education sector reports

Unlikely Allies: Unions and Districts in the Battle for School Reform

By Elena Silva and Susan Headden

EDUCATIONSECTOR
www.educationsector.org

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge and thank Steve Smith and Tom Brady, as well as everyone within the Providence Public Schools and the Providence Teachers Union who provided information and graciously hosted our visits to Providence. Special appreciation goes to the principals, teachers, and students at the four schools—Roger Williams, Lillian Feinstein at Sackett, Cooley/PAIS, and Charlotte Woods/Young—who so generously gave their time to speak with us and opened their doors for us to visit their schools during very busy times. Thanks also to the many others we spoke to and to all of our Education Sector colleagues who helped with this project.

Education Sector would also like to thank everyone who participated in its series of private labor-management meetings that occurred from 2006 through 2009. This off-the-record working group of district and union leaders, which included Steve Smith, was convened by Education Sector to discuss and build consensus around policies and reform strategies related to teacher quality. Over this period of three years, the group developed a template of shared principles for a teacher agreement premised on the central theme of "reciprocal obligations." The restart option for labor-management in Rhode Island and the new United Providence (UP!) is premised on these core principles.

The Joyce Foundation provided funding for this project. The findings and conclusions are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the foundation.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ELENA SILVA is a senior policy analyst at Education Sector. She can be reached at esilva@educationsector.org.

SUSAN HEADDEN is a senior writer/editor at Education Sector. She can be reached at sheadden@educationsector.org.

ABOUT EDUCATION SECTOR

Education Sector is an independent think tank that challenges conventional thinking in education policy. We are a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to achieving measurable impact in education, both by improving existing reform initiatives and by developing new, innovative solutions to our nation's most pressing education problems.

1201 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Suite 850, Washington, D.C. 20036
202.552.2840 • www.educationsector.org

Providence, Rhode Island, is one of those gritty eastern mill towns that wears its centuries-old history on its sleeve. Dozens of monuments, parks, and streets, as well as a middle school, are named after its founder, Roger Williams, the 17th century theologian who was banned from the Massachusetts colony for sedition and heresy. The city is lined with converted brick factories reminiscent of its manufacturing heyday, when it made jewelry, silverware, and shoes for the country. Interstate 95 cuts a noisy swath through the city's downtown, with signs announcing New York City to the south and Boston to the north, as if Providence itself were just a place to pass through. But if a bold new reform effort succeeds, the capital of the Ocean State may soon become its own destination on the education map.

Like many American cities, Providence is home to a struggling public school system with chronically low-performing schools. They include the founder's namesake, Roger Williams Middle, where last year only 17 percent of eighth-graders scored at or above proficient in math, compared with the state average of 53 percent.[1] In reading, only 31 percent crossed the proficiency bar, compared to 65 percent statewide. As for science achievement at the 77-year-old southside institution, it could not, quite literally, be any lower: In 2008, the percentage of students who scored proficient on the state test in science was zero.

These scores have put Roger Williams—along with three other Providence schools—in the forefront of national educational reform, among the first group of failing schools whose efforts to radically improve are being supported by federal stimulus funds. The U.S. Department of Education gives these schools three choices: "turnaround" or replace the principal, fire all the teachers, and rehire no more than half of them; "transformation" or replace the principal and significantly change structures and instruction; or "restart," meaning bring the school under new management by a charter or outside organization.

More than 90 percent of schools are pursuing the first or second option.[2] Providence has selected the third—but with a significant twist. In what is believed to be the first such arrangement in the country, it has created a novel union-district alliance in which the two factions will develop the reform plan together and share the responsibility of making it work.

Those factions, of course, are notorious for not getting along. Unions complain that the demands put on teachers continue to rise as job security declines; districts protest union rules so rigid that they prevent even small changes to teacher hiring practices, evaluation procedures, and work schedules. It is a singularly antagonistic relationship that has made cooperation, thus any kind of substantive reform, all but impossible.

Yet in Providence, where the labor-management relationship has been worse than most, both sides now find reason for encouragement in the newly forged partnership of two unlikely allies in the battle for school reform: District Superintendent Tom Brady, a retired Army colonel with a background in operations management, and Providence Teachers

Union President Steve Smith, a former teacher and state legislator with deep working class roots in the city. Working together, the two have laid out an ambitious "restart" plan for the four failing schools, under which the principal *and* a union teacher will share control, and the union contract—and many of the securities and protections that come with it—will no longer apply.

In Brady and Smith, who just a year ago were battling each other from opposite sides of a lawsuit, reformers see a promising new brand of school leadership, one that is collaborative rather than confrontational, characterized by problem-solving rather than finger-pointing. Pushed together by federal and state demands, and the promise of additional funds, Brady and Smith are leaders who are willing to toss out old models even when change comes at a significant risk, both for themselves and the factions they represent. They have shown a willingness to change strategies when the new approaches don't work. And they have demonstrated a trust for each other despite their differences. "We say that ours is an arranged marriage," says Smith. "We know that divorce would be very expensive."[3]

> **"We say that ours is an arranged marriage. We know that divorce would be very expensive."**
>
> **Providence Teachers Union President Steve Smith**

To be sure, success is by no means guaranteed. Collaboration, a popular but still fuzzy idea in reform circles, has been tried to some extent before in Providence and has largely failed. And with the stakes even higher this time, plenty of conflict points remain. Teachers, facing longer hours, new leaders, and even reassignments, could subvert the process. Principals, whose jobs will also be on the line, may be reluctant to share control. And any revival of tensions between Brady and Smith could open old wounds. "Many people have been at this for decades," says former mayor and newly elected congressman David Cicilline, who worked closely with Brady and Smith on the strategy. "They have scar tissue from it."[4]

Yet the restart plan might be the best chance that these struggling schools have for lasting change, and the best chance students in these schools have for a quality education. The shared knowledge of those high stakes might be enough to make the Brady-Smith team not just a local success story, but a model for other schools and districts nationwide.

