization breaks down into financial, operations, education, talent, equity, and communication officers. Last, there are 22 additional positions below that, including network chiefs who oversee subsets of schools that are broken up by geographical region and are divided by elementary and high schools. Many of these positions are filled by former principals from within the

district. Decision making is run largely in a top-down format although feedback can be given at board meetings in public comments and in monthly webinars for principals with the CEO.

Figure 12

CPS Organizational Chart



The collective bargaining responsibility is outlined in policy as the responsibility of the CEO but all agreements then need to be approved by the board (Chicago Board of Education, 2013). The city's Board of Education is currently appointed by the mayor and has never been publicly elected.

The district has 478 elementary and 157 high schools under its control that served 322,106 students as of September 19, 2022. These schools are broken into 17 networks and some schools are charter run. There are 41,669 employees of CPS, 34,336 of which

are based in public schools, and 646 of these positions are principals. This leaves 1,761 employees at the central office or network level (CPS, 2022). Important yet obvious to observe is that administrators and district-level employees are largely outnumbered.

To serve this population, the district had a budget of \$7.99 billion for the 2023 fiscal year, about half of which came from the local level with a quarter each coming from the state and federal levels (CPS, 2022). Comparing this to New York City's budget of \$38 billion for its 1.1 million students as a reference point because it is another large urban district (NYC Public Schools, 2023), Chicago averages about \$24,805 per student whereas New York has about \$34,545 per student. This points to a possible funding challenge. This challenge is scheduled to get worse. As a result of pension funding shifting from the state to CPS, the city is facing a possible \$600 million "fiscal cliff" in a few years when the federal pandemic relief money runs out (Issa & Spielman, 2022).

This financial challenge is being exacerbated by declining enrollment. The current number of 322,106 students is 115,000 lower than enrollment 20 years ago with an increase in students leaving the district during the pandemic (Vevea & Peña, 2022). Though this may be due in part to declining trust in the district, it is also due to declining birth rates, a decrease in immigration, and families leaving the city (Issa & Karp, 2022). There was a specific decrease in the enrollment of Black families from 1,187,905 to 787,551 between 1980 and 2020 from a lack of trust in CPS. Because CPS follows a student-based budgeting model, this means the lower enrollment is affecting Black communities disproportionately (Parrish & Ikoro, 2022). As a reminder, CPS was never successfully desegregated and in 2016, it was found that 82% of schools were not racially diverse (Loury, 2017), which further compounds the resource impact of Black families

leaving the district. The declining enrollment presents a funding and equity challenge for the district. As demands from the union grow, the resources available to meet them may not be available. This echoes Carolyn's reminder: "You're used to everything being scarce and so it can get superheated super quick."

In a February and March 2023 network meeting, the Chief Education Officer shared these challenges with principals as well as data that showed widening disparities in student outcomes for attendance and academic performance for low-income students of color. The district names its financial and equity challenges as priorities internally.

Chicago Teachers Union. The union consists of about 25,000 teachers, clinicians, and related service providers across the city. The union is organized to promote democracy. According to the CTU (n.d.-a),

The Chicago Teachers Union's democracy means both that every individual member has a voice and, at the same time, that our Union speaks with one voice.

CTU teachers, clinicians and PSRPs have many opportunities to express their ideas at the school level and to participate in the Union on a citywide level.

Educators can also seek approval from their peers to represent them on school committees and Union-wide bodies. (Everyone has a voice section, para. 1)

There are unionwide votes to elect leadership as well as approve important decisions such as ratifying agreements and changing bylaws. Members can also volunteer to participate in union committees at the city level.

The union has elected leadership and an executive board that has representatives from numerous committees and the officers; this body organizes the agendas for the House of Delegates. The union has a clear structure outlined in its constitution that values

input over time. The executive board and delegates are all union members, which means they are contributing to issues that directly relate to their day-to-day experiences whereas district leadership do not have the day-to-day experience of working inside of schools.

Each school elects a delegate to represent its school at the union level and to run union activities within the school. In its document, “Responsibilities of School Delegates,” the CTU outlines all the roles a delegate should ideally play, from holding monthly meetings to recruiting staff so 100% of eligible staff are represented in the union (CTU, n.d.-b). Union chapters should also have a safety committee and a Professional Problems Committee (PPC) that

meets with the principal every month to bring concerns to them and negotiate solutions to problems, to resolve violations of [their] contract, and to ensure that the principal’s plans do not infringe on members’ rights or the healthy functioning of the school. (CTU, n.d.-c, School Committees section, para. 1)

Important to remember, though, is that not all teachers want to participate in all of these meetings, and most teachers surveyed and interviewed in my study only interacted with their union during contentious times like contract negotiations or negotiations over COVID-19.

The delegates are required to participate in monthly House of Delegates meetings where trends across the district are shared with one another. The delegates are responsible for voting to authorize strikes and approve contracts through this body and are expected to vote in line with the majority of their staff.

During collective bargaining, the district representation only has higher-level representatives and though they sometimes meet with administrators to gather feedback,

they are not required to hold votes or get approval before making agreements. The union, on the other hand, gathers a lot of input from its members via surveys, town halls, and delegate meetings and requires votes to move forward with agreements or strikes, which takes more time. Rory shared some frustration over this model:

I feel like sometimes they don't take advantage of the time. Like it'll be 3 o'clock in the afternoon and they haven't even gone to negotiate yet. So I feel like time is not always taken into account or taken advantage of. I feel like sometimes it could be because they're no longer in the classrooms. I don't know, but I feel that they don't feel the pressure until many days have rolled by and they don't have any results.

Remaining committed to democracy means decision making takes longer. The union is currently in a 3-year contract with the district that expires in 2024. No announcements had been made as of May 2023 about beginning negotiations.

The Chicago contract stipulates how administrators can use teacher time and places limits on the amount of principal-directed activities an administrator can ask a teacher to do during their preparation periods. This limits the time school and district administrators have to communicate to and with teachers. Though the union organizes its structures for information sharing, feedback, and shared decision making, teachers have very limited opportunities to engage with the district in this capacity.

Competencies

The leadership styles and public communications of CTU leadership as well as the mayor drive much of the tension within the district, which is in line with what the participating teachers mentioned about political forces shaping cooperation efforts. The

ideal competencies of the CTU delegate, though, resonate with what the teachers in my study appreciated about their school-based union representatives. Teachers in the research stated they appreciated delegates who were good listeners and problem solvers and acted as a bridge between colleagues and administration during times of conflict.

