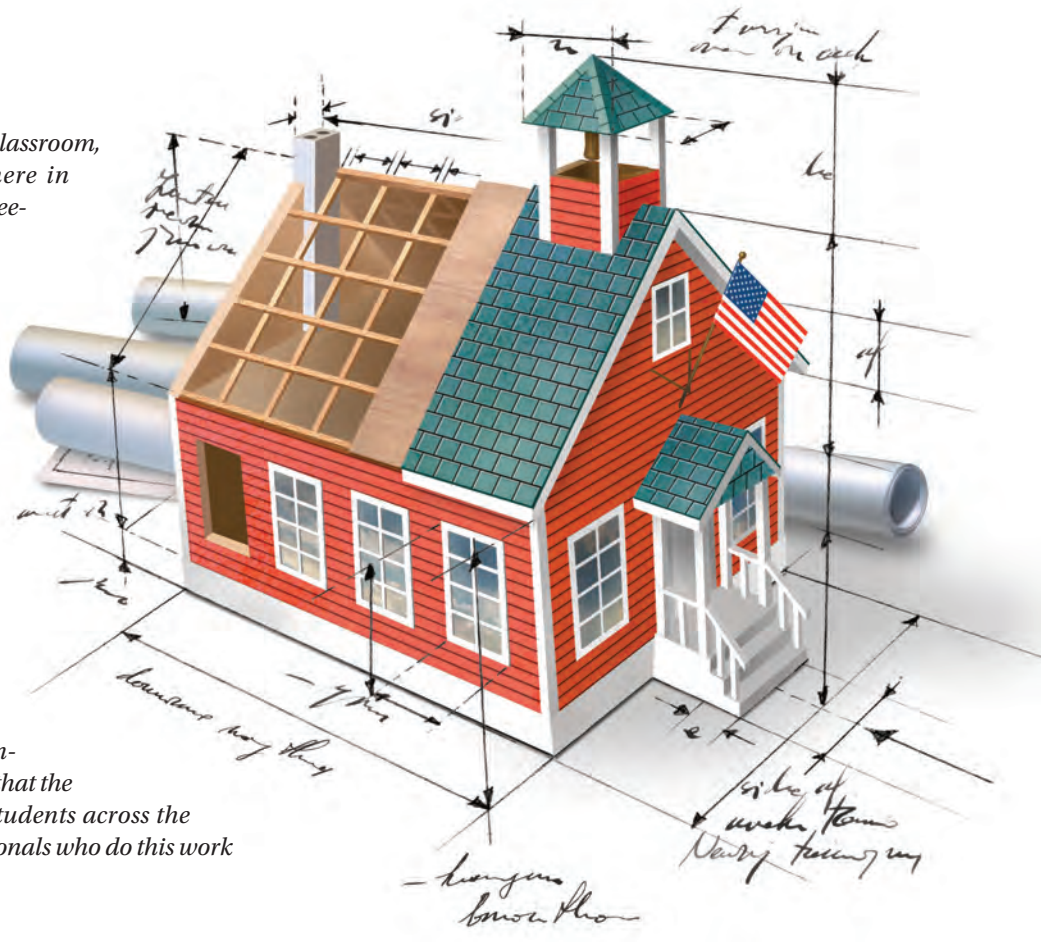
# Pittsburgh's Winning Partnership



*Professional educators—whether in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: seeing all students succeed in school and life. While they take great pride in their students' accomplishments, they also lose sleep over their students' unmet needs. Professional educators routinely meet with students before and after school, examine student work to improve lesson plans, reach out to students' families in the evenings and on the weekends, and strive to increase their own knowledge and skills. And yet, their efforts are rarely recognized by the society they serve.*

*The AFT is committed to supporting these unsung heroes. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—not just their accomplishments, but also their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.*

By Sean D. Hamill

It was sometime in July 2009 that then–Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) Superintendent Mark Roosevelt and then–Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT) President John Tarka had some things to work out. They were in yet another meeting in the midst of three months of incredibly intense work on a proposal to the Gates Foundation that would eventually win them $40 million and national acclaim, and they decided to leave the room where they were meeting with staff.