A History of Hostility

Rhode Island's capital is a city of contrasts. Off the highway, the city's erratic streets follow the curves of the Providence River and the contours of Federal Hill, home to elegantly restored 17th century homes and the ivied campus of Brown University. Small in physical size but densely populated, the city is increasingly diverse. Its familiar triple-decker row houses have sheltered generations of Italian and Irish immigrants. Portuguese and Cape Verdeans, descended from turn-of-the-century fishermen and dockworkers, are now joined by a sizeable African-American population and growing Asian and Latino communities.

Providence is also increasingly poor. Its industry long gone, the city suffers from one of the nation's highest unemployment rates, at about 13 percent, and one of its highest poverty rates, 26 percent.[5] Those numbers have helped produce a public school system that is the lowest performing in the state. Last year, less than half of the city's third- through eighth-graders scored proficient on the state's reading exam, and only 30 percent scored proficient on the math exam (the state averages are 70 and 58, respectively). The city's proficiency rate for the state science exam was a dismal 7 percent.[6] Remarkably, in a testament to recent reform efforts, those numbers reflect upward trends in reading, math, and science. But the district has a long way to go. When Rhode Island Education Commissioner Deborah Gist identified the six persistently lowest-achieving schools in the state, it was a surprise to no one that five of them were in Providence.[7]

The sixth was Central Falls High School, a troubled institution in an economically distressed town that was thrown into the spotlight early in 2010 when its entire teaching staff was fired after the superintendent and union president failed to agree on required elements of its chosen school improvement plan. The

> **"Many people have been at this for decades. They have scar tissue from it."**
>
> **Congressman David Cicilline**

bold move was condemned by the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, and applauded by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. After four months of complaints, legal arguments, and negotiations, the parties reached an agreement that included the rehiring of all of the teachers and the implementation of a more rigorous teacher evaluation system.[8]

The Central Falls debacle was surely on the minds of Smith and Brady as they chose their plan for Providence, based as it is on the untested idea that through joint governance failing schools can fix themselves. If such turmoil could break out in tiny Central Falls, the situation could only be worse in the state's largest city, where the union was particularly strong and relations with management remarkably poor.

As far back as 1999, then-Superintendent Diana Lam had worked furiously to fix the piecemeal operation of Providence schools, which lacked a uniform curriculum as well as data and evaluation systems. Bringing in more than $30 million to the district, she started on reforms that would extend well beyond her tenure. But from the start, Lam felt the full force of Providence's union machine. Many teachers saw Lam as an uncompromising bully who imposed a top-down approach on a bottom-up town. Lam's deputy, Melody Johnson, who recalls the Providence union as "one of the most radical and entrenched in the country," watched the conflict intensify to the point where the union took a vote of "no confidence" in her boss.[9] When Johnson took over as superintendent in 2002, she vowed to rebuild trust with the union, while continuing the reforms. "The first thing she did was call me and say she wanted to meet," recalls former union president Philip DeCecco. "That set a different tone."[10] Johnson visited every one of the city's 54 schools, and in a dramatic response to poor morale, canceled school one day to bring teachers together to acknowledge their work. "You can't be a dictator in a place like Providence," says Johnson. "You have to bring people with you."

But bridging the gap between union and management proved even more difficult than Johnson had expected, causing progress to stall. "When [No Child Left Behind] was new and the state was interfering more, we tried," says Johnson, "and we made some steps forward, but we couldn't do it all. There were too many fingers in the pie." Johnson ultimately left to be become district superintendent of Fort Worth, Texas, and her successor, Donnie Evans, left after two and half years of unremitting clashes with the union. By 2008, state and city leaders were bemoaning a "leadership crisis" in Providence and growing increasingly concerned about the stability of the district.[11]

> **"You can't be a dictator in a place like Providence. You have to bring people with you."**
>
> **Former Superintendent Melody Johnson**

A Rocky Start

When Brady arrived in Providence in 2008, he encountered a union that essentially fit the expected mold. "There was no trust," he says.[12] That was no surprise. "No one trusts anyone in these urban districts," Brady observes. "The job of the union president by definition is to safeguard the rights of teachers against the district. So they are constantly at war." Smith admits that he came on strong at first. Before Brady had even arrived, Smith called him to explain why he was holding up the certification process for Brady's new job. "I needed [Brady] to know that he wasn't going to just sweep in here," Smith says.