The Mayor. Though elected out of office in the Spring of 2023, understanding the ways in which Lori Lightfoot's tactics affected union relationships helps explain the current state in Chicago. Lori Lightfoot began her tenure in 2019 and faced the first strike with the union 6 months after being elected. Prior to becoming mayor she was a prosecutor and president of the city's police board (Chicago Public Library, n.d.). During her tenure as mayor, there were several public disagreements and work stoppages with the teachers union.

The most recent disagreement in January of 2022 revolved around whether schools should remain open during the Omicron variant surge of COVID-19 and was typical of the hostile relationship between the mayor and union. Schools had reopened 4 months prior for all students and district and city leaders were hesitant to return to remote learning as it proved ineffective for student learning and placed a strain on the city's economy as parents struggled to find childcare. Teachers feared getting sick as cases were surging past numbers the city had seen before in spite of large vaccination numbers. A deal could not be reached and teachers voted to not return to work until one could be struck. Though not an official strike, the work stoppage lasted 5 days in which teachers did not report to their buildings. The mayor actively and publicly blamed the stoppage on teachers:

And to be clear, what the Chicago Teachers Union did was an illegal walkout. They abandoned their posts and they abandoned kids and their families . . . This walkout by the teachers union, which is illegal, has had cascading negative ripple effects not only on the students in their learning, their social and emotional welfare, but also on the families themselves, it is making them have tenuous financial status because they have to work, but they also have to take care of their kids. This is an untenable situation and completely, utterly avoidable. So I'm going to be on the side of the parents fighting every single day to get our kids back in school. (Wolman, 2022, para. 3–5)

This added more tension to the union and district relationship as it directly included the language of “taking sides.” During the negotiations, Lightfoot and CPS CEO Pedro Martinez released a joint statement in which they said,

CTU leadership, you're not listening. The best, safest place for kids to be is in school. Students need to be back in person as soon as possible. That's what parents want. That's what the science supports. We will not relent. (Kawash & Wade, 2022, para. 15)

In response, CTU President Jesse Sharkey said,

Do you know the way teachers see that? We see that as bullying. We see this as an attempt to dictate all the terms and not listen to the people who are actually in there trying to make schools and make education work. (Kawash & Wade, 2022, para. 16)

By communicating in this way, the mayor did little to publicly build bridges with the union. She often described situations as ones where she was fighting for students and

families whereas teachers were out for self-interest. She was what Fisher et al. (2011) described as a “hard negotiator”:

The hard negotiator sees any situation as a contest of wills in which the side that takes the more extreme positions and holds out longer fares better. He or she wants to win; yet often ends up producing an equally hard response that exhausts the negotiator and his or her resources and harms the relationship with the other side. (p. v)

This echoes the type of relationship previous mayor Rahm Emmanuel had with the union that began with his “What the fuck do you want?” initial interaction.

The CEO. The current mayor-appointed CPS CEO is Pedro Martinez, who began his role in September of 2021 and has appeared to be making concerted efforts to smooth the relationship between the city and union since. The current CTU president is credited as saying that she appreciates Martinez for making an effort to work with the union (Karp & Woelfel, 2023). Martinez shifted the way the CEO communicated with principals from webinars that only offered one-way communication to a series of virtual meetings where administrators are offered the chance to come off microphone and ask questions directly. He has also made a point to speak directly with principals at network professional development days. There are still limited opportunities for teachers and staff to communicate directly with the district. Though there are many examples of language used by the mayor or CTU president that blames the other, finding examples of this from the CEO specifically proved more challenging. This shows a different competency in leadership and communication. Similarly to how the union calls for the delegate to train

principals to be more open to feedback, the CEO may have access to the mayor to do the same.

The Chicago Teachers Union Leadership. As mentioned previously, the union prides itself on being democratic. It has elections every 3 years for its top officers who generally govern the union. The previous president, Jesse Sharkey, had been in his position since 2014 but did not run again in 2022 when the vice president, Stacy Davis Gates, took over as president.

CTU leadership can also participate in publicly vilifying the other side. Again, during the school reopening debate, then-president Jesse Sharkey was credited with saying,

We feel like we're at a point where we don't have enough at the table to be able to go back to the people who, frankly, have sacrificed a lot at this point, and confidently say, "This is something that can help ensure our safety. . . . The mayor is being relentless, but she's being relentlessly stupid, relentlessly stubborn."

(Esposito, 2022, para. 2)

Labeling the mayor publicly as relentlessly stupid did not build bridges either. In press releases, the union pointed to Lightfoot as the person responsible for problems, not CPS leadership or the organization. This simplification in language plays a role in creating a common enemy that unites the union. This passion can occur within the union as well.

Rory shared this experience:

I was in the house of delegates meeting and somebody asked [the president] a question and it must have rubbed him the wrong way. And he started to answer it and he literally left the podium and said I quit [laugh] and I was like, okay,

unfortunately, if you are leading the troops, then there's a certain way you have to carry yourself. He did apologize at the next union delegate meeting.

The language recent leadership has used could be characterized as emotional and somewhat unproductive, which contributes to the overall functioning within the union and between the union and external parties.

The Chicago Teachers Union Delegate. The union communicates with its membership through emails, social media, tele-town halls, and press releases. It also communicates through the school-elected delegate. This role shifted when CORE took power in CTU. Previously they had a largely transactional role as the ones who dispensed information at their schools, but CORE trained delegates to be organizers and mobilizers at their schools designed to increase activity and engagement. The previous union leadership before 2010 generally aimed to reduce demands to appear more reasonable, but CORE opened meetings discussing “banks, billionaires and racism” (McAlevy, 2016, p. 122). The delegate is now expected to bring this perspective to the teachers at their schools.

This is also the role where the CTU president said the delegate's role is to train principals to be less defensive as shared in Ryan's interview. Each delegate has a complex set of responsibilities that can only be properly fulfilled if the competencies of leadership, collaboration, problem solving, and organization are attained.

Culture

Though the statements made in the press, large union actions and negotiations, and systems and structures point to a certain reality, the interviews and surveys offered further insight into how things may actually be functioning. Teacher priorities and

perspectives on an individual level are not always aligned to union priorities and perspectives.

Lived Experience of School-Level Union Structures. Though CTU lays out a blueprint of chapter meetings, PPCs, PPLCs, and safety committees, most teachers surveyed and interviewed did not find value in attending union meetings outside of negotiations and heightened circumstances such as strikes. As a reminder, almost 60% of the teachers said they communicated with their unions monthly or less frequently either through in-person meetings or email. In small schools, it may not be possible to staff all of these committees regularly due to time constraints.

