



Urban Education and Teacher Unionism Policy Project

Charter school expansion in Massachusetts and the “No on 2” campaign:

The role of the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) and Educators for a Democratic Union (EDU)

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INTRODUCTION

[In an article published by the National Education Policy Center](#), (NEPC)

Lawrence Blum analyzes what occurred in the November 2016 election in Massachusetts when voters decisively defeated a referendum, funded by corporate backers of charter schools and privatization. The measure would have significantly increased the number of charter schools in the state and was fought in a campaign called “No on 2.”

With permission of the NEPC, we reprint Blum’s article. In this Policy Brief, Barbara Madeloni, President of the [Massachusetts Teachers Association](#) (MTA), elected as the candidate of a reform caucus, Educators for a Democratic Union (EDU), responds to questions I have posed (in italics) about the union’s involvement in the “No on 2” campaign, especially aspects of racial politics as well as MTA’s internal politics. Following the protocol of the Policy Project, the Brief is followed by a commentary presenting a different perspective. Dr. Marilyn Maye, Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at New Jersey City University, teaching and serving in leadership roles related to the preparation of leaders for public schools, has written the commentary for this Brief. In addition to writing for professional journals, she is author of *They are men and not gods, Stone of Help*, and co-author of *Orita: Rites of passage for youth of African descent in America*, and *Beloved Educators: Women of Color Who Inspire Us*. Dr. Maye is also a Consulting Director of the Policy Project.

Many thanks to both authors for finding time to contribute to this discussion. I hope future commentaries will address the controversies their work has illuminated.

Dr. Lois Weiner, Director

Urban Education and Teacher Unionism Policy Project

Charter school expansion in Massachusetts and the “No on 2” campaign: The role of the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) and Educators for a Democratic Union (EDU)

Barbara Madeloni, MTA President

Question: What was the role of the union and the reform caucus within the state union in the campaign? How did the union side of the campaign function?

Blum states that while teachers unions were among the key players, their role was also exaggerated by the mainstream press, which cast the “No” campaign as “controlled, organized, and funded” by teachers unions. He notes teachers were “only one component of a broad-based and diverse coalition on the ‘No side’” and describes participation of other groups, in particular QUEST (Quality Education for Every Student), which ran a grassroots campaign (knocking on doors and making phone calls), as well as outreach of Black and Latino parents through existing groups (such as the NAACP, the Black Educators’ Alliance of Massachusetts, and the Union of Minority Neighborhoods) to their communities. How would you characterize the relationship of the MTA to the other organizations in the alliance, other than unions?

I find the frame of this question to be interesting in terms of the idea that the role of the unions was overstated. The “Yes” side wanted to paint the “NoOn2” campaign as union driven, as if that were a bad thing. Indeed, it was union financed and would not have happened without the teachers unions- in particular MTA- saying we were going to fight this battle. Union educators were critical in the win across the state. A look at the numbers in each district tells you that lots of people had lots of conversations that persuaded voters to vote no. Those were educators- some canvassing, some phone-banking, many having conversations more informally. Across the

state, educators who had received talking points were wearing buttons, talking to neighbors, tabling farmers' markets, writing letters to the editor.

In some places, Boston in particular, parents and students were very active in spreading the word. This was essential work that sealed the win in Boston. In other places, Worcester for example, we had some great student and educator alliances. The support of the AFL-CIO and their spreading of the word through locals- and the boots on the ground of some of those unions including the Massachusetts Nurses Association- all contributed to the victory.

There are layers of influence and different kinds of work. That these were able to operate successfully together is part of the beauty of the campaign. The Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance (MEJA) is the coalition from which came the Save Our Public Schools (SOPS) campaign. MEJA's focus was on testing and charters. We worked together to support legislation in 2015 calling for a moratorium on high stakes testing. Russ Davis of Jobs with Justice brought first the leaders of MTA, AFT (American Federation of Teachers)-MA and BTU (Boston Teachers Union) together and then we brought in Boston Education Justice Alliance, Citizens for Public Schools, QUEST, Youth on Board, BESAC, Progressive MA, NAACP, AFL-CIO, and other groups. Juan Cofield, President of the NAACP Northeast (NE) Region, had approached the MTA soon after I took office asking how we could work together to confront the re-segregation of schools through charters.

