

Engaging Teachers' Unions

Role of Teachers' Unions

The mission of teachers' unions is to advocate for education professionals by partnering with parents, families, communities, and other stakeholders to prepare and accomplish educational and student success. Unions provide a collective platform for education professionals to improve both their status professionally and the quality of public education. As administrators engage with teachers' unions throughout the evaluation reform process, states and districts will be better equipped to successfully implement new policies.

Engaging the Union on a Individual Basis

Interaction with unions is successful when administrators develop positive, personal and individualized relationships with union representatives.

Frederika Jenner, a middle school science teacher at the time, served for five years as either Vice President or President of her local teachers' union. She worked with two different principals who frequently visited and consulted with her. In addition to discussing issues around procedures of the teacher evaluation system, they also discussed professional development, school planning and events, and effective classroom observation techniques and procedures. These discussions fostered honest dialogue where all suggestions were encouraged. Presently, one of her former principals is now a district superintendent and still holds regular meetings with union board and staff.

“Once you have a relationship established, then both parties can weather problems more easily and readily.”

–*Frederika J. (DSEA President)*

Frederika's tips:

- Engage the administration regularly and often.
- Make them understand that you are available.
- Because of the relationship you build, “it is very important for association reps and leaders to give a heads up to administrators on important issues that may be happening in the wider community before they are the last to know.”

Engaging Multiple Union Representatives

Thoughtful and regular communication and information sharing with the local union lays the foundation for healthy dialogue.

Dr. Merv Daugherty, Superintendent of Schools for Red Clay Consolidated School District, believes it is important to have frequent communication with the local union through school representatives and union presidents but also at a building level and with the union's board. He keeps communication consistent by hosting informal, monthly coffee meetings and lunches with liaisons. He has found that consistently visiting teachers or staff members in the union, either in their classrooms or on the job, is beneficial to both sides.

“We may not always agree, but I want to know every side. With 1300+ teachers and even more staff, I want to understand their perspective.”

–*Merv D. (District Superintendent)*

Merv's tips:

- If you keep an open line of communication with honest conversations and build that trust in the relationship, when you get to a problem such as a grievance, you realize they are not out to get you and they know that you are not out to get them.
- Both parties should approach the situation with an attitude of, "here's what I know or have, now how can we move forward?"
- It is important to build a good working relationship right off the bat and not just when things get difficult.
- It's ok to get advice from a lot of people because somebody may have a great idea.
- If we don't work to accomplish things with the association, then it will directly affect the kids in the classroom.

Suggestions for Engaging Unions

- If possible, establish a one-on-one friendly or cordial relationship with your union representatives and board members by asking for input or opinions on school issues before the development of a new reform.
- Discuss proposed initiatives with the union and other interested teachers. Determine a game plan to frame the discussions. Iterate the importance of the union's continued engagement in the process.
- From the beginning, set a tone of dialogue, an environment for idea sharing and a process for resolution. Understand that perspectives do not always align but agreement can be reached through collaboration. Don't allow conversations to get personal; honor the process. It is important to recognize that there are probably more shared interests than differences.
- Be deliberate in your efforts to communicate with the union using email, printed material, and in-person meetings/conversations. Keep everyone involved in the process.
- Maintain a high level of transparency. Even though you won't always agree, union representatives will see that you are serious about keeping them involved and informed and genuinely interested in their feedback.
- Demonstrate to union representatives that you are willing to go out of your way and are dedicated to including their suggestions by incorporating their ideas.