Some teachers reflected that they did not find much value in participating in union structures at all. Kelly stated in her interview,

If you're at a school that you really respect and you have a good rapport with, they usually are on your side and they are standing up with you and backing you up as a professional. And so I don't quite understand where that stops and the union begins.

Her experience of the union was largely unnecessary because she saw her school as generally supportive.

Ryan, a CORE member and union advocate, reflected some challenges of the internal union structure in his first school. The union members gathered and asked, "We were looking at the contract and kind of just workshopping, like, 'what are some things that we can do to try to enforce this contract and make our lives better?'" As a member of CORE, Ryan was excited to find ways to organize the teachers based on the contract. The teachers thought about changing a lesson plan structure that was rather time consuming

but some of the teachers liked the structure and did not want to change it. Ryan saw this as teachers siding with management to exact some kind of benefit. Some teachers just may have found value in the lesson plan structure for kids. This model of looking for issues to press was not successful for his school and it sounded like it led to distrust between teachers.

On the other hand, Alix spoke about how beneficial frequent collaboration between the delegate and principal was for her school in resolving issues on class size. The difference between these two contexts could be the objectivity of class size as opposed to lesson plan structures. The more concrete and logistical the demand, the more helpful the union structure may be. This may be an interesting point for further research. Issues that can be quantified are often more negotiable than are gray area concerns such as instructional choices.

Social Justice Concerns as a Priority. Though CTU frames its mission as social justice-oriented as evidenced by its tenets in “The Schools our Students Deserve 2.0,” most teachers did not reflect this idea in their surveys and interviews. Of the interviews, only Ryan mentioned social justice issues as a purpose of teachers unions. In the survey, teachers ranked social justice concerns in last place on their list of priorities. More interestingly, though, they placed it in fifth place for their union. Though unions may be representing themselves this way publicly, teachers from the study were not upholding the same priority.

District as Compliance Mechanism. Ryan described CPS as a “behemoth,” whereas Kelly, who worked in a much smaller district, identified feeling backed up by her district and found the professional learning offered by her district to be incredibly

valuable. Larger districts may have a harder time creating this feeling of support, but Carolyn, who was from New York, did find the district to offer valuable feedback and learning. Only one teacher from Chicago highlighted a positive district-provided professional learning opportunity. She attended a new teacher mentor training she found valuable.

All of the interview respondents from Chicago described the district as feeling like a compliance mechanism. Teachers did not necessarily take issue with this. As Rory shared, “I may not always agree with [district communications], but I do trust that that’s stuff that needs to get done.” Teachers referred to required assessments, clocking in, mandated training, and COVID-19 health screeners as compliance mechanisms that reminded them of the district. Increasing the support the district can provide through professional learning and moving away from checklist items may be a way to improve teacher experiences of the district. This is an additional area for further research.

To Be

Block (2009) described the value of community and developing a sense of belonging that leads to shared ownership over bettering the community. This vision provides a glimpse into a new possibility for union–district dynamics. He said the key work is to “transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole” (p. 1). This requires shifting the focus from problems to possibility. The key to transformation is creating a stronger sense of belonging as belonging gives a sense of ownership over an organization or group. Members of an organization are therefore motivated, then, to build and nurture the community and we become more accountable (p. xviii). This is the “To Be” state we

should be striving toward—a district in which leaders, parents, students, staff, elected officials, and union members have shared ownership over the success of all students.

Context

There is value in noting that the challenges facing CPS are not solely the fault of the union. Similarly, they are not solely the fault of the district. The larger context around the district needs to affirm the value of both parties and allow for the understanding that the teachers and staff of CPS are not one-minded. Though the goal is to have a district where all stakeholders have shared ownership over resolving challenges, there are times when a union is necessary to advocate on the behalf of teachers and students. When there are dangerous facilities issues or teacher positions are being threatened, the union is most likely to operate to get resolution more quickly—there is great value in this ability.

The media also plays a role in contributing to the contentious relationship in how they cover disputes. Some news organizations are biased toward teachers and some are biased toward districts, but few are nuanced in acknowledging the assets and challenges of each perspective. The mayor and other elected officials should adopt this approach as well. With a more balanced perspective, the outside public would be better positioned to be supported. Those within the district rely on news outlets to narrate challenges as well and reading things that emphasize blame and distance only reinforces the isolation that makes it harder to solve problems.

Legislation from the state around collective bargaining and budgeting should be supportive of district functioning and allow for the needs of students to be met in an equitable fashion. Legislation explicitly targeting unions can have negative impacts on students. For example, in Wisconsin, Act 10 has had negative effects on student outcomes

due possibly to high teacher turnover and decreased teacher salaries (Baron, 2018, pp. 42–44). Furthermore, some states are currently passing laws censoring schools from addressing Black history or LGBTQ students. Rather than restrict instructional practices and unions, the state should focus its efforts on creating policy that supports financial health and sustainability for its schools. Districts, schools, and teachers should seek input from their communities but also use research-based best practices to improve student achievement. These individuals have more experience and expertise in instruction than most legislators and their perspectives should be valued.

Part of the reason teachers and leadership struggle to cooperate is the quantity and size of the challenges schools face in educating students whose basic needs are not being met outside of school in the areas of housing stability, health care, mental health services, food security, safety, and more. If larger political structures were able to organize to provide more equitable access to health care, affordable housing, community resources to prevent violence, mental health services, parenting resources, childcare, and immigration services, the burden on schools would be lightened. Shipps (2006) noted that when considering the complexity of the challenges facing schools, the solution has been to stick to managerial solutions like accountability rather than looking at the basic structure of systems (p. 175). This systems thinking is needed. Support with these root causes could improve the health of the districts' enrollment and reduce some of the stress on the district and union's relationship.

With the new mayor being union endorsed comes the potential that he will be more amenable to collaboration with the union. Johnson has an opportunity to build his institutional knowledge by spending time learning about the functioning of the district

from the families, teachers, district leaders, principals, and the union before he engages in negotiations. The relationship with the mayor should allow for collaboration around challenges and advocacy with the state for needed policies and resources.

Last, the union should not consider striking as its prime means for attaining better conditions for students and teachers. Time and resources should be invested in improving negotiation strategies and structures. The union has shown its ability to disrupt the city through its strikes when families have to scramble to find childcare, students who rely on school for food are kept in their homes, and students lose valuable instructional time. Furthermore, strikes generally heighten conflicts between unions and managers (Msila, 2021, p. 287). Though these strikes have resulted in raises, increased social workers and nurses, support to limit class sizes, and protections for tenured teachers, they often end short of union member expectations and leave a bad taste in the mouths of all stakeholders (Blanc, 2022). Consideration should be paid to long-term structures for problem solving and collaboration with the district that offer more sustainability and partnership with students and parents.