When the charter threat became evident- from the lawsuit to the ballot question to the squeeze to get us to agree to legislation that would have raised the cap while imposing some accountability on charters- MEJA agreed to oppose the legislation and go to the ballot box. Within MEJA there was never any doubt that we had to take a strong stand in order to stop what would have become an intensified onslaught if we compromised. We met

with the state senate president in the fall of 2015 to assert our shared commitment to fighting any attempt to raise the cap. The people at that table, myself, Tom Gosnell, President of AFT-MA, Richard Stutman, President of BTU, Steve Tolman, President of AFL-CIO MA, Lisa Guisbond, Citizens for Public Schools, Russ Davis, Jobs with Justice, and student representatives from Boston sent a very strong message. We were together and would not be divided in our commitment.

When it came time to form the steering committee, I was committed to having the same kind of representation on the steering committee as was on MEJA. This posed some challenges internal to MTA. We were going to foot the major part of the funding, along with NEA (National Education Association), but I wanted the voices of the coalition members to remain strong. I insisted on student representation and fought to have all voices be equal at the table. I both won and lost this fight. Internal MTA insisted that MTA, AFT and BTU would have a percentage of the vote based upon our funding, but it never came to that. Decisions for the SOPS campaign were made over discussion and through consensus.

Of course, how issues of power and money were a part of even the consensus building needs to be interrogated. At some point- at many points- the campaign was being led by Dewey Square- the group we hired to lead it- and we were mostly following their advice.

From my position, the campaign was successful because it had a good balance between structure and chaos. The structure gave people a way into the campaign- organizers, canvassing, phone-banks, stand outs, forums and debates, letter writing. The chaos allowed groups to act independently to organize their own efforts within their communities while the campaign supplied flyers, signs, stickers and talking points.

The campaign to get school committees (editor's note: school boards or local education authorities) to pass resolutions opposing the ballot

measure is a good example of this structure/chaos process. SOPS set a goal of 50 school committees by the end of the summer. But as school committees signed on, the campaign itself lost track of who was working on a resolution where. Late nights were spent on twitter with people informing each other of where a resolution had passed- often to the surprise of the campaign. The work by parents and students in Boston was similar. When Governor Baker was in a "Yes" ad saying that we needed to raise the cap to save students from failing schools, Boston students and parents started #visitusCharlie. The SOPS campaign was not behind this, but cheered it on, and the parents and other activists gave it tremendous momentum. Meanwhile, parents and students were joining canvasses in Boston every weekend.

Where was MTA in this? Maybe the question behind that is, what is MTA? Members joined the campaign and the coalitions in their communities, canvassing with community partners, sharing information in social media, attending and sometimes speaking at community debates. Members who live in Boston canvassed Boston. We phone-banked together. As President, I not only did speaking and media appearances, but grew strong alliances with parents – lots of these through social media. The campaign worked hard to put the voices of others, besides union leaders, out front in the campaign. But, as noted below, because this was a campaign that focused on the impact of the ballot question at the local level, it was local voices and conversations that carried the day. Everyone who worked in any community to influence voters can and should claim to have been critical to the campaign.

Were there tensions? Absolutely, and I speak to some of those below. There were tensions within the campaign relative to the focus of our work. I wanted a movement-building campaign. We eventually got a huge victory but did not establish as much of a foundation for movement-building as I

would hope. People felt part of a movement, and we are working to access this as we build for the schools our communities deserve. But we did not track and connect within each community as much as I would have wanted. Still, MEJA is now officially a 501(c)4 and will be hiring a director to go out and build regional coalitions to fight for public education as central to the struggles we face today.

Tensions manifested in different communities in different ways, but maybe especially in Boston where the long history and present of racism remains an active part of any political action. I speak to that below.

It is important to understand that the MTA's leadership was critical to making the charter fight even possible. In 2014, legislation that would have started to raise the cap was before the House and had passed overwhelming. MTA, under the former leadership, had stayed silent about that legislation while AFT-MA was opposed. When new MTA leadership took office, the same legislation was before the Senate. MTA sent word immediately to oppose the legislation and mobilized membership to do the same. The legislation failed in the Senate. As the state's largest union, MTA had to be on board to make the "NoOn2" coalition effective.

Question: The alliance with the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) seems especially critical, given the density of the charters in Boston. How did the collaboration between the BTU and the MTA develop/emerge? Was the MTA contact directly with the BTU or was it via the state AFT?