The two then followed historical precedent by clashing over a classic issue. In 2009, acting on an order from then-Rhode Island Education Commissioner Peter McWalters, Brady abolished the practice of "bumping," the process through which a

teacher with less seniority is displaced by a teacher with more, regardless of school need or the teacher's record in the classroom. The order, overriding the existing contract, provided that teachers would have to formally apply for vacancies and be selected by principals through a criterion-based system.[13]

> **"We were both open and honest. I told [Brady] I was going [to sue], and then I did. And he was up front with me, too."**
>
> **Providence Teachers Union President Steve Smith**

Yet seniority rights are among the most sacrosanct of any provisions in a union contract; they are virtually non-negotiable. So in August 2009, after failing to win concessions, the union sued the district for breach of contract. Smith charged that the changes ignored obstacles to teacher success, including chronic discipline problems, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of early childhood education. He said the district had failed to work with the union and demonstrated incompetence in implementing the criterion-based hiring plan, which, he said, "had no criteria."[14] He further claimed that the interview system was inconsistent, allowing some candidates to interview by phone while requiring others to present 40-minute PowerPoint presentations.

McWalters recalls the tension that erupted between the two men. Superintendents, as key drivers of reform, would like nothing more than to eliminate unions, McWalters says. Doing so would prevent the endless contract negotiations district leaders blame for delaying and diluting improvements. Although collective bargaining was developed in the 1960s to protect the wages and work conditions of teachers, it has grown into a sometimes years-long process that produces contracts running to the hundreds of pages and spelling out every work rule imaginable.[15] But, says McWalters, "Tom knows he can't."[16] As for Smith, "He was trying not to be a barrier," McWalters says. "But he was pushing, saying, 'You need to legitimately sit down with me.'"

Brady knew from his experience as chief operating officer in the public school systems of Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia that he couldn't change things in Providence without the union. "Success depends on collaboration," he says. And yet he faced what he called "a 67-page contract from hell." Teachers, who lived by the letter of the document, did not have to write lesson plans; professional development was not uniformly required; and teachers' work days were prescribed to the minute.

Meanwhile, Smith, who had negotiated the contract, was becoming exhausted by what he saw as increasing anti-union and anti-teacher sentiment, not just in Providence but across the nation. "Teachers feel put upon, blamed for everything," he says. And he was determined that teachers be heard. "I'm committed to change … but I'm not going along lock, stock, and barrel without any negotiations … I will not just be ignored."

The lawsuit brought the divide between the two men into sharp focus. And yet it was also the lawsuit—in particular, how the two men conducted themselves as the suit went forward—that helped define what was becoming a more agreeable relationship. "We were both open and honest," recalls Smith. "I told [Brady] I was going [to sue], and then I did. And he was up front with me, too." Brady admits that his relationship with Smith was "rocky at first," largely by virtue of their respective offices. "The president of the PTU, by position, their mission is to safeguard the rights of teachers *against* districts," he says. But what would ultimately be very different from Brady's experiences in other districts, he says, was that Smith became willing to take a less confrontational approach. "It was a transformation," Brady says, "from [Smith] being a representative of problems to being a solver of problems."

> **"It was a transformation, from [Smith] being a representative of problems to being a solver of problems."**
>
> **District Superintendent Tom Brady**

A Closer Look

Brady and Smith are in many ways an unlikely pair, the tall former Army colonel with the ramrod bearing and the executive style, and the short fast-talking populist from the wrong side of town. Where Brady is reserved, Smith is animated. Where Brady sticks to his talking points, Smith gives in to candor. Brady is an operations man; Smith is a politician. At the same time, both men were raised in blue-collar households, each was the product of Northeastern parochial schools, and both started their careers as teachers.

The son of a New York City policeman and a homemaker, Brady graduated from Niagara University (he later received a master's in human resource management from Pepperdine University), taught social sciences for a while, then joined the Army. Rising through the ranks, he ultimately became post commander of Fort Belvoir in Fairfax, Va., a position akin to being mayor and city manager of a town with a population of 20,000. Active in the post's school community (he has five children), Brady progressed from being the PA announcer at his daughter's soccer games to being president of the Parent Teacher Association for a large high school. There, he says, "I started to see clearly that having an impact on education really matters."

The PTA experience led Brady to pursue the job of chief operating officer of Fairfax County Public Schools, where he leveraged the school's unused land to attract other financial resources and managed the controversial matter of school boundary changes. Soon after, he was accepted into the Broad Foundation's acclaimed Superintendent's Academy, which trains leaders in other fields to be school administrators in urban districts. Participants attend executive training sessions for 10 months while working their current jobs.

Tim Quinn, the former managing director of the Broad academy, says the Broad team knew almost instantly that Brady had the stuff to be an outstanding superintendent. "We knew within two sessions," he says.[17] But then came the third session, where Brady announced an interim plan. "The third session was in D.C., and everybody was focused on D.C., which at the time had probably the worst public school system in America," recalls Quinn. "And Tom said 'I want to be COO.' And we said 'Tom you don't need to do that; you've already been a COO, and this is a lateral move.' But he wanted to do it. He said, 'They need what I've got, and I can help fix it.'"