Conditions

Given the potential of CPS's fiscal cliff, financial stability is imperative and the district will require support from the city and state in balancing its budget. The research pointed to a lot of contention around the scarcity of resources. Ideally, the district will run a balanced budget that will allow for sustainability at all schools with a healthy teacher pension system. In the event that the district faces the massive deficit in a few years, conversations around school closures will begin again and the potential for a new round of strikes and protests that align the union and community organizations will be high. It

should not be left to the district and union to negotiate contracts as though there is Monopoly money available to meet or not meet the demands on the table. As it stands already, city schools can be perceived to negatively affect the city because they take state and federal dollars and redistribute them to the poor parts of the city to help schools, which takes away from urban development in the eyes of many business leaders (Shipp, 2006, p. 9). Business leaders are stakeholders in the education system as well and given the financial crisis facing the district, “if corporate and union leaders worked together on behalf of school reform, they would be an unstoppable combination” (pp. x–xi). To build sustainable solutions, the fiscal limitations should be transparent and a responsibility of all members of the bargaining team.

The district should be organized in a way that allows it the flexibility to follow into school and teacher needs with support, feedback, and professional learning. Teachers would be able to describe CPS as helpful as opposed to a compliance mechanism. This may require a shifting of the organizational structure in the district and the structures of time spent in schools by network support.

Time needs to be built into the schedule for problem solving and professional learning between teachers, principals, and district leaders. There also needs to be time for district leaders to collaborate with principals and for the mayor to hear from these parties directly. Instead of each group staying siloed until a crisis or negotiation occurs, they should engage frequently. The structures for collaboration should be context specific and determined collectively based on what makes sense for that community. A school with 1,500 students will have more individuals to participate in more committees than one

with 300. Given the hesitations and limitations on meeting time, all meetings or committees should be purposeful, efficient, and meaningful.

Competencies

In the ideal state, union, district, and school leadership would have sufficient competency in mediational strategies as well as be able to see policies and systems from the lens of multiple perspectives at once. They would have the emotional intelligence to not see dissent as a personal attack but rather an expression of care. District leadership would emphasize this during contentious moments with the union and help school leaders understand how to communicate with their school communities in a way that promotes healing.

Rubinstein and McCarthy (2014) highlighted in their research the importance of more frequent and less formal communication between union members and school leaders: “This kind of communication allows union leaders and principals the ability to plan and work together, and it gives them the opportunity to resolve issues before they become larger problems” (p. 14). The principal and delegate relationship can lay the groundwork for thinking through the challenges and possibilities of situations. If the delegate has a strong relationship with teachers and can understand their priorities, concerns, and assets, they can problem solve with the principal in a way that does not necessarily require endless consensus building and meeting time. This requires, though, that the principal be open to feedback and input and value the perspectives of teachers who may or may not understand all of the factors going into a decision. Resources from both the district and union should be available to support principals and delegates in their skill development and relationship.

Official communications from schools, districts, and unions should be regular, factual, and consider multiple audiences. As the current communication from the mayor and union can seek to blame the other for current challenges, the city, district, and union should produce more joint communications that describe all the factors that went into decisions. In the way that Alix saw her principal and delegate on the same page in figuring out class size challenges, the union and city can and should work on problems together. No one person currently in charge is solely responsible for the numerous challenges facing the district, from lead pipes to a growing achievement gap, and no one can fix any challenge alone.

This shared ownership should be evidenced in how the union and mayor describe one another publicly. Statements can acknowledge diverging perspectives and priorities in a way that does not blame, ridicule, or patronize anyone. For example, during the COVID-19 work stoppage, the mayor could have acknowledged the anxiety teachers faced related to returning to work while reiterating the importance of in-person learning. Speaking to both realities does not undermine their perspective and could de-escalate contentious situations.

Because most teachers are receiving most communication through email, email communication would be offered but opportunities to communicate in smaller groups within the school and district should exist as well. This communication would be directed outwards as well to the media and larger community to create more trust externally.

Culture

The district should be seen as helpful and not just as a compliance enforcer. This would be not just for perception but also because teachers and schools need help. A

district that mainly focuses on control is what led to the current state, which is a reminder of Block's (2009) "stuck community" in which the inherent assumption is that members cannot manage themselves or contribute to the common good. Schools, districts, and unions should be characterized by trust and an assumption of best intent as these are the conditions under which the most collaboration occurs between teachers that leads to better outcomes for students (Rubinstein, 2013–2014). The district can begin to be helpful through providing effective professional learning that can connect teachers across the district.

Unions have a role in protecting teachers and districts have a role in maximizing outcomes for students. Teachers align their priorities with both parties and do not blame one side on the whole the way public statements suggest. Clearly stating shared priorities as a union, district, principals, and teaching force can provide a strong starting point for collaboration. Similarly helpful is stating diverging priorities and having transparency around the conditions and resources available to resolve disagreements.

This new imagination for the district will require accountability, which asks that all stakeholders see themselves as a part of the cause for the realities they seek to change. Without this ownership, they become reliant on the transformation of someone else (i.e., the district, the union, the mayor). To develop shared ownership, everyone must engage with the question, "How have I contributed to creating the current reality?" (Block, 2009, p. 134). In the current context, this question is rarely engaged with and instead blame is embraced.

Conclusion

Achieving this ideal state of shared ownership, functioning systems, and effective communication is possible. In the next chapter I describe several policies and actions that can move all districts, including CPS, toward this reality.

CHAPTER SIX

Policy and Leadership Recommendations

Block (2009) highlighted that “social fabric is created one room at a time” (p. 11). Intentional engagement in localized contexts builds shared ownership and accountability when the right questions are asked and the community is engaged in thinking through possibilities for the future. He went on to say that “large-scale transformation occurs when enough small groups are aggregated to lead to a larger change” (p. 97). Too much of the current state of education in Chicago and beyond relies on representative democracy, which leaves most teachers isolated from decision making until it gets to extreme questions: Should we go on strike? Do we accept this contract? Ideally, more input would be gathered in earlier stages of prioritizing and vision setting. Shipps (2006) recommended this approach in building better relations with parents when she asked that parents and teachers “collaborate from the beginning in a common coalition on behalf of a mutually agreed upon performance agenda” (p. 194). This again echoes the recommendation for more frequent and less formal communication to create a more cooperative context. This means the principal and school communities have the potential to influence the larger district by modeling the shared ownership and solution-oriented thinking desired.