When I was elected President of the MTA it signaled a new MTA, one that was ready to fight against the assault on public education and for strong unions and economic and racial justice. Shortly after I took office, I had lunch with Richard Stutman, President of the BTU, and we agreed we would fight charters. Right after I took office, Tom Gosnell, President of AFT-MA

visited me to ask if I agreed with him that we would say 'No' to charters. We worked very closely together before the ballot fight, during it, and now continue that work with Jessica Tang, the new BTU President. As the BTU community organizer, Jessica was often the person in BTU organizing the on the ground for the fight in Boston. She had the strongest relationships with parents, students and community organizations. Boston is its own place- with its history and relationships. The work in Boston was taken up and done by Boston educators, parents and students. As was right. MTA supported that work through the campaign, but Boston got it done.

Question: How about the alliance between the state affiliates? How was that developed? What tensions and synergies developed?

Curious question in that there was not really a need for an alliance of state locals. The membership understood that this was an essential fight to take up. A big part of our success was that we made this a fight that mattered to every community and to every local. Statewide, the question of how much money is lost every year to charters affects almost every community. We shared information with every local about how much was being lost to a charter, and we helped the membership translate that into concrete terms: loss of librarians and part-time nurses, larger class sizes, fewer electives, etc. We worked with members and community partners to get letters and op/eds published in local newspapers that spoke to the impact of charters on those communities. The degree to which this became a local issue across the state was critical to our success.

One of the amazing things about the campaign for our members, and something I am hoping we can access and build upon, is the degree to which voters wanted to hear from teachers/educators about the ballot question. When we knocked on doors or made phone calls and said, "I am an educator and want to talk with you about Question 2." Voters welcomed us, asked

questions, wanted to talk about the ballot question and about public education. The narrative of bad teachers and bad unions was not borne out. Nor was the narrative of failing public schools. This is an essential take away: people respect educators, care about public education, believe in supporting the public good.

Question: Can you describe the role of the caucus (EDU) vis-a-vis the MTA apparatus in regard to the campaign?

The decision to go all in and fight the attempt to raise the cap on charters was being made during an election year for MTA leadership. The then vice-President was running against the current President (me). The narrative being used against the progressive caucus, Educators for a Democratic Union (EDU), was that we were divisive. While I was working with MEJA to push the question, refuse to compromise and prepare for the fight, the Board (which was compromised of many 'old guard' and 'new old guard' directors) was looking to slow the process down. At the January 2016 Board meeting, where we were to vote to support the campaign, to which members had been invited to observe, a motion was made to go into executive session to discuss the campaign, excluding membership from observing the debate and vote. I was instructed, along with the Vice-President, to meet with legislators to discuss the proposed legislation. Eventually, any vote to fully commit to the campaign was delayed until the May 2016 annual meeting of the delegates. There, those who were opposed to my leadership used points of information to delay the vote- angering the delegates.

The opposition to me and to EDU was in a bind. They could not come out against the fight as that would spell disaster for their campaigns- the membership had enough of collaboration with those who would hurt us. But neither did they want me or EDU to be successful or to own the victory. They

tried to both take away the fact that we would not have been in the fight except that I was President and then, after the vote was taken and work started, delayed their participation until we were clearly gaining momentum. At our summer conference, where we put plans into place at the Board meeting and then began our canvassing, some board members sat passively while plans were made and very few actually joined the canvassing. It was not until our October 2016 board meeting, when the polls were showing we could win, that we had more full-throttle participation of all board members.

Meanwhile, EDU members were actively organizing within their locals and joining the campaign where the local leadership were resistant to the campaign. EDU held a meeting in the fall with a specific focus on learning how to canvas and then going out into Watertown, where the meeting was held, to knock on doors. More than 50 EDU members canvassed that community and were then prepared to go back to their locals and canvas. EDU members were leaders in the canvassing campaign in Worcester, where they built alliances with students; Newton, where they helped to get a recalcitrant liberal school committee to vote for the resolution supporting "NoOn2"; and Somerville, Jamaica Plain, Plymouth-Carver; all of Western Massachusetts; Andover; Concord; and through organizing within higher education- to name just a few sites of organizing.

The campaign gave EDU members an opportunity to experience one-to-ones and organizing. As a caucus, our previous efforts focused on passing new business items at the annual meeting, and then on my and subsequent election campaigns. The "NoOn2" campaign allowed us to do the work of mounting a fight. Many EDU members join out of frustration with the MTA and with some analysis of the struggle we are in, but few had any experience organizing. The campaign helped us focus and know ourselves as doing the work of the union.

