

# Teacher Ownership and Teacher Unions

## Two Discussions

*Joe Graba - a regular attendee at meetings of the Teacher Union Reform Network for the last several years - had suggested to the co-chair, Adam Urbanski, a session about teachers forming and running schools through partnerships they collectively own. And, getting in teachers actually working in this model. Urbanski and TURN Co-Director Bruce Dickinson agreed. Graba briefly presented the idea at the fall 2002 meeting, and distributed copies of Teachers As Owners which describes the idea. For the discussion in Seattle Graba was accompanied by Cris Parr, a teacher involved with a school set up on this model in Milwaukee and by John Parr, her father and a long-time AFSCME official in Milwaukee, who had helped in establishing the school.*

*Below are notes first of the discussion at the TURN meeting February 7, 2003 and, second - as an Addendum - notes of a follow-up interview with Cris and John Parr that was more specific to the organization and operation of the I.D.E.A.L. cooperative itself.*

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**Graba:** The idea of teacher-ownership had been discussed in Minnesota since the mid-1980s. The first school to form on this model was the Minnesota New Country School in 1994. Teachers - several of them from the local high school - set up a new secondary school built on the idea of project-based learning, and run through what is technically a workers' cooperative. The cooperative - EdVisions - has an agreement with the board of the (chartered) school. The school thus has no employees. The teachers are owner-members of the cooperative; partners in a professional group. The school has about 120 students, grades seven to 12. About 1998 other schools began to ask the cooperative to take them on. In 2000 the Gates Foundation came out, looked, liked the school and gave EdVisions \$4.5 million to replicate the model. There are now about 12 such schools, most of them affiliated with EdVisions.

In the summer of 2000 Cris and John Parr visited, with others planning the I.D.E.A.L. school. On the way home they designed a different model, that I think you'll find compatible with TURN principles. Yesterday in your discussion about principals I had to bite my tongue. With teachers running the whole thing everything changes. If I'd had this chance myself, at the time, I might never have left teaching.

**Cris Parr:** I'm in my 19<sup>th</sup> year with Milwaukee Public Schools. I was the building rep for 13 years, and three years as an alternate. I've had lots of different jobs. After some years I went as a teacher to the school I'd attended. It was a school you had to wait until somebody died to get into. But the new principal then decided to change the whole program, against the wishes of both teachers and parents. A member of the district board of education suggested we form our own school; use the charter law. He knew about New Country. We went there; liked it.

We had 12 teachers with us. We went to the union and said we're not happy. The union supported us. We got three old shop rooms in one wing of an MPS middle school, and

started I.D.E.A.L. We're now in our second year. We have 200 students maximum, given our space limits. It's a family atmosphere. Our students are 50% white, 25% black, 16% Hispanic, 4% 'other', 3% Asian, 2% American Indian. There are 109 males and 89 females and 58% are on free and reduced lunch. I mention this so you can evaluate the charges sometimes made that we're 'creaming'. We have 50-70 kids per room. Each room has multiple teachers. There is no principal. Responsibility is shared. It is incredibly exciting.

**John Parr:** I was born in Rochester NY; my father was in the labor movement. I grew up in Milwaukee; graduated from its schools. I was an officer with AFSCME for 20+ years; then left to do consulting; now find myself back with labor organization work.

My daughter had always wanted her own school. But she also wanted the pension and the benefits that come with teaching. We'd looked for a vehicle to make this possible. I also wanted to find a way to get teachers some standing, comparable to other professions. Lawyers are not told what to do by managers. Nor doctors. But teachers are, always. I was looking for a model that would fit the urban setting, would fit the union setting, would let the teachers remain employees of the district, with stability. So I came to this concept of the teachers' cooperative *for the professional side of teachers' life*.

We created a not-for-profit cooperative, for the 'instrumentality' charter school. The contract with the district allows the teachers to deliver the educational program they and the parents want. In addition, for the first time the teachers also control the budget. They can now say, "This is mine". I volunteered to be their business person; to get them started. Teachers have never been trained or experienced in business affairs.

I want to emphasize, too, that this does not come from the union *down*, but from the teachers *up*. The MTEA was very supportive, once they saw the teachers would clearly remain employees. It was easier, of course, because I knew all the teacher-union leadership, having represented the secretaries and clericals in MPS when I was with AFSCME.

**Cris Parr:** In getting our school started we had to make it clear that our group was not 'hiring'. We're simply interviewing and *selecting* from among the MPS teachers who wanted to join our cooperative. The district was uncomfortable with our interest in getting 501(c)3 status, fearing we'd be a competitor for grants. So we just stopped talking about this; on the theory that it's easier to ask forgiveness later than to ask permission ahead.

