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Brooklyn charter teachers join UFT



All smiles as teachers anticipate what a union can do for their school. "Our union will give teachers strength to be able to help the students soar to new heights," as Tiffany Jones put it.

In another victory for the UFT's effort to organize New York City charter schools, educators at Fahari Academy Charter School in Brooklyn announced on Oct. 4 that they have organized a union at the school and intend to join the UFT.

A majority of the educators at the Flatbush school have signed union authorization cards, and the UFT has filed a formal petition for recognition with the school's board on their behalf and notified the state's Public Employment Relations Board that Fahari teachers are seeking union recognition.

If the school does not voluntarily recognize the union within 30 days, the UFT can petition PERB to certify it on the basis of the authorization cards.

UFT President Michael Mulgrew warmly welcomed the Fahari teachers into the union. "These dedicated educators want what is best for their students, and they know that having a union will help them achieve it," Mulgrew said. "I'm very pleased they have chosen the UFT to represent them."

Fahari currently serves more than 250 students in grades 5 through 7 but plans to expand through grade 12.

The teachers informed the school's board and executive director, Catina Venning, of their intentions in a letter in which they outlined their vision for the school and their belief in its mission "of instilling in its students the 'core values that are critical for academic, social and professional success.'"

"We believe that by establishing a collective voice within our school community, we will be in a better position to realize this mission and to provide our students with the best possible education to ensure that they become productive members of our society," the educators wrote.

Closing the deal: Merrick, BAOP reach first contracts while others enter into new contracts

As the unionized charter school movement continues to grow, schools throughout the city have reached agreements on new contracts.

After a long and hard-fought union campaign, teachers at Merrick Academy Charter School ratified their first contract on Nov. 3 by a unanimous vote. The contract provides teachers with a pay increase and tuition reimbursement, but most important to educators was the improved 'just cause' protections outlined in the agreement.

"Four years ago, some of the staff, went ahead and reached out to the UFT. Forgetting money and salary, just being able to have due process is the biggest win for us right now," said Christine Hernandez, who has taught for 10 years at Merrick.

"We are incredibly relieved to have a contract," said special education teacher Susan Randel, "and look forward to working with our administration and our board toward making next year a positive and productive school year."

The contract is retroactive to September 2008, when Merrick educators first joined the UFT, and runs through August 2013.

Bronx Academy of Promise (BAOP), a kindergarden-through-grade-4 charter school located in the Morrisania neighborhood, also just ratified its first contract. The contract provided educators with a 2.6 percent salary increase and created an improved due process procedure for grievances and termi-

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Since joining the union, Reagan Fletcher, a seventh-year music teacher said, “we have a better relationship with our board and administration. We were able to get on the committee to hire the new principal, which they never would have considered before we went union.”

Currently, the school is developing a teacher evaluation system, which will be negotiated in a labor-management committee composed of educators, a UFT representative, and the school’s principal.

In other contracts news, Amber Charter School, a ten-year-old charter school in East Harlem, approved a new two-year contract. The contract includes a 10 percent raise for educators, along with a bonus system, and an improved due process structure.

At Green Dot New York, a high-performing charter school in the Bronx, teachers recently approved a renewal of their innovative contract signed in 2009. The new two-year contract provides a 6 percent raise over the life of the contract and includes a bonus system for retaining employees. Green Dot, like BAOP, will be implementing a teacher evaluation system in the 2012-2013 school year.



^ Before ratifying their contract, educators at Bronx Academy of Promise — (from left) Reagan Fletcher, Lisa Rodgers, Jennilee De Hoyos and Danielle Viggano — read it over.



< Standing at the ballot box are Merrick teacher Christine Hernandez (left); Miles Trager, UFT coordinator of charter school services; and teacher Susan Randel. Signing in to vote is teacher Crystal Boyd.

