



New Organizations, New Voices

The Landscape of Today's Teachers Shaping Policy

Kaitlin Pennington June 2013

Introduction and summary

In the past five years, a number of grassroots groups and fellowships have emerged across the United States with the goal of giving teachers a greater role and a stronger voice in improving everything from the professional practice of teaching to the way the profession is governed. These groups are often called “teacher-voice organizations,” and in many cases they are established with the aim of giving practicing teachers direct access to influence the policies that affect their practice.

Education scholars note the powerful benefits of having *teacher voice* at the table when education policy is being discussed—both for teachers and for the educational system as a whole. According to Julia Koppich, an education policy analyst and labor and management expert:

While teachers do not have a monopoly on educational wisdom, their first-hand perspective gives them a unique and critical vantage point from which to assess the efficacy of educational policy decisions. Omitting them from this arena seems an approach destined to create more problems than it solves.¹

As education policies have evolved and recent policy initiatives have worked to expose the organizational and structural barriers to improving teaching, teacher voice in policy is perhaps more relevant and important than ever before. “There are people far removed from the classroom making decisions that impact what happens in classrooms,” says William Wong, a member of Educators 4 Excellence Los Angeles and the president of the San Gabriel Teachers Association. “It’s important that teacher input be considered, as they’re the practitioners that implement policies each day with students.”

These new teacher-voice organizations, however, are not the only teacher groups—or the largest groups—to push on issues around the teaching profession. Until recently, teachers unions were the loudest and sometimes the only voices representing teachers and their interests. It’s important to note that not all teachers agree with these new emerging groups or with the positions of the nation’s two

largest teachers unions. Yet the birth of these new groups reveals a fact that was previously hidden: Teacher voice is not monolithic. The very existence of teacher-voice groups and their growth has been noted and has prompted union leaders and others to look more closely at their diverse missions and messages. As Bill Raabe, director of the National Education Association's Center for Great Public Schools, points out:

I think these organizations will help raise teacher voice, and we're going to clearly partner with a number of them to bring their voice into the union and also to think about how to use those voices more strategically in the policy debates. ... And I'm talking about voices of practicing teachers that maybe wouldn't have been involved in the union [without teacher voice organizations].²

Many teacher-voice groups are working under the assumption that involvement in policy discussions also affords teachers leadership opportunities not yet seen in our current education system. School districts experimenting with career ladders for teachers have begun to consider working with the teacher-voice organizations to increase opportunities for teacher professional development. Officials of the District of Columbia Public Schools, or DCPS, have added teacher-voice-organization opportunities such as the Hope Street Group National Teacher Fellowship, the Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellowship, and the U.S. Department of Education's Teaching Ambassador Fellowship to their list of leadership-training experiences in DCPS's career-ladder program for teachers known as the Leadership Initiative For Teachers, or LIFT.³ For some leaders of the new teacher-voice groups, the inclusion of their leadership opportunities as part of what districts consider to be official training begins to fulfill one of the goals of teacher-voice groups: elevating the teaching profession by providing teachers with leadership opportunities outside of the classroom while continuing to teach.

This report highlights several common characteristics and many unique differences among the teacher-voice organizations and fellowships. The commonalities and differences in the teacher-voice organizations and fellowships suggest that the current education-reform environment has spurred the birth of these groups that are all working toward getting more teachers directly involved in the policies that impact their daily teaching experiences. But the way in which the organizations go about getting the teachers involved is unique to each group's individual founding principles, missions, and structures. Yet, as mentioned above, there are basic elements shared by teacher-voice groups and fellowships, which include the following:

- Each organization or fellowship was formed using a unique grassroots model.
- Teacher-voice organizations and fellowships operate under the premise that teacher voice is not monolithic.
- Despite differences in structure, all of these teacher-voice organizations and fellowships are working on ways to professionalize the teaching profession.
- Technology is integral to all organizations and fellowships either as a driver of programs offered or as a link to connect participants.
- All teacher-voice organizations and fellowships respect the history of teachers unions and see them as powerful players with which to partner.
- Teacher-voice organization and fellowship membership is diverse.
- Funding often comes from outside sources.
- Organizations and fellowships overlap in some policy interests, but the mix is unique to each group.

While it may not be possible at this moment to determine the impact of teacher-voice groups given their short histories and size, this paper details the role that teacher voice is playing in education reform, at a time when the teacher-voice movement has picked up speed and is growing in importance.

Methodology

The following analysis of teacher-voice organizations and fellowships in the context of what some are calling a teacher-voice movement uses qualitative data collected through interviews with education-policy scholars and academics, leaders of teacher-voice organizations and fellowships, teachers-union officials, and teachers. (The full list of respondents is included in the appendix.) Research consisted of a review of scholarly and think-tank research

and relevant news and journal articles on the role of teacher voice in education policy. The particular teacher-voice organizations and fellowships were selected because they are influential in the size and scope of their work, though the list is by no means comprehensive and it is possible that relevant organizations and fellowships are not mentioned. The organizations and fellowships are presented by the size of their membership.

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