In D.C., then a dysfunctional system about twice the size of Providence's, Brady instituted a new procurement system, oversaw improvements to deteriorating buildings, and led a round of painful school closings. Colleagues say he was unflappable under pressure. Ed Schmidt, a school architect and facilities expert, recalls a community meeting about the closures at which an intoxicated citizen parked himself at the front of the room and began heckling. Brady was unfazed. But when a woman got up and confronted the heckler, things got more heated. "So Tom stepped in when the guy was about to take a swing at this woman," Schmidt recalls.[18] "He wanted to make sure he got between them. His watch got knocked off, and he just dusted himself off and put his watch back on and walked off."

A 14-month stint as chief operating officer of the School District of Philadelphia followed, with Brady inheriting a budget deficit of $180 million, a number that translated into staff layoffs, supply cuts, and assorted other unpleasantries, all of which Brady executed while trying to appease angry parents and hostile teachers. Although he considered the superintendent's job, a shift in the political winds pushed him to seek opportunities elsewhere. He found one about 200 miles up the coast in Providence.

Throughout his career, Brady has earned a reputation as a problem-solver and a deft executive with the quick analytical mind of an engineer. As befits his military background, he puts a premium on efficiency. His motto, according to more than one of his colleagues, is "Be brief, be bright, and be gone." Smith—who jokes that he is none of the above—says that style works both to the benefit and to the detriment of a process. "[Brady] wants things to go as planned," says Smith. "So he'll start with 'OK, we have an hour.' But I know this can't be negotiated in an hour. We can 'collaborate' in an hour and not change anything, but that's not the same."

While Brady has travelled from city to city, Smith is Providence born and bred, a product of the working class Italian neighborhood of Silver Lake, an enclave so tight that when Smith had an opportunity to buy a

house a few streets over, his mother responded with "So, I guess you're moving out of the neighborhood." It was a close-knit place that taught him lasting lessons about loyalty, self-respect, and ethnic pride. It also introduced him to a Boy Scout leader named Joe Hoard, who Smith says "saved my life." Smith and his buddies spent Friday nights—the roughest on the streets, Smith recalls—at Hoard's house working on their merit badges. "Joe asked us once what level of Scout we wanted to be, and no one said 'Eagle Scout' because we didn't think we could be. But he challenged us then to become Eagle Scouts, so we all worked really hard to make it that far." Smith did.

Smith's father was a non-union mechanic (his mother worked in a jewelry factory), whose ambition for his son was to get a good union job. "His goal was for me to wear a tie," says Smith. Although he describes himself as a "solid C" student, his test scores won him a spot at the city's highly respected Classical High School. His father had found him a job working at a unionized construction site, but a guidance counselor urged him to go to college. Starting at a community college, Smith went on to earn a degree in secondary education from Rhode Island College and a special education certificate, then taught history in a suburban high school. "I took the job seriously," Smith recalls. "They called me John Travolta because I wore a suit—a three piece suit—every day."

He went on to teach in Providence, where his community involvement—with his church and with the Boy Scouts and other youth groups—led to his election in 1988 to the state House of Representatives. Serving in the House for two decades, he gained experience that he says prepared him well for his election to president of the union in 2002. Although he concedes he didn't know the contract well, he says he knew how to be a leader. He credits Hoard with teaching him that "leadership isn't really about giving heat; it's about taking it." He also credits Hoard with teaching him "to see trouble before it hits" —a lesson he may later have applied to school reform.

Colleagues call Smith hard-working, open-minded, and fiercely independent. "He's not the type who will roll over for others—he has his own beliefs and vision," says Smith's assistant, Michelle Fleet, who also reports that Smith is "in the schools from Monday through Friday and meeting with people until 11 at night."[19] Smith is also, by most accounts, skilled at politics. Sitting for years on the state House labor committee, he was a strong union advocate—fighting attempts to increase state workers' contributions to their pension plans—and a savvy dealmaker who could slap the back of even his fiercest opponent. "There's a certain comfort level to being uncomfortable," he says. "My political background helps me go at it, and then go for a beer."

A Reason to Get Along

To some extent, collaboration between these two leaders seemed more likely than not. Already, both had political instincts more reasonable than the stereotypes of their positions would suggest. They were both decent men, sharp minds, and good listeners who cared deeply about educating kids. (It is also worth noting that Brady's involvement with labor unions started as being a member of one. During college he worked in a Helena Rubinstein factory that made the 60s-era perfume Heaven Sent, and he was required to join the AFL-CIO. "I wasn't anti-labor at all," says Brady. "I assumed the union was there for a good reason.") In other words, they already had much of what it would take to come together on their own. But first, they had to be pushed.

In January 2010, with the lawsuit still dividing them, a powerful new pressure to collaborate emerged. The state's new education commissioner, Deborah Gist, was preparing to submit Rhode Island's application for federal Race to the Top funding—more than $12 million for school improvements, which could not be won without a formal show of union support. Union presidents throughout the state balked at backing the application, but Smith, after deliberating long and swallowing hard, signed it, making the PTU one of only two unions in the state, and the only urban one, to formally endorse the bid.[20]

Signing on to the application, which promised bold changes to teacher policies, including evaluations that would base performance on student achievement, was an enormously risky move for Smith, one that put his district presidency on the line (he won re-election that May). As such, it was a revolutionary step forward in the so-far incremental efforts to reform Providence schools. "The pressure to 'stay strong' and not sign was everywhere," says Smith. "It was intense … But

as I see it, we don't have the luxury to engage the way we used to. The administration can't keep all of the control, and labor can't have contracts laying out every specific detail. … We have to be fully vested in teacher quality. We're in this game now."

