



United Federation of Teachers
A Union of Professionals



UFT ACTS
Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff

CHARTER VOICE

Spring 2010

www.uftacts.org

Organizing for our students, our schools, and our jobs

**IT'S NOT
anti-charter
TO BE
pro-union**

Bronx Academy of Promise organizes

"We are with our kids eight hours a day and deserve a voice in the policy decisions that affect them," says Regan Fletcher, a second-year music teacher at the Bronx Academy of Promise, the most recent charter school to form a union with the United Federation of Teachers. "Ultimately, this will benefit our children."

Teachers and staff at the school announced their intentions to join the UFT on March 12. The entire teaching staff, along with other staff members at the school, had previously signed union authorization cards.

In letters hand-delivered to the school's principal and faxed to its board, the teachers wrote of their desire "to establish a formal collective voice within our school community" to ensure the quality of their students' education. They also said that they hope to move forward in a spirit of collaboration with administrators and board members and requested voluntary recognition of their union.

"The recognition of the teaching and professional staff as respected partners in BAOP is fundamental to the success of our school and to the realization of the mission of our charter: helping kids get the education they deserve," the teachers wrote.



^ Fresh from publicly announcing their intention to join the UFT as the union's newest bargaining unit, teachers from Bronx Academy of Promise are congratulated by UFT President Michael Mulgrew at their first official union meeting. The second meeting of the President's Council on Charter Schools, the gathering was held March 12 at union headquarters in Manhattan. Left to right: UFT Vice President Leo Casey, Mulgrew, Sarah Schlesinger, Melissa Garcia and Kathleen Butler.

Parents and teachers win at Merrick Academy

After a months-long battle, teachers and parents at Merrick Academy in March forced the Queens Village school's board of trustees to address several of the problems plaguing it, including sporadic heating and a shortage of textbooks and copy paper.

"Through the efforts of parents and teachers working together by rallying, flyering and gathering petition signatures, we have been able to get the school to take action on ordering textbooks that some classrooms were missing, purchasing enough copy paper for teachers to use, and working to repair the faulty heating system," reports Chapter Leader John Carrington.

Teachers at the UFT-represented school teamed up with parents and other community members for rallies at the school building and pickets outside the law offices of school board head Gerald Karikari.

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Union certified at AECI

"We're making history for our school. We're paving the way for people who come after us to commit fully to both the institution and the students who attend it."

That is how Lissette Velazquez, a first-year English teacher and member of the teachers organizing committee at the New York Charter High School for Architecture, Engineering and Construction Industries (AECI), enthusiastically described her colleagues' recent victory in their fight for union recognition.

The 19 teachers at AECI declared their intention to join the United Federation of Teachers as a new collective-bargaining unit on January 13. The school's board and for-profit management company, Victory Schools, initially resisted the teachers' effort to organize. However, at its April 13 meeting, the board changed course, voting unanimously to voluntarily recognize the new unit.

The school board and UFT announced the results of the vote in a joint statement on April 15, writing that they "look forward to developing a constructive relationship, focused on our mutual commitment to providing the highest quality

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Employees of charter schools are covered by the Taylor Law, with all of its protections

The Public Employees Fair Employment Act, better known as the Taylor Law, is a comprehensive statute covering all public employees in New York State. It became effective in 1967 and grants public employees the right to organize and be represented by a union of their choice. It grants public employees protections when they are organizing for union representation.

It also requires public employers to negotiate with unions concerning the terms and conditions of employment

and prohibits employers from engaging in harassment, intimidation, threats or retaliation against union supporters.

Charter schools are public schools and therefore public employers covered under the Taylor Law.

It is your right to...organize a union! During an organizing campaign, you have the right to...

- participate in meetings to discuss joining a union
- distribute, read and discuss union literature (in non-work areas during non-work hours, i.e. breaks and lunch periods)
- wear union buttons, stickers, t-shirts and hats to show support for the union
- sign a union card and demand union recognition
- circulate and sign petitions or join

together in other activities to protest unfair treatment or demand improvements in wages, hours and working conditions

- organize other employees to support the union and sign union cards. During an organizing campaign, management is prohibited from taking certain actions. **Bottom line: management cannot threaten employees with loss of jobs or benefits if they join or vote for a union.**

If you are threatened in this way or feel that any of your rights listed above have been violated, you should document the incident thoroughly and give the report to an organizing committee member from your school, or call the UFT ACTS hotline at 212-510-6464.

If you are not sure if an incident violates the law, document it anyway.

Fair funding for all public schools

Letter from the President

Dear Colleague,

The UFT is against all budget cuts to district schools and charter schools. We believe that charter schools should be treated fairly by the law and should receive their fair share of state education funding.

The state's fiscal condition is dire. Our schools could lose as much as \$600 million in state aid in the coming school year. A cut of that magnitude would decimate our schools, both district and charter. That is why the UFT has been waging an all-out campaign in Albany to minimize these cuts across the board.

Many community, education advocacy and parent allies have joined us in that fight. Missing in action have been the New York City Charter School Center and New York Charter School Association, which have instead tried to use the economic crisis to pit charter school against district school, charter teacher against district teacher, charter parent against district parent, and charter student against district student.

This union would never set out to harm charter schools. We operate two charter schools of our own and represent members in another 10 and counting. Having a foot in both charter schools and district schools gives us a unique perspective: we know that we must fight on behalf of the students in all public schools.