In addition to Block (2009), Fisher et al.’s (2011) work, *Getting to Yes*, offers valuable insights on how negotiations can be improved from big negotiations for contracts to smaller school-level negotiations over conditions in the building. Principled negotiation “suggests that you look for mutual gains whenever possible, and that where your interests conflict, you should insist that the result be based on some fair standards

independent of the will of either side” (p. ix). Improving the quality of negotiations has the potential to contribute to the sustainability of agreements and an overall positive impact if the foundational principles of making agreements based on objective criteria and centering conversations around interest over positions are embraced by leaders at every level. As illustrated in “The Schools our Children Deserve 1.0” and “The Schools our Children Deserve 2.0,” the union enters negotiations on positions (e.g., required nurses, librarians, and social workers; changes to the budgeting formula; specified wage increases; etc.). The district enters with hard lines around what they will offer. Deals are often created based on how long both sides can withstand a strike instead of being based on objective criteria for the quality of those deals. Implementing principled negotiation could have significant effects on improving the quality of union–management functioning.

To move to this reality of shared ownership, cooperation, and principled negotiation, recommendations on strategies are given in this chapter for principals, districts, and unions and districts together. To support this work, policy at the federal, state, and city level needs to address financial stability for the district. All of these changes have economic, political, legal, and ethical considerations for decision makers that are addressed as well.

Strategies and Actions

Recommendations for strategies and actions are considered for principals, district leaders, and for union and district leaders to employ together. They are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9*Strategies and Actions*

	School leaders	District leaders	District and union together
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be open to and solicit feedback • Use time effectively • Listen • Focus on interests, not positions • Use commonly created and objective criteria for decision making • Develop union structures that make sense locally • Hold frequent opportunities for dialogue • Respect confidentiality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiated support for schools • Strong professional learning • Provide opportunities for direct interaction with teachers • Advocate for cooperation with city leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create joint communication • Provide development for principals and school-level union leaders • Use principled negotiation tactics
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff feedback • Quality of agendas and intentional planning for meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher feedback of district support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreements that can be honored long term • Negotiations that do not result in work stoppages

School Leaders

The strategies and actions summarized above align with what Horsford et al. (2019) referred to as “empowering leadership.” That is, leadership that is “open” or characterized by a willingness to share power, honesty, communication, and participation as well as “transformative,” which asks the leader to challenge the status quo by raising the consciousness of its stakeholders. “Empowering leaders . . . can more easily achieve goals of social justice while also achieving greater inclusiveness and more authentic and democratic relations” (pp. 99–101).

Teachers in my research confirmed this when they were very clear that they trusted their principals and felt belonging at their schools when their principals were open to feedback and when they interacted with their principals frequently. Engaging teachers regularly in the planning, visioning, and decision making for the school is important when it comes to shifting the narrative from “what are you, principal, going to do about this?” to “how are we going to solve this challenge?” Principals need to be intentional about how principal-directed preps and professional learning days are used if they are to achieve this shift. Teachers also are hesitant to read too many emails or attend too many meetings so the opportunities principals do have to connect with them need to be well planned and impactful.

These opportunities for feedback and planning are where teachers and administrators can focus on interests as opposed to positions. First, principals need to de-escalate the personal conflicts so that “figuratively if not literally, the participants should come to see themselves as working side by side, attacking the problem, not each other” (Fisher et al. , 2011, p. 12). They can do this by using the authentic listening skills

and openness to feedback that respondents pointed to as building trust in their building administrators. Strong influencers “need to understand empathetically the power of [the other side’s] point of view and to feel the emotional force with which they believe in it” (p. 25).

A good example of this type of building-level conflict is the issue in Carolyn’s school of teachers being frustrated they have to share rooms. If teachers enter the conversation as “we do not want to share rooms,” the principal enters with “some of us have to share rooms” and both only discuss those positions, meaning more flexible solutions are not possible. Fisher et al. (2011) warned against staying stuck in positions:

The more attention that is paid to positions, the less attention is devoted to meeting the underlying concerns of the parties. Agreement becomes less likely. Any agreement reached may reflect a mechanical splitting of the difference between final positions rather than a solution carefully crafted to meet the legitimate interests of the parties. The result is frequently an agreement less satisfactory to each side than it could have been, or no agreement at all, when a good agreement was possible. (p. 6)

The underlying concerns could be around being able to easily transition between classes, having a quiet place to work during preps, feeling organized, and more. There are more solutions to these concerns than just sharing or not sharing and focusing on them allows for more useful solutions to emerge. The decision of how to share should also not be determined based on who has the most influence or will, but rather on objective criteria of efficiency and fairness that teachers themselves would be a part of determining;

therefore, the solution is judged on fairness, not personal issues (Fisher et al., 2011, p. 13).

If these tactics became the norm of interactions within a school, prioritizing protecting teachers above all else would no longer be necessary for teachers because they would experience efficacy in advocating for changes and all stakeholders could prioritize working together to improve student achievement, like Rory described feeling in her district. Teachers may feel protected by the community and would not fear punishment for speaking dissent. They would feel empowered to take on more decision making and organizing within their school and district. Instead of waiting for policies to come down that affect their conditions, they would play an active role in creating such policies.

Principals also need to cultivate strong relationships with their delegates and internal union structures. Though some teachers mentioned principals who seemed afraid of or even hostile toward interacting with the teachers union, the teachers surveyed appreciated administrators who had a collaborative and understanding stance toward the union. It makes sense for individual school communities to design their structures for collaborating as a union. Though there are committees outlined in the contract, smaller schools may be less equipped to run all of them well and fewer committees that attend to more concerns may make more sense. Finding the balance that is sustainable for teachers and administrators is important so consistency of communication can be maintained. Teachers need space to communicate separately from administration to sift through their concerns and determine what needs more attention. The participating teachers were clear that they did not want to meet just to meet. Administrators likely feel similarly, so agendas should be created collaboratively and time should be respected for all meetings.

Principals need to meet regularly and frequently with delegates as well so they can address potential challenges before they get out of control. In order to collaborate effectively, both parties need to be transparent about the possibilities, priorities, and challenges while respecting the confidentiality of teachers not at the table. Doing this well means the delegate can help diffuse issues with teachers by offering more context to their concerns. Two of the teachers pointed to the strength of this relationship as building trust and helping the school come to mutually beneficial solutions around issues like room sharing, class size, and student support.

