



Opportunity Charter School teachers join union



All smiles: OCS educators celebrate their decision to join the union as a way to speak up for what's best for them and their students.

"Having a union at OCS will allow the entire staff to participate in creating the best academic environment for all."

—OCS teachers' letter to their principal and board

Teachers and staff at the Opportunity Charter School (OCS) announced on May 10 their intentions to join the UFT. The vast majority of pedagogical staff signed union authorization cards indicating the need for a UFT chapter at the school.

In a letter given to Opportunity Charter School's principal and board, the teachers laid out their vision of a positive school culture that allows teachers and the principal to become collaborative partners to help realize the mission of the school and ensure the quality of the students' education. In the letter, the teachers and staff explained their decision to join the UFT: "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."

In tandem with the letter delivered by the teachers, the UFT notified the state's Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) that OCS teachers are seeking union recognition and filed a formal petition with Opportunity Charter School's Board of Trustees. The school's board has 30 days to voluntarily recognize their union or the UFT can ask PERB to certify it on the basis of the authorization cards.

"The teachers at Opportunity Charter School are committed to ensuring that their students receive the best possible education," said UFT President Michael

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Charter educators join protest of teacher layoffs, budget cuts

On May 12, tens of thousands of teachers, students, unionized workers, community groups and other concerned New Yorkers converged on Wall Street to protest teacher layoffs and Mayor Bloomberg's proposed budget cuts.

"This city is upside down," said UFT President Michael Mulgrew to the huge crowd of UFT members, students and parents who gathered outside City Hall. "It's not working for all of us and that's why we are out here today. We want a city that works for everyone."

The UFT protesters, who marched en masse to Wall Street after the City Hall rally, were united in their outrage at the mayor's insistence on teacher layoffs when the city has a \$3.2 billion budget surplus.

Down on Wall Street, the UFT marchers met up with thousands of activists representing other sectors of the city economy, including transit workers, CUNY faculty and students, housing advocates and AIDS and homeless advocates.

While the proposed teacher layoffs will not affect charter schools, charter teachers came out to show solidarity with their fellow union members.

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Teaching for social justice

ONE TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE



Jennifer Antolino

In the 2010-2011 school year, the UFT offered a professional development series entitled "Teaching for Social Justice: Charter School Perspectives." The sessions brought together charter school educators and expert scholars for a series of workshops planned by teachers, for teachers.

Jennifer Antolino, chapter leader at Amber Charter School, who attended every session, spoke about her experiences. "I think the PD sessions were such a success because they were developed with a lot of teacher input. The sessions were filled with short-term projects I could bring into the classroom right away but also long-term strategies to help develop a positive school culture. I would recommend them to all of my fellow charter school teachers."

The series brought together a wide variety of panelists, including Bob Moses, founder of the Algebra Project and a veteran of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee of the 1960s; AFT President Randi Weingarten, a former UFT president; famed educator Deborah Meier; and Mona Davids of the New York Charter Parents Association.

There were four sessions over the course of the spring semester on a variety of topics:

- Keeping Authentic Education Alive in the Age of Standardized Tests
- Action Research: Inquiry into Teaching and Learning
- Bridging the Achievement Gap
- Trust and Community: The Foundation of a Good School

The sessions provided an occasion for teachers to interact with their peers and the guest speakers. "It was great to get the chance to network with my fellow charter school teachers and share our experiences, and the opportunity to speak with some of the amazing panelists that were there," said Antolino. "During one session I got the chance to speak with Randi Weingarten. Also, it was great to hear Deborah Meier speak — she's an icon."

Antolino noted that continuing education is essential for teachers. "As teachers, we do this from the heart and every year presents new challenges, so it is important for us to continue to grow in our profession. We want our students to be life-long learners and attending these sessions helps us to lead by example."

Currently, UFT ACTS is planning a conference for charter school educators for October 14 and 15, 2011. Check www.uftacts.org for updates.

Charter educators join protest of teacher layoffs, budget cuts

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Teachers from Beginning with Children Charter School in Brooklyn came out to rally against the proposed layoffs.

As chapter leader Craig Garber observed, "There are incredible things happening all over the world right now. Regular people are taking to the streets and having their voices heard.

"We are teachers, we have busy lives and work extra long hours so it is tough to always get involved," said Garber, noting the importance of taking time out to fight the proposed layoffs. Joining fellow UFT members was important for him and his colleagues because "everyone is hurt when schools have their funding cut. Cuts in education, when looked at from the long view, may inhibit many students' chances of attending college, participating in business, and can lead kids down a dark path."