We take seriously our role as the representative of our charter school members. That's why we called for eliminating the current two-year lag in the formula. In direct response to the issues raised by our UFT charter school members, we proposed that charter schools whose educators participate in the Teachers' Retirement System should be allowed to take that cost off their books and have the local school district assume it. And to ensure fairness among different charter schools, we proposed that charter school funding for special education students and English language learners be calculated based on the actual number of those students that each school educates.

Just think how powerful it would be if other charter advocates stood united with the UFT in Albany on behalf of funding for all public schools.

Michael Mulgrew

Michael Mulgrew

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They have also paid several visits to the offices of the school's for-profit management company, Victory Schools, which has stonewalled the teachers in their effort to negotiate a first contract while at the same time charging the school exorbitant management fees upwards of \$1 million annually.



^ Merrick parent Shannon Ernest confronts board members at their April 29 meeting. Parents were there to support teachers' push for a contract.

Urge New York charter leaders to join the fight for fair funding. Go to: www.uft.org/charter.

The view from the classroom



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John Carlos Benros is a second-year 10th-grade global history teacher at the NYC Charter High School for Architecture, Engineering and Construction Industries (AECI) in the Bronx. AECI is the most recent charter school to receive employer recognition of its union.

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

A: I decided to become a charter school teacher because I wanted to venture into the “new model.” I had gone to New York City public schools my whole life so I wanted to venture out. The kids are the same; it’s all about the teachers and the relationships they build with students. It’s a matter of what individual teachers can do with particular students, classes and schools.

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

A: One thing is that the board of trustees has requested more teacher input. For example, the school is in the process of hiring a new assistant principal and three teachers are on the search committee. We’re also forming an academic committee and a school thematic committee since the theme of the school is architecture and engineering.

Organizing also brought teachers together. Prior to that, there was a separation between teachers who had been at the school last year and new teachers who came to the school this year. Since organizing, that divide is gone

and it is a positive development for the entire school community.

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

A: I would say three things to them. First, I would tell them that I know people tell horror stories about unions, that once you have a union your job gets caught up in red tape. But that’s not true.

Second, I would tell them that a union creates continuity. When you organize, you create a situation with benefits comparable to the district schools and teachers have an incentive to stay.

Finally, I’d tell them that the one advantage we have over district colleagues is that those of us who organize have the ability to negotiate with our individual school boards. So we’re holding the “red tape” – it’s not something you walk into, it is something you make to protect yourself and your colleagues. And if you stay at the school long enough, it is something you can change. It’s not a decree handed down to you from some anonymous union or administrator.

CERTIFICATION PROBLEMS? CALL CHARTER SCHOOL SERVICES REPRESENTATIVE MILES TRAGER AT 212-701-9492.

Battle for the soul of the charter school movement

More than 500 progressive teachers, academics and education advocates turned out April 17 at Manhattan’s Julia Richman Education Complex for the first symposium of the Deborah Meier Institute on the theme “Remapping Progressive Education.”

Leo Casey, a UFT vice president, joined Suzanne Eckes, from Indiana University, for an informative afternoon workshop on “Charter Schools’ Role in Progressive Education.” Casey over-

sees the union’s effort to organize charter school teachers.

In his comments, the labor leader laid out the history of the charter movement and emphasized how far afield it has gone from its original vision of charter schools as “laboratories of learning” in which teachers could experiment with best practices and “where teacher voice, parent voice and student voice would be strong.”

“Something has changed in the last 20 years,” Casey said. The movement has been “colonized” by Wall Street-types and corporate interests like Wal-Mart’s Walton Foundation that want to make public charters into *de facto* pri-

vate schools, he explained. Corporate charter advocates are also virulently anti-union, often subsuming educational goals to the goal of keeping schools “union-free,” regardless of what teachers think is best for their school.

“There is a battle for the soul of the charter school movement,” Casey said. “Are charters going to be real public schools?” The UFT’s role, he added, is to help make sure they are, and to restore charters to their original goal.

UFT President Michael Mulgrew also spoke at the symposium, on the opening plenary.

The UFT Teacher Center is now offering professional development courses specifically for charter school teachers. Watch for details on the UFT and UFT ACTS websites (www.uft.org and www.uftacts.org).

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of education to the students of the school and a professional educational environment for the teachers.”

According to Velazquez, the teachers organized “because we want to feel more permanent in our positions here.” Already, she said, “the teachers communicate a lot more and, since being recognized, the conversation is a

lot more open about what can happen for us in the future.”

The next step in the process is negotiating a contract, which guarantees the rights and conditions that the staff and management agree upon in their negotiations. That process will formally get under way later this spring.

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Charter school staff are covered under the state's labor law for public employees, known as the Taylor Law. Find out what you can do under the law, and what management *can't* do.

Union fighting for fair funding for all public schools – p. 2



UFT President Michael Mulgrew calls on the New York City Charter School Center and New York Charter School Association to join the UFT in a united effort in Albany to fight for education funding.

“Organizing brought teachers together” – p. 3



So says John Carlos Benros from AECL explaining how the union has already made a positive difference in the school. He also says that since organizing management has sought more input from educators.

Battle for the soul of the charter school movement – p. 3



Over 500 progressive teachers, academics and education advocates gather for a symposium on the “Remapping Progressive Education,” where the UFT’s Leo Casey spoke on the past and future of charters.



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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