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Keep on Pushing: A Teacher Union President's Efforts to Save an Urban District from Neoliberal Orchestrated Collapse

Keith Benson

Abstract

This autoethnographic case study describes the approaches a local teachers union enacted to preserve their New Jersey urban public-school district from neoliberal-orchestrated collapse during one calendar year. While there is ample research highlighting union responses to standardized assessments, staff lay-offs, and school-based working conditions, little research is available describing methods teachers' unions enact to fight off neoliberal takeover for their public school district's survival. This study draws on meeting field notes, diary entries, and voice recordings to better understand the tactics the union and its president operationalized during the 2017-2018 calendar year, the first year of the teacher union's new president's term. Here we learn of the union's approach to boost student enrollment in their district, rebrand their public schools to the local citizenry, and overtly fight back against their superintendent. Lastly, we set out to explicitly communicate doubts held by the union and their president concerning whether their efforts had any impact on the District's actions. This work provides a framework for other teacher unions and urban public education activists to further their fight in preserving their urban public schools from the challenges we face under neoliberalism.

Keywords: Urban education, Neoliberal Education Reform, Union Activism, New Jersey

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*Now look-a look (look-a look)
A-look-a yonder
What's that I see,
A great big stone wall
Stands there ahead of me,
But I've got my pride
And I'll move on aside,
And keep on pushing...*

—“Keep on Pushing” by Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions (Mayfield, 1964)

Introduction

May 24th, 2017, the Canton Education Association (CEA)¹ elected me as their new president, Dr. Keith E. Benson, to a three-year term. The CEA is the teacher's union for teachers and support staff serving in Canton City School District (CCSD) schools. I had little formal involvement with CEA during my thirteen-year career as an educator in the District and was elected to the Association's highest post primarily due to my educational activism and outspokenness on behalf of Canton's public schools that were, and still are, under neoliberal attack. I researched the impact of neoliberalism on urban redevelopment and public schools and subsequently published a book (Benson, 2018). I recognized the fight that lay before our union; protecting our urban school district (CCSD) and by extension, their communities, was much broader than the traditional responsibilities undertaken by most teacher unions and presidents. Within the climate of orchestrated, urban edu-corporate takeover engulfing the school district and CEA union, confining CEA obligations to their traditional duties would be wholly insufficient. For the CEA to work in the best interest of their members, and this community in this current context, the union would need to go beyond the normal duties of contract negotiations, educator salaries and benefits, and school-based gripes. CCSD public schools, the future survival of this district, members' jobs, the learning environments of nearly 8,000 students, and their Camden community was at stake when I took office as CEA Union President in the Fall of 2017.

I've written this article as an autoethnographic case study, documenting my journey as a first-year union president and our efforts to preserve a school district from neoliberal-orchestrated collapse during one calendar year. This study draws on meeting field notes, diary entries, and voice recordings to better understand the tactics the union and union leadership operationalized during the 2017-2018 calendar year, the first year of my term as the new union president. I detail the strategies we employed to boost student enrollment, rebrand public schools to the local citizenry, and overtly fight back against the superintendent. This work contributes to the literature as there are few studies on teacher union efforts to survive neoliberal takeovers. My aim is that this study provides a framework for

other teacher unions and urban public education activists to preserve, advance their fight, and resist the challenges we face under neoliberalism.

While attacks on urban public schools and their communities inhabited by people of color is not unique to Camden as neoliberal ideology gained greater influence on urban policy generally, and within urban education policy specifically since the 1980s (Lipman, 2012; 2015). What made its existence in Camden distinct, is that I was elected to become teacher's union president, with some political capital to call attention to neoliberalism's predatory presence. As an urban education researcher, and resident and parent to a child attending CCSD public schools, my motivation to protect this community's public schools from neoliberal takeover, was (and still is) both professional and personal. As such, I sought to operationalize the research skills acquired through my doctoral studies. I was guided by the following questions: *How did urban teacher unions in similar contexts, go about working to resist neoliberal takeover from threatening their schools' survival? How did other union leaders handle what I am about to face? How did they help their schools survive? What information out there could I use to inform my next steps that prioritizes public school survival, and the communities in which they are situated?* Following months of searching Google Scholar, Academia, ResearchGate, and other academic search engines, I came to the realization that what I was looking for did not exist in established or procurable research. There was no existing literature or an established framework from which to gather ideas, no peer-reviewed research or vetted best practices for urban union locals fighting back against the influence of neoliberalism within their districts. There was *nothing*. And so, I and CEA were left to gather information from what limited, seemingly relevant literature did exist. Essentially, we were fighting blind, primarily on intuition, and "what seemed to make sense."

Early in my first year of the CEA presidency, I began documenting the days through a variety of mediums to eventually add to existing urban education research. My aim was to provide both a close-up perspective of an urban teacher union's attempt to fight for their survival, and a broader perspective of activism in similar settings. I am under no illusions that what follows represents a panacea of teacher-union-resistance-in-a-neoliberalizing-urban-district research. But it is my hope that urban union presidents and their unions can have this, as a resource, to guide them in their quest to resist neoliberal takeover. In the following sections, I will demonstrate what my varied approaches to pushing back against takeover were, explain the rationale, and detail the outcomes.

Guided by the promises from my days campaigning for the union presidency, I took office committed to do the following: grow stronger bonds between educators and the Camden community, connect the survival of the public-school district to the survival of its neighborhoods, improve public relations with media, and maintain a never-ending offensive against the sitting superintendent. There certainly is literature dedicated to all of the above in some form. However, little

has connected those approaches to a teacher union's implementation plans; and indeed, even less research on how teacher unions strategize to protect their district's schools.

