

It's time to give school employees a seat at the big table



Louis Malfaro
Secretary-Treasurer

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

—1 Corinthians 13:11

When I was a child, and part of a rather large family, I used to be seated at the kids' table—that ignominious card table—away from the principal dining area where the laughter roared, the matters of the day were discussed, and the people in charge of the whole affair dined. Adults got to sit at the big table and children were assigned to a side board.

When I got older, I was invited to join the adults and partake of not only the meal but also the status, company and place among my equals, lately my superiors.

Isn't it time here in Texas that public school teachers and other school employees got to sit at the big table? Does it really make sense that school districts are run exclusively by unpaid, part-time school boards and school managers/superintendents, most of whom are either long-removed from the world of the classroom or perhaps never taught in one at all? These folks get to

In a handful of Texas school districts, union affiliates have worked with enlightened school boards to set up consultation policies that provide teachers and school support staff with a democratic means to elect their own representative organization.

make all the decisions about our schools to the exclusion of the professional teaching staff and others who do the actual educating of students.

The time has come here in Texas to give teachers and school employees a seat at the big table. This means that school employees in Texas should be freed from state government dictates that restrict our right to negotiate as a group with our school districts. Texas teachers and school employees should be permitted to engage in collective bargaining.

Many recent news stories have featured groups of workers seeking the basic right to a negotiated contract. In Fort Worth, at Texas Christian University, hundreds of food service workers voted last month for union representation through the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). Their agenda: a

collectively bargained contract with Sodexo, the giant food services corporation that employs them. In April of this year, 450 helicopter mechanics and technicians at L3, a military contractor at the Corpus Christi Army Depot, voted overwhelmingly to join the International Union of Machinists and Aerospace Workers. The union organizer who led the campaign said that workers know a contract can address pay and job security issues in a “professional manner while giving them the respect they deserve as skilled technicians.”

Even our students seem to understand the value of a union

contract. Northwestern University football players recently won the right to form a union and negotiate a contract after a ruling by the regional National Labor Relations Board (now on appeal) that recognizes them as workers. These overworked, underpaid and taken-for-granted folks (sound familiar?) decided that they wanted a say in their hours, working conditions and, yes, pay and benefits.

From food service workers to highly skilled workers to those who have traditionally worked for little or nothing, gaining the right to a negotiated contract is a fundamental desire—one that is shared by Texas public school employees. But the anti-public employee laws of our state (among the most oppressive in the nation) prevent us from exercising our basic rights, and that's wrong.

Texas law prohibiting collective bargaining for public school employees makes it hard for school districts to partner with and obtain independent input from teachers and other employees who work directly with students. In a handful of Texas school districts, union affiliates have worked with enlightened school boards to set up consultation policies that provide teachers and school support staff with a democratic means to elect their own representative organization. Under these consultation policies, the school administration and elected consultation representative engage in collaborative discussions about budgets, district initiatives, systems that affect employees and students, program design and school improvement efforts.

In school districts where our union represents teachers and staff through these consultation policies (San Antonio, Austin,



Corpus Christi, South San Antonio) there has been real progress through union-management partnership and agreements on a wide range of issues, including professional training of staff, mentoring, bus route bidding processes, employee evaluation systems, budget allocation, and testing of students—not to mention bread-and-butter issues like pay, sick-leave banks, stipends and health-care offerings.