That EDU can claim leadership in this campaign, both from my leadership as President and members' work on the ground, infuriates certain members of the MTA. Copies of this <https://www.solidarity-us.org/node/4852> article were on the table at a recent board meeting, I expect with the double message that we are socialists and that we take too much credit. The bottom line is that if EDU was not ready for the fight, if I had not been elected as an EDU candidate, if they did not push the board and persuade the delegates, we would not have engaged this campaign. Lots of people came on after and many rank and file members, unaware of the internal politics, took up the campaign and had necessary conversations because they knew it mattered. But none would have happened without EDU.

Question: What role did the AFT and NEA, the national unions, play in the campaign?

NEA's funding was critical. They contributed \$5 million and support staff for organizing. AFT contributed as well and added support staff including opposition research. But decisions were made by the steering committee.

Question: What tensions and synergies emerged in the alliance? How independent were the activities of the member groups?

As noted above, we were able to balance structure and chaos in a way that was effective. Groups organized their own forums, standouts and canvassing with materials and advice from the campaign – or just on their own. MTA staff worked with those who were going into debates to review facts and talking points. Differences and tensions arose around which talking points to highlight in which communities. Should we focus on the racism

behind charters? Who tells that story? How much do we identify and talk about Wall Street hedge funds behind the “Yes” campaign? How much are charters a Boston story and how much a Massachusetts story and how do we negotiate to tell both parts of the story where? Ultimately, everyone could talk about the draining of funds from public schools, everyone could talk about the loss of local control, and everyone could frame these arguments within the context of their local communities.

I am aware that I saw the campaign from above- even though I knocked on lots of doors and spent lots of time on the phones. I caution that my perspective might not include some of the more intimate tensions that develop among people working on the ground and interacting with the larger campaign. The tensions I struggled with were about movement-building versus get-out-the-vote, and the questions of Whiteness and racism discussed below. Regarding movement-building, at one point, after much discussion and angst, I realized that we needed to support standouts from members in lieu of canvassing and phone-banking because that was all that they were ready to do, because it would build momentum and bring more members into the effort. The social media campaign that grew from those standouts – and the lawn signs- helped to create a sense of how big the opposition was. That mattered and members felt powerful in that work, but I wanted them to feel more closely the power of their voices in conversation.

Question: Blum’s article describes the NAACP’s role in opposing the cap, pointing to contestation among organizations that spoke on behalf of how Black students, a large percentage of the population in charter schools, would be served by the change called for in the referendum. Black pro-charter organizations, such as the Black Alliance for Educational Options, lobbied against the NAACP stand. Significant Black opposition to Question 2 included a Boston city councilor, Tito Jackson, representing a predominantly Black district in Boston, who appeared with the NAACP on behalf of the “No” side in debates and pushed the Boston City

Council's "no" vote on the ballot question. But some who opposed the referendum, like Boston's Mayor Marty Walsh, also argued they did not oppose charter schools in general but argued lifting the cap would "wreak havoc on funding for public schools" (Blum, p. 9).

What was going on politically with Walsh and Tito Jackson? How can we explain their opposition to the lifting the cap? Does it relate to city political dynamics connected to the AFL-CIO involvement in the alliance?

This is actually a trickier question to answer just now than the EDU question. Marty Walsh is running for re-election and Tito Jackson is running against him. The MTA gave Tito the "Friend of Education" award at our recent annual meeting. There is lots of deep Boston politics to all of this, much of which (most of which) I am not familiar with except from a distance. Recall, I not only came out of nowhere to win the election as MTA President, but I came from western Massachusetts by way of Colorado and Long Island, New York (where I grew up). I was a real outsider in many ways and Boston is an insider's town. (Though I must add that union leaders who wanted a fighting union welcomed me and my Yankee fandom.)

That said, the campaign did craft a space for people to say they were not opposed to charters but to the ballot question. This gave cover for elected officials like Walsh and Elizabeth Warren to not completely abandon those supporters who are so wrong about public education. I really think this narrow "I am not against charters but am against this ballot proposal" reading was just about politicians. The people I spoke to on doors and phones – even those who sent students to charters- just wanted fully-funded public education. The outrage about the lost funding was real- and many people did not realize how much money was leaving public schools. That politicians wanted to carve a careful space says more about who is funding them and whispering nonsense in their ears (Warren's education aide is from

TFA) and less about the public. Because our win was so widespread and so decisive, these voices have lost some of the power.

I was amazed by the energy and commitment from Tito. He showed up at rallies, was ready to debate anyone and did it with humor and a special joy. His leadership as a Black elected official was so important to the campaign.

