

'We Wanted a Voice'

For most charter school teachers, rights, job security remain elusive

When Christina Marasco-Lopreste was looking for a new teaching job, it was the Conservatory Lab Charter School that sang to her. The pre-kindergarten teacher was drawn to the school's clear focus and the innovative way that music was incorporated into every aspect of the curriculum. "The school just really stood out to me," recalls Marasco-Lopreste, who joined the faculty of the Brighton K-5 school three years ago.



STANDING TOGETHER Teachers at the Conservatory Lab Charter School in Brighton chose to form a union so that they would have more of a say in how the school is run. From left: Christina Marasco-Lopreste, Jennifer Gionfriddo and Michelle Marzi.

Federation Focus

As excited as she was about Conservatory's mission, though, Marasco-Lopreste soon found herself questioning the way the school was being run. "There was a lot of turnover among teachers and the leadership was constantly changing." And the tumult at the top—Conservatory has gone through six principals in the ten years since its doors opened—had real consequences for teachers at the school, notes Marasco-Lopreste. New administrators meant new programs, new standards and a pervasive sense of insecurity among Conservatory staff.

"You start to wonder: 'how am I going to be judged this time around?' and 'is my job secure?'" As teacher turnover rates soared, topping 50% in a typical year, students at Conservatory were affected too. "The kids didn't know from year to year who was going to be teaching them," says Marasco-Lopreste.

At faculty meetings, in less formal discussions, even happy hours, the small, close-knit group of teachers worked to identify problems at the school and

began to talk about ways that they thought the climate there might be improved. "There were so many issues related to working conditions," recalls Mona Rashad, who taught violin at Conservatory when it first opened in 2000 then returned to the school in 2004. "One day, one of the other teachers just sort of put it out there. She said 'you know, if we had a teachers union, we wouldn't be having all of these problems.'"

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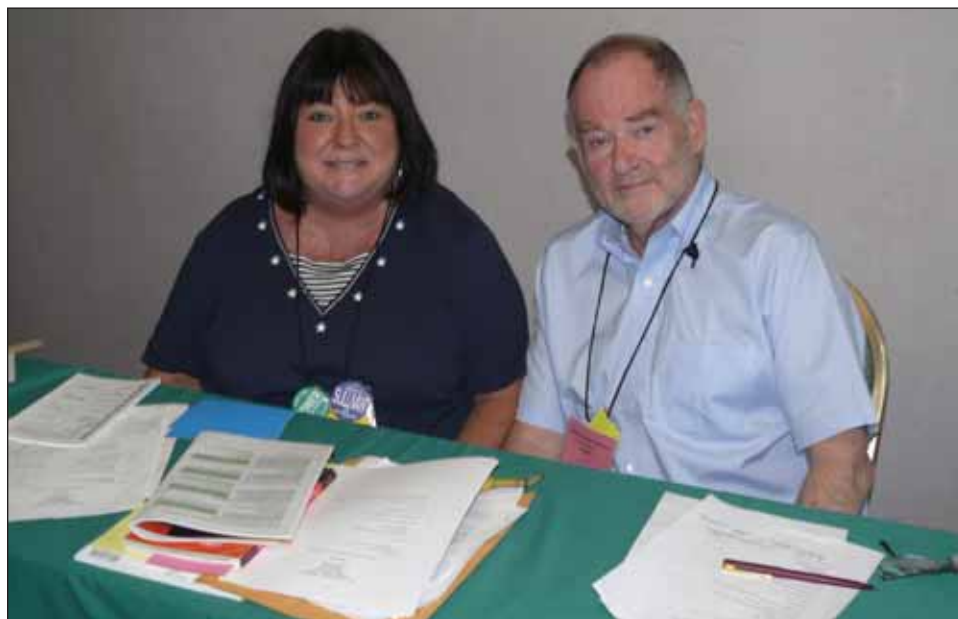
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Two Teacher Unions, One Cause

At a recent hearing at the Massachusetts State House about Governor Patrick's education proposals, the leaders of both statewide teachers unions sounded a similar message. The turn-around plans for low-performing schools being advocated on Beacon Hill, they argued, cut teacher rights and limit their roles in the reform process. "Teachers and their unions are part of the solution," said Anne Wass, president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association or MTA.

These days the two unions are joining forces on a host of education-related issues. The MTA and AFT Massachusetts recently agreed to partner on an innovative early childhood education campaign that seeks to direct more resources to the state's early childhood centers. Last spring, in a sign of the new spirit of unity, the two organizations held a joint meeting of their respective governing boards.



COMMON GROUND The Massachusetts Teachers Association and AFT Massachusetts are increasingly finding ways to work together to address common challenges. Seen here: Anne Wass, president of the MTA, and Tom Gosnell, president of AFT MA

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'Walking on Eggshells.'