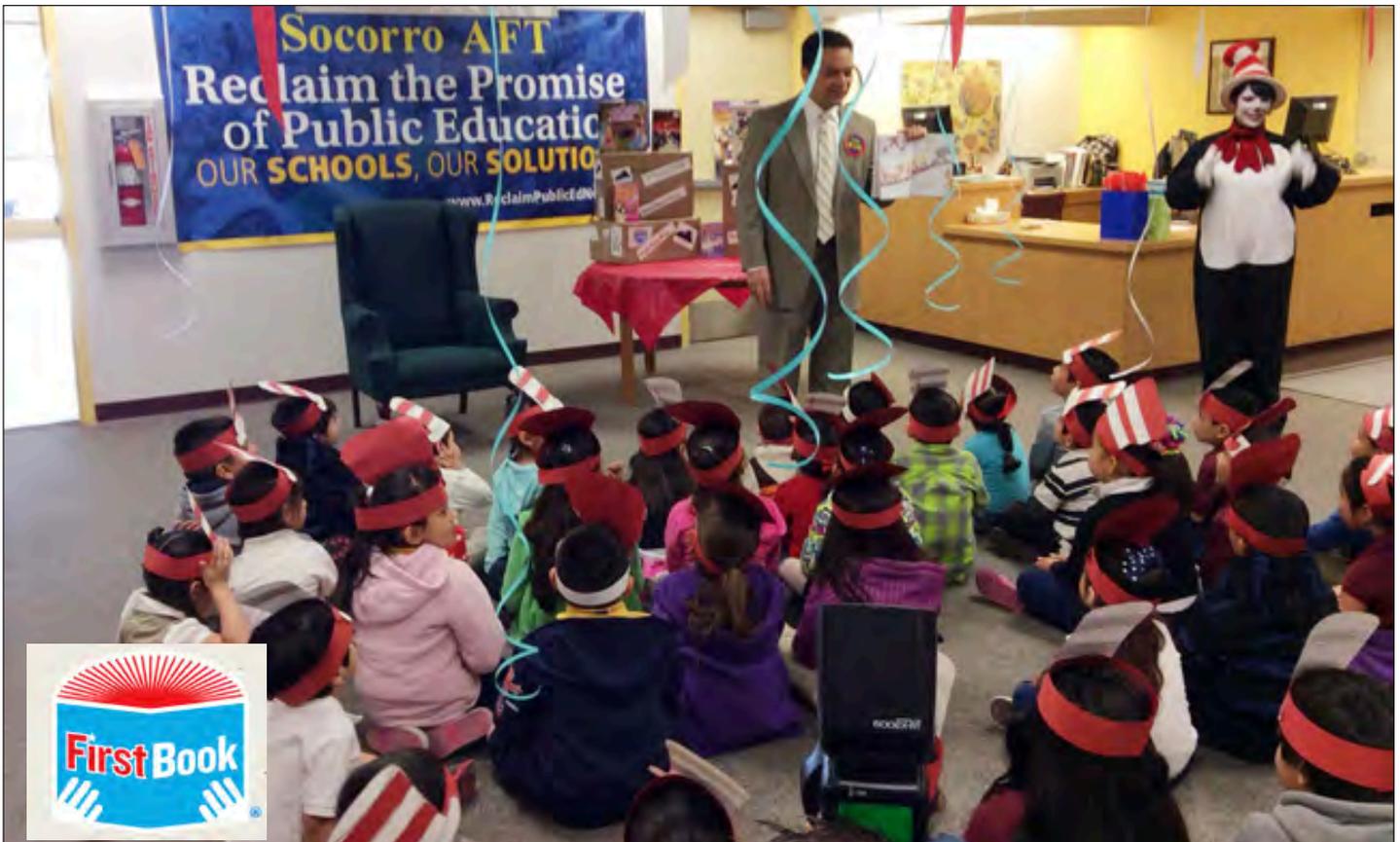
As school districts attempt to address

complex and challenging issues like curriculum rigor, student assessment, teacher evaluation, discipline, rising health-care costs, designing effective compensation systems, supporting teacher quality and the like, having a clearly established and institutionalized mechanism for engaging the front-line professional experts becomes increasingly necessary for meeting goals.

Consultation policies are showing the way in districts where they have been

adopted. School employees and our unions must push for more school districts to adopt these policies.

As we demonstrate to the public that involving teachers and staff in the decision-making process at the school-district level benefits our schools, our students and district employees, we open up the space necessary to change the restrictive laws that currently keep teachers and school employees stuck at the kids' table. 



Above, Socorro AFT sponsors a "Today a Reader, Tomorrow a Leader" event that provides books directly to students, while Education Austin volunteer Sherlon Nash (below right) gets ready for big crowds at a distribution day that provided cases of 50 books to teachers and giveaways to students.

40,000 x 2 =

A whole lot of books that bring smiles to kids' faces! Socorro AFT and Education Austin each launched successful First Book drives in March to distribute 40,000 books in their school districts.

Texas AFT has partnered with First Book to provide these free, new books to children in low-income families. More than 2,000 Texas educators have signed up to be First Book partners, which allows them access to giveaways for their students. For more information, visit www.firstbook.org/aft.

