



CASE STUDY #1: A UNION SCHOOL

Teachers at Kelvyn Park High School in Chicago have transformed their school into one where the whole staff feels the union is strong, members are unafraid to speak up, and leadership is shared.

“The union is very present,” said longtime steward Jerry Skinner. “We have a history that everyone is aware of.” That history includes 100 percent participation in the 2012 strike and many confrontations with difficult principals.

New staff learn about the union right away, because members have transformed their lunchroom into a union hall. The latest union newsletters and copies of *Labor Notes* are available. Newspaper articles about the union’s activities at Kelvyn Park have been blown up and turned into posters to decorate the walls, along with mementos from the strike.

Members also have an email list, coordinated by the stewards (called delegates), where all members receive and can respond to organizing updates.

MORE PROBLEM-SOLVERS

In recent years the stewards have maintained a policy of “one and done.” “Once your three-year term as lead delegate is up, you step down,” Skinner said. That brings new people into the steward role.

“Instead of looking for the ‘right person’ to fill the position,” Skinner said, “we find people will rise to the occasion. People will find they have abilities and skills they didn’t know they had.”

That’s partly because they get lots of mentoring. Former stewards continue to contribute, and today teachers are as likely to go to former stewards for help as to current ones.

Leaders at Kelvyn Park do surveys to discover the most pressing issues, and have made potent use of petitions. Facing a hostile principal in 2010, more than 90 percent of tenured teachers signed a petition that went over her head to her boss.

At an ensuing meeting with the boss’s representative, 65 teachers were prepared to describe specific problems, including all the ways the principal was failing students. The two stewards “couldn’t have done it by ourselves,” Skinner said.

“We couldn’t have countered his arguments. We needed the special education teachers there. We needed science teachers there. All the teachers would give their precise individual expertise. When the official tried to argue that the school was adequately funded in one area of instruction, a literacy teacher would say, ‘No, that’s a different budget.’”



“This was a watershed moment for our school,” Skinner said, “in which the experience and expertise of the entire staff, not just that of a couple of leaders, was demonstrated to the bosses and to each other.”

Eventually Kelvyn Park got a new principal. Before she was hired, her boss discussed the nomination with a teacher leader, to find out whether she worked well with the staff.

WITH PARENTS AND STUDENTS

Union members reinforce their workplace presence by allying with parents and students. Chicago public schools each have a Local School Council (made up of parents, students, community members, teachers, and the principal) that meets monthly to oversee operations.

Active union members ran for and won seats on the LSC. Other members often come to meetings to keep the LSC informed about their views, grievances, surveys, and petitions.

As a result, the LSC has become far bolder in calling for more resources and a safer school. In 2010, 150 students even staged a midday walkout demanding more teachers. The same year, two parents and their children went to a school board meeting to speak against the principal’s defunding of extracurricular programs. They got the money back.

By keeping their school well organized and vigilant, in recent years teachers have:

- Gotten back \$300,000 that a principal tried to return to the board.
- Restored full funding of athletics programs.
- Restored teachers’ right to make as many photocopies as they need.
- Rehired an experienced dean to deal with discipline.
- Saved the jobs of two P.E. teachers and one art teacher.
- Forced the principal to redo the evaluations of several veteran and activist teachers who were targeted with lower performance ratings.

“The administration will ignore you if it can,” Skinner said, “but if you consistently show you’re not scared to stand up to the principal or their boss, you can get somewhere. We’ve created a culture where that’s the norm.”

