

Teach Plus Teacher Roundtable

Reactions to the BTU/BPS Contract Negotiations

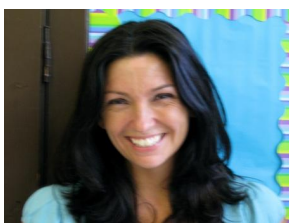
In October 2012, the Boston Teachers Union ratified a new teachers' contract after more than 24 months of negotiations. The following are four reflections from Boston Public Schools teachers, describing their individual perspectives on what the new contract will mean for them, for their students, and for their profession.



“Career ladders are key to keeping effective teachers in the classroom.” – Andrew Vega, Orchard Gardens K-8



“While none of these is a game-changer in and of itself, together they positively impact the development and retention of exemplary BPS teachers while providing more support to all teachers.” – Riana Good. BTU Pilot School



“Strong unions create working conditions that allow the focus to be where it belongs, on the teaching and learning.” – Jennifer DiSarcina, Eliot K-8



“When the focal point of our education system is on the adults and not the students, student achievement suffers.” – Nicholas Gesualdi, Orchard Gardens K-8

Andrew Vega



My perspective on our new contract stems from my experience teaching in the Los Angeles Unified School District before moving to Boston, having witnessed contract negotiations there and a union that operates very differently from the Boston Teachers Union. Overall, I have a more positive perspective of the new contract because, from a national standpoint, it truly is a great contract overall. In light of that, I do have some specific points:

Areas of Praise

1. I am thrilled to see that provisional teachers are now eligible for **tuition reimbursement**.

As a teacher who moved from another state and district, but has been teaching longer than three years, I appreciate that the district recognizes any additional education I pursue. We must continue to provide different career tracks for teachers outside of administration, and encouraging additional learning through tuition reimbursement is a great way to create that culture.

2. The addition of the **Lead Teacher** role in the building is an excellent way to add to a career path for teachers that does not inevitably end in a transition into administration. The selection process as well as the definition of the role will add to the overall effectiveness of the role in Boston Public Schools. Conducting the selection process as an executive decision by the principal under the recommendation of a sub-committee (rather than a vote by teachers) adds to the objectivity as well as the prestige of the role. Because principals work with the lead teacher to clearly define what his/her role will be in the building, individual schools can tweak the duties of Lead Teachers so that they most benefit areas of need to increase student achievement. Teacher leaders have been crucial to the turnaround at my current school, Orchard Gardens. Career ladders are key to keeping effective teachers in the classroom.

3. Granting **paraprofessionals first consideration** will improve the career ladder and increase the culture of professionalism in the paraprofessional role. I am excited to see that the new contract recognizes the work these professionals do and how they serve our students, by providing them with clear paths into teaching positions. Creating a ladder for paraprofessionals that allows them to earn recommendations by a school administrator will aid them in constantly increasing effectiveness in the classrooms they serve.

Area of Concern

1. The dates in the **timeline for the implementation of the evaluation system** are “provided as guidance.” Working in a turnaround school, I have already seen what the new evaluation looks like in its application. Not providing hard deadlines for teachers and principals does a disservice to the purpose of evaluation—to help teachers hone their craft for the betterment of student achievement. With deadlines comes the ability to set goals and effectively track a teacher’s path toward achieving them. If we do not hold teachers and evaluators accountable to executing all facets of the evaluation in a timely fashion, the evaluation will not be an effective way to gauge teacher professional development.

Riana Good

The recent BTU/BPS contract may not be groundbreaking, but it paves the way towards a more “professional” teaching profession. As a teacher who shares in leadership and decision-making at the teacher-led Boston Teachers Union Pilot School, I see these six changes as particularly valuable for increasing teacher voice and leadership across the district:



1. Establishing the BTU Professional Development Institute, to be staffed by a Coordinator who is a member of the BTU, both honors teacher voice and leadership, and makes PD offerings more in-tune with teachers’ professional development needs. The PD Institute will hold the BTU more accountable for PD, providing a constructive outlet to address past criticism of current professional development quality and offerings. Because PD options for World Language teachers like me are currently slim to none, I look forward to having more say in the direction of future PD.