AFL-CIO President Steve Tolman was behind the fight from the very beginning- the AFL-CIO was part of MEJA. Steve understood that the effort to privatize public education is part of a broader attack on the public sector and on public sector unions. Before we even entered the fight, Steve was holding panel discussions where the trades, the nurses, the postal workers, and educators as well as others would talk about our struggles and make the connections that we were all under the same attack by the same enemy. This political education was key in preparing the unions to support the “NoOn2” campaign. It became politically dangerous to support the “Yes” campaign- and as our polling kept showing the voters shifting toward us, I imagine others were seeing similar numbers.

Question: How did the collaboration with the member organizations rooted in the Black community emerge? Which Black political leaders and community groups (real, not astro-turf) supported lifting the cap? Blum observes “Many Black and Latino students and parents in the traditional system were loyal to their schools, saw the charter system as a fiscal threat to them, and visibly and publicly shared their views.” (p. 9). How did that loyalty become operationalized? How was that support evidenced in the campaign? Blum notes that the vote in urban and inner-ring suburbs, where charters planned to expand under the caplift, was much like the tilt in state vote (62% to 38%). He argues this suggests cities, with their larger Black and Latino populations, were not nearly as in favor of lifting the cap as the “Yes” campaign suggested and that White exurban/suburban areas were persuaded to a perspective that was similar to that of racially diverse urban areas. The few

towns and Boston precincts that voted "Yes" by significant margins were wealthy areas (Blum, p. 10).

I am going to answer these two questions at the same time since the answers are connected. Lots of credit has to go to Jessica Tang and the BTU, BEJA and Boston youth for the activism within the Black and Latino communities. Boston youth and parents were already very active in budget fights and resisting school closures. The "NoOn2" campaign grew from activist work and organizing in Boston that had been building for a long time. Groups like the Boston Teacher Activist Group were connected to the community. Again, they canvassed, phone-banked, participated in debates and were very active on social media. Jonathon Rodriguez, a BTU staff, worked incredibly hard through canvassing and reaching out within the Latino community- which was the hardest to access. The campaign developed talking points in different languages and got into the community media markets to be heard. But it was the students and parents who picked up this work.

So there was work that had already been done and struggles engaged and working to keep the cap emerged from that work. This was not without its tensions. While there were strong community networks getting the work done, these sometimes ran into conflict with the campaign. To the degree that the SOPS was campaign was a traditional get-out-the-vote campaign, it alienated some Black leaders. I recall one meeting where I sat as a SOPS representative and listened as the history of Black Boston's relationship with White political leadership- a relationship in which Black leaders had not been fully respected for decades- was played out in questions, demands, and considerable anger. Tito Jackson helped to bridge those divides. My own guide in this work was Donna Bevins, to whom I gave the MTA's President's

Award this past May. A long-time leader in racial justice, she helped me think through how Whiteness and White supremacy – being everywhere– could best be addressed within the context of this campaign– by me as a White woman and for the “NoOn2” campaign.

You ask which Black leaders were “Yes” and, as I write in July, I can hardly recall. The degree to which the “Yes” campaign was a White campaign was kind of startling. I kept waiting for the “Yes” people to have people of color represent in debates. The faces of the “Yes” campaign included Governor Charlie Baker sitting in his mansion talking about failing schools. The Massachusetts Secretary of Education Jim Peyser– White man. Paul Sagan– chair of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education– White man. Marc Kenen– director of Massachusetts Charter Public School Association– White man. Marty Walz– former state representative from the Back Bay of Boston– White woman. Liam Kerr– head of Democrats for Education Reform– White man. Paul Grogan– Boston Foundation– White man. Keri Lorenzo Rodriguez, but I believe Rodriguez is her married name so I do not know if she identifies as a person of color– organizer for Families for Excellent Schools. Julia Meja, a Dominican woman who appeared in some debates speaking as a parent and Kevin Andrews, also connected with the Massachusetts Public Charter School Association, a Black man. (I had been slated to debate Kenen that night but they brought in Andrews and Kenen watched from the audience.) And then there were all those unseen White men hedge fund managers funneling money to the campaign.

Is it any wonder “Yes” won in the richest districts in Massachusetts and Boston? And lost by a wide margin everywhere else? The arrogance of their campaign– that they could spend money and deceive people into denying what people know about their lives– charters drain money from public schools– is startling—and helped our campaign.