For school leaders to evaluate their effectiveness in these strategies, they should regularly gather staff feedback about their leadership, school climate and culture, policies, and professional learning. They can also reflect on the cadence and quality of their interactions with teachers by reviewing agendas and professional learning calendars. Other metrics that might be related are teacher retention and attendance as these point to investment and shared ownership in the community.

District Recommendations

To move away from the “stuck community” of top-down control and compliance, districts need to provide localized support for schools. Though this could look like cross-district professional learning on universal district priorities, schools need differentiated support. The schools themselves can be a part of asking for what that support is and designing what it looks like. Teachers can be leveraged to share their strengths across the district.

As an example, CPS has messaged the intention to support this work through the Equity Office. They describe targeted universalism as the strategy toward improving

outcomes for students. Targeted universalism asks school communities to come together to create a shared universal goal, consult data to reflect on which subgroups of students are struggling to meet that goal, plan short- and long-term interventions for those students, and to begin with the students who are farthest from the goal. It allows communities to prioritize their own challenges and acknowledges that students and schools have unique circumstances that contribute to their overall success. The office emphasizes the power of shared accountability as well:

We believe the most effective way to reduce disparities in opportunities is to empower all educators, staff, and students across the district to identify the challenges within their individual classroom, school, network community, or district department, and implement thoughtful, data-driven practices to help all students reach our shared, universal goal. (CPS, n.d.-b, para. 3)

To achieve this vision, the district needs to give schools flexibility, resources, and time to meet the challenges they identify.

Though promising, targeted universalism is not yet experienced by all stakeholders in the district. When I became an administrator, it was the first time I learned that the district had invested many resources in designing an equity framework to guide policies and decision making. Teachers, who as a reminder placed equity as their number one priority on the survey, largely are unaware that this work has been done. Allowing teachers the opportunity to opt into further learning with the Equity Office is an example of an untapped opportunity for the district to help teachers meet their goals which, in turn, would improve their practice. This can serve as a learning point for leaders of other districts.

Whatever the content of professional learning and support schools and teachers ask for, sessions should have space for teachers to ask questions and give feedback to district and network leaders. The more this happens, the more productive those moments will become. CPS, for example, has put a concerted effort into doing this for principals. When the CEO initially started his monthly webinars allowing principals to come off mute and ask questions, the meetings always went to the end of time with questions, concerns, and complaints from often heated principals. But now, a year later, the meetings often end early as there are fewer concerns to voice. I have seen how this practice has built trust and collaboration with administrators and know it could go a long way if teachers had the opportunity to communicate more directly with the district. As Msila (2021) wrote,

Negative gestures will elicit negative responses, while goodwill draws goodwill. The more people interact with each other, the greater the chances of cooperation. If people know that they must deal with friends and adversaries in future, they will behave more cooperative. (p. 287)

To build trust, goodwill needs to be shown and there needs to be more frequent interactions. This echoes the same recommendations for principals to empathize with teachers' needs, focus on underlying concerns, and find fair criteria for assessing decisions.

Last, district leadership needs to advocate for its constituencies by helping local politicians and the larger community understand the district and various stakeholder priorities so that conflicts can be de-escalated and resolved. They need to train politicians to be less defensive and to understand the inner workings of the district. This can best be

done by having district leadership and local leadership meet frequently and informally as well as organizing opportunities for the local leadership to learn from teachers and students directly. Acknowledging that politicians have many other competing priorities and learning about what those are is another function of this relationship.

To evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies, the district should engage teachers in feedback surveys about the frequency and quality of their interactions with the district. Principals can give feedback on the quality of differentiated support they receive as well. Other metrics to consider might be teacher retention in the district and the percentages of teachers who opt into professional learning multiple times.

The Union and District Together

The district and union need to work together on the things they agree on to begin transforming their relationship. As a teacher and school leader, I often ask students who are struggling to get along to do projects together as a way to practice professionalism and to rebuild community. The challenges facing the district are not the fault of the union or district alone and many of the challenges are completely external to the education system. They agree on much more than it appears from how they have negotiated over the past 10 years. As Fisher et al. (2011) emphasized, “shared interests help produce agreement” (p. 12). They went on to note that there are shared interests in any agreement, and explicitly naming the shared interests as a goal makes them useful and working from shared interests makes negotiations smoother (p. 74).

The recommendations can be applied during negotiations, but also could be imagined on a large scale. Districts have published goals and visions as do some unions, so there would be value in both teams coming together to name their shared priorities and

goals and outline their roles in achieving them. Only coming together over divergent priorities is not building trust. Changing the narrative from inherent adversaries to two organizations that respect one another needs to start somewhere. This would allow both sides to start attacking problems rather than attacking each other (Fisher et al., 2011, p. 12).

The union and district could work together to provide professional learning and support for the principal–delegate relationship as well. Though some leaders and delegates are naturally disposed to conflict resolution and nonviolent communication, many will need help in making these relationships more effective. This relationship is also rooted in shared experiences and mutual benefit. Most principals were teachers union members at some point in their career and have a personal understanding of that experience. Principals, delegates, and union members at large do not need to exist widely separated from one another. Training, coaching, and professional learning communities would all be valuable. Creating these supports together is another area in which the union and district could work together instead of against one another.

If employed effectively, media coverage would show the union and district presenting together and not contribute to an adversarial image of the two. Joint statements should also appear in the coverage. Evaluation for the joint training should be assessed by participant feedback as well as attendance.

Policy Recommendations

Policies should respect teachers' right to organize and states should not explore legislation similar to Act 10 in Wisconsin, which dramatically disrupted the education system and outcomes for students. Rather, attention needs to be given to balancing school

budgets as the federal relief money from COVID-19 is running out nationally and districts are facing a fiscal cliff. To do this effectively, the city leadership, union, district, and state legislators should be involved in determining what that means. Feedback should be gathered as well from community, family, and student stakeholders.

One example of how this crisis may appear in districts, especially large ones, is a call for school closures. CPS, for example, is under a moratorium on school closures that will end in 2025. School closures, which disproportionately targeted Black communities, are a large part of what radicalized the CTU in the early 2000s as the closures were shown to negatively influence the outcomes of students in the communities affected (Parrish & Ikoro, 2022). The city, though, was grappling with a billion dollar deficit, schools with fewer than 100 students, and old buildings requiring major capital investments (Karp et al., 2023). Currently facing similar financial challenges, building issues, and declining enrollment, the union, district, and city have an opportunity to engage with one another differently this time. Using principled negotiation offers one path forward. Specifically, cities and unions can determine objective criteria for when a school should be closed as well as when investments can be justified. There will still be pain points, but trust can be built in difficult times.