2. Establishing Lead Teacher positions at each school acknowledges the value of teacher leadership and the need for job growth and increased responsibility within the teaching profession. In their new role, Lead Teachers can model professional practices and lead school teams to examine the impact of teaching practice on student learning. Though the union had pushed for a more democratic selection process, ‘term limits’, and a job description that

recognized the nuances of a hybrid role, the resulting Lead Teacher position still allows for personnel subcommittee recommendations and a job description developed with input from the Lead Teacher. Future revisions of the position should take into consideration a more representative model so that the voices of various constituents of a school's faculty are heard through multiple teacher liaisons.

3. Increasing the number of Peer Assistants from four to five will support more teachers in their classrooms. Modeling the role of mentor teachers also moves schools towards on-going exchange of feedback and collaboration among all teachers.

4. Increasing tuition reimbursements, from \$0 to \$500 for provisional teachers and \$500 to \$1000 for permanent teachers, acknowledges the benefits of continuing studies and growth for teachers.

5. Creating the Academic Ladder Credit (ALC), an alternative, tuition-free credit for academic lane advancement, provides incentive for teachers to take a series of courses developed by the district. More opportunities for both content-based and leadership-based learning will create career and leadership opportunities that grow teacher roles while allowing them to remain in the classroom.

6. The new Post-Transfer Placement Process (PTPP) eliminates the stigma of the excess pool, which has been considered a discard pool by many administrators. Now that up to 20% of teachers in a school can voluntarily excess themselves (as is already the case with pilot and turnaround schools), the excess pool can be seen as an opportunity rather than a menace. Teachers have more options for mobility within the district, and thus choice in joining schools

While none of these is a game-changer in and of itself, together they positively impact the development and retention of exemplary BPS teachers while providing more support to all teachers. In combination, the incentives for professional development and the additional leadership roles move us closer to professionalization and a process of Peer Assistance and Review (PAR), which was discussed during contract negotiations, but left out because each side had very different views on its structure. A district-wide implementation of PAR would provide career advancement for coaches, support for all teachers, and higher retention of new teachers, and so should be at the heart of the next round of contract negotiations in 2016.

Jennifer DiSarcina



Teaching in urban schools in both the D.C. Metro area and Boston for 13 years, I have been conflicted for years by evaluations.

I feel empowered, proud, and energized by how my evaluators spoke about what they see from my students, specifically through my teaching and instructional choices.

I feel honored when they commend my professionalism and the multiple ways I extend myself to colleagues and families. Then I am given the written evaluation to sign...and there is that word: **satisfactory**. Satisfactory. Such a distasteful, broad, and uninspiring word for an inordinate amount of effort on behalf of my classroom and students. This is the feedback that will live in my human resources file for anyone in the district to see, people who may never see me teach: my professional reputation. I am satisfactory, and my labors are tantamount to a series of 6-10 checkmarks on the left column on a page.

After 27 months of negotiations on behalf of the teachers, paraprofessionals, nurses, and substitutes, the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) has put forth a new Bargaining Agreement that will help teachers elevate their profession through critical feedback from evaluators.

How can a tighter, more specific evaluation help teachers? By giving us the specific feedback we need to know what we are doing well instructionally and professionally. By giving us constructive criticism, paired with a pathway of tools and professional development for improvement, to help us move from 'good' to 'great.' Professional teachers, those who see our craft as a vocation, love to learn, and strive to improve so that we may reach each and every student to help them achieve at their own personal best. True, valid, effective, and earnest evaluations can help us achieve that goal.

According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), the "focus of the new evaluation tool [will be] on improving educator quality, including more detailed, timely, and constructive feedback." Specifically, the end goal is to "enhance the professionalism and accountability of teachers and administrators that will enable them to assist all students to perform at high levels."

I am excited about the opportunity for authentic feedback as prescribed in our new BTU contract. I feel empowered that I can set my own goals after some reflection and self-assessment. Co-creating goals and an action plan allow me to grow as an individual educator while advancing my students' learning and my school's effectiveness as a whole. Additionally, I support the idea that teachers who are not meeting standards will be given specific and timely feedback to implement in their classroom so not only they improve as teachers, but their students should see a more immediate benefit as well. Teachers who do not improve after multiple cycles of immediate feedback and prescriptions for improvement will not be allowed to advance on the salary scale. I think this is fair and what's best for our collective members and students.