When they didn't come back for much longer than expected, Rob Weil, director of field programs in the Educational Issues department of the American Federation of Teachers, who was visiting Pittsburgh and sitting in on the meetings, decided to look for them. He expected that maybe each had wandered away individually for a break. Instead, he found them both in Roosevelt's office, huddled together looking over some documents, deep into a conversation that obviously hadn't broken since they left 15 minutes earlier. "This is what needs to happen," he told them.

"I wish more places would do that: have an honest discussion about the issues," Weil says now, thinking back to that visit. "Mark and John already knew that the relationship [between the union and] the district had to change for the future of the kids in Pittsburgh. They said that outright."

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY NENAD JAKESEVIC

In some ways, this is a story about the individuals who put old ways aside to find new, more productive ways of working together. They did not follow a formula or a cookie-cutter approach, and other district and union leaders will have to create their own path to genuine collaboration. But there are important lessons to be learned from Pittsburgh's transformation from traditional, adversarial management-labor relations to the productive partnership that exists today.

## A Challenging Start

John Tarka didn't think much of Pittsburgh Public Schools' decision to hire Mark Roosevelt as its new superintendent on July 27, 2005. "My initial reaction when I heard that he was being hired, and I heard about his background, was 'Oh blank!' " Tarka recalls, editing himself. "Just what we need. Someone with no educational background. Someone who never taught a basic education class, who never ran a school. 'Oh blank!' "

Had he not been primarily worried about the need to close schools right when he started, Roosevelt, a former Massachusetts state legislator only recently graduated from the Broad Superintendents Academy, might have thought something similarly profane about Tarka and the union. Tarka, a no-nonsense former high school English teacher and football coach, had also only recently been appointed to his post as PFT president, taking over two months earlier because the union's legendary leader, Al Fondy, had died after 38 years in the position.

The contract approval margin by teachers had been narrowing over the prior decade. Fondy's death emboldened a long-simmering faction of teachers incensed with smaller and smaller salary increases. They were poised to challenge whoever took over from Fondy. And no one thought anything would change in dealing with the administration.

"We were in survival mode," Nina Esposito-Visgitis, a former district speech-language teacher who is now the union president, said of the union's attitude in 2005. "It was reactive. We'd wait for the district to do something stupid and then we'd fight them."

And the difficult relationship with the union wasn't the half of it. By 2005, the district hadn't come close to achieving the federally mandated "adequate yearly progress." The state threatened a takeover. The district was losing thousands of students a year to parents fleeing for the suburbs and charter schools, which left it with too many schools with too few students. Disputes over everything from test scores to proposed school closings resulted in a fractious nine-member board of public education. "It was unbelievable," Bill Isler, former board president, said of the district's situation leading up to 2005. "It was a dysfunctional board and in many ways a dysfunctional district."

Roosevelt concedes he didn't fully appreciate what he had taken on. "The first year was horrible. The school closings had to be done in the first six months. An expired union contract. A $50 million budget deficit," he said, looking back. "Honestly, if I had to do it again, I couldn't."

But he did. And so did Tarka, the teachers' union, the school administration, the school board, and the foundation and business communities. What they have all done in Pittsburgh is take a floundering urban school district of 26,000 students and pull it from the academic abyss. In five short years, it went from a possible state takeover to the forefront of educational reform, after winning a $40 million Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant for its novel Empowering Effective Teachers proposal in 2009, winning a $37.4 million federal grant to help fund the work, and agreeing on a groundbreaking five-year contract with teachers that formalized what had first been proposed to the Gates Foundation.

## Creating Conditions for Change

The district already has academic gains to show for its pre-Gates work—the district finally attained adequate yearly progress in 2009 for the first time. But the most attention-getting steps have yet to be fully implemented. They include a new teacher evaluation system, a performance-pay system that has an opt-in for existing teachers, an alternative teacher certification program, new career ladder positions, and district-run teaching academies.

Led by core groups from the district and the union, but aided by a burgeoning committee system of teachers who were deeply involved, the district found a way to change its culture.