To best convey my first year as union president in a corporatizing urban district, I used an autoethnographic approach to ground this research. It could be argued the lack of research on teacher union presidents, and on teacher union resistance, forced me to come up with our own Camden-specific plan. I engaged in a constant praxis of reflection (Freire, 1970), identifying and collecting information on problems, developing plans of action, implementing our collective plans, and circling back to reflecting, self-critiquing, and re-examining our union priorities and approaches to protect our schools and community at large. This was an on-going process of examination, deconstructing, questioning, planning, executing, and repeating, that placed me, and CEA, in a space of continual introspection with little to guide us. We centered the views of CEA's leadership team, and advice of trusted allies and community members—for better or worse, successes and failures.

To document my first year as CEA President, and consistent with ethnographic data gathering, I took notes during group and individual meetings, and audio recorded conversations between CEA leaders, as well as my own thoughts to capture moments as accurately as possible. Over a year's time, I compiled a stockpile of real-time thoughts and rationale of my decisions upon which I would document and reflect. With such contextual evidence and personal involvement, the autoethnographic approach seemed to be the appropriate method in which to convey my approach and actions toward fighting back against District's neoliberal sabotage during my first year.

The Utility of Autoethnography

The researcher becoming the researched, the phenomenon under investigation and the central unit of analysis is the staple of autoethnography (Douglas & Carless, 2013). Where ethnography, the prolonged embedding of researchers of others for qualitative analysis as the principal unit of investigation, has been largely accepted in the halls of academe, turning focus on the self has had a more contentious road to legitimacy. While the two research approaches share commonality in their respective qualitative data collection approaches of observation, note-taking, interviewing, reflection and coding, autoethnography relies less on the interpretation and reflections of others, but solely on that of the researcher in that outside parties are not subjects for investigation, understanding, or elucidation (Reeves, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008). Despite being dismissed as not being "real research," throughout the 1970s to today, autoethnography is gaining a broader audience as it requires the researcher to be both reflexively critical as well as reflective of their own thoughts and actions, and expressing that which may not be visible or readily documentable but only known to the researcher (Collinson, 2012).

Differing from the literary genre autobiography, autoethnography, through its communicated introspection and sharing of doubts, emotions, thoughts, and rationale—elements of research largely unexplored—make autoethnography potentially didactic in nature for others to learn and glean information from. Quality autoethnography puts the reader, as best as possible, in the midst of not only the actions described, but also in the heart and mind of the researcher and, thus, teaches more about ourselves in leading us to weigh the actions and introspections of the teller while weighing our own hypothetical actions were we in a similar situation. Autoethnography is uniquely purposed with using the accounts ‘of the personal to illuminate the general.’

And while autoethnography as a valid form of research inquiry does not employ the distanced, “objective” positionality of classic research, it instead, understands and accepts the inherent bias of the storyteller—the *only* story. Unlike other forms of inquiry, autoethnography explicitly elucidates what is commonly ignored, that the researcher cannot separate our own selves in the conveyance of any research no matter how objective the researcher aims to be. We cannot split our interpretation of events from our own lived experiences, along with collection of events that coagulate to shape our interpretation of the events we set out to describe.

With the researcher telling *their* story, being both omniscient narrator and fly-on-the-wall, it potentially presents the previously stated problems of bias and interpretation influencing research findings. But in autoethnography allowing the reader, like no other epistemological form of research, the reader is confronted throughout the text with the researcher’s biases and interpretations of described events within a given moment in time. Objectivity is never the goal in autoethnography. Further, autoethnography acknowledges the situatedness of the researcher impacts what is presented and possibility that anyone else witnessing the same events and the same time, could interpret them differently, providing counter analysis that could be equally didactic from which we all could learn as well. We understand in this form of research inquiry, that the researcher does not have the “last word” nor are their findings absolute, but are entirely open to interpretation, critique, and even amendment by others. Additionally, scholars of color and marginalized communities have often employed autoethnography as a counterstory-telling research method to give testimony to the injustices of the past, to reinscribe local knowledge, and to challenge majoritarian narratives of power (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1994).

The applicability of autoethnography also stems from the lack of research examining how teacher union presidents fight to save their districts from neoliberal takeover. It is a tool to document my lived experiences as a first-year union president. I remember looking for advice, or a “how-to” guide, that I might employ to save my own school district from being dismantled. I went to the internet to search for existing literature to guide me in the days ahead. There was nothing that fit my specific query. There was endless research on teacher unions and education

reform (Compton & Weiner, 2008; Bascia, 2008; Catone, 2013; Cowen & Strunk, 2014), teacher unions and social justice (Dixon, 2003; Simon, 2011), teacher union activism and union participation (Weiner, 2012; 2015); countless articles on improving teacher practice, improving student outcomes, and neo-liberalization of urban schools (Kirshner, Gaertner, & Pozzoboni, 2012; Hawley, Bridges, & Shields, 2016), but nothing out there, it seemed, examined or investigated *how* teachers unions could preserve and protect their schools' very existence. Finding nothing in academic research that was relevant or helpful, I reasoned that I was not the first newly arriving union president, nor would I be the last, to wrestle with the reality of working to save an urban district that has been slated for destruction, and therefore I should write something that could initiate subsequent research for anyone after me who will toil in similar circumstances (Sparkes, 2000). This work is intended to start an ongoing conversation, and hopefully, to contribute to a growing body of best practices.

In full transparency, I had and still have no idea whether my plans to save our school district from neoliberal takeover will work at all. I have doubts about my efforts' impact all the time, "*Is this working?*," "*What am I really accomplishing?*," "*Am I simply moving chairs on the Titanic?*" are questions that crept into my mind all the time, and caused many sleepless nights during my first year in office—and still do. Honestly, the thoughts that I and others fighting for our CCSD public schools are championing the losing side, were and never are far removed from my mind. And while other forms of research take a stand of certainty, a positionality of knowing from which we are to gather information and come up with a cemented conclusion, I on the other hand, am filled with doubt about the effectiveness of my approach and actions to save my district. We at CEA decided we'd to keep focus on what CEA was fighting against, grow stronger connections with community members, connecting the survival of CCSD to the future survival and sustaining of our neighborhoods, highlight the greatness of our schools, and maintain a never-ending resistance or "truth campaign" against our sitting superintendent.