The accountability and responsibility are ours now. For the first time in 19 years I have my own set of keys. I can come in on Saturday if I want. This is my place. If the kids fail, I fail personally. I can't lay responsibility off on the principal or the central office.

Milwaukee Public Schools is now a unique place. The superintendent was principal of the first charter school in Milwaukee: Fritsche Middle, where I'd attended. It was a conversion. Bill Andrekopoulos has created an atmosphere for change. This is scaring some people. And the axe will fall on the 2000+-student high school. I wish the folks from Franklin who were here yesterday were still here: What we're doing in Milwaukee would be perfect for them. Get rid of the principal and take over. We have got to have

change. Graduation rates are abysmal, especially for African-American and Hispanic males.

The concept now is 'multiplex'. We hope to have two more small charter schools in our building next fall. This is part of a bigger thing between the Gates Foundation, and the New Country model it is involved with, and the district. Just a couple of weeks ago there was a big meeting; several major organizations and Tom Vander Ark from the Gates Foundation. This may bring \$22 million to Milwaukee, to replicate these small high schools and to develop more teacher ownership models.

Well, I'm finding it hard to be just 'presenting' to you here. I need to know your questions from a union perspective. I'm not a teacher who lectures, so this is making me slightly insane. I'd rather be sitting cross-legged on the floor in jeans talking with you..

**Question:** [Having to do with the voucher program in Milwaukee and the Bradley Foundation] **Cris Parr:** We had an early grant from them but have nothing at this point. **John Parr:** Charter schools and vouchers are not the same thing. We cannot set 'criteria' for admitting students. The voucher, 'choice', schools are competitors to MPS. We are part of MPS. Bradley is still involved with the voucher program.

**Question:** [The same person asked about the Association of Commerce] **Cris Parr:** There're lots of groups now working together, and apparently successfully. This reflects Andrekopoulos' influence. His commitment to the kids is real; not just on paper. He is annoying a lot of people now who are just thinking to protect their jobs. He has eliminated a lot of central-office positions; transferring the money to the schools. His own contract is tied to the district improving; as on graduation rates and student scores. We've never seen that before. Small schools will be very important. I personally believe you cannot be successful with a school like Garfield, for example, with 5,200 kids. Some parents interested in I.D.E.A.L. at first said they would never put their children into a school with 6'3" eighth-graders. But in our school the 6'3" kid takes off his shirt when the four-year-old spills milk on himself at breakfast and treats the younger kid like a brother. This is the only way we're going to change what happens in education: It has to happen in small schools with teachers who are actually enjoying their job because they're committed to it and have some control over it.

**John Parr:** Andrekopoulos' drive is at the teachers' level. This is why the schools are changing to charter status. They can control their money, and have greater flexibility. It is an opportunity for the teachers to buy in. The I.D.E.A.L. teachers did it themselves, from scratch. Without a principal. The superintendent at the time found this just unacceptable.

**Joe Graba:** Several things about these teacher-owned schools are remarkable to me.

I talk a lot to boards and superintendents and it is clear they just cannot believe teachers can do this. They are astounded at the thought of teachers running a school. Yesterday you had some discussion here about licensure, and a lot of that suggested teaching is not really a profession. The public probably still does not really believe teachers are professionals. What's reassuring to me about the teacher-owner models I've seen is that teachers change their behavior radically when they own the operation. It is a lot of work. But they spend almost no time in the coffee-room complaining about

the administration and the board. Decisions get made and they do not argue afterward. Their energy is redirected in a very positive way.

Also, in my opinion, this is the best way to provide teacher leadership. I despair at trying to find enough principals committed to a strong teacher role in the school. We are the only professional institution to combine administrative and professional leadership in a single organizational position. Any law firm of any size has an administrator; any medical clinic does. The professionals hire that administrator. The administrator *never* hires the professionals. The two roles are incompatible. Very few people have the capacity to do justice to both roles. A principal gets selected by the people above, and what matters most to the people-above is good, smooth administration. The people below, the teachers, need the principal to nurture and lead them. And that is not the purpose for which the principal is appointed.