> **"We have to be fully vested in teacher quality. We're in this game now."**
>
> **Providence Teachers Union President Steve Smith**

At the same time, Brady faced a risky choice on a different matter. The state union affiliate, the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers, had received a grant to redesign the state's teacher evaluation system from the AFT's Innovation Fund, a three-year initiative supported by union and foundation dollars.[21] The grant meant additional money for the district. But by participating in the process, Brady would signal a commitment to work with, rather than against, labor—as well as a willingness to cede some control.

Forging a formal partnership with the union would put Brady well outside of expected boundaries. "As a superintendent in Providence," says Marcia Reback, president of the state teachers union and a former president of the Providence local, "you will be expected to and applauded for taking on the union."[22] Doing otherwise, she says, could have made Brady look overly conciliatory. Yet when the innovation teams were called to a three-day meeting in February in Troy, N.Y., Brady got on a plane. "It was Steve and his team and me and my team," Brady says. "We all engaged in the process." Smith and Brady also traveled together to Toledo, Ohio, to learn about the AFT's peer assistance and review program, and then to Seattle for the AFT's national convention. Brady's appearance at the latter event was particularly striking. Superintendents are usually neither invited to nor interested in attending the huge biennial event, where thousands of delegates converge to debate and vote on union policy. Although invitations were extended to all 16 superintendents of districts whose unions had won grants, only one other superintendent showed up.[23]

Already this was an unusual display of cooperation for two people occupying historically adversarial roles. But it was only a prelude to the bigger partnership to come—the creation of the "restart" plan.

Under the rules established by the U.S. Department of Education, Providence could have taken a number of approaches to improving its low-performing schools. To decide which was best, Brady held more than two dozen meetings with parents, teachers, and community leaders. Many argued for the "transformation" model, which required replacing the principal and significantly changing structures and instruction. But both Brady and Smith pushed back, noting that the transformation option required schools to rigidly follow every one of its requirements, and that some, like merit pay for teachers, might not have been appropriate for Providence schools.[24] They argued that the "restart" model, with a labor-management structure built their way, would give the schools more flexibility.

Months earlier, Gist had been persuaded of the same thing and agreed to add a labor-management alternative under the restart option in the state's protocol for school intervention. "In general, we believe that in the right circumstances, with the right conditions, the right leaders, and the right agreement, a partnership between labor and management would be very powerful. We wanted to be sure that districts in this state had this opportunity," says Gist. Deputy Commissioner David Abbott says there was an even greater incentive. "We've been on the other side of the experience, where relations are not positive. The bottom line is that the barriers we face in improving schools were created jointly; labor didn't write these contracts alone. They need to work together."[25]

> **"Systems have to change. Just talking, railing, being emotional is not going to do it."**
>
> **District Superintendent Tom Brady**

As Brady and Smith moved ahead with the plan for the four schools, the risks on both sides became increasingly apparent. Already Smith had broken with

'Reciprocal Obligations': A Premise For Providence

The "restart" option for school improvement calls for a management structure, like a charter organization, to take over a low-performing school or set of schools. But in the case of Providence, the management team for the affected schools will be the union-district partnership, governed by the newly formed nonprofit organization, United Providence (UP!). Its main premise, that of "reciprocal obligations," has been developed and used not just by labor and management in Providence but also nationally. In 2006, Education Sector convened a group of union and district representatives from across the country to discuss and debate some of the most difficult issues in education reform, from teacher hiring and placement to dismissal. For several years, the group, which included PTU President Steve Smith, worked together to identify key points of agreement between labor and management. The UP! compact reflects many of these ideas.

Excerpted highlights of the UP! compact:

Purpose. *The purpose of this Joint Management/Labor Compact between the Superintendent of the Providence Public School District (the "District") and the Providence Teachers Union, AFT Local 958 (the "Union"), is to enable principals, teachers, students, and school communities to lead the charge for reform by eliminating previous barriers and constraints imposed by contractual agreements, past practices, and bureaucratic procedures.*

Concept of Reciprocal Obligations. *The principle of "reciprocal obligations" recognizes the mutual responsibility and commitment between labor and management in public education to ensure student and school success. It also embodies the shared belief that student and school success will either be enhanced or diminished based on a cooperative or contentious labor-management relationship, respectively.*

Governance. *This Compact shall be governed by an Executive Board comprised of the Superintendent of Schools, or designee; President, Providence Teachers Union (PTU), or designee; 3 PTU Executive Board Members; PSD Chief Academic Officer; PSD Chief Financial Officer; Executive Director of School Transformation; and 2 Parent Representatives. In addition, one UP! principal, one UP! teacher, an UP! high school student representative and a School Board representative will be active on the board as non-voting members.*

The Executive Board's main task will be to uphold the tenants of this Compact and provide policy direction and support to the staff responsible for the day-to-day functioning of the nonprofit EMO, United Providence (UP!). In addition, the Executive Board will engage in fundraising and community outreach on behalf of UP!.