Through conveying of our plan to beat back neoliberal takeover, all of our doubts of our plans' efficacy, my inner self-critique, perhaps who are interested in this topic can take away something worthwhile.

Getting Started...

Though I did not officially take office until September 1st, 2017, I was in the CEA office all summer to get a feel for the position and the lay of the land. I was aware that our union membership was soon entering a salary negotiations year as the ending of our current contract was looming at the end of our 2017-2018 academic year. Of all the many things I did not know about teacher unions and being president, one thing I did know was how important contracts are to union members. Though I had not taken over as President at that point, I nevertheless

began receiving emails, and fielding calls from staff who were RIF'd (reduction in force), non-renewed for poor performance, and those who had their increment for increased pay withheld. Our District was transitioning out of the State Employee Health Benefits Program and was looking at other health insurance vendors and I, along with the other heads of unions working in the district, had the opportunity to research and offer perspective into what insurance program would be most desirable to our membership. I also had an annual conference to attend hosted by our state affiliate, the New Benton Education Association, "Now that I'm President, What Do I Do?" which was tasked with getting new presidents schooled in the NBEA way of how to dress, speak, conduct, and act as a teacher union president should.

While I quickly understood all the above came with being a union president, nothing addressed or was related to our CEA's and our public schools' most urgent concern: survival. Whether my fellow CEA members or state affiliate knew it or not, from my research, I knew our district's schools were in immediate danger of closure due to the increased, and imposed, proliferation of renaissance schools—state mandated corporate charter schools that are intended to replace our neighborhood public schools. Armed with that knowledge, I prioritized our survival above all else and committed internally that I'd do everything in my power and imagination to fight for it. During the summer before taking office, as yet still an observer, I learned quickly that the duties of a union presidents are vast and varied, and I could quickly lose my guiding focus on survival as a union leader in a targeted district by getting diverted in tending to the conventional matters of traditional teacher union presidents operating in a traditional context.

I was cognizant that our Canton reality was distinct, unique, and urgent. To keep myself focused on executing what would be CEA's new guiding mission, to survive by protecting every school, I posted signs with the varied approaches I would take to accomplish our task throughout my office. If ever I got distracted, or lost focus, or spent too much time mired in organizational minutiae, I only need to look at my office walls as a reminder of what I should be doing.

The three signs represented three different priorities for CEA for my first year in office. The first sign read: *Boost Student Enrollment*; the second sign read: *Rebranding our Schools*, and the third sign read: *Start Punching Back*. Each sign represented a priority that I would employ to protect our public schools, and by extension, my community over the course of that year.

Boosting Student Enrollment

For obvious reasons, the sustainability of all schools, especially those with in the crosshairs of predatory neoliberalism, rests in the viability of its student enrollment. As many education researchers identified in prior literature, the manufactured shrinking of student enrollment in urban public schools is a tool employed to justify co-habitation or outright school closure (Lipman, 2012; Baker

& Miron, 2015). Schools that are determined to be underutilized through low student enrollment, are targeted for shuttering. And while the rationale—that school buildings without the students should not continue to operate—declining public school enrollment is not an organic occurrence. Rather, it is a facilitated approach employed by education’s corporatists operating within urban spaces to justify public school closure (Green, 2017).

The oversaturation of charter and recovery schools in urban centers puts a drain on student population. For every child that attends a non-public school, it is one student the public-school system loses along with its accompanying funding (Baker & Miron, 2015). Over the course of several decades, there has been a sustained messaging campaign of ‘anti-urban public education.’ The barrage of messages have come through popular media, contrived “research” by think tanks, corporate-funded reform institutes on university campuses, or anti-union billionaire supported advocacy groups. As a result of such a prolonged and targeted messaging campaign, segments of urban parents believe public schools are failing, and any non-public school is a superior educational approach for their child; as a result, they choose to send their child to a place they deem “better” (Holme, Carkum, & Rangel, 2013).

Additionally, the arrival of single, universal enrollment systems in urban districts, further muddies the choice process and dilutes a once robust pool of urban students. With single enrollment systems, that are utilized exclusively in urban areas, parents are asked and in some instances compelled to enter their own and their child’s personal information into a computer database, and finally their child’s school placement is determined by a proprietary computer software algorithm operated by a third party-entity (Walker, 2016). (In every instance nationally, the software providers operating the universal enrollment systems have similar funders and investors as the corporate charter school operators that have also taken residency in the same urban district.) Predictably, as school “choice” is removed from parents, and placed within the purview of a corporate-supported software company, some students are assigned schools their parents don’t want them to attend. Many times, these schools are farther from their homes or community, and indeed likely to not be their local neighborhood public school at all, but instead a corporate charter school.

Finally, the massive remaking of urban demography is having an impact on urban public-school populations (Lipman, 2015). Coinciding with the reduction of available public and low-income housing in urban areas, and in its place the increased presence of market-rate and “affordable housing”, the number of low-income minorities, the specific demographic most likely to attend urban public schools, has also shrunk. In a nearly a half-century effort to attract the middle-class back to cities, municipal planners have used both state and federal housing policies to manipulate who lives in cities (Danley & Christiansen, 2017). As a sustained exchange in urban residents goes from lower-income persons of color,

to an increasing amount of middle-income earners (both white and minority), a coinciding lessening of urban public-school enrollment ensues as middle-class urbanites seek alternative settings for their child (Cucchiara, 2013).

Public schools that exhibit sustained “failure,” can become targets of outright takeover by recovery or takeover schools like Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), UnCommon Schools, Mastery Charter Schools, and a host of others. Such schools and their charter management organizations (CMO) operate exclusively within urban school districts that serve low-income communities of color. Unlike traditional charter schools, those started by community groups or former educators established to provide a model of education not available in a district’s public schools, CMO recovery schools exist only where urban residents have little to no educational democracy in the form of publicly elected boards of education with official decision-making powers.

