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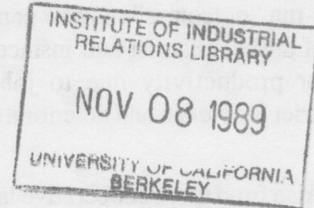
LEARNING TO COOPERATE: LABOR RELATIONS IN CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS

by *Lars Arriola*

In the discussion of how the U.S. should adapt to a competitive world economy, the need for a more flexible and more educated workforce has taken center stage. Calls for improving school quality have echoed throughout the nation and a variety of reform efforts, including expanded parental choice of schools, school-based management and enhanced teacher autonomy, have sprung up in numerous school districts and states.

To succeed, such changes will require the collaboration of teachers, administrators, and other staff to solve problems. And increasingly, many educators in California view innovation in labor relations as an essential component to encourage cooperation and improvements in schools.

This article examines changes in labor-management relations in California schools. It looks at the use of cooperation to improve the bargaining relationship, and the potential benefits of cooperative relations. It also discusses the tentative steps being taken in some schools and districts, and summarizes the core elements behind these efforts.



Why Try Cooperation?

To build better labor relations in schools, many labor representatives and administrators are stressing cooperation to improve both schools and collective bargaining. In schools, cooperation provides a model to solve problems in the classroom, to share decisions concerning school management and organization, and to implement innovative plans to build teacher autonomy and accountability. In bargaining, cooperation lessens the burden of confrontation between various educational actors at the negotiating table.

Further, many emphasize that cooperative frameworks and techniques in labor-management relations will not replace collective bargaining, but rather complement and support it. The relationships among teachers, support staff, and school district administrators contain conflicts because each party possesses particular interests. Disputes can arise on issues which are not within the scope of collective bargaining under the Educational Employment Relations Act (EERA). These disagreements may then aggravate the working atmosphere of the bargaining relationship.

Regarding issues both within and outside of EERA's scope, cooperation can alleviate strains on collective bargaining. Cooperative decision making on curriculum and teacher training is an integral part of many school reforms. As these practices spread, they will affect the substance of negotiations, raising questions of how to manage schools, share power, and improve the quality of education. Cooperative structures will play a central part in advancing, not displacing, collective bargaining.

Benefits of Cooperative Relations

The most notable benefit to cooperative relations may be one that is easily overlooked: a climate that promotes a deeper commitment to compromise and collaboration. Such a climate occurs when parties address the process of labor-management

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relations and de-emphasize the desired, short-run outcomes of current negotiations.

Typically, representatives at the negotiating table focus narrowly on achieving the aims of their party, and consequently neglect how this method may adversely affect the bargaining process. Over time, indifference to process aspects of a labor relation corrodes the overall functioning of an organization. In schools, the long-run "outcomes" may be periodic work stoppages; feelings of anger, mistrust and insincerity among parties; lower labor productivity due to job-related stress; inattention to district problems; and deterioration in the quality of education.

Benefits that arise from more cooperative labor relations are those which simultaneously improve both process and outcomes. Here are some benefits that would occur in any employment setting:

- Improvement in trust and understanding among union and management in the bargaining environment.
- Improvement in employee morale and an associated increase in labor productivity. Individual employees work better as the stress related to labor relations is reduced.
- Improvement in the conflict resolution process. This signifies that problems are resolved among individuals and not passed up to higher authorities. In practical terms, the grievance procedure is less frequently used, and employees may exchange ideas and solve a problem without requiring a manager's intervention.

Moving to Better Labor Relations

The current question on the minds of many labor representatives, educators, and administrators is, "Where do we begin?" Of course, enthusiasm varies for such bold changes, among both district administrations and unions. While some California schools are attempting to embark on new paths to amicable labor relations, others may choose to maintain the status quo. However, many educators do possess a strong interest in building cooperative relations to reduce the stresses of current conflicts and their effect on schooling.

Still, efforts to advance cooperative relations remain in the early stages. Few districts and schools have progressed rapidly in experiments with alternative negotiating techniques or reforms in school management practices. Nonetheless, a number of notable programs demonstrate the range of changes occurring through the state. The following stories provide an introduction to the various efforts now underway.

The recent history of the Lompoc Unified School District shows how hostile relations can be transformed through improved communication over time. From 1979 through 1985, negotiations between the administration and the Lompoc

Federation of Teachers were tumultuous: bargaining was uncooperative and drawn out with very bitter outcomes. Then, the combined effects of a contentious strike and a new superintendent created an opportunity for change. Meetings were held outside of the usual bargaining process to reduce the discord. Over the past few years, the union and administration have settled some of their differences through discussions outside of the standard collective bargaining environment. Other imaginative changes include the creation of a superintendent's cabinet with teachers as members, and continuing talks about financial issues to promote shared understanding of available resources.

Having opted to try new structures, St. Helena Unified School District looked to other districts for models. Starting with a series of meetings to discuss attitudes and hopes for change, they devised a formula for annual increases in salaries and benefits, and agreed to maintain an on-going forum. District leaders attribute progress in large part to the participants' wider commitment to cooperation.