Each school will establish a Leadership Team with representation from each stakeholder group for the school, which will be chaired by the Principal and a Chief Learning Representative and may include representation from the Assistant Principal; Teachers and Other Educators; Support Staff; Parents; Community Partners. The Chief Learning Representative will be selected by the UP! Executive Board based on pre-established criteria with input from the Turnaround Principal.

The Leadership Team shall have the ability to:

i. Enter into a contract with UP! to run the schools.

ii. Operate outside the districtwide collective bargaining agreements except as agreed to by the Executive Board or required by law.

iii. Utilize alternate hiring policies/procedures to select all staff for the school.

the other unions in endorsing Race to the Top—a move that some say cost him a shot at the state presidency. (Reback announced her retirement in September 2010.) Now some thought he was giving away the rest of the farm. "They think I've gone to the dark side, that I'm naïve and headed into a trap," says Smith. Meanwhile, Brady was growing impatient with the slow turns of the reform wheels. "Systems have to change," he says. "Just talking, railing, being emotional is not going to do it." And yet he, too, was again taking a chance that he would appear to be ceding control.

John Simmons, director of the Rhode Island Public Expenditures Council, a state research organization, worked for two administrations overseeing Providence teacher contract negotiations and understands how difficult it can be for both sides to openly work with one another: "For Smith, if he collaborates with management, he's at risk, members are at risk—that's always the fear … What if he agrees to something, what if he gives up something?"[26] As for the superintendent, Simmons says, "he gives up some authority by negotiating."

In April 2010, Gist approved the restart proposal, which led to the creation of United Providence or UP!, a local management group.[27] "The Administration and Union acknowledge their shared responsibility to stop the reform churn," the group's compact states, "[to]

'Reciprocal Obligations': A Premise For Providence, cont.

iv. Design the school's learning model building upon the Aligned Instruction System.

v. Implement a professional development program to support the Aligned Instruction System which can be tailored to individual school's needs.

vi. Implement a teacher evaluation model, to be approved by the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education ("RIDE").

vii. Implement alternative school and work schedules.

viii. Utilize flexible funding procedures to strategically align resources to meet strategic goals and expend all funds which comprise the school-based budget.

ix. Establish mechanisms to resolve curriculum, staffing, and operational issues within the context of the school intervention plan at the school level.

***Accountability.** Throughout the three-year Compact, PPSB [Providence Public School Board] will review whether UP! schools have met the school-level benchmarks articulated in the School Improvement Grant Application and School Reform Plans. If UP! schools have made significant progress toward meeting their benchmarks, the Compact will be renewed. If the schools have not made any progress they will be re-incorporated into the District and a new reform model will be applied to the school. In addition, at the conclusion of each school year, UP! shall submit to a comprehensive performance evaluation assessment to measure its effectiveness. UP! shall annually publish its performance against the accountability metrics and standards as well as the results of the evaluation assessment.*

At the conclusion of each school year, the Leadership Team shall submit a comprehensive performance evaluation assessment to measure the Leadership Team's effectiveness. The Leadership Team shall annually publish the school's performance against the accountability metrics and standards as well as the results of the evaluation assessment.

All staff selected to work in these schools shall agree to uphold this Compact and to implement the approved school reform plans. Educator evaluations shall be based on a RIDE-approved evaluation system with established and pre-determined standards of excellence as measured by actual and multiple observations of classroom practice, and additional evidence of good teaching and student learning including where appropriate, student test scores, written work, performances, presentations, projects, and other measures of student performance.

establish a strong and stable school environment, and give educators the resources and tools to transform these struggling schools so that once and for all students receive a genuine opportunity to obtain a quality education." Providence Public Schools, Gist wrote to Brady, "made it clear that this model allows for the greatest fiscal sustainability, as well as an unprecedented opportunity to work in collaboration with its teachers union."[28]

Just a year after Brady and Smith had been embroiled in the legal dispute over criterion-based hiring—a dispute still not fully resolved—they had embarked on a groundbreaking plan that called for shared decision-making, shared accountability, and shared leadership.

The Plan in Detail

The restart plan, with all its promise and peril, is now taking shape at the four schools. In addition to Roger Williams, they are Lillian Feinstein Elementary at Sackett Street, Charlotte Woods Elementary, which has merged with Sergeant Cornel Young Jr. Elementary (not on the restart list), and William B. Cooley Sr. Health and Science Technology High School, which has merged with an adjacent high school, the Providence Academy in International Studies or PAIS (also not on the restart list) to form a combined institution.

Under the plan, each school will establish a leadership team that will be chaired by the principal and a "chief learning representative," presumably a teacher, who is selected by the UP! executive board with input from the principal. Disputes are to be resolved by the leadership team. If they can't be, the principal will settle the matter. If the leadership team is not satisfied with the principal's decision, the matter swings back to UP! (See "Reciprocal Obligations: A Premise for Providence" on page 8.)