Further, CMO schools have corporate support through investment, lobbying, and expansion plans much like any other corporate entity. These schools also have no democratic oversight from, nor accountability to, their local public nor the school district’s governing body. For example, CMO-operated schools often employ a zero-tolerance, no excuses approach dedicating an inordinate focus to discipline, student compliance, and testing. These schools take over existing urban schools, along with their students and in turn make both their own. In these cases, these CMO schools become the only option in students’ neighborhood, forcing parents to choose between sending their children to the corporate charter school close to home or incur the burden of finding a school for their child further from home.

In Camden, we have the neoliberal trifecta of an abundance of both charter schools (11) and takeover schools (11), a common universal enrollment system, and the massive redistribution and repurposing of urban housing away from meeting the needs of low-income residents in favor of courting the more affluent. Comparatively, there are only eighteen public schools today, down from twenty-six just five years ago. As can be reasonably deduced—as more non-public schools begin taking root in the city, there are less low-income residents, leading to low school enrollment, which then provides all the rationale needed to label a school ‘underutilized’ and eventually calls for school closure.

Throughout my days campaigning for the union presidency, and certainly, since arriving in the post, the imperative to boost and protect our student enrollment was obvious. Indeed, the only way we could preserve our schools’ existence, and thus protect our broader community, is to work to keep our buildings filled.

My first initial approach in trying to boost student enrollment began the summer before taking office where I visited every district school and taking pictures of the school building’s interior and exterior. I then posted the photos along with narratives about each school highlighting their unique and vast array of both curricular and after-school programs to social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. The rationale behind this action was simple. The popular conception of “inner-city

public schools” forwarded primarily by those far removed from such spaces, commonly evokes thoughts of deficit: terrible, dirty and under-resourced buildings, teachers who don’t care, and schools that offer students virtually nothing beyond schoolwork. To push back against such widespread prejudices about our schools, I posted what our buildings *actually* looked like: Clean floors. Lockers. Student artwork. Microscopes. Model skeletons. Awards-filled trophy cases. Colorful pre-kindergarten classrooms. Smartboards in every classroom. Modern desktop computers and laptops. School libraries. I reasoned that public perception among residents would change when the public could see what our schools truly looked like and became aware of all the beautiful things taking place within them for our city’s children.

All of our K-8 schools have after-school programs. Some of our K-8 schools have Girl Scouts, some have the Insight/Western University partnership assisting students in North Camden with academic support; one school is in partnership with the Philadelphia 76ers, and another is in a partnership with Northern Philadelphia University, along with a litany of other programs, clubs and sports offered in all primary and secondary schools. I understood our residents have heard about all that our schools lacked in facilities and programming for decades, thus making non-public schools with their perks seem “better,” but showing all of the awesome stuff our schools make available to students could begin changing the perception that Camden public schools were somehow “less than.”

Next, I stole a page out of the charter school marketing playbook and utilized similar promotional techniques from my days as a nightclub promoter in Philadelphia and created “postcards” or handbills advertising our schools. Both sides of our postcards featured Camden school students in various contexts of their achievement and growth. One side featured a group of Latino students smiling while preparing to receive a lecture in a nearby hospital, and the other side featured a Camden High School graduate donning her cap, gown, medals, and sashes. The postcard’s headline read: “*Camden’s Public Schools...for your Young Scholar’s Brightest Future!*” and the byline: “*Add your child to the legacy of excellence coming from Camden’s schools by enrolling IN PERSON at one of these neighborhood PUBLIC schools*”; along with the names and phone numbers of each of the city’s neighborhood public schools.

I spent the early months of my presidency placing these postcards in cornerstones, Chinese-food stores, Crown Fried Chicken stores, day care centers, and on car windshields throughout various Camden neighborhoods. Additionally, I dropped some off in the main offices of our city schools, distributed them at Board of Education meetings, and passed them out hand to hand to residents. The idea here was to put something in people’s hand and let them see successful Camden students, and begin talking to people specifically about the potential of our schools and explaining why our schools were the right places for their children to grow and learn in addition to explaining why the preservation of our schools protected our communities. It was all about direct marketing.

Additionally, throughout the winter and spring of 2018, I began calling each of our public schools, bi-weekly, to get their latest enrollment numbers. As CEA president, I wanted to know how many students were in our buildings to learn whether our schools' enrollment was growing or shrinking, and also learn which schools may have needed more marketing support and positive promotion. Also, I wanted always to remain informed concerning our District's enrollment so that the superintendent could not misrepresent our District schools' enrollment to forward the argument that buildings were underutilized.

After receiving our bi-weekly attendance reports, I began posting the current enrollment numbers to social media to show, that despite the further proliferation of non-public schools in Camden and the implementation of the common enrollment system, our public-school enrollment was growing! I touted our enrollment increase at every opportunity I got. In op/eds, on Twitter, at Board of Education meetings, to parents, on Facebook posts, at the State Board of Education meetings in Trenton—every time I spoke about our schools, I mentioned that despite deliberate political and neoliberal attempts to dismantle our schools, we were thriving because Camden parents continued to believe in our schools' potential.

That our District schools' enrollment rose throughout the 2017-2018 school year was a great sign going forward. Our rising attendance indicated, that all of our schools would stay open in that none were "underutilized", and that very few staff members, if any, would lose their jobs through a RIF (reduction in force), and most importantly, our communities and residents were protected from more immediate displacement and gentrification efforts at least in the short term.

Rebranding our Teacher's Union and District Schools

There is a growing body of research identifying the need for teacher unions to shed the dominant perception of being an organization that exists to serve itself and protect "bad teachers" (Weiner, 2015). For decades, teacher unions have been cast as tone-deaf, and intransigent in their reluctance to change. Recognizing the ever-increasing prices of monthly mortgages, rent, food, car payments, student loans, and taxes, a growing force of politicians and anti-union forces have made enormous gains in casting teachers and their unions as contributors to the economic troubles most Americans are experiencing (Garrison, 2018). There is a long list of factors contributing to economic challenges including: stagnant wages, a reduced pool of careers paying middle-class wages, the diluted value of bachelor's degrees, less buying power of the U.S. dollar, rising health care costs, college, tuition, prices of consumer goods, etc. Within this landscape, many commentators hold the public education system as a central factor in our nation's economic decline (Chase, 2015; Finn, 2018).