How PPS and PFT ultimately got to their groundbreaking contract in June 2010 has its roots in the five previous years, with all their ups and downs. Led primarily by core groups of leaders from the district and the union, but aided by a burgeoning committee system of teachers who were deeply involved in many of the changes that came before the contract was even proposed, the district found a way to change its culture.

It all really began a year before Roosevelt was hired.

By 2004, the board had been in internal mediation for a year in an attempt to get over its dysfunction, and by then seven of the nine board members reached an agreement to move in a new direction. To the board majority, that meant bypassing the classically trained education PhDs who applied for the job and going with a nontraditional superintendent. That wasn't unusual anymore in urban districts elsewhere, but it had not yet been tried in Pittsburgh.

When he showed up for his interview, Roosevelt came in confident and full of big ideas, and challenged the board, telling them: "If you're looking for a traditional superintendent, I'm not who you need."

"Once we met him and started talking to him, it was an easy choice," said the school board president, Theresa Colaizzi.

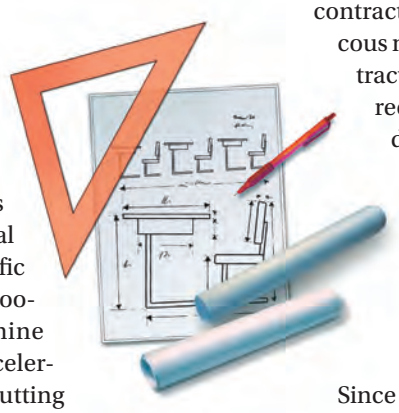
Teachers say the same was true of deciding to install Tarka. But if they thought they were getting a carbon copy of former PFT President Al Fondy, it quickly became obvious he was anything but. When it came time, for example, for negotiations—which were ongoing when Tarka assumed his post—"John

involved us more as a team. Al's situation was very autocratic," said George Gensure, who was a high school math and computer science teacher in the district for 30 years before joining the union staff.

Two weeks after he started, Roosevelt sent the board a memo telling them that he had hired the RAND Corporation and assembled a panel of local nonschool leaders to conduct a dispassionate study to determine which of the district's 88 schools would be best to close, which elementary schools to turn into kindergarten through eighth-grade schools, and which schools would become so-called "accelerated learning academies" with longer school days.

With some schools barely half full, costing the district millions each year in inefficiency at a time the district was facing a $50 million annual deficit, there was no question the district needed to close some. But past efforts to close a few schools each year inevitably got bogged down by individual board members' and parents' desires to keep specific schools open, no matter what. In November 2005, Roosevelt used the study to ask the board to turn nine schools into K–8 schools, turn eight more into accelerated learning academies, and close 20 schools, cutting about 8,400 of the district's 13,700 empty seats and saving $10.3 million annually. To the surprise of many, the recommendation got support from teachers and principals, and both of their unions, and generated relatively little angst from aggrieved parents. The proposal was even expanded to include closing two more schools and turning another building into a K–8 school.

> The union president and superintendent were bothered by the contract negotiation process. Neither liked that, at crucial points, attorneys for both sides were alone in a room deciding the district's future, not the two of them.



Succeeding in closing so many schools all at once, with such little rancor, would become the signature project that first year, building cachet in the district. But it wouldn't be long before Roosevelt would become much more well-known for something very different. On November 10, 2005, the day after Roosevelt proposed closing so many schools, the country learned about the extraordinary offer by a group of anonymous benefactors in Kalamazoo, Michigan, to give a college scholarship to every student who graduated from that struggling city's troubled school district.

The idea seemed almost providential to Roosevelt. Pittsburgh and its public schools, like Kalamazoo and its schools, were losing residents and students at an astonishing rate—1,700 students, or a 5.5 percent loss, in Roosevelt's first year alone. "Managing decline is the roughest management task you can have. And that's what Pittsburgh's been doing for a while," he said. "But if you think about really improving your schools, and having a college scholarship program such as Kalamazoo was exhibiting—hmm, that might do it. That might stem the decline."

Roosevelt announced the Pittsburgh Promise on December 13, 2006, garnering renewed financial support from some of Pittsburgh's biggest employers and foundations. The University of Pittsburgh Medical Center led the way, with a historic $100 million, 10-year commitment. Beyond the money, though, the mere idea of the Pittsburgh Promise became a guiding initiative for everyone in the district to rally around. To demonstrate its support, the teachers' union made the first donation: $10,000—not a lot, but enough to make its point.