**Question:** [About how the I.D.E.A.L. group formed]

**Cris Parr:** The I.D.E.A.L. group formed when parents became upset about the changes our principal had made to the school program. They decided that the best thing to do would be to create our own charter school. The teachers moved ahead with the parents to do this. By January of the year we were set to open in the fall we had 130, 140 kids signed up, and no facility. We were kidding about having to rent a tent and set up on somebody's driveway. We were battling everything with the district. There was such intensity and so much adrenaline flowing that it was hard to think about doing the day-to-day operation. The district said we could not have our charter unless we designated a 'lead teacher'. Having to do this was kind of an issue for us. Because it kind of set somebody apart. And luckily that person didn't run with that and say, "I'm the boss". That could be an issue for people who hadn't been with us from the beginning and shared the same philosophy. What has become an issue is that the vision wasn't necessarily a common vision. Some of us wanted to escape from that other principal and the programming changes. I'm now on several committees doing all the politics etc., and working with some other potential charters, with Gates money hopefully coming. And there are others who have chosen to come in and put their work on the board and just do the job of teaching. Doing a phenomenal job of teaching, but that difference in vision is creating some tension. So we do a certain amount of hand-holding and group discussion about those issues. There are days when you want to strangle someone because they've lost the vision that was common. That is an issue in all the groups we've dealt with. Part of what's keeping me so excited is that we're working on two more charter schools potentially opening next fall, so when I get exhausted with my teaching I can see that enthusiasm again, and see it spreading through the district.

**John Parr:** The difference is also in self-selection as opposed to 'negotiated' selection. You can't negotiate behavior. So there is a self-selection process. That was the difference between I.D.E.A.L.'s formation and these others. The others have teachers coming together from different spots. I.D.E.A.L. had a different look at the world; were oriented to relationships and to what the educational program would be. These others came together to rally against the principal and to work with parents but they didn't necessarily buy all the way in. Those are the things you learn.

**Question:** [A classroom teacher, asking about the importance of a profession owning its training. Do you see 10-15 years from now teachers taking ownership of the training?]

**Cris Parr:** That's exactly what we're talking about in the multiplex we're developing. We're working with HomeBoyz Interactive. They've been around for a decade or more. They do the web sites for MPS, Marquette University. High school kids are in charge of the process and learning to become programmers. They are getting paid while they learn. We're working with them in connection with the Professional Learning Institute, another of the charter schools that will open this fall. It's like The Met, in Providence; all internship-based. We'd like to grow our own teachers in that arrangement. This has awesome implications. But it has to happen. I see the teachers coming to me from training that's unrealistic, archaic, stupid. Joe mentioned the question of teacher burnout and how many people we lose in the first five years. I think that ownership gives you support. If some of the young people coming into teaching had that support, maybe they wouldn't walk out. MPS has recently decided to eliminate its 'mentoring' program; one of the dumbest things the district has done in a long time. The ownership model can give us that support, ourselves.

The one thing that would be an issue for the unions is that we give up many of the things the union contract states we should have. I don't take a lunch hour: I have a dance group then. Or I work with kids during lunch. I know teachers who say, "It's terrible you're doing that; that will affect the contract". Well, my responsibility is to the kids. If I eat lunch during 'dance' or if I run to the bathroom which by the way we share with the kids - we have no teachers' lounge - all those things we've ignored because we want what's best for the kids. The question is, "What do you focus on?" Do you want your 45-minute lunch hour or do you want the scores to go up and the kids to be successful?

**John Parr:** Could I just finish the little piece about the profession and the training? I think that's the advantage of doing this in a unionized setting. You are going to have to take on the universities. And that's politics. All politics. So if you can develop how to do it, where teachers are the leaders about what the educational curriculum should be, you go back upstream and you take the parents with you and students, all of the people you'll need when the university says "You can't do that". It'll be slow. But it can happen gradually. I've seen it. An inch at a time.

[A participant suggested looking further at The Met and its approach, but the afternoon had been running behind schedule and the buses were waiting, so Urbanski adjourned the meeting with thanks to all.]

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Both Joe Graba and the Parrs said that at the reception back at the hotel after the meeting many people expressed excitement about, and interest in, this development. **Cris Parr:** Actually, the discussion at the reception was amazing to me. A number of people came up to us to further discuss the way the co-op works for us and how to apply it in their school districts. I think people needed time to digest the information presented and form questions.

## **Addendum:**

### **THE I.D.E.A.L. TEACHER COOPERATIVE IN MILWAUKEE**

*Some days later Cris Parr and John Parr sat down for an interview, to describe more fully the teacher cooperative itself. The discussion went about this way:*

**Q:** What is it legally? **A:** The cooperative is organized under Chapter 185 of Wisconsin law, which is the cooperative statute. In many instances a cooperative would not be eligible for tax-exempt status, but given that the teachers have their economic interests with district-employment the cooperative provokes no pecuniary gain to the members, so we have in fact gotten 501(c)3 status for the cooperatives organized on what you call 'the Milwaukee model'.