Similar to that of the rest of the country, the current economic milieu in urban America among its residents is even more tenuous. Unemployment is higher

among urban persons of color, and they are more likely to work insecure hourly positions that offer low wages and no health benefits (Ayres, 2013; Manzo, Manzo, & Bruno, 2017). Despite the nation's unemployment being the lowest in decades, and despite academic achievement being at its highest across all demographics, most citizens of urban America are struggling economically. And, the blame is frequently cast on urban schools' not adequately preparing its students for the present and future economy. Subsequently, teacher unions in urban areas also bear blame and contempt from some segments that view them as obstructionists to educational progress. The cycle contributes to the economic plights today's students will likely face as tomorrow's adults (Catone, 2013; Cowen & Strunk., 2014).

Wide-ranging perception holds that teacher unions' interests extend little beyond protecting bad educators, generating revenue through the collection of dues, fighting to increase taxpayer-funded salaries and benefits, and helping their workforce escape all measures of accountability. Teachers unions are frequently framed as impediments to educational progress in their established resistance to charter schools, longer workdays and school calendars, performance pay, and high stakes standardized testing (Eberts, 2007). Within the urban public-school context, the critique of teacher unions is often even harsher. By much of the local urban citizenry, teachers and their unions are increasingly seen as out-of-touch and working in urban schools only to "collect a check" (Benson, 2017). They are viewed as uncaring outsiders, as the vast majority of the teaching force, even in urban areas, is comprised of white educators who do not reflect the urban communities where they work—not culturally, economically, or racially. Even educators of color are not spared from similar critiques of holding values that marginalize and disenfranchise urban students and residents (Benson, 2017).

In Camden, the reputation of the CEA was not necessarily negative among the community, but many residents were not aware of CEA's existence at all. Some residents who were aware of our local teacher's union, were curious as to why our union did not appear to be "fighting" for our schools when they were being forcibly closed, or for staff member's jobs when they were being laid off by the hundreds. While campaigning and into the early days of my presidency, I sensed the community felt estranged from the teacher's union. Many folks would ask, "*What does CEA do for us?*," "*What has CEA ever done here?*," or questions of that nature. These questions were valid.

Prior to assuming my office, I read extensively on traditional teacher unionism, teacher unions and social justice, and the burgeoning activist movement of teacher unions nationwide, none more impactful than Lois Weiner's *The Future of our School: How Teacher Unions Can Fight for Social Justice* (2012). It became a priority for me that CEA improve its organizational relationship with the Camden community. From my readings about teachers' unions and from prior research on community expectations of urban teachers, I recognized that if CEA wanted to protect its schools, and thus educator's jobs, we had to be inseparable from the community.

Organizationally, it was my mission to ensure CEA was welcoming and accessible to the community residents and their needs for two reasons: (1) we have both the platform and capacity to be faithful allies for residents, and (2) the sustainability of our district's public schools, careers of Camden educators, and by extension CEA, cannot exist without the community. I recognized the enormous accomplishment of enrolling students in our public school district, given the twenty-two non-public schools in Camden, the presence of two massive nearby technical high schools available to our students, and the implementation of a new single enrollment system. The only reason our schools continued to be filled with Camden students, is because parents chose to send their children to our schools. And for that, I was, and still am grateful. It matters to me that I, and CEA show the community gratitude for their continued support.

Therefore, as early as September 2017, my first month in office, we at CEA searched for opportunities to partner and ally ourselves with Camden's citizenry, whether the issue was related to education or not. One of our first endeavors in trying to connect with the community was financed and supported by the local education association and our state affiliate. Understanding the dire impact poor vision has on students' academic progress, coupled with the expense inherent in providing eyecare to children, the local education association pre-paid for Camden students' eye exams and eyeglasses if needed. It was our teacher union's task to promote the event. While the Optical Academy is an annual event and CEA has long had a partnership with, I understood how important it was to inform the community. I purposed to highlight it through posting pictures on social media so that the community could see their educators serving the city's children in a capacity outside and beyond the classroom.

As October got underway, a subcommittee within our teacher union called PRIDE began executing community-focused events with the intent on serving our adult constituency. One event, "Healing Your Inner-Hurt" was meant to highlight the issues of suicide and domestic violence that was widespread yet are still taboo. Both issues have very little to do with matters traditionally tackled by teacher unions, but have everything to do with what every demographic group was experiencing behind closed doors. Unfortunately, unlike the Optical Academy event just one month before, this event was very poorly attended mainly due to poor planning and execution on my part—for which I take full responsibility. This event was held on the last Saturday in October putting it in direct conflict with many Halloween "Trunk or Treats" throughout the city on that date. Additionally, as October is also Breast Cancer Awareness Month, many local organizations and volunteers including our CEA staff participated in a four-mile Breast Cancer Walk in nearby areas. And, also on that same Saturday, both of the city's comprehensive high schools had football games. In the end, had I done the appropriate research, I would have learned of all the events taking place that day, and would have scheduled "Heal Your Inner-Hurt" on a different date.

In November, we sponsored a Hispanic Cultural celebration at one of our schools to amplify and show appreciation for Latino culture. Unlike “Heal Your Inner Hurt,” the school was packed full of parents beaming with pride watching their children, sing, dance, and perform recitations. Latino food was served at the conclusion of the event, and all attendees ate heartily, and some even went home with trays of leftovers. It was a priority to me that CEA recognize and celebrate the Latino community in Camden in that Latino students, now, outnumber Black students. In Camden, the Latino population continues to climb. On a personal note, my wife who is Puerto Rican, my daughter who is an Afro-Latina, and I were particularly sensitive to hearing about a festering schism between the Black and Latino communities. Our CEA leadership positions were filled entirely by Black people, and I reasoned that our organization could work towards uplifting the Latino community. We could help begin changing perceptions that our educators, and the Black community disregard our Latino neighbors. On that night, the community comprised of both Black and Latino residents came together; we ate, sang, and fellowshiped. And, it was our teacher union that helped bring the community together on that night.