COMMENTARY – MARILYN MAYE

In the discussion of the referendum to raise the cap on the number of charter schools allowed in Massachusetts, we hear such terms as “battle”, “campaign”, “opposition research”, “defeat”, “victory”, used to describe a multi-million-dollar struggle, ostensibly on behalf of public school children. As an African-American, a lifelong educator and an activist parent in my day, I am deeply skeptical of the combatants, conservatives and progressives alike, who claim to be driven primarily by concern for the students. Instead, I see self-interest as the fundamental reason for much of this costly warfare, and I encourage Black and Brown parents to pursue their own interests, collaborating warily and flexibly with both sides. I also encourage White citizens of good will to challenge colleagues to abandon their extreme rhetoric, and to engage in good faith, reality-based dialogue, that includes representatives of those who have the most to lose if we keep failing this population.

Whatever the claims of their original inventors, public charter schools today are designed primarily for children of color. Two-thirds of public charter school pupils nationally are Black and Brown. Few of the activists on either side have their own children in charter schools, except for the relative handful of Black parents that are recruited to go door-to-door and get-out-the-vote for referenda or elections of supportive politicians. So the education of their own children doesn't appear to motivate White advocates to support or to resist the expansion of charters.

When unions fully finance a campaign to vote “No” to proliferating more Massachusetts charter schools, it is not surprising that many wonder if they primarily seek to protect the interests of educators. Who else seems to have more to lose if charters proliferate? Isn't that why they are spending and working as they are to stop them? Yet, despite all the problems with

charters, increasingly, people in communities of color see them as better opportunities for their children to achieve full citizenship in America than most other school district options. The benefits of resisting charters do not appear to be as clear cut to all in the coalitions of groups with radically different power status in society.

On the other side, the pro-privatization advocates that heavily funded the “Yes” vote, to raise the cap on charters, appear disingenuous as well. Most of those who funded the “Yes” campaign don’t even get as close to the Black and Brown children as the mostly White, female union members who at least venture into those marginalized neighborhoods, to work as teachers, librarians, administrators. Many of the “Yes” campaigners live in the suburbs or in multiple houses around the world, and wouldn’t know what a charter school looked like if their Jaguars skidded into one in a snowstorm. Other supporters of the “Yes” vote know only that members of their tribe support the campaign, and, despite the lack of innovation in their own local schools, they vote uncritically with the tribe and the status quo.

On both sides, undoubtedly, there are individuals who could support compromise if they understood how all groups really have skin in the game. If those who polarize the debate would call out the bad actors in both the charter sector and in the district public schools, and work to craft high-quality schools of both types, all school children and the nation would benefit by the innovations that would inevitably emerge.

SOME HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Most advocates on both sides are very recent to the struggle, compared to those who were born into it. For the latter, what matters ultimately is whether or not Black and Brown children are empowered to effectuate their own liberation from the United States caste system. Black

and Brown families have always known that equitable access to quality schools, housing and employment is key to ever-elusive enfranchisement, freedom from racist terrorism, and achieving the quality of life that has been systematically denied them during centuries of slavery, Jim Crow and migrant exploitation.

As early as 1967, Black psychologist Dr. Kenneth B. Clark, in a paper titled "Alternative Public School Systems" called for "realistic, aggressive and viable competitors" to the public schools, especially those in urban areas. His critique of the practices in traditional public schools at that time included descriptors like "pervasive," "persistent," "constrained," "inhibiting."

Today, the public charter school embodies what Dr. Clark foresaw and constitutes one of several strategies over the decades, targeting systemic racism. That racism ensured that the children of slaves and of migrant workers would remain in perpetuity a source of unpaid or cheap labor for the wealthy and privileged and White. This economic exploitation continued during industrialization, while their parents were discriminated against in hiring and often incarcerated unjustly. Children attending all-Black and all-Brown schools in the South and Southwest, despite the anticipated demoralizing effect of being schooled in poorly equipped facilities, benefitted from high expectations and strong bonds between students and educators. In the 1950s, the school integration strategy had given access to formerly all-White public schools, and eventually morphed into "majority-minority" public schools, but transferred few of the Black and Brown educators that had learned how to support their children when schools were segregated. In the 1990s, charter schools became the solution proposed by education reformers to promote democratic education in the US. They would serve as laboratories to test new ideas for revitalizing failing district schools.

Unfortunately, the desire for school innovation proved not as strong as endemic White supremacy. Experiments with charter school options would

have to occur in a racially-separated context. America was not ready to surrender its commitment to racial hierarchy. As with “separate but equal,” right-wing ideologues have co-opted the reformers’ ideas, overlaying them with undemocratic practices like vouchers and for-profit management, which promise to enrich their kind, while leaving the caste system intact. They use spin to market their ideas, policies, and plans. Giving parents choice? That’s free-market terminology for the goal of privatizing public education for poor children. Parents will always choose the places where their children are loved and encouraged to develop into their best selves. The only parents who have real choice are those who can afford to pay tuition or high local taxes for institutions that hire teachers and promote curricula that protect their interests.