So where, exactly, does the buck stop? That is one of many open questions about how UP! will be managed and staffed, and the school-level plans have yet to be finalized (or approved by the state).[29] What is known is that the draft plans call for more school-level autonomy in staffing, scheduling, and budgeting—all

to meet the overarching goals of boosting student achievement, particularly in math and literacy. So far, there is agreement that the school day and the school year will be lengthened at all four schools for both students, who will receive extra instruction in math and reading, and teachers, who will get more planning time and professional development. Teachers will work an additional 10 days a year and at least one extra hour each day (specific designs for extending time and for compensating teachers for this time are still under debate). Also planned is the addition of specialized staff, including literacy and math specialists at all four schools, a dean of teaching and learning at the high school complex, social workers for the two elementary schools, and a staff person to oversee the extended time initiative at Roger Williams.

Not surprisingly, the most controversial provision of the restart plan is the requirement that teachers reapply for their jobs. In February 2011, teachers must submit a formal application, including a resume and an essay. Hiring decisions will be based on a performance review conducted by the principal, an interview conducted by a leadership team—including the principal, a union board member, and at least one other teacher from another school—and an additional essay on why they want to teach in a turnaround school.

> **"I don't care if no one reapplies. If you're not committed to this, you shouldn't be here."**
>
> **Feinstein Elementary Principal Jose Valerio**

Principals say the ability to hire teachers at the school level is the single most important element of the reform plan, and that the labor-management compact provides a key opportunity to get faculty buy-in. Principals will now have teachers "who are on board with the philosophy, vision, and approach," says Janelle Clarke, principal of the Sanchez complex, which includes Cooley and PAIS high schools.[30] To make sure they are, principals will share data that illustrates exactly how dire the situation is. Principals have a lot at stake here. After all, if benchmarks for student achievement are not met in the next year or two, they are likely to lose their jobs. "This is not about hurting your feelings," says Jose Valerio, principal of Feinstein Elementary, referring to the teachers, "but you have to see how bad it is to feel a part of changing it."[31]

Before that happens, many teachers are likely to quit, and many others are likely to lose their positions. As for those who leave, Clarke says, "Life happens. You may not be able to engage in this difficult work at this time in your life." Valerio puts it more bluntly: "I don't care if no one reapplies. If you're not committed to this, you shouldn't be here." The prospects have teachers anxious, to say the least. "In the back of their minds, this [has been] a five-month interview every day from 8 to 2:40," says Brearn Wright, principal of Roger Williams.[32] He and other principals have their own concerns: What will happen from February through June with those teachers who are still under contract but who know they aren't coming back? "The worst thing that could happen," says Wright, "is that five or 20 teachers … go on stress leave or are disengaged and not showing up."

The district has agreed to rehire displaced teachers at other schools or place them in its pool of long-term substitutes. Some argue that this policy simply perpetuates "the dance of the lemons," in which the worst teachers are passed from one struggling school to the next.[33] The Rhode Island Department of Education has pushed Brady and Smith to address the dismissal policy, but both men say that it is teacher evaluation, not rehiring, that must serve as the lever for improving teacher quality. A new statewide teacher evaluation system, under development for the past year, will be piloted at the four schools at the start of the 2011–12 school year.[34] "If a teacher fails to perform," says Brady of the new system, "there's no protection in the contract that ensures their job."

The Challenges Ahead

Meanwhile, at the four schools, expectations for faculty performance are high. Teachers can no longer invoke the union contract to resist longer hours or to protect their spot at a school. "Enough with the teachers saying, 'I can only take 26 students,'" says Valerio. "If there is a student who needs help at that moment, you help. You pitch in." Teachers will also be judged by how well they communicate with parents;

for instance, attendance at parent conferences, which the contract does not now require, will be mandatory.

With many of them effectively starting over, Providence teachers are still taking the changes in. They have watched other reforms—and other reformers—come and go, so predictably, a measure of cynicism has infected the ranks. "It'll be back to the way it was in a few years," says one teacher who spoke only with the promise of anonymity. "But there aren't a lot of people who want to hear that." Yet this time in Providence, there is a sense of inevitability about the changes. If there is not yet universal enthusiasm from teachers, there is at least acceptance, along with an appreciation that the turnaround plan could have come from outside, and that, from their standpoint, it could have been much worse. "There is dialogue going on, and in the past this would not have happened," says Gerri Lallo, a reading and literacy teacher at PAIS.[35] "A lot of joint decisions are being made. It's a messy process, but it's exciting to be on the cutting edge, to be in the forefront of something that is not going to be happening just in Providence."

And it likely isn't. Experts agree that the Providence effort is uniquely important in the current context of school improvement, and that it is bound to spread. Cities are full of low-performing schools that have not been turned around so much as spun in circles, partly because many of the technocratic solutions embedded in the federal agenda fail to fully account for the human element. The Providence model not only recognizes that element, but elevates it, by extending control beyond district administrators to teachers and principals. "Bringing the union on board from the start to shape the plan … over time, that may be the deciding factor," says Julia Koppich, an education policy consultant who specializes in labor relations.[36] "These early decisions—which turnaround model to use, and when and if and how much to involve the union—these matter a lot."