Other such events took place throughout the year with the aim of unifying Camden residents and working to rebrand our schools and our teacher’s union. There were some challenges along the way. Poor communication with the community regarding notification, scheduling conflicts, the (repeated) oversight of providing bilingual flyers clearly hampered some of our outreach attempts throughout the 2017-2018 year.

CEA certainly throughout the past year however, as it always had since its inception, did a lot of community service. Through donations to organizations and individuals in need, the city’s public-school educators as individuals and union members gave freely. Sometimes the giving was monetary, and other times, it was physical labor and hard work. Many of our members took up beautification projects or mentorship efforts throughout the community, mostly without media or fanfare. Though I tried to highlight the generosity of our members in a local weekly newspaper the *Anointed News Journal*, and on social media, I fell woefully short in capturing and recognizing all that our educators were doing outside their workplaces and in the community.

One effort I did manage to narrate through social media, and in writing, was CEA’s partnership with the community to regain residents’ right to vote for local Board of Education members. Since the passing of Camden’s *Municipal Rehabilitation Act* (MERA) of 2001, Camden citizens did not have the ability to vote for their board members. For nearly two decades, Camden’s board members were political appointees with no accountability to the larger public, a reality known too well to the local citizenry. Though the MERA Act clearly expressed residents would have the right to vote on whether they wanted to vote directly for board members or continue to have board members appointed by the mayor. However,

the mayor at the time refused to put the matter on any ballot as a referendum. And while residents, including myself, for years tried to petition to regain these rights, many signatures were dismissed by the City Clerk's office dooming our efforts. To their credit, the frequently aloof NBEA funded an attorney to help in our efforts to regain the right to vote, and CEA alongside residents, have been battling together throughout the past year to keep the public aware of this issue which will be finally put on the ballot the following year.

In sharing this long-fought victory alongside residents, after committed grassroots, door-to-door advocacy, CEA established substantive alliances with community members that fosters the potential for greater collaboration in the future. The relationships formed during the process of fighting for Camden residents' to regain voting rights, Camden citizens saw their public-school educators as partners in their struggle as opposed to teachers who enter the city only to work, and exit at the conclusion of the workday unbothered and unconcerned by resident matters.

Finally, a source of extreme pride came during our 50th CEA Anniversary where we combined our spring banquet celebrating the history and legacy of this union, with also honoring our graduating scholarship recipients for the first time. Typically, CEA honored one qualifying senior from each of our city's five public high schools, awarding them \$2000 toward college. This year, we decided to spread the scholarship dollars to more students by granting less money to more students. We reasoned, that if all seniors took the time to complete our exhaustive scholarship application, put themselves in a position to continue their education, we wanted to support as many college-bound seniors as possible. Thus, CEA awarded thirteen graduating seniors \$600 in scholarship money, the most scholarships our association has ever handed out. We deliberately opted to recognize more students and celebrate with more families in the academic progress of their children. We felt it important to celebrate and recognize students alongside our members, together, in our concerted efforts to erode divisions or perceived barriers.

In rebranding our teacher union, and the public perception of public-school educators through service and giving, I hoped the long process of changing the popular narrative was underway. The reputation of the uncaring urban teacher, and by extension teacher union, is cemented in the minds of many urban and suburban Americans. Not confronting that reality head-on and working to change that characterization through earnest and altruistic means would be irresponsible of any urban teacher union president, particularly in a time where their district's schools are under attack. Charters and renaissance schools put forth the message that their teachers "care more" or are more dedicated to the success of students than our public-school educators, though there was little if any empirical evidence supporting such claims. I recognized that the absence of proof often comes second to popular perception. To ignore that our teachers, have for too long had a reputation for being disinterested in anything that did not directly impact their careers or bottom lines would be tantamount to willfully disregarding an obvious critique.

Regardless of its validity, it would not serve our educators or our union to disregard it. Therefore, this year, we confronted that popular, yet possibly misplaced perception through direct allyship with community members in community matters, and through an open campaign of generosity.

Finally, as president, I initiated an “open-door” policy for community members to stop by our office and discuss educational and community concerns. In some instances, I had to explicitly explain to residents that they were invited to simply show up if they wanted to talk or meet. My intent was to make our CEA union office a community-friendly space. Reducing barriers between our residents and their public-school educators, who I as union president represent, was a priority if I wanted our residents to see our CEA members as an extension of the community. With that same rationale in mind, when I address residents in education matters, whether in-person or over social media, I make it habit to give out my personal phone number to demonstrate that CEA, and its president, are always accessible to the community. As a city resident myself, I know how critical it is to begin taking steps to change the perception of our educators in the community and how vital it is for the future viability of our schools. For the entirety of my first year as president, CEA deliberately worked to improve our relationships with the city’s citizens and slowly, there were signs that our efforts were bearing fruit in an improved community perception.

Start Punching Back!

In the years prior to my running for CEA President, going back to the initial unveiling of the *Urban Hope Act* in late 2011, and through the appointment and term of then-governor’s appointee to serve as superintendent of CCSD in 2013, my voice and activism in resistance to all de-democratizing manifestations of neoliberal education reform in Camden was becoming constant. I was growing increasingly confident that what I was fighting for, alongside a contingent of committed resident activists, was justice, democracy, and civil rights. Further, the more I progressed in my doctoral studies and my research topic examining the link between Camden redevelopment efforts and the simultaneous establishment of corporate charter schools, the more I became convinced of our appointed superintendent’s motive to destroy our public-school system. And by extension, assist in facilitating the turnover of, and eventual displacement in, our neighborhoods. As such, I viewed it as my responsibility as a Black man, a resident, and a city educator to expose our superintendent whenever the opportunity arose. I would confront him in meetings with the truth in public. I would confront him with the truth on social media. I confronted him with the truth in local newspapers in authoring editorials. I would expose the truth about the superintendent in presentations and national research conferences. Suffice it to say, I was on an endless campaign to get the truth out—and that work started long before my election to

union president. After getting elected, I also knew I would have to continue in my efforts to expose the superintendent throughout my term.