## A Traditional Labor-Management Context

From inspiration, to proposal, to funding, the Pittsburgh Promise's creation came amidst a difficult labor backdrop. When both Tarka and Roosevelt took their posts in 2005, the district was already in the middle of negotiations on a contract that expired in June 2005. The two-year contract agreement reached in March 2006 was a standard offer and counteroffer process; opposing attorneys handled the typical issues of wages and other budget-related topics like health care.

For a riled-up opposition led by high school teachers, it was time to challenge Tarka and end a string of substandard contracts. In the first vote, at a still-infamous, raucous meeting of teachers in March 2006, the contract was voted down by about 100 votes. Tarka, recognizing that the opposition faction had a disproportionate presence at the meeting, did an end run. He held more informational meetings across the district and asked for another vote a month later, this time with mail ballots that attracted far more votes—almost 700 more. Almost all of the new votes were in favor of the contract, which was approved.

Since it took so long to reach a contract, there was barely a year left on the two-year deal, and negotiations on the next contract began shortly thereafter, again with the traditional process led by attorneys from each side making offers and counteroffers.

By the end of October 2007, four months after the previous contract expired, Tarka, frustrated by a lack of movement, called for the district's first strike authorization vote in decades; the district hadn't gone on strike since the 1975–1976 school year. It passed resoundingly and teachers began building picket signs. The whole affair had the added benefit of shoring up Tarka's street credibility with his teachers.

"With that first contract, John had just started. The teachers didn't know him," said Esposito-Visgitis, Tarka's successor. "But with the second contract, they saw John leading them."

Three months later, after an all-night negotiation session with school board members, a contract was agreed to and easily approved by mail ballot by the union. The 2007 negotiations and strike authorization vote were reminders that, despite all the good that was in the works, it wasn't a perfectly rosy time in Pittsburgh, and the opportunity to establish productive collabo-

ration teetered precariously on a foundation not yet firmly established.

For Tarka, the incident contained an important lesson for both sides: no one cast aspersions on the other for the strike vote, or claimed victory over the other with the contract. "We were ready to go on strike," Tarka said. "But I didn't say, 'Mark Roosevelt, because he's a legislator from Massachusetts, he doesn't have a goddamned clue what's happening.' And he didn't say, 'Tarka is an old, bald-headed union goon.' We didn't do that. We just didn't do it. I don't think there's any magic to it, but I think it helped when we tried to sit down."

Both Tarka and Roosevelt were bothered by the contract negotiation process. Neither liked that, at crucial points in negotiations, it was attorneys for both sides who were sitting alone in a room deciding the district's near future, not the two of them. They concluded this process wasn't going to happen again.

"That was the old way of doing business," Roosevelt says now.

While leaders of both the union and administration were learning to change their culture, several projects in the district were convincing teachers that real change was possible on the ground, too. One of Roosevelt's first projects when he came to the district was to hire Kaplan K12 to rewrite most of the district's curriculum. But a year into Kaplan's three-year project, teacher feedback committees lambasted the first courses from the New York company. For Linda Lane, who was then the district's deputy superintendent and is now Roosevelt's successor, it was obvious that the district needed to go in a different direction. The district decided to let the teachers write the curriculum, but train them first, and develop a better feedback structure to evaluate what they produced. Engaging teachers in such a big way was the idea of Jerri Lippert, the district's chief academic officer, who realized, "it's kind of foolish not to listen to [teachers]."

For the nearly 200 teachers directly involved in the training, writing, and feedback over two years, the process was transformational. "Before this, I was ready to quit. I was burned out and thinking of leaving teaching," said Adam Deutsch, who teaches math at Allderdice High School and was a lead writer for the district's Algebra I curriculum. "But this really reenergized me." Many teachers appreciated the chance to contribute as professionals and became "advocates in our schools and outspoken about reform efforts," when that wasn't necessarily the case before, according to Deutsch.