Recommendations for Further Research

There is a limit on the research available that explores teacher experiences of their unions and how to build a cooperative union–management partnership at all levels of a district. Specific attention should be paid to how to do this in large districts and when districts are facing financial challenges. Case studies on successful collaborations and negotiations would be extremely beneficial. Though teachers are an important piece of

this puzzle, this study did not include explorations of parent, student, community, and support staff relationships to the district and unions, which limited its scope. Education is a multidimensional field, so the more perspectives that are understood the more successfully systems can move forward.

This study had numerous limitations, its sample size being a significant one. This calls for further research to explore some of the themes that emerged. In addition to the other findings, is it consistent that teachers in CPS are experiencing the district as a compliance mechanism rather than a support organization? Does effective professional learning lead to more trust in a district? The impact of segregation on teacher, student, and family experiences of union relationships could be explored as well, especially in Chicago where segregation continues to dominate the district. Last, given the significance of teacher to parent and community relationships over time, a further study could explore the current relationship further and analyze how parent and teacher partnership affects student outcomes.

Leadership Lessons

I began this research with many experiences of feeling pressured by and frustrated with my teachers union. I regularly felt pulled between school and district leaders and union representatives, not knowing who to trust, which was reminiscent of my early experiences with my divorced parents. I naturally empathized with principals who were put in difficult positions and were doing the best they could to provide for their communities even when problems existed in their schools. I assumed most teachers were frustrated by the way the union operated as well. What I learned is that I may have been wrong.

Most teachers I learned from appreciated the support the union provided in protecting teachers when they may face punishment or job loss as well as the working conditions and benefits they have won for their members. They found strikes to be annoying but generally did not think of the union very much. Most teachers “stayed in their lane” for lack of a better word. Most of the large scale union–district conflicts are abstract to these teachers. They do not vilify their school or district leaders or have a long list of demands that are not being met. They are not wallowing in resentment toward the establishment. To me, this spoke to a large mischaracterization of the landscape and highlighted the potential impact of a contentious relationship with the mayor. On a personal level, it pointed to how my background primed me to see the situation from a lens that was not largely shared.

As a leader, I am reminded that I need to actively plan to engage teachers as frequently as possible and to recognize that teachers are unique individuals with their own perspectives and priorities. When they do not have opportunity to question, create ideas, and give feedback, distrust sets in. Teachers, like all humans, want to feel heard and safe.

The research also helped me see new possibilities for how the district at large can influence the teacher experience. Teachers in other districts referenced feeling empowered by their districts to create and give feedback on curriculum, as well as receiving useful professional learning and feedback and a general sense of support. Though teachers in CPS did not have negative feelings toward their district, they did not find it helpful. As a leader, I have seen that there is a lot of competence and creativity in

the central office and would love to see it shared with teachers more directly. There is too much separation between teacher and district leader experience.

Conclusion

Block (2009) offered a path forward for transforming the current relationship of blame and mistrust to one of shared ownership, accountability, and belonging. By working together to initiate more engagement of stakeholders, union and district leaders can lead by example to begin to shift this dynamic and build a new social fabric. The conversation also needs to move away from deficits to possibilities. The reality is, every student, parent, community member, district leader, principal, and teacher plays a role in the success or failure of schools. Unlocking the potential of this accountability will improve district outcomes.

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Appendix A
Survey Questions

Context

Please answer the following questions about yourself, your school and your district.

2. My school is...

Mark only one oval.

Other:

Charter

Non-Charter Public

Private

3. I have been teaching for...

Mark only one oval.

Other:

1 year or less

2-3 years

3-5 years

5-10 years

Over 10 years

4. What is your highest level of education attained?

Mark only one oval.

Bachelors

Masters

Doctorate

Some graduate school

5. How old are you?

Mark only one oval.

20-29

30-39

40-49

50-59

60-69

70 or older

6. Which of the following best describes your school?

Mark only one oval.

Other:

Urban

Suburban

Rural

What is your highest level of education attained?

7. I teach...

Mark only one oval.

Other:

Preschool

K-5

6-8

9-12

8. I identify as...

Mark only one oval.

Other:

Male

Female

Non-binary

9. I identify as...

Mark only one oval.

Other:

White

Black

Latinx

Native American or American Indian

Asian / Pacific Islander

10. My district is

Mark only one oval.

Other:

Unionized

Non-unionized Skip to question 21

Unions

The following questions will ask you about your experiences with and perceptions of your union.

11. To what degree do you feel a sense of belonging and community within your union?

Mark only one oval.

Very much so

Somewhat

Neutral

Not very much

Not at all

12. To what degree do you feel comfortable expressing dissent within your union?

Mark only one oval.

Extremely comfortable

Somewhat comfortable

Neutral

Somewhat uncomfortable

Extremely uncomfortable

13. To what extent do you agree with the statement, "My union has my best interests in mind."

Mark only one oval.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

14. What factors led to the current relationship you have with your union? [open response]

15. How often do you interact with information from your union? (e.g. social media posts, union meetings, emails etc).

Mark only one oval.

Other:

Daily

Weekly

Monthly

Quarterly

Less than quarterly

16. Do you interact with certain union communications more than others?

Mark only one oval per row.

Indicate how likely you are to engage with information from your union on each topic:

Topics:

Updates on negotiations with the district.

Information on collective actions like work stoppages or strikes.

Professional learning opportunities.

Working conditions in other schools.

Perspectives on political elections.

Updates on negotiations with the district.

Choices:

I will definitely interact with this kind of information.

I will likely interact with information on this subject

I will likely not interact with information on this topic.

I definitely will not interact with information on this topic.

17. I would describe my union communications as (check all that apply)

Other:

Check all that apply.

Factual

Biased

Helpful

Relevant

Irrelevant

Informative

Manipulative

Productive

Aggressive

18. How do you interact with information from your union?

Other:

Check all that apply.

Social Media

Reading Emails

Meetings

Conversations with your rep

19. To what degree do you trust information from your union?

Mark only one oval.

I trust it completely

I trust it somewhat

Neutral

I do not trust it somewhat

I completely do not trust it

20. What motivates you to participate in your union? State the degree that each factor motivates you to support your union.

Mark only one oval per row.

Factors:

Problems within my school.

Problems in other schools.

Job protection

Lack of funding for school resources.

Poor wages for teachers.

Social pressure

Choices:

This is not important to me at all.