As pressure to improve schools grows nationwide, models that join districts and unions will only become more appealing. Evidence of this is already present in a growing number of districts, from Evansville, Ind., where the district and union have collaboratively built a professional development academy to improve teacher quality, to New Haven, Conn., which recently adopted a new contract that emphasizes labor-management collaboration. Hillsborough County, Fla., another district where the superintendent is leading reform with, not against, the union president, was the site of a recent announcement by Secretary Duncan, joined with both national union presidents, that the U.S. Department of Education will host a national conference on labor-management collaboration.[37]

> **"A lot of joint decisions are being made. It's a messy process, but it's exciting to be on the cutting edge, to be in the forefront of something that is not going to be happening just in Providence."**
>
> **Literacy Teacher Gerri Lallo**

For Providence, the real test of collaboration is putting the plan into school-level practice, and that means working through the disagreements and discord that surely lie ahead. For starters, the lawsuit over criterion-based hiring remains unsettled, awaiting an agreement between the teachers union and the school board. If the parties can't come to an agreement, another lawsuit could follow. That, in turn, could threaten not only the new UP! compact, but any further union-district agreement. The question is simple, says McWalters. "Will [Brady and Smith] have the courage to keep it up when they want to kill each other?" He says: "One thing I have learned is that change gets complicated when it gets real … Something will happen that's out of line, something will go wrong. It always does, and that's the test."

Already, Brady and Smith are wrestling with scheduling designs for each school, trying to find ways to expand learning for students without breaking the budget or losing teacher support. The two leaders fully expect such challenges. "I am not foolish enough to think that just because I'm working through this with Steve that it all will automatically be absorbed and endorsed at every level overnight," says Brady. "But I know that if we don't work together on this,

it will be three years and done." Smith, too, is frank about the plan's difficulties and its stakes. "Look," he says, "nothing is simple or straightforward about this. We have to fix this together. We can't walk away."

Notes

1. Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. In 2008–2009 Rhode Island used the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) to test students in grades three through eight and 11 in reading and math; in grades five, eight and 11 in writing; and in grades four, eight and 11 in science.
2. Education Sector analysis of Race to the Top applications and plans submitted to the U.S. Department of Education, November 2010.
3. Steve Smith, in discussion with author, June–October 2010.
4. David Cicilline, in discussion with author, September 2010.
5. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009; US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2006–2008, 3-yr estimates.
6. Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council, April 2010. Spring of 2008 (testing year 2007) was the first time the NECAP science assessment was taken by Rhode Island students.
7. The four "restart" schools initially included a fifth, Feinstein high school, which was subsequently closed for under-enrollment.
8. More details on Central Falls can be found in a series of news articles in the *Providence Journal* at: http://www.projo.com/news/content/central_falls_agrees_to_transfor_05-17-10_OCI_v27.e2d665d.html
9. Melody Johnson, in discussion with author, October 2010.
10. Philip DeCecco, in discussion with author, September 2010.
11. Linda Borg, "Who'll lead schools in Providence?" *Providence Journal,* March 19, 2008.
12. Tom Brady, in discussion with author, June–October 2010.
13. Letter from commissioner to Superintendent Brady, available online at http://www.providenceschools.org
14. Steve Smith, "Where We Stand," Providence Teachers Union website, http://www.proteun.org/index.htm
15. For more analysis of unions and collective bargaining, see Jane Hannaway and Andrew J. Rotherham, eds., *Collective Bargaining in Education: Negotiating Change in Today's Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2006).
16. Peter McWalters, in discussion with author, August 2010. (McWalters serves on Education Sector's board of directors.)
17. Tim Quinn, in discussion with author, September 2010.
18. Ed Schmidt, in discussion with author, September 2010.
19. Michelle Fleet, in discussion with author, September 2010.
20. NEA-RI in Foster, Rhode Island (pop. ~4,500) was the second.
21. The Innovation Fund totals $3.3 million, including union dues and support from five private foundations: the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.
22. Marcia Reback, in discussion with author, October 2010.
23. Gary Smuts of California's ABC Unified, a district with decades of positive union-district relations behind it, was the other superintendent who attended the 2010 AFT convention.
24. See Providence Public Schools School Improvement Intervention Plan, March 2010 at http://www.providenceschools.org. Also see Linda Borg, "Providence Proposing School Changes That Include Teacher Participation," *Providence Journal,* March 9, 2010.
25. Deborah Gist and David Abbott, joint discussion with author, October 2010.
26. John Simmons, in discussion with author, September 2010.
27. See Protocol for Interventions (January 2010, amended April 2010) at Rhode Island Department of Education's website.
28. "Commissioner Gist Approves Unique Management-Labor Compact," Rhode Island Board of Regents Elementary and Secondary Education press release, April 1, 2010.
29. Draft plans for each of the four schools are available at http://www.providenceschools.org
30. Janelle Clarke, in discussion with author, September 2010.
31. Jose Valerio, in discussion with author, September 2010.
32. Brearn Wright, in discussion with author, September 2010.
33. For example, see reports by The New Teacher Project at http://www.tntp.org/index.php/publications/reports/ and by the National Council on Teacher Quality at http://www.nctq.org
34. See November 2010 Public Forum presentation about the new educator evaluation system at http://www.ride.ri.gov/educatorquality/EducatorEvaluation/ACEES.aspx
35. Geraldine Lallo, in discussion with author, September 2010.
36. Julia Koppich, in discussion with author, September 2010.
37. "Duncan, AFT & NEA Call for National Education Reform Conference on Labor-Management Collaboration," U.S. Department of Education press release, October 14, 2010, http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/duncan-aft-nea-call-national-education-reform-conference-labor-management-collab