Nearly 2,000 teachers are currently employed by charter schools in Massachusetts, a number that could increase significantly if state lawmakers approve a measure being pushed by Governor Deval Patrick. (See October 2009 Advocate.) Unlike traditional public school teachers, educators at charter schools cannot negotiate with administrators over how the schools are run; nor are their rights and working conditions spelled out by the contracts that protect every other public school teacher in the state. "Teachers are often attracted to charter schools because they offer an opportunity to be creative and innovative," says AFT Massachusetts organizer Dan Justice. "But the fact that teachers have no guaranteed voice at these schools makes it extremely difficult for them when problems arise."

unsustainably high. "Just the idea that you can be fired at the whim and will of administrators creates a very fearful atmosphere," says Idzik.

It is also a situation that Idzik understands all too well. In 2005 he joined the staff of the Frederick Douglass Charter School in Boston after years of teaching in public schools in and around the city. When an administrator evaluated him in a way he considered unfair, Idzik quickly realized that he was powerless to do anything about it. "If you have a union you get a chance to respond—you have a chance to review what's going into your file." Even control over the school calendar lay entirely in the hands of administrators. "Parent meetings might be scheduled with a week's notice, and if you weren't there your pay would be docked and a negative would go into your file," says Idzik.

There's this argument that if you have a union in the school then the school isn't innovative. But that's a real misconception. The staff has big ideas; we care about the kids. We don't feel that having a union negates that.

—Christina Marasco-Lopreste, Conservatory Lab Charter School

Justice, who assisted the Conservatory Lab teachers in their successful effort to form a union, says that he receives a steady stream of inquiries from charter school teachers seeking more of a say in how their schools are run. One common complaint: job insecurity—charter school teachers typically must have their employment agreement renewed every year, meaning that they never know whether they'll have a job in the next school year. "Over and over again, we're hearing that all of the power at these schools rests in the hands of the principal and that the teachers are basically walking on eggshells."

Needed: a counterweight

History teacher Chris Idzik formerly served as an evaluator for the state, assessing the performance of charter schools to determine whether or not they should have their charters renewed. He visited nearly a dozen schools, including the Conservatory Lab Charter School, interviewing teachers about their working conditions. And while the missions of the specific schools differed, there was a disturbing familiarity to the challenges faced by staff members, says Idzik. Teachers were being hired at variable rates of pay; classroom assignments—even the number of students in a classroom—were often based on who the administrators liked; attrition rates among teachers were

The experience teaching at Frederick Douglass, which ultimately lost its charter and closed its doors, convinced him that charter teachers are in desperate need a voice. "Teachers in these buildings need a counterweight to the whims and will of administrators. The state has to understand that."

The innovation challenge

Proponents of charter schools argue that it is the absence of negotiated contracts between teachers and administrators that makes the schools laboratories for innovation. But a growing number of charter school teachers say that the opposite is the case—that putting too much power in the hands of a single principal or director makes innovation harder, not easier. One such teacher, who spoke to the *Advocate* on the condition that neither his name nor the name of the school where he teaches be identified, described a culture in which teachers fear that they could lose their jobs at any time, where the principal challenges sick days and recently cut teachers' prep time in half—with no explanation. "We want to do these great things with the kids," the teacher told the *Advocate*. "But I also want to know that I'm making a fair wage, that I'm going to have a job next year and that procedures aren't suddenly going to change."

Come together now

At Conservatory Lab Charter School, there is a sense of celebration in the air these days. After voting last fall to form the first union at a Massachusetts charter school, teachers there spent the spring and summer negotiating a contract with school administrators. Both sides approved the historic agreement this fall. The new contract, a three year agreement, includes 'just cause' language—teachers and staff were formerly employees at will, meaning that they could be fired at any



IN HARMONY Mona Rashad, who taught violin at the Conservatory Lab Charter School from 2000-2001 and again from 2005-2009, says she wishes teachers there had decided to organize a union sooner. "If we'd started the process earlier, we wouldn't have had two years of mass exodus from the school."

time, for any reason—and a grievance procedure with binding arbitration. Jennifer Gionfriddo, a kindergarten teacher who helped to negotiate the contract, says that the teachers set out to address the chronic instability at Conservatory resulting from the ever-changing leadership. "We used to have a one year contract that had to be renewed by administrators every year," says Gionfriddo. "But new administrators had no way to assess whether we'd grown from the previous year."

Key to the new three year agreement is an evaluation tool that teachers at the school will be instrumental in designing. Third grade teacher Michelle Marzi, a bargaining committee member, says that the goal is to develop a comprehensive

evaluation mechanism that is genuinely helpful for teachers. "We're saying 'judge the whole teacher'—don't just come in the classroom twice a year for a quick observation," says Marzi.

As for the argument that having a union runs counter to the spirit of experimentation touted by charter school proponents, the Conservatory teachers say they couldn't disagree more. "There's this argument that if you have a union in the school then the school isn't innovative. That's a real misconception," says Marasco-Lopreste. "This is the most innovative school I've ever taught at. The staff has big ideas—we care about kids. Having a union doesn't negate that." ■

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