## Tackling the Toughest Issues

Late in the summer of 2008, at about the time the first year of the teacher-led curriculum project was under way, Lippert called her counterpart at the union, Mary VanHorn, who worked on teacher professional development but was considering retirement, and told her, "You're not allowed to retire yet. We have to work on this new teacher evaluation system together."

In the two short years since Lippert had come to her post in the administration, she and VanHorn had developed an effective relationship, so much so that VanHorn said, "If Jerri Lippert were to leave the district, I'd retire right away."

The new evaluation system they were about to work on didn't even have a name yet. It came to be known as the Research-Based, Inclusive System of Evaluation, or RISE.

Revamping the district's evaluation system was something both the administration and union leaders long sought. Roosevelt made changing the way the district evaluated and hired principals a primary project when he started. This approach contributed to nearly half of the district's principals changing during his tenure. His goal was to get principals to see themselves as the professional development leaders in their schools. He saw RISE, then, as a natural second step in changing the way the district managed its employees.

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The old evaluation system was often based on as little as one classroom visit by a principal—"and they might not even stay for one whole class if they thought you were good already," Tarka said from his years as a teacher in the district. From that and a few other factors, a teacher would receive a simple "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" annually from the principal. It was seen, at best, as unhelpful; at worst, as simply an onerous way of meting out discipline; and, more typically, as worthless.

"So many of our teachers would say, 'It's not fair. This teacher next door doesn't do what I do, doesn't work as hard, but she gets a satisfactory evaluation like I do,' " said VanHorn, who started as an elementary teacher with the district 44 years ago.

The early work on RISE was done by a core team of Lippert, VanHorn, Esposito-Visgitis, and Jody Buchheit Spolar, the chief human resources officer (and one of the few cabinet-level administrators Roosevelt kept in place when he arrived in Pittsburgh). They began hammering out the framework and process in the fall of 2008, capped by a one-day retreat in December 2008 at the union's office, where "we locked ourselves in a room and just worked through issues," Lippert said.

They worked out the parameters of the program, but then took it to leadership teams of teachers and administrators at all of the district's schools starting in the spring of 2009. They sent out a teacher survey in April to get feedback on the emerging proposals. Then, in a one-day retreat, they showed representatives from each school—nearly 200 people in all—what they thought RISE might look like.

With that system in hand, the district asked for schools to volunteer to pilot RISE in the 2009–2010 school year. They expected to get perhaps a handful of brave schools. In the end, instructional leadership teams of teachers and administrators at 28 schools—nearly half the district—agreed to pilot the program. Representatives from those schools formed the core of the RISE leadership team that over the summer of 2009 drew up the fine print of what RISE would entail. It began with a four-day retreat with the entire team, a setting that was a revelation to those involved.

"What I loved was that all the power players on this were in the room together—the union, the school district, teachers, principals—hammering out the details for the framework for RISE," said Cindy Haigh, a middle school health and physical education teacher for 13 years in the district who was part of the process.

What they developed was a system where the teacher actively engages in his or her evaluation with an administrator. Both of them collect evidence across the school year of four teaching domains: planning and preparation, classroom environment, professional responsibilities, and teaching and learning. Classroom visits by an administrator are preceded and followed by discussions about the lessons being taught. The teacher provides a self-evaluation before the lesson using a rubric that breaks the four teaching domains into 24 components of practice, and the discussions between them focus on areas where they disagree. After each observation, the administrator and teacher meet again to review what was observed and agree on plans for improvement, which are revisited throughout the year and in a final evaluation.

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At the end of the year, rather than a final "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" finding, teachers' practice in each of the 24 components is assessed as distinguished, proficient, basic, or unsatisfactory. "The picture that's given of my performance now is much more fair," Haigh said.

Tarka saw the number of schools willing to pilot RISE as a vote of confidence in the direction the district was headed. "Districts all over the place say 'Here's a new system of teacher evaluation,' and they institute it unilaterally. That's one way to do it," he said. "The second way to do it is do it the way it was done in Pittsburgh, where they brought classroom teachers with years of experience, they brought union representatives, they brought school principals, they brought central administrators to hammer out this collaborative approach to teacher evaluation so teachers simply wouldn't get 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory.' That helped set a tone of working together that was very important."