The first weekend following my election to the presidency, I and a fellow community activist, penned an Op/Ed in the *Courier-Post*, “How an undeserving leader is destroying education in Camden” (Benson & Dickerson, 2017). It was my first salvo in a sustained effort to start punching back at the superintendent from my CEA presidency. Before to my election, our union leadership was developing a reputation among our membership and community as being too friendly, too weak, and possibly too scared to fight our appointed superintendent who was decimating our schools with ruthless efficiency. The superintendent’s closing eight schools in five years, laying off dedicated staff by the hundreds, using his position to upend the lives of staff members and city children, in my eyes, was unforgivable. He hadn’t had a teaching position for more than two years, had never been a building principal or gone through any of the struggles and professional lessons of the educators he was discarding like trash. In my eyes, he was sent here, to my city and our school system, by the governor, not to improve our schools, but to destroy them. And it was my mission to use my office to remind him, his allies, and the public what this superintendent was all about. Punching back, constantly and factually, was a central part of my strategic plan to help protect our schools during my first year as president.

Through it all, I had been hearing that now I was in the position of union president, that I had to “be strategic,” “be more political” and “be more friendly” in my dealings with the superintendent because this was a contract negotiations year, and because members’ jobs depended on the superintendent’s decisions. My mother even told me, “You know, you get more bees with honey than you do with vinegar.” And a member in an elementary school told me that it seemed I “was too focused on going after the superintendent” and I should focus less on him, and more on other things like curriculum. From my vantage point however, I saw how being cordial and accommodating was met with increased exploitation and oppression from the superintendent. I further reasoned that bullies, oppressors, cannot be charmed out of their oppressive ways. Such people can never be bargained with because they recognized a structural power imbalance in their favor. So, in remembering what it felt like to be bullied as a child, that the only way to protect myself from bullies was to fight back. I applied the same lessons here. I further believed that if CEA members and residents could visibly see someone champion the cause of those with less power, perhaps they would join in the resistance in whatever manner they felt most comfortable.

When the appointed superintendent first arrived in the district as an uncertified and uncredentialed superintendent, one of his first hires was a de-facto personal spokesperson whose responsibility it was to create whatever spin to shine a favorable light on the superintendent. The spokesperson, and the revamped Office of Communications were effective in getting a sanitized version of the superinten-

dent's reign out to the public. The appointed superintendent was a darling of print media, news shows, and even urban radio. Despite Communications staff's efforts to craft a pristine image of the superintendent as a compassionate, pragmatic, understanding education reformer that put "kids first," it also exposed a weakness in the superintendent that as CEA president, and I planned to exploit. It was apparent to me the superintendent was self-conscious about his lack of qualifications, obsessed with his public image, and notoriously thin-skinned. Therefore, I spent particular focus in reminding both he and the public, that he did not earn his position for which he was gifted by a governor hostile to urban public education, along with using a grass-roots counter-narrative to shatter that the superintendent was the answer to all that ailed Camden's schools.

My intention was to use my position as CEA president to enact the dual twin approaches of publicly shaming the superintendent into either leaving the post or being removed from the position when the new governor of New Jersey took office in 2018. I truly had no idea how to utilize media for a focused cause such as this. Through prior years of education activism, I did have a quasi-sizeable following on Twitter and Facebook where I began to attack the image of a successful, Camden-friendly appointed-superintendent. I reminded social media and the public of all the schools the superintendent closed and corporate charters he replaced them with, without community participation or inclusion, his willful disregard in ensuring that our schools were appropriately staffed with instructional support and custodial staff. I highlighted his failure to proactively protect our buildings from weather-related damage which forced some to close during winter and late spring months. The aim was to provide the public with factual information of what was really taking place with the governor's appointed superintendent at the helm. These were also things that were easily confirmable. They could be photographed and subsequently posted for all to see. They were truths that could not be explained away aside with fancy speeches or slideshows. My aim was to force him and other decisionmakers to confront that in all of these matters, it was the superintendent who either refused to listen or failed to sufficiently prepare - neither of which would cast the superintendent in a favorable light.

As my efforts using Twitter was designed to reach non-Camden residents and education activist organizations throughout the state and rest of the country, I used Facebook to communicate more directly with my Camden neighbors. I learned that Camden residents, much like the rest of the nation, largely believe what is in print, and what is on the news. Most parents regardless of where they reside, are not deeply informed about what is happening in their district's schools beyond what their child tells them is happening in their classrooms. As such, many Camden residents and parents needed to be informed about what the Superintendent was doing to harm their city's schools and the district as a whole. To inform residents, I began using the information I gathered throughout my dissertation to connect the erosion of our school district to the massive redevelopment, gentrifi-

cation and possible displacement. These consequences would negatively impact most residents whether they had children in our public schools or not. I believed I needed to make every resident, understand that we all need to be engaged in our public-school system. Everyone needed to “lean in” together.

At times it seemed like the message was beginning to gain traction, other times, not so much. I have never truly understood why some messages resonate with residents, while others miss entirely. But rather than wondering why some citizens weren’t engaged, I focused on simply continuing to put content out. I figured I’d use my position as CEA president, and Facebook videos to try to both inform and educate. Through recorded Facebook videos, residents could visually see CEA trying to talk to, and protect, the Camden community. This was a stark contrast from the superintendent and local politicians that to many residents seemingly cared little for their well-being.

