Collective Bargaining at Charter Schools

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Goals and Approach

Examine a set of public charter schools that unionized between 2014-16 and adopted at least one collective bargaining agreement (CBA) to understand why teachers were motivated to unionize and how the CBA and union impacted the school.

We used data compiled by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools to identify schools. When staff email addresses were available we offered a $25 gift card incentive and scheduled interviews by phone; we used a “snowball sample” to recruit additional participants.
# Sample & Interviews Conducted by Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Teacher/Board Member</th>
<th>Admin</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelso</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>1-200</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waterville</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>1000+</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic</td>
<td>West coast</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>201-400</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pomeroy</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>1-200</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ephrata</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>1-200</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldendale</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>6-12</td>
<td>800-1000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okanogan</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>201-400</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathlamet</td>
<td>West coast</td>
<td>6-12</td>
<td>400-600</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total:**
- Teacher/Board Member: 2
- Admin: 8
- total: 29
### Theory: Unionization Presents Opportunities & Risks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students Benefit When Schools Have:</th>
<th>Opportunity posed by Unionization</th>
<th>Risk posed by Unionization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Common vision &amp; culture of high expectations</td>
<td>Teacher voice is recognized and teacher leadership contributes to stronger culture</td>
<td>Divide between teachers &amp; leaders could weaken leadership and distract from high expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust &amp; psychological security</td>
<td>Consensus &amp; transparency over employment terms reduces teacher stress and increases trust</td>
<td>Negotiations may exploit or increase distrust or a sense of “us vs. them”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional quality &amp; effective use of time</td>
<td>Teachers embrace and help implement evaluation processes that develop teachers, counsel ineffective teachers out.</td>
<td>Limits on adult interactions hinder joint problem-solving &amp; innovation. Teachers work “the contract” and time is used less effectively.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Observations & Quotes
Vision and Culture

Teachers in some schools suggest that CBAs help them hold administrators to their school’s mission.

Some administrators note that CBAs may interfere with strategies to improve student outcomes or meet mission.
Trust and Security

Contract negotiations ill-suited to address tense relationships/mistrust, may exacerbate strains.

Post-contract many teachers felt less uncertain and anxious about their work. Some teachers said this improved their ability to focus on students and parents.
Instructional Quality and Effective Time

In some schools CBAs promote a positive culture of evaluation (more regular formative assessment) and increase teacher prep time.

In other schools CBAs to restrict day-to-day interactions that promote positive student outcomes (e.g. some coaching models, teacher involvement in community building activities).

The right to terminate poorly performing teachers was preserved.
Other Observations in Sample

Unionization did not distract students or parents, according to both teachers and administrators.

Teachers across the sample used contracts to push for higher pay and traditional pay scales. Administrators expressed concerns that salary & class size demands would push charter schools to overcommit.

The role of pre-existing organized labor groups varied quite a bit:

- Administrators questioned the political agenda of these groups, and some cases may have made contract negotiations more difficult.
- However, as noted in CRPE’s earlier work, unionization seems unlikely to have occurred if there weren’t pre-existing concerns of charter school teachers.
“The contract makes it hard for us to support [teachers] in the ways that they need...because you can only have one coaching cycle per week. [Detailed provisions] limit the flexibility that school's really required to function well.”

“No matter what [we protected] the right to performance manage...even if someone is post probationary.”
Teacher Voice on Evaluations

“So I think this is probably the first year that they're really following to the letter, the evaluation process, but that has been really positive, because teachers are getting a lot more observation and feedback and a lot more professional development because they're sort of holding the admin to that evaluation process. So that's really good too.”
Teacher Voice on Security

“They just had the power to let go of anybody they want. So you see lots of good teachers come and go...that's the number one thing that [teachers] were trying to fight for so the teachers could be tenured”
Teacher Voice on Security

“Now that I'm less worried...about what's going on in school, I can pay more attention to the kids, and therefore communicate more with parents. I think when we were all...stressed out about our jobs, it was harder...get outside of ourselves and think as much as we should have about the kids.”
Teacher Voices on Pay

“Apparently all the previous admin teams would just dole out raises to their favorite teachers. So that was kind of shocking.”

“I started out about at least 5,000 less than my peers [in Teacher for America cohort]. For the veteran teachers, they were making way less than they would have [in the district] too.”
“Be as transparent as you can be about budgeting and spending upfront...it's a closed system and you can't keep adding stuff to the closed system without taking stuff away.”

“Since you've had the union and...they've been getting the union pay, we haven't covered our costs. Our parent organization is kind of floating us for some of the things we need, like books and computers...So we're not really financially viable now. And so how long we can live with that?”
“I'm sorry, but the real winners here are the lawyers...they don't bargain in good faith. Let me tell you this. They try to squeeze every penny out of the schools.”
Discussion
Implications for Leaders

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Turnover, high demand, high stress & workload remain challenges in the charter school sector that should be addressed.

Labor recruitment efforts will always have greater traction in dysfunctional schools.

Management needs to be upfront and open about their available resources and current spending practices to counter unsustainable demands for parity.
Implications for Teachers

Teachers may want to pick union partner carefully. We saw variation in whether/how union partners were sensitive to school mission and teachers’ desires for flexibility to innovate & problem solve.

Political agendas associated with unions can color how administrators react to unionization campaigns.

Bread-and-butter issues are important, but after a baseline of security is achieved, what do unions do next and how do teachers use them as a vehicle to improve student outcomes?
Limitations

Unionization is a sensitive topic and many teachers AND administrators were reluctant to speak to us despite the promise of confidentiality.

The schools we picked may still be too new to unionization to understand the longer term impacts at their schools.

Our sample does not include schools that closed or did not vote to unionize even if a unionization drive was active. The experience of these schools could be very different.

Only one school was part of a CMO.
Future Research

Ultimately we care about student outcomes:

- The opportunities and risks are claims we can test empirically over time and with a larger sample.

- Future work could include surveys, financial analysis, or linking union status to test score data to better understand the impact of unionization on students.