## Building on Momentum to Accelerate Reform

In mid-January 2009, Roosevelt got a call he had hoped for, but did not expect. John Deasy, then–deputy director of education for the Gates Foundation, called to say the foundation was taking a close look at the district to see if it could assist its efforts with a grant.

According to Deasy, what Gates found during its evaluation was basic, but essential: "There was persistence through conversation, with absolute honesty between leadership. No one gave up when the going got tough, and they were truly working for the kids." So, in April 2009, Deasy called to say that Pittsburgh was one of 10 finalists invited to craft a funding proposal. Roosevelt thought the timing of Deasy's call was perfect. "We were so ready because we'd done the precursor work," he said. "We'd done the work on curriculum and the work on principals, and we were working on RISE.... So, the timing was really, really good for us."

The district was given three months to bring Gates a proposal demonstrating how it would change. In May, central administration and union core leadership—typically six people each, including Roosevelt and Tarka—plus several consultants paid for by Gates, and later two dozen more people as part of a subcommittee structure, began meeting several times a week and nearly daily during that last month. Compared to most of the district's prior reform work—on RISE and rewriting the curriculum—the Gates proposal was intentionally done with a concentrated core. "It was on a tight timeline, with a big goal, making it incredibly intense. It had to be a smaller group," said Lane, Roosevelt's successor (Roosevelt left the district in December 2010 to lead the creation of Antioch College in Ohio). To the dismay of everyone, though, the Gates process started out like so many prior negotiations, from things as basic as both sides sitting in union and administration groups on opposite sides of the table, to the general attitude. "It was a lot of people just working out of old paradigms. If I think I want 1,000 of something, I'll ask for 1,200 so I'll end up where I want to be," said Buchheit Spolar, who came to the district in 1986 after working in labor relations in the steel industry. "It's hard to break out of that thinking."

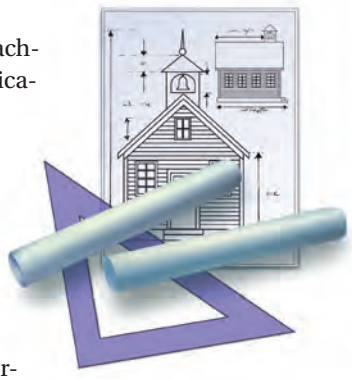
Early on, Tarka and Roosevelt began meeting privately to talk about specific issues, and they agreed to push their cabinets on both sides to deal with each other in a new way. "We said, 'What if we pretend none of us has any affiliation other than we're involved in education here. We want to improve outcomes here. You guys are union guys, we're management guys, but let's forget that. Let's just start putting up problems on the wall. All right. We've made a lot of progress in K–8. We've made none in high schools. That's pretty crappy. And we're embarrassed by that, and we should be embarrassed. So, let's just put something up like high school diplomas. Let's leave our swords and shields outside the room. Let's agree everything's private, no one's gonna be held accountable, and let's talk. What would you do? What would I do?' " Roosevelt recalled.

Lane noted that working on the Gates proposal built on prior collaborative work and also strengthened the relationships at the same time. "Doing something really hard together really builds

trust," Lane said while reflecting on the intense work during the summer of 2009. In awarding $40 million for the district's Empowering Effective Teachers proposal in November 2009, Gates told the district it believed that relationships had truly changed.

What the district proposed was a plan based on three priorities: to increase the number of highly effective teachers, to put more highly effective teachers in front of high-needs students, and to create environments that promote college readiness for all students. The district said it would pursue those priorities with seven initiatives:

1. Create a Promise-Readiness Corps of highly effective teachers who stay with the same students in ninth and tenth grades—which is when many students drop out—with a goal of getting them to eleventh grade ready for college, or "Promise-Ready" as the district now refers to it;
2. Refine RISE and implement a project to assess who is a highly effective teacher;
3. Improve teacher recruitment, hire new teachers earlier, and create an alternative certification program;
4. Foster a positive teaching and learning environment in every classroom for teachers and students;
5. Create a teacher academy to shepherd new teachers and provide professional development for experienced teachers;
6. Create a new performance-pay and career-ladder system that links performance to the opportunity for new, higher-paying jobs with expanded responsibilities, and also seeks to put more effective teachers in front of high-needs students; and
7. Create a new technology system that gives teachers more tools to be highly effective.