The Alhambra City School District adopted the Win/Win contract negotiation program as a tool to improve bargaining relations. The early experience of collective bargaining in the district was traumatic for both sides, with loss of trust and a deterioration in working relationships. The union and administration decided that change was necessary, and embarked on the Win/Win program. All parties are pleased with the harmonious relations achieved, and the past three negotiations have led to contracts of mutual satisfaction to all sides.

A similar approach was taken to improving relations between the district and classified employees in San Mateo City School District. Through Win/Win, classified employees and the school board met and exchanged ideas for the first time, allowing each party to better understand and communicate its viewpoint. This dramatically influenced how parties treated each other. Significant developments include a Professional Growth Committee for classified employees and a dramatic decrease in the number of grievances.

An innovation in the Napa Valley Unified School District is a more open discussion of budget and financial issues. Here, they have developed an explicit formula for setting changes in incomes, benefits and other district expenses. Through wide distribution of this information, parties have been able to more quickly understand various points of view. Further, this has allowed the district more time for discussion of other key issues, such as professionalization and major district problems.

An important experiment occurring in some districts in the state is the trust agreement project organized by Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). These agreements are designed to motivate district administration and unions to work together on a problem outside of the scope of bargaining. Parties negotiate an agreement for areas such as teacher peer evaluation or site-based management. By improving relations

through the trust agreement, it is hoped that cooperation can spill over into the collective bargaining framework. These agreements provide a tool to help district leaders collaborate, and to simultaneously improve bargaining and schooling.

A final story comes from the San Juan School District. It demonstrates how strong leaders can create change. For 15 years, acrimonious relations persisted in the district. Then, a few years ago, new leaders embarked on change. Tom Alves, newly elected president of the teachers' association, met with a new school board and new administration to explore possible reforms. Alves initiated a movement for shared decision making, where consensual agreement between administrators and teachers would be necessary, and site administrators could not veto decisions. This emphasis on joint, cooperative decision making seeks to enhance the flexibility of schools to respond to their particular needs. Here, the support of many parties proved to be a critical aspect of these changes.

These stories indicate the variety of innovations being developed in schools to improve collective bargaining. Changes such as these are not easy to undertake or advance. Moving to cooperation demands dramatic shifts in institutional structures and individual attitudes, and such change takes time. So, attempting to more fully understand how these methods work is sometimes difficult.

Yet, the experience of these and other school districts allow us to draw some general inferences about what is necessary for creating and sustaining improved bargaining relations. Briefly, here are some elements:

- Parties must be willing to experiment with new attitudes and structures. Change involves taking risks with new forms of power sharing and decision making. Further, attitudinal change is critical. Involved parties must realize that conflict will remain, that creating a cooperative process is an ongoing effort, and that expectations must not be set too high.
- Development of trust and mutual respect among the parties is important. With greater communication and demonstration of honest intentions, cooperation can progress smoothly. If formal or informal negotiations lack these elements, old habits and processes may quickly re-emerge when difficulties arise.
- Capable, strong leadership is fundamental for encouraging constituencies to try new methods. Given the risks involved in changing roles and attitudes, some persons may feel threatened by change. Leaders can stress the improvement in working relations and negotiations to help foster support for more cooperative relations.
- Greater employee involvement in decision making

has an important effect on collective bargaining. Cooperative processes such as the trust agreement, regular meetings with employees, enhanced school-site autonomy, and employee participation have a dramatic influence on the attitudes of all parties. This may be especially true for institutionalizing new structures: employees have a greater commitment to changes which they have helped to create, as opposed to those imposed through a top-down management initiative.

- Flexibility is critical to adapt to new demands. Working within cooperative structures, people are better prepared to assess new problems and find solutions. Such structures may be regular meetings among managers and workers to examine current challenges and problems.

Conclusion

Three themes should be repeated, as they bear significance to all concerned with improving labor relations. First, cooperative and participative practices will not replace collective bargaining as the central structure to resolve contract disagreements. Rather, they will serve to augment and supplement bargaining and improve both process and results. Second, attitudinal changes progress slowly because they require people to assume new responsibilities and to become more flexible in responding to challenges. Finally, greater employee involvement will improve bargaining relations and the school environment.

Labor relations in schools in California are changing fundamentally. As this change occurs, continued discussion and learning will allow all districts to improve the working conditions for all school personnel and the learning environment for all students. In addition, these changes may hopefully inform the steps needed to promote cooperative relations in other industries.

Note: This article summarizes the findings presented at a conference, "California Public Schools: Meeting the Challenge" (May 1989). The conference was sponsored by the Institute of Industrial Relations at the University of California at Berkeley, the Public Employee Relations Board of the State of California, and the Bureau of Labor-Management Relations and Cooperative Programs, U.S. Department of Labor. Conference proceedings are available from Dr. Leon Lunden, Bureau of Labor-Management Relations and Cooperative Programs, Room N5416, 200 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20210.

The 2nd Annual "California Public Schools: Meeting the Challenge — A Look at Current Issues and Promising New Approaches to Labor-Management Cooperation" will be held on March 2-3, 1990 at the Inn at the Park in Anaheim, California. For more information, contact the Labor Center at (415) 642-0323

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