This is mostly not important to me.

Neutral

This is somewhat important to me.

This is extremely important to me.

District

The following questions will ask you about your experiences with and perceptions of your

district. District can be the organization that runs public schools in an area, charter school networks or private school networks.

21. To what degree do you feel a sense of belonging and community within your district?

Mark only one oval.

Very much so

Somewhat

Neutral

Not very much

Not at all

22. To what degree do you feel comfortable expressing dissent within your district?

Mark only one oval.

Extremely comfortable

Somewhat comfortable

Neutral

Somewhat uncomfortable

Extremely uncomfortable

23. What factors led to your current relationship with your district? [open response]

24. How often do you receive information from your district? (e.g. emails, press releases, social media posts, district meetings etc)

Mark only one oval.

Other:

Daily

Weekly

Monthly

Quarterly

Less than quarterly

25. How do you receive information from your district?

Other:

Check all that apply.

Social Media

Reading Emails

Meetings

Colleagues

News

Presentations

26. To what degree do you trust information from your district?

Mark only one oval.

I trust it completely

I trust it somewhat

Neutral

I don't trust it somewhat

I completely do not trust it

School

The following questions will ask you about your experiences with and perceptions of your

school and administration.

27. To what degree do you feel a sense of belonging and community within your school?

Mark only one oval.

Very much so

Somewhat

Neutral

Not very much

Not at all

28. To what degree do you feel comfortable expressing dissent within your school?

Mark only one oval.

Extremely comfortable

Somewhat comfortable

Neutral

Somewhat uncomfortable

Extremely uncomfortable

29. What factors led to your current relationship with your school and administration?

[Open response]

30. How often do you receive information from your administration? (e.g. emails, bulletins, meetings, etc)

Mark only one oval.

Other:

Daily

Weekly

Monthly

Quarterly

Less than quarterly

31. How do you receive information from your administrator?

Other:

Check all that apply.

Social Media

Reading Emails

Meetings

Conversations

Coaching

32. To what degree do you trust information from your administration?

Mark only one oval.

I trust it completely

I trust it somewhat

Neutral

I don't trust it somewhat

I completely do not trust it

33. Which of the following does your principal consistently do?

Other:

Check all that apply.

Follow through on what they say they will do

Provide feedback on professional behaviors

Provide feedback on instruction

Gather feedback before making decisions

Give teachers leadership opportunities

Articulate the vision of the school and its programs

Admit mistakes

Articulate expectations for staff

34. To what extent would you agree with the statement, "teachers at my school are collaborative"?

Mark only one oval.

Teachers at my school are extremely collaborative.

Teachers at my school are somewhat collaborative

Neutral

Teachers at my school are not very collaborative.

Teachers at my school are extremely not collaborative.

35. Which of these things do teachers in your school collaborate around?

Other:

Check all that apply.

Curriculum

School Policy

Events for Students

Instruction

Events for Families

Priorities

Order the following priority statements from most important to least important for you and

your perceptions of importance for your union, district and administration.

36. Which priorities are the most important to you? Rank the following in terms of your priorities for schools:

37. What priorities do you think are most important to your union? Rank the following in terms

of your perceptions of your union's priorities:

38. What priorities do you think are most important to your district? Rank the following in terms

of your perceptions of your district's priorities:

39. What priorities do you think are most important to your principal? Rank the following in terms

of your perceptions of your principal's priorities:

For 36-39, respondents ranked the following from 1st to 7th most important:

Protecting teachers (evaluations, compensation etc)

Equity

Resource Allocation

Social Justice Concerns (housing, policing, health care access etc)

Student Achievement

Class size

Curriculum and Instruction

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. How did you first become aware of the union in your district? Describe your initial interactions with the union. Has your relationship to the union changed over time? If so, describe how.
2. What do you think is the role of the union? Should it be different?
3. What do you think is the role of the district? Should it be different?
4. How has your principal created or hindered trust?
5. In what ways does the district interact with you? How does the district affect your day to day experience?
6. How has your district leadership created or hindered trust?
7. How has your union created or hindered trust?
8. What do you think are the factors keeping the union and district from being collaborative?
9. What is your principal's perspective on union activity? How do you know?
10. How has union activity impacted the climate of your staff?

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Given as the first slide of the survey:

My name is Whitney Fink, and I am a doctoral student at National Louis University. I am asking you to participate in this study, “Cooperative Pathways: Insights from Teacher Experiences on Improving Union and District Cooperation”, occurring from 06-2022 to 12-2022. The purpose of this study is to understand teacher perceptions of union, district and school leadership and their relationships to each. This study will help researchers develop a deeper understanding of opportunities to make union-management relationships more collaborative. This form outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant.

By signing below, you are providing consent to participate in a research project conducted by

Whitney Fink, doctoral student at National Louis University, Chicago.

Please understand that the purpose of the study is to understand teacher perceptions of union, district and school leadership and their relationships to each. Participation in this study will include:

- 1 survey.

The survey will last approximately 15 minutes and include approximately 40 questions to understand how the union, district and administrators impact teacher experiences and collaboration.

Your participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time without penalty or bias. The results of this study may be published or otherwise reported at conferences, and

employed to inform school leader practices but participants' identities will in no way be revealed (data will be reported anonymously and bear no identifiers that could connect data to individual participants). To ensure confidentiality the researcher will secure responses in a password protected file on Google Drive. Only Whitney Fink will have access to data. All data will be destroyed three years after the study is complete.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits, no greater than that encountered in daily life. Further, the information gained from this study could be useful to school and union leaders in union districts.

Upon request you may receive summary results from this study and copies of any publications that may occur. Please email the researcher, Whitney Fink at [REDACTED] to request results from this study.

In the event that you have questions or require additional information, please contact the researcher, Whitney Fink, [REDACTED].

If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that has not been addressed by the researcher, you may contact Angela Elkordy, Ph.D. AElkordy@nl.edu 734-476-0936 , the chair of NLU's Institutional Research Board: Dr. Shaunti Knauth; email: Shaunti.Knauth@nl.edu; phone: (312) 261-3526; or Dr. Christopher Rector; email: crector@nl.edu; phone: (312) 261-3526. The chair and co-chair are located at National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL.

Thank you for your consideration.

Consent: I understand that by signing below, I am agreeing to participate in the study "Moving towards a Cooperative Union-Management Partnership in Schools". My participation will consist of the activity below during the summer or fall of 2022:

- 1 Survey lasts approximately 15 minutes composed of around 40 questions

Do you consent to participate in the survey?

-Yes

-No