

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## Community Tries to Influence Teachers' Pact

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Who teaches where in this city of bricks and bygones matters personally to Stacie Ann Green. A senior at John Bartram High School in southwest Philadelphia, she suspects students at some schools have teachers who always welcome discussion and wouldn't dream of showing a movie in class all week. But that's not the case at her school, she says.

Parents, too, in certain neighborhoods notice something is wrong, says community activist Dolores Shaw. "It never ceases to amaze me how quickly during a school year a [teacher] face will change, and some of [the teachers] get younger and younger every year," Ms. Shaw said.

**Education rights lawyer Len Reiser sees an even bigger picture. "We have a two-tier [education] system along racial lines," he charged, and one part of that disparity is the way the system's least experienced and least-qualified teachers typically end up in the schools with the most minority children.**

The student, the activist, and the lawyer are making common cause these days in the nation's eighth-largest district. Marching under the banner of "the teacher-equity campaign," nearly 30 civic and advocacy

groups hope to influence the course of the Philadelphia teachers' contract, which has been under negotiation behind closed doors since early this year.

### Policy Documents

The coalition's formation comes as teachers' contracts are more and more seen as policy documents that either foster or hinder student achievement. Opinion is divided over whether it is healthy for the unions to hold such power, with some arguing that it helps ensure teacher participation in school improvement, and others saying that a private group shouldn't hold such sway over a public institution. ("Boston Contract: A Policy Blueprint," Nov. 13, 2002.)

But activists in struggling urban systems often prefer a pragmatic approach: Change the document.

Contract provisions that the teacher-equity campaign has targeted include seniority rights when teachers change schools, a hiring process that gives little power to schools, and incentives and supports for teachers in schools with the toughest working conditions.

"If we can't sit down with the union and the district in the literal sense, we'll make sure through the media and public pressure that our voice will be heard," said Aldustus Jordan, the education coordinator for Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth, which has been a leader of the campaign.

Union leaders believe the effort is misguided. If the groups want teaching staffs of equal quality in every school, the critical factors are recruiting better teachers and giving them the administrative and other supports that will make them want to stay in schools in tough neighborhoods, said Hal Moss, a Philadelphia Federation of Teachers spokesman.

"In between our contracts, [these groups] are nowhere to be heard from when they could be supporting students and teachers by taking real pro-education stands," Mr. Moss said.

He added that "school-site hiring," in which the principal and often others at a school play the major role in hiring teachers, will not solve the district's problems. "Many of these groups are being used by the politicians and administrators," Mr. Moss charged. "They are persuading everybody that these noncost items are the panacea for everything wrong in the public schools."

Now, the central office does most of the hiring. The current contract allows schools to control much of the process if two-thirds of teachers approve the arrangement, which must be renewed each year. Forty-four of the district's 264 schools use local hiring.

### **Making the Rounds**

School officials have supported much of the campaign publicly and say they will "rein-

force" the concern over equity during the negotiations.

The 200,000-student district has pushed for improved recruitment and retention of teachers under Chief Executive Officer Paul G. Vallas, who drew in business and civic leaders to help.

Many of the aims of the teacher-equity coalition would require contract changes, but others depend much more on district action. The goals include:

- Placing a cap on the number of emergency-certified and inexperienced teachers at any one school, and perhaps a cap as well on experienced teachers at any one school;
- Moving hiring for low-performing schools earlier in the year;
- Strengthening the effectiveness of principals at struggling schools;
- Starting a program to help paraprofessionals at hard-to-staff schools become teachers; and
- Involving students and parents in planning teacher professional development.

Leaders of the teacher-equity campaign have been making the rounds of city, district, and union officials to urge change along those lines, while rallying members of their constituent groups to get in touch with the mayor's office and the school board.

Last week, the coalition went in both directions by hosting the just-past president of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system in North Carolina, which in recent years has tackled teacher distribution more boldly than most other districts. Arthur Griffin, the former president of the school board there, spoke about Charlotte's experience at a forum for coalition members that included, among others, representatives of the Philadelphia Student Union, the

Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project, the Education Law Center of Pennsylvania, and 2000 African American Women.

The forum also featured a report comparing Philadelphia's school assignment practices with those of other districts, both large urban ones and ones nearby. It painted a picture of outmoded hiring and placement practices in the Philadelphia system.

"Philadelphia is really hobbled by schools' not being able to select their own teachers and [by] iron-clad seniority rules—much more so than other districts," contended Elizabeth L. Useem, one of the authors of the report, which was sponsored by Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform, a research and public-awareness project.

The spokesman for the teachers' union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, dismissed much of Ms. Useem's report. "She doesn't like unions, doesn't like this union," Mr. Moss said.

"There's not a single study to show that seniority [rights] are detrimental to education," he continued, "and not a single study that shows site-based selection of teachers raises student test scores."

### **Federal Complaint Filed**

Nonetheless, the Education Law Center of Pennsylvania believes the distribution of teachers in Philadelphia is illegal. It has filed a complaint with the civil rights office of the U.S. Department of Education to that effect.

Mr. Reiser of the center's Philadelphia office also points to the Pennsylvania law that placed the district under state control in 2001 as offering a remedy. The

measure gives the district's reform school board the power to act unilaterally on teacher assignment, Mr. Reiser said. "It does seem to say very clearly," he said, "that the district has a lot of room to push" at the negotiating table.

On the other hand, two classroom teachers who attended last week's forum said district leaders need to consider carefully where to push, because not all the proposals would have an equal effect.

"If you look at all the [ways] of improving equity, site-based selection is the least important," asserted Keith Newman, who moved from business to teaching middle school some 10 years ago. Although he voted in favor of making hiring a school function, he said getting teachers smaller classes and more help with troubled children would go further toward producing a stable staff.

Added Bennett Sears, a social studies teacher at West Philadelphia High School: "I'd rather spend my time building bridges between parents, school staff, and students" than sitting on a hiring committee.