On one side, conservatives widely disparage all public schools, where despite their best efforts otherwise, millions of White and Black and Brown children have actually managed to escape poverty through exposure to reading, writing, calculating, and socialization in the ways of the elites. Yet, these same partisans fail to address the educational failings of the privatized schools from which they seek profits. They refuse to regulate bad actors in the charter school sphere. Failings of governance and financial oversight, overuse of school discipline, and discriminatory hiring and promotion, are not acknowledged or addressed. A key strategy, historically used to frustrate progressive change, is to deliberately confuse distinct concepts, such as vouchers and charters, private schools and public charters, and for-profit and not-for-profit school management. The co-mingling of bad actors with those who are struggling for positive change leads the general public to resist change altogether.

As a counterweight, unions and organizations like the NAACP have reliably pushed back against the lack of transparency and accountability of the charter school for-profit management companies that use taxpayer funds

to seek profits for shareholders. They have defended parent and community rights to have access to public charters, and to fight against admissions lotteries and policies of secrecy and intimidation. They have challenged overly rosy test scores and questioned the availability of services to students with special needs. They have called attention to the need to track the disproportionate use of school discipline against boys and girls of color in public schools nationwide. They have called out financial malfeasance, and demanded increased funding and space allocation for public schools to more equitably address student needs. They have tracked the voting records of politicians on these issues. They have challenged research and “faux accountability” studies conducted by pro-privatization think tanks and foundations. They have defended public education in the face of an onslaught of reactionary propaganda that would exclude the poor and people of color from education altogether if its funders had their way.

On the other side, progressives too often uncritically tout the traditional public schools, where a century of activism has resulted today in mostly White women having the secure jobs, teaching where more than half of the students do not look like their own children, and where they would not send their own children. Those whose livelihoods depend so heavily on public schools for the less privileged economically and socially are not willing to confront the fundamental problem of White supremacy in America, that ensures that White families will not send their children to schools with significant numbers of African-American and Latino students. They typically resist potentially disruptive practices such as merit pay structures for teachers that consider student achievement outcomes and professional growth expectations; independent school-level, collective bargaining; creative co-teaching assignments and new educator-certification agreements; substantive partnerships between co-located district and charter schools; requirements for educator residency in the school’s

community; and, the closing of schools that consistently fail students, with the taxpayer funding for those students following them to their new schools.

It is the rare district public school where leaders are able to promote, unhindered, the true psychological and social well-being of Black and Brown children. Instead, they continually have to fight both sides. While unions typically assert teachers' rights on every page of their voluminous contract documents, they have relatively little to say about the rights of students to high quality instructors and curricula.

Black and Brown advocates on each side tend to believe that they need their outside supporters more than they really do, and often surrender their better judgment in order to keep outside financing, even if it means compromising what they suspect is required. In fact, many northern educators of color are themselves victims of the failings of integration, and lack the experience of supportive education in the southern segregated schools. That vision of public education would have provided more clarity about what works for their children. Malcolm Gladwell's podcast series, *Revisionist History*, and African-American researchers like Vanessa Siddle Walker from Emory, and Charles Payne from Duke document how the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* decision's strategy of "integration" resulted in dismantling the Black-run public school systems, that had historically put the interests of Black children and their communities above other agendas.

Black parents have always had to find ways to eke out their own survival strategies, playing both sides, as needed. They have had to dodge the crosshairs of the left v right conflict, picking and choosing among the latest false panaceas, rarely having the final say, although it is their children who are most at risk.

RECLAIMING OUR OPTIONS

Black and Brown advocates on each side sometimes fail to act in their own interests, mistrusting each others' motives as well as the questionable support of outside sponsors. Beyond these tensions, there is fundamental agreement, that we want the schools for our children that will develop their potential and lead them beyond society's limitations for them. Disagreement about strategies does not need to result in the kinds of recrimination and vilification practiced by those who often have very different agendas and far less skin in the game. Alliances with those whose children are not at risk must be examined carefully to ensure they don't distract us from the goal – the liberation of our children.

Charter school corporations that promote overly-severe disciplinary policies, prepare our children better for prison than for the workplace. Privatization that transfers public wealth into the deep pockets of hedge fund managers and corporations must be resisted at all costs. We must oppose the resistance to regulation and accountability from these purveyors of "choice".