## Sealing the Deal

As exhilarating as winning that grant and making bold proposals was, it all still needed to be put into a new contract, with the old one about to expire in June 2010. "The fact that we had put ideas into the Gates process was important because it helped establish the framework for collective bargaining," Tarka said.

After the 2009 year-end holidays, Roosevelt and Tarka talked about the upcoming negotiations, and both agreed they wouldn't use any attorneys in direct talks—though attorneys would review what they agreed to—and there would be no board members engaged in the negotiations. Neither wanted to go back to the 2007 negotiation when there was "a great deal of time wasted, great deal of money wasted, a lot of posturing and crossing t's and dotting i's," said Tarka. It was a startling move, but with all the other changes the two sides would make in crafting this new contract, as Buchheit Spolar put it, "the entire collective bargaining process was turned on its head anyway."

Among the biggest changes was the first negotiating session in January 2010. The attendees were just Roosevelt and Buchheit Spolar for the administration, and Tarka and George Gensure for the union. "I put a one-page paper on the table and said, 'I think this is the outline of our settlement,' and everyone more or less agreed," Buchheit Spolar said. "We spent the next four months defining that one-page settlement."

After a month's worth of meetings, Tarka decided he needed to bring in most of his core leaders. "I told them I was not going to try to explain to my key staff every time we had a meeting. Because then I was doubling the work. And also they were being secondhand recipients," said Tarka. In addition, he needed multiple voices to give firsthand accounts of exactly what was happening to spread the truth through the union. He wanted VanHorn, Esposito-Visgitis, then–PFT Secretary Sylvia Wilson, and Bill Hileman, who played an integral role throughout the Gates proposal process, to be participants in the bargaining.

From there, the two groups worked in concert, drawing up specific definitions for those areas it had proposed to Gates, but leaving some of them open-ended, to be worked out in one- and two-year-long committee structures within the district, such as how the Promise-Readiness Corps would function. The negotiations became an extension of the methods and process the two groups had developed during the Gates grant work, which Roosevelt liked to say was simply "adults solving problems together."

In awarding $40 million for the district's Empowering Effective Teachers proposal in November 2009, the Gates Foundation told the district it believed that relationships had truly changed.

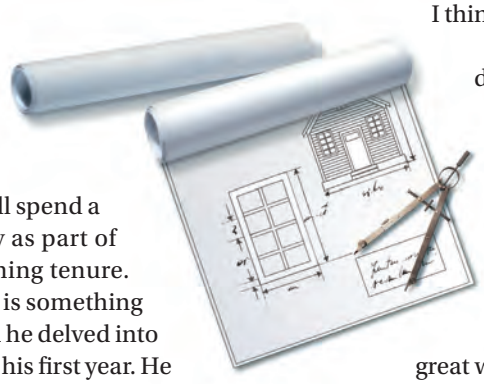
One of the areas where they worked the hardest was the performance-pay package. Tarka asked Esposito-Visgitis to head up, and eventually write, that portion of the contract. "I loathed the idea," she said. "I don't think it's fair. I haven't seen it done fairly and we're trying to make it work fairly. But John made me write it, because I'm the RISE queen and worked so much on that with Mary [VanHorn]." Tarka said it was specifically because she knew the objections to performance pay so well that he chose her. "She would anticipate what members would object to, because the concerns she had were very legitimate concerns."

There were two main objections: the district's teachers had worked under the current experience-based, step-salary system for decades, so asking them to vote to scrap that would never fly; and there simply was no proof anyone could find that performance-pay systems work well. "You can approach these things a couple different ways," Tarka said. "You can approach it with a bludgeon and impose it on everyone. It's easy to find performance-pay plans like that that haven't worked and are viewed negatively in many school districts. We got feedback on one performance-pay plan where teachers regarded it as 'winning the lottery' because they had no idea what they did to earn it."