**Q:** How many members does it have? **A:** We have 12 members; all teachers. **Q:** Are there non-teachers? **A:** No. The school has some assistants, paras, etc. but they are not members of the cooperative.

**Q:** Does the cooperative hold the charter? **A:** In Milwaukee – in a so-called 'instrumentality', at any rate - the charter is issued to the people who run the school. In most cases that'd be the principal. In I.D.E.A.L. it's the teachers. Then the teachers form the cooperative as a vehicle through which they operate.

**Q:** Is there a board for the cooperative? **A:** The president, vice president, secretary and treasurer form an executive board. We have an instructional committee; one person from each unit: primary, elementary and middle school and the literacy coach and the special ed person – along with, of course, the 'lead teacher' the district insisted we designate. Most of what we do is informal: the "Roberts Rules of Order" thing proved cumbersome. We don't even use the executive board except in an emergency. **Q:** Are there problems reaching decisions? **A:** No. We all just get together and do it.

**Q:** Will the I.D.E.A.L. cooperative expand to take in other schools? **A:** No. The new schools set up will have their own cooperatives.

**Q:** So the cooperative runs the school? **A:** No, not alone. Like all Milwaukee district schools I.E.A.L. has a 'governance council' made up of parents, a couple of teachers and support staff, and a student. This council signs off on the budget and – in a traditional district school – the principal. Our cooperative takes certain recommendations to the council, almost as if we were 'the principal'. It isn't required, but in practice we do get the council's OK for decisions about the learning program. We want parents involved in that – and in the budget. So the council and the cooperative run the school jointly.

**Q:** So with the freedom you have – at the school and through the cooperative – how have things changed? For example, do you allocate people differently at your school . . . or allocate revenue differently? **A:** We spend more on technology than other schools would. Obviously we have no principal, so we spend less on administration. No vice principal, either. No 'security' people. We buy some services from the YMCA we partner

with. We get their summer camp at a lower rate. We buy-in some music and fine arts services.

**Q:** You said you have a treasurer: Does the cooperative itself handle any cash? **A:** Not currently. The cash is in the district. We would, I guess, if we had a grant, or earned some revenue from training or consulting.

**Q:** Explain how it works when it comes to selecting, or de-selecting, teachers. **A:** We have a committee, to interview. We select. But understand: This is standard for Milwaukee schools now. The cooperative evaluates the teachers. If it came to de-selecting, our procedure would be different than what's standard, obviously, since we don't have the 'principal' who normally does that. If a member needed to be de-selected the cooperative and the governing council would try to counsel-out that member by suggesting perhaps there's another program that would better fit that person's style of teaching. The union is OK with us 'rating' each other: It just doesn't want us involved in legal questions – as, about employment. You have to distinguish between 'selecting for the school' 'hiring'. Teachers are employed, hired, by the district. De-selecting just returns the teacher to the district pool.

**Q:** Are you allowed to carry over unspent balances? **A:** Yes . . . and we do. This is up to three per cent of the budget. With board permission this could be higher.

**Q:** How large a budget are you controlling? **A:** The allocation for I.D.E.A.L. is about \$1.3 million. About 15 per cent of that is mandatory chargebacks, for district central administration, etc. Then there's an element that's discretionary: We can buy certain services if we wish: transportation, payroll services, etc. We choose to buy our computers, for example, through the district-purchasing program: There're savings that way. In general with the charters there's more flexibility and a lot less paperwork. That's partly why so many MPS schools are switching to charter status.

**Q:** Are there other cooperatives forming in Milwaukee? **A:** Oh, yes. Five or six of them at the moment, it looks like.

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Joe Graba was a teacher in Minnesota, a state vice president of the Minnesota Federation of Teachers, a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives (where he chaired the K-12 Finance Committee); later deputy superintendent of the Minnesota Department of Education and dean of the graduate school of education at Hamline University in Saint Paul MN. He is now an associate with Education/Evolving, a policy group based in Saint Paul.

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Everyone interested in the general idea of teacher professional ownership - in the form it is taking in Minnesota or the form it is taking in Milwaukee - should look at [Teachers As Owners](#). The book explains the 'what', the 'why' and the 'how' of the idea. Look at [www.scarecroweducation.com](http://www.scarecroweducation.com). Copies are also available through [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).