Two UFT-represented charter schools, Opportunity Charter School and New York City Charter High School for Architecture, Engineering and Construction Industries (AECI), are currently in the midst of negotiations for their first contracts.

Commenting on her experience on the

negotiation committee at AECI, third-year tenth-grade English teacher Lissette Velazquez said, “Being on the negotiating committee at my school has shown me what the union does, and how hard they will fight to make sure that teachers, who deal with so much, are given the proper support to do their jobs.”

Meet Your Colleagues: Lissette Velazquez



Lissette Velazquez is a third-year tenth-grade English teacher at the New York City Charter High School for Architecture, Engineering and Construction Industries (AECI) in the Bronx.

Q: Why did you decide to become a charter school teacher?

What I immediately liked about charter schools was that teachers are allowed to design their own curriculum. This freedom gives teachers more flexibility to teach to the specific students in the classroom as opposed to being given a generic curriculum that may not suit the kids that live in our community. By allowing teachers to develop their own curriculum, it gives us the chance to teach to each student’s learning style and help teachers grow as educators.

Q: How has the union made a difference at your school?

The union can help curb teacher turnover, which hurts students because of the lack consistency in the classroom. When the teachers here called, the UFT immediately stepped in and asked how they could make the school better for the kids and a more supportive community for the teachers. This school is new, and the union has been wonderful in helping to get teachers and students whatever they need to be successful. Especially in charter schools, there is so much pres-

sure on us, it burns people out and they leave the profession. The union respects teaching as a profession that needs to be protected and respected. Teaching is a calling, you don’t do it for fame or money, you do it because you feel it’s the job you were made to do.

Q: What would you say to your colleagues in non-union charters schools about the union?

Charter school teachers work really hard; there’s a misconception that we have everything handed to us. So I would tell them: as a fellow charter school teacher, I know how hard you work, I know you’re there hours before kids are there and hours after. I understand what it is like to feel like you have no way to reach out to the administration. The union gives you a way to channel your voices as teachers to communicate with administration in a way that is productive for both you and the kids. The union gives you the opportunity to no longer have to worry about things outside the classroom, so you can focus on what matters – what happens inside the classroom.

Educators gather to re-infuse progressive values into charters

After an Oct. 14 evening panel featuring UFT President Michael Mulgrew, celebrated educator Deborah Meier, Green Dot founder Steve Barr and parent advocate Mona Davids, the more than 100 charter school educators in attendance returned to UFT headquarters on Oct. 15 for a full day of workshops and panels on “building a progressive charter school movement.”

Sessions touched on a wide range of subjects — from the role of progressive leadership in New York City charter schools to how to create an effective learning environment for instruction in math and literacy — all capped off with a screening of the new documentary film “American Teacher.”

In a session on charter schools and educational justice, CUNY professor Michelle Fine argued that the once-progressive “small schools movement” had been captured by corporate interests but that unionized charter teachers can push back.

“You are the bridge over troubled waters,” she told them.

In another session, on teacher, parent and student voice in charters, John Parr, from Education Evolving, contrasted the direction taken by most charters in New York with their counterparts in Milwaukee, where many charter schools are unionized teacher-led cooperatives that actively encourage parent and student engagement. Parr encouraged New York City charters to adopt this so-called “Milwaukee Model.”

UFT Vice President Leo Casey, who oversees the union’s effort to organize city charter schools, said he was impressed by the educators, many of them new teachers, who turned out for the conference.

“We’re fighting a battle for the soul of the charter school movement,” Casey said. “It’s a difficult battle, but with leaders like the teachers who came out this weekend, I know we can win it.”

Kenya Burton, a teacher at the Sisulu-Walker Charter School of Harlem, which organized with the UFT in October 2010, chaired the session on teacher, parent and student voice.

“It was great,” Burton said of the



^ Members take part in an exercise at the conference.

conference, recalling that she was particularly impressed by Renaissance Charter School’s Stacey Gauthier, who discussed progressive leadership at her school. “I actually got her phone number and want to do a site visit to learn how to bring her approach back to my school,” Burton said.