In contrast, "if you provide, as we did, a number of career ladder positions, for which people apply and have to show their eligibility, that's a key way to get performance pay in place that might work," Tarka said. "We've also done work so that school-wide performance can be recognized, district-wide performance can be recognized. A couple of the plans do recognize student achievement, but rather than do some of the negative things that some traditional performance-pay plans have done in terms of divide and alienate, it's more based on a school working together and a district working together to try to raise student achievement overall."

The six new career ladder positions—from teacher leaders and mentors, to Promise-Readiness Corps teachers, to instructors at the new teachers' academies—will pay $9,300 to $13,300 more annually. Teachers in those positions will work longer days and a longer school year.

Also, in a move designed to get what they knew would be hard votes anyway, the contract provides an opt-in provision to the performance-pay package for regular classroom teachers. That is, existing teachers can stay on the standard payment schedule if they choose to, and still earn more money under the contract, including $1,500 more per year if a teacher is already at the top of the scale. Teachers hired since July 1, 2010, have been required to be part of the performance-pay system.



New teachers in core subjects will spend a year in the new teachers' academy as part of their new four-year process of earning tenure. Tightening up tenure requirements is something Roosevelt began emphasizing when he delved into principal evaluation and training in his first year. He reminded principals that, though schools rightly get blamed for having too many bad tenured teachers, state law leaves granting tenure up to the district. Awarding tenure inevitably falls on the principals who evaluate the teachers.

Details of exactly how teachers would be evaluated under the new contract that will qualify them for higher pay were left to a committee structure to work out over the next two years. The same is true for components of the Promise-Readiness Corps, which were intentionally left unwritten in the contract—a decision Tarka said has been confusing, but was necessary. He told teachers, "We didn't want to work it all out before we passed the contract and bring you a deal that said, 'Here's what it is.' Instead we're more interested in working on it together, getting practitioner input … and how we determine how effective it is."

The district was elated when the contract was approved with little rancor in June 2010, and then doubly so three months later when the federal government finally approved a $37.4 million grant to help fund the new programs.

So how did it all happen? Roosevelt pegs it to one change that evolved over the last two years of his tenure in particular: "I don't go many days without talking to John. I ask him for advice on everything. If I have a decision to make that seemingly has nothing to do with him, I'm gonna call John and ask his advice," he said. "It's not shared governance, but it's approaching some version of shared governance. And I think it gets you a lot."

Tarka, with his long history through the ups and downs of the last four decades in the district, sees the successes in historic scope. "This last chapter of this story began in 2005 when [former superintendent] John Thompson was pushed out, when Al Fondy died, when Mark Roosevelt came in," said Tarka. "When we were at one of the lowest points we had been as a school district. There were efforts by some to destroy the union because they saw Al's demise as a time of great weakness, and it was. We were really rock bottom. There were many, many nights when I woke up at 3 a.m. and didn't get back to sleep. And I'm sure Roosevelt did too. But you fight and you grapple and you get through the process and you realize perhaps if we treat each other fairly, perhaps we can make some real changes here." ❐

## Lessons to Share

The story of the partnership between the Pittsburgh Public Schools and the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers offers a powerful counterpoint to the current rhetoric about district-union relations. At its core, the story is deceptively simple. District and union leadership modeled a new way of partnering. Successive, successful collaborations on issues that grew in complexity built trust, capacity, and a sense of possibility. A commitment to focus on vision and problem solving created space for creativity. And engaging teachers at every step in the work built ownership, leveraged expertise, and led to better results for teachers, the system, the union, and, most importantly, for students and their learning. Boiling the themes from the PPS-PFT partnership down, four strategies emerge that other school districts and teachers' unions may want to pursue:

- Communicate and collaborate on a wide range of topics to create shared understanding on substantive issues and a track record of constructive collaboration that supports contract negotiations.
- Demonstrate from the top of both the school system and the union a commitment to genuine dialogue and partnership, creating an example for others to emulate.
- Embrace uncertainty and commit to learning through design and implementation to support the pursuit of ambitious goals and to create joint ownership for developing solutions.
- Replace traditional negotiations with a problem-solving approach that defines priorities for the work of the district and its teachers first, and then drafts contract provisions to reflect the priorities. Consider ways to limit the role of lawyers and expand the role of practitioners.

–S.D.H.