Strong unions create working conditions that allow the focus to be where it belongs, on the teaching and learning. Strong union states, like Massachusetts, consistently top national rankings on assessments like the NAEP and evaluations from publishers such as *Education Week*. The evaluation piece of our new BTU contract provides a real opportunity for the union and its teachers, both collectively and individually, to move student achievement through advancing and improving teaching and learning.

As a teacher at a formerly persistently underperforming and current turnaround school (Orchard Gardens K-8 Pilot School), I am headstrong in my advocacy of policies that promote my students' best interests. The amazing students whom I've come to know during my 2.5 years as a BPS teacher have proven time and again that their capabilities far exceed the objective measures that suggested they were some of the lowest academically performing students in the Commonwealth.

Nicholas Gesualdi



When the focal point of our education system is on the adults and not the students, student achievement suffers. The recently negotiated contract between the BTU and the BPS is an example of this. Instead of a singular focus on improving student outcomes, the BTU and BPS negotiated a contract that maintained the status quo, choosing to pass on addressing several areas of student need.

The majority of the contract is the boilerplate evaluation framework designed by the Department of Elementary & Secondary Education pursuant to the passage of 603 CMR 35.00.

All Massachusetts districts are required to collectively bargain on evaluation, with the state standard as the minimum performance requirement for teachers. With their backs against the wall by the state regulations, both parties chose to take the easy way out. The opportunity to be at the forefront of the coming evaluations and openly and actively promote a culture of accountability was lost. Nationally, the education landscape is shifting towards having real, meaningful accountability, and in Massachusetts, it's already here. Boston had the opportunity to be proactive and to lead, but they chose to stay on the sidelines instead. Will this provide a small benefit to students suffering from ineffective instruction? Sure. But will it promote a culture of student achievement throughout the district? Only time will tell.

Is this the best we can do for our kids?

As a result of the bickering, press releasing, and campaigning, \$9.4 million dollars in federal grants for teacher leadership bonuses were lost along the way. My school, Orchard Gardens K-8, has a cadre of Teach Plus Turnaround Teacher Team (T3) leaders whose shared leadership has helped to make it a model of how turnarounds can work. The forfeited Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) monies put this effective team leadership model in jeopardy at Orchard Gardens and other turnaround schools. Without the financial flexibility of TIF grant monies, opportunities for teachers to further invest in their schools through leadership positions will become scarce. As it stands in the contract, \$2250 will be provided to each school (under 1,000 students; schools that are larger will get two allotments) to promote a single lead teacher--a significant departure from the opportunities presented by the TIF grant monies.

Is this the best we can do for our kids?

Another casualty of the process was the extension of the school day. BPS initially proposed a 45 minute extension to the school day, one of the shortest of any urban district in the country. Even though the contract includes language that provides annual raises for teachers, the BTU insisted on additional compensation for the extended time. A contract is a means of defining a relationship between parties (in this case, teachers and the district). In many ways, a newly negotiated contract is a fresh redefinition of this relationship. Although the contract provides for a modest increase in wage, the BTU insisted upon an hour for hour increase in wage, over and above the raises negotiated. Teachers surely are not as valued by society as they should be, both financially and otherwise, but at the end of the day, our commitment has to be to the students. The vast majority of our students would benefit from increased time in school with their teachers, but under this contract, nothing is accomplished to support that goal.

So, I say again, is this the best we can do for our kids?

Conclusion

The contract has been a long time in coming. We acknowledge and appreciate the long hours and extensive compromises that took place. As teachers, there are pieces that make us hopeful, pieces that we have to learn to live with, and pieces that inspire us to participate in shaping future contracts to better serve all of our students. It is incumbent upon all of us to keep informed about education issues in Boston, Massachusetts and the nation at large. Going forward, the needs of students must always take precedence when negotiating between divergent district and union positions.