At the same time, district public schools must be challenged, if they consistently fail to hold high expectations of our children, and never have students performing in the highest level (exceeds expectations) in an entire grade or school. Unions must stop protecting mediocre educators and should be ready to change rigid workplace rules that stifle initiatives associated with greater student success. Teachers who are not seen in the community after dark should not work there during the daylight hours. Children that can benefit from weekend and after-school tutoring and enrichment, that suburban parents pay for in spades, should be afforded that support by any means necessary. School board members who join only

to ensure that budgets are voted down, while their children attend independent and parochial schools, need to be outed and voted off.

And, on both sides, if no Black leaders can be found for the advocacy organizations, at the highest levels and down the ranks, nor entrepreneurs of color to provide funds at whatever levels they can afford, then those who provide credibility to those organizations must make demands that they be recruited, or resign themselves to misdirected decision-making, and undesirable student outcomes.

At the turn of the current century, I and a handful of Black, Brown, and White progressive types got together and committed to Black parents in my Bronx neighborhood to create an opportunity for their children that was not otherwise available without having to pay tuition. We promised them a school where faculty would care for their children and educate them, not to just meet state standards, but to far exceed those standards. We launched a primary-grades charter school with 50 students, based on the petition signatures of hundreds of community residents, and with the reluctant but ultimately wise support of our mostly Black, elected state and city representatives. Seventeen years later, we have two schools, thousands of parents on a waiting list each year, and our first graduates going into their third year of college, at institutions that include state universities and Ivy League schools.

We are now two charter schools, with no corporations or philanthropists underwriting or controlling our curriculum. We still have a disproportionate number of White teachers and administrators on our faculty, a fact that our predominantly White board openly acknowledges, and continues to confront with a variety of strategies. We resist pressures from left and right. Our agreement with our teachers is student- and community-focused, with transparent salary and promotion guides. We do not over-discipline students, directing their every move, telling them what to think

and what's worth knowing, in the opinion of outsiders. We have survived multiple re-authorizations by the State, and our state test scores are above the state average, although we have the same high poverty rate as the surrounding neighborhood and our fair share of special education classified students. We work with a university-based Masters program in New York State, where our professional developers serve as adjunct professors to help prepare apprentice teachers, several of whom eventually are hired to work full-time in our school. Have we achieved all the goals demanded by those who see no value in charters? No. But, we are far exceeding the levels attained by children from the same demographic in neighboring schools. And, we are not satisfied with our progress.

Our situation is so political, we shy away from too much publicity, either favorable or unfavorable. If we show off our achievements, our neighboring schools, in which we share space and sometimes resources, feel disparaged and humiliated. If we ally ourselves with the right-wing charter school movement, we would be mistaken for the corporate charters whose strategies seem to prepare Black and Brown children for future compliance with the caste system. We try to keep below the radar, and yet, thousands of parents find us every year and sign up for our lottery, hoping against hope their child will have the lottery number that gets called.

If you're protecting Black and Brown children through some loophole in the charter system laws, you have to hide, so you can do so as long as possible before being found out. This is what Black and Brown families have been reduced to, after a century and a half of the progressive vision of public education for all.

Sure, put the cap on proliferating corporate charter schools that take taxpayers' money to enrich capitalists, on the backs of Black and Brown children. They are gathering data and creating tools and turning schools

into marketing opportunities, and, quiet as it's kept, they are doing this also in district public schools as well as in the corporate charter schools.

But, don't yield to demands that Black and Brown parents take a side or support efforts to remove or limit a strategy that can create viable outcomes for their children. Black people did this in the de-segregation fight, and far too many lost.

Progressives need to be more nimble and learn how to fight on both sides. Take a public stand against the corporate influence in public schools – both charter and traditional. But, leave Black and Brown parents to their own historically best interests, supporting rather than supplanting them, as they demand what they really want and have rarely gotten from universal public education in America - education for their children that develops, that supports, that liberates.

Our clearest historical experience and research show that this happens best when Black teachers and leaders are in proportional representation and model for their students what it looks like to think for oneself, to speak for oneself, to develop oneself. When White teachers are selected to teach our children, they need to be educated in their own racial identities and histories, and to be able to envision taking pride in their Black and Brown students potentially surpassing their own academic achievements. They need to resist resenting affirmative action and compensatory programs that attempt to right historical wrongs. And, in a political environment of escalating racial conflict, White educators in predominantly White schools need to commit to educating their students about historical discrimination and current inequality in their own communities, as well as nationally.