The last and final step I took in fighting back against the superintendent was getting the on-the-ground truth out to policymakers at both the state and local levels. I understood that feel-good narratives commonly render facts and nuance moot. Much of what people knew about the Superintendent’s tenure in Camden was based on spin, which he and his supporters crafted. In Camden, and other urban districts with leadership from education reform backgrounds, much of the turnaround success stories are contrived. They originate from a prolific public relations machine largely foreign to urban districts. Coupled with the erosion of local newspapers and beat reporters, locally and nationally, the environment exists for corporate superintendents to shape their own harmful narratives.

Aware that new members of our New Jersey State Board of Education, our new state Commissioner of Education, and new governor likely knew very little about what was truly occurring in Camden under the Superintendent aside from what they read, I began attending State Board of Education meetings to provide testimony. I delivered information to board members, the Commissioner and Governor’s Office in hard copy on a biweekly basis, hoping they would better understand the realities of public educators in a neoliberalizing district. And despite having no official control or authority over our city schools, I also took the same information to the new mayor of Camden, city council members, and other local politicians. I used my title and the social capital that garnered, to communicate what I could about what was going on in our schools under this superintendent. I wanted the superintendent’s deeds to be known in every political and educational space at both the state and local levels. I wasn’t sure what those actions would yield, but I knew I wanted to do everything in my power to inform anyone who may have power, or connections to it.

The decision to “punch back” was one I arrived at out of necessity and recognized was an approach few teacher’s union take in fighting for their schools. I was not concerned with maintaining a professional dialogue or relationship with the superintendent. I decided that fighting him publicly and outright, was required

in order for our schools to have a chance at survival. In the superintendent, the Camden District had a clean-cut, young, and affable leader who had been featured in the *New York Times* and *Politico* for his perceived leadership and effectiveness, as well as the support of national foundations and institutes such as Chiefs for Change, and the Broad Foundation. His public perception was immaculate, yet unquestioned. His criticisms of CCSD's schools, coinciding with his public exultations of Camden's imposed corporate charter schools and the demand for more, served only to make our district's public schools appear deficient while casting the city's corporate charters as a panacea.

Fighting back against the superintendent's narrative began with fighting back against its most visible messenger, and so I did. We at CEA, forced the public to recognize who the Superintendent was from the perspective of students, educators, and residents, not connected city and state powerbrokers and education reform ideologues. Using social media, national education conferences, local and state board meetings, we spent an entire year focused on getting our truth out about the Superintendent and the damage he was doing to our schools. We sought to muddy his pristine image so much, and so often, that he would either willingly resign, or be removed by the new governor. Our driving force was the survival of our public-school District.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my first year, I believe the goals I expressed during my campaign, and posted on my office walls of boosting student enrollment, rebranding our union and teacher force, and start punching back—were largely achieved. Using an autobiographical approach, gave me the opportunity to share the knowledge and lessons I encountered through my documented experiences.

In the Spring of 2017, our school district student enrollment was projected for September 2017 to have just above 6,000 students. Our schools finished 2018 with over 8,000 students. By no means could I, or CEA claim that we caused such a sharp rise in our schools' student enrollment alone. There were outside factors that contributed to the student increase including the closing of one city charter school, students needing to be redirected to other schools, and Hurricane Maria that ravaged Puerto Rico in the Summer of 2017, all leading to an influx of students. Additionally, our public schools' student enrollment typically increases as academic years continue and students in charter and corporate takeover schools either are guided or transfer out.

All of those events factored into a rise in our student enrollment and thus, the viability and survival of our schools, but so did promoting positive information about our schools. Regularly, the posting of programs and pictures of our schools on social media were responded to with, "I didn't know that school had that program," "That school looks so nice," or "My child goes there and loves it." Steadi-

ly, on social media at least, the perception about our schools began to evolve from places to be avoided, to educational spaces that would develop, teach, and care for Camden's children. As such, it seems, parents are not running to take their children out of our schools, but at least, content with keeping them in our buildings. (And I do also know of instances where parents are fighting to keep their children in our schools.)

Concerning the re-branding of our union and teacher force, I'm not sure how much the perception has changed from viewing teachers as self-serving, and an overall uncertainty what the CEA does in the community, but it is definitely not because of a lack of effort. When I recently was asked by a community member, "*What's CEA do for Camden?*," I was able to verbally list organizations we donated to, causes our educators volunteered for, events we've held for the community, list of names of students to whom we awarded scholarship money, and city families we've helped through charitable donations. The person's response was: "Oh, wow! I didn't know y'all did all that." I am aware it only takes a few moments for people to develop a negative perception of any person or organization, but certainly much longer to change those perceptions once they're formed. Slowly but surely, we're working to change our reputation among residents, but at this time, it is too early to tell if our approach is working.

Pertaining to the superintendent, on April 11th, 2018, he announced he would be resigning at the conclusion of the school year. The announcement took me completely by surprise. One of my goals was, specifically, to start punching back on behalf of our members, and residents, but more important to me, our schools. Simply, I wanted to either have him removed from his position by our newly elected governor or have him resign after our sustained campaign to shame him out of his office, and he did. I cannot be sure if any effort I employed to get him to leave his leadership post had any impact at on his decision to vacate his position. I just know he did. All of our eighteen schools stayed open, and no staff member lost their job due to a reduction in force (RIF). From a distance, it appears it was a pretty successful first year in our fight against the superintendent and the neoliberal mechanisms instituted to collapse our public schools. But as the year came to a close, there's no way to truly discern how effective I was in accomplishing my mission during my first year in office.

The purpose of the study was not to convey "what works" from a position of authority or certainty as I recognize context and settings matter in any fight to stave off neoliberal takeover of urban public schools. This was simply my approach as a local teacher union president to fight for our schools upon assuming office with nothing available to refer to or serve as a guide in this fight. Thus, this is my contribution to the field, and as a tool for other union leaders, concerned educators, and community members. My hope is that it speaks to the continuing fight in preserving urban public schools from neoliberal takeovers near and far.

Note

¹ All names of people and organizations have been attributed pseudonyms except the author's.

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