Arien O'Connell, a 6th grade special education teacher at Beginning with Children Charter School who also attended the rally, agreed: "I think that Mayor Bloomberg's budget proposal is unfair. He is cutting the teaching force without budgetary necessity. This will especially hurt



Beginning with Children teachers Craig Garber, Arien O'Connell and Emily Mason came out to support their district school colleagues and oppose education budget cuts at the May 12 rally.

students in lower income neighborhoods and teachers who have recently come to the teaching profession. No good can come from this, and I'm proud of all of those who came out on May 12 to show the mayor their disapproval."

MEET YOUR COLLEAGUES:

Kenya Burton

Kenya Burton is a sixth-year resident teacher at Sisulu-Walker Charter School in Harlem.



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

A: My initial impression of charter schools was they were freed from being forced into a “cookie-cutter” curriculum and provided teachers with greater control over what was taught, which seemed exciting to me. I thought of traditional district schools as more rigid and charters as having greater freedom over what was taught in the classroom.

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

A: Being part of a union allows us to rise above the factions and all work towards what’s best for the school and the students. The union is a call to be united and pushes us towards one another because we have a common goal; we may teach in different classrooms but we have a common goal of providing a quality education to all of our students. Once we have developed a strong school culture as a group we can develop even better culture in each classroom and then reach the larger community. As we learned in the UFT professional development workshop on trust and teaching, there is a direct correlation between teachers’ relationships and the performance of the school; the high performing schools have teachers that trust one another.

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

A: If you want to have your voice heard you certainly need a union. Charter schools were initially formed because they were supposed to be teacher-run, teacher-oriented schools – it wasn’t supposed to be bureaucrats who had no classroom experience. The union allows teachers to have an active voice in the school.

The union helps the school to be a more collaborative effort: teachers, parents, and community members can all have a say in educating the students. I’ve had three colleagues check on me today because the head teacher is out and that is prompted by the union; that is prompted by the sense that we are all in this together.

Bronx school pioneers a healthy eating initiative

The Bronx Academy of Promise Charter School (BAOP) is tackling the issue of childhood obesity head-on with an innovative new program developed by Bronx Health REACH. The program brings together teachers, students and their caregivers to help kids and their families stay healthy.

Bronx Health REACH is part of a national childhood obesity prevention effort funded by the Johnson & Johnson/John Hopkins Community Health Care Scholars Program to provide children with nutrition education. The UFT’s Safety and Health Department was instrumental in bringing the program to two third-grade classrooms at BAOP. The course helped children improve their food choices and begin to set personal goals to help maintain healthy eating habits. The class was offered twice a week for 45 minutes.

The program also encouraged parents and caregivers to participate in after-school workshops to reinforce the lessons the students learned around healthy eating. These workshops educated parents and caregivers on the importance of home-cooked meals, the nutritional value of fruits and vegetables and the need for physical activity. Each class encouraged caregivers to set weekly goals to improve their own health.

As part of the program, Bronx Health REACH will evaluate its effect on children’s eating habits, but teachers already know it has had a positive effect on their students. “The kids were really motivated and learned a lot. They always asked, ‘when is she (the teacher from Bronx Health REACH) coming back?’” said third-grade teacher Kristin Crocitto.

Anita Iezza, who also took part in the program, found that her students were engaged; she told the story of her third-grade student who confronted his mother about the family’s choice of cereal bar – “This one has too much sugar and not enough fiber.”

Over the next two years, the program hopes to expand to reach 600 students in elementary schools across the South Bronx. Both BAOP teachers say they would love to have the program back at their school.

UFT ACTS online!

Check out the Alliance for Charter Teachers and Staff at www.uftacts.org. Interviews with charter educators, tons of classroom resources, information about your rights, and more...

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“Cuts in education, when looked at from the long view, may inhibit many students’ chances of attending college, participating in business, and can lead kids down a dark path,” said Craig Garber, explaining why he and others took to the streets on May 12.

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Jennifer Antolino says the UFT ACTS recent professional development series gave her “short-term projects I could bring into the classroom right away but also long-term strategies to help develop a positive school culture.”

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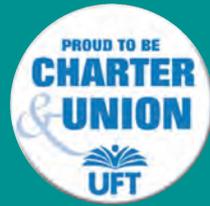


High-performing schools have teachers that trust one another, and the union helps build that trust.

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Food for thought: An innovative program to help combat childhood obesity.



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.ufacts.org
212-510-6464
confidential hotline



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Mulgrew. “By forming a union, these teachers have shown that they are committed to having a collective voice in creating a great learning environment for Opportunity’s students. We are proud to welcome them into the UFT.”

Teacher Nayomi Reghay echoed Mulgrew’s comments: “I believe everyone has a voice

and every voice deserves to be heard. We need a union to ensure our right to speak up for what’s best for us and best for our students.”

Opportunity Charter School opened in the fall of 2004. It currently serves approximately 400 students in grades 6-12. The school is located on West 113th Street in Manhattan.



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