Brittany Helpard, a middle school math teacher at the unionized Opportunity Charter School, where negotiations for a first contract began in late October, also participated. She had only the highest praise for the conference. “Teachers, administrators and charter reform leaders came together to dialogue about how to best serve the students and families at our schools,” she said. “It was motivational.”

< Green Dot Public Schools founder Steve Barr (on panel, second from left) answers a question while fellow panelists (from left) New York Charter Parents Association President Mona Davids, Central Park East school founder Deborah Meier and UFT President Michael Mulgrew and UFT Vice President Leo Casey, the panel moderator, look on.



Union certified at Harlem’s Opportunity Charter School

This summer, the New York Public Employees Relations Board (PERB), the state agency that covers all public employees, including charter educators, officially certified the union at Opportunity Charter School (OCS) in Harlem. With this announcement, the United Federation of Teachers will serve as the exclusive collective bargaining agent for the educators at OCS.

Christopher Haywood, a behavior specialist at the school, eagerly described his and his colleagues’ reaction to their victory in their long fight for union recognition. “The certification of our union

is positive step forward. I’m excited to help engage the entire staff in the collective bargaining process. It’s a chance to be part of the process from the ground floor. Now that we have been certified we can build our voice to speak up for ourselves and the students.”

On May 10 of this year, the vast majority of Opportunity Charter School educators declared their intention to join the United Federation of Teachers. In a letter sent to the board, the teachers and staff explained that they had decided to join the United Federation of Teachers: “we, the teaching and professional staff, know what’s needed to support the students’ academic and personal goals. Our voices should be heard. Having a union at OCS will allow the entire staff to participate in creating the best academic environment for all.”

The school’s board had 30 days to voluntarily recognize the union. After the deadline passed, the teachers and UFT filed a petition with the Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) to certify the union on the basis of union authorization cards signed by the teachers. After reviewing the cards PERB officially acknowledged the union at Opportunity on August 26.

Over the course of the school year, the staff and management will begin the process of negotiating a contract. Educators at the school said they look forward to working with the school’s administration to create a contract which will solidify their mutual commitment to providing the highest quality education for the students and a professional environment for the staff.

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Joining the union is “creating an environment where I can be the best teacher I can be for my students,” says Bethany Murano. “I’ve never been more excited to be a part of something in my life!”

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UFT ACTS is on a roll: First contracts at Merrick and BAOP, new contracts at Amber, Green Dot, talks ongoing at Opportunity and AECI.

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Teachers take the next step in their goal of “creating the best academic environment for all” through a collective, unionized voice.

“A battle for the soul of the charter movement” – p. 3



A two-day conference brought together experts and charter teachers to discuss how to build a progressive charter school movement.



The Charter Voice

A newsletter by, for and about New York City charter school educators, produced by the United Federation of Teachers Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff (UFT ACTS).

We believe that schools work best when educators are respected and when they are included in program and policy planning. We believe collaboration and communication are most successfully achieved when educators are organized and have the collective power of a union. We believe our union can help you do your job and help your school reach its goals. If you are interested in learning more, call our confidential hotline.

www.uftacts.org
212-510-6464
confidential hotline



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Special education teacher Tiffany Jones said that forming a union will help foster a positive school culture that will benefit students. “When administration, teachers and staff work together, students excel,” she said. “Our union will give

teachers strength to be able to help the students soar to new heights.”

Jones’s colleague, first-year teaching assistant Bethany Murano, echoed that sentiment. “Being part of this union is more than coming together with my colleagues and earning the respect we deserve; it’s about creating an environment where I can

be the best teacher I can be for my students,” said Murano, who teaches math. “I’ve never been more excited to be a part of something in my life!”

With the decision of the Fahari teachers to join the UFT, the union now represents educators at 14 charter schools on 16 campuses.



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