



June 2024

## Productive Working Relationships and the Power of Off-Cycle Contract Change

Meriden Public Schools, CT

Meriden Public Schools (MPS)—a district in former industrial haven Meriden, Connecticut that serves 8,600 students, the majority of whom identify as people of color and qualify for free or reduced-price lunch<sup>1</sup>—has been thinking creatively about school schedules to improve student outcomes since the introduction of an expanded-day program at Pulaski Elementary Schools in Fall 2013. Complementing MPS’s interest in expanding learning time through schedule shifts is its firm commitment to district-union collaboration. Years of intentional relationship- and community-building among district and union leaders, teachers, and community members has given rise to promising, schedule-related innovations in Meriden and a subsequent boost to student achievement.<sup>2</sup>

### MPS’s Challenge

For years, MPS grappled with a persistent opportunity gap between students with disparate economic and racial backgrounds. MPS Superintendent, Dr. Mark D. Benigni—an MPS alumnus, former Meriden Mayor, and former MPS teacher—reflected that for years, “Meriden Public Schools faced troubling academic results, low graduation rates, and high suspensions, expulsions, and arrests.”<sup>3</sup> Compounding these challenges, “The neighborhoods around the district’s elementary schools facing some of the greatest needs lacked activities and support for children during the time after school.”<sup>4</sup>

In the early 2010s, Dr. Benigni and MPS found themselves in need of a radical change to address this reality. MPS took a unique approach informed by Dr. Benigni’s experience as a graduate, member, and leader of the MPS community by leaning into its strong relationship with its teachers’ union and embracing an off-cycle Memorandum of Understanding.

### Collaboration as a Path to Improvement

Before Dr. Benigni assumed his role as superintendent, he was a teacher at one of MPS’s schools and had occasionally crossed paths with Erin Benham, a veteran teacher with a 30-year tenure in MPS and the Meriden Federation of Teachers (MFT) President at the time. Dr. Benigni reached out to Benham even before he formally started the job. Louis Bronk, MPS’s Assistant Superintendent for Personnel and

Talent Development, and also an MPS alumnus, reflected, “[Dr. Benigni’s] vision for running a district is about working together with people and understanding that unions can be either a great help or a great barrier to progress. [E]ven before he stepped foot in the role, he had already reached out [to Benham] to talk through the vision [of] the district but also working with the union to get there.” Once Benigni became superintendent, Benigni “made [it] clear to [the] office and admin[istration] that [cooperation between the district and union] was the expectation.”

Benham came into the position with a legacy of district-union collaboration already in place. Current MFT President Lauren Mancini-Averitt explained, “Three superintendents ago, my predecessor [Benham] would sit down [with the superintendent] and have lunch nearly every Monday to discuss [issues]. When the next super[intendent] came in, she [Benham] kept doing that. And now [we] have monthly administration/union meetings every first Monday of the month, during which we discuss [current] issues. Everything is on the table.”

## Flexible Contracting and Continuous Learning: the MOU

When teachers at Pulaski Elementary School, as well as two other elementary schools, began talking about extending their school days in order to provide opportunities for creative enrichment activities and increase instructional time, the district and union worked together to make it a reality. Benham explained, “It was [about] putting that trust [in district-union partnership] out there and showing the district that this does work . . .”<sup>5</sup> Dr. Benigni and Benham together secured the support of the Meriden Board of Education and teachers, and applied and secured private grant funding to support the effort.

Following receipt of the grant, MPS did not immediately amend its contract. Instead, it utilized a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) as a vehicle for advancing change outside the formal bargaining process. “District and union leaders recognize that memorandums of understanding are a key vehicle to bringing new innovations and student-centered initiatives to our schools and students without violating union contracts,” Dr. Benigni stated.<sup>6</sup> Benham’s message was similar, “We have a lot of informal agreements, but we also recognize we need to make some of these policies and procedures more formal so they’re down on paper and not relying on people for the history.”<sup>7</sup>

“The MOU process has given our school system an opportunity to pilot new initiatives without the fear of the program becoming permanent or binding . . . In essence, the MOU process allows staff and management to try something out first before locking us into an agreement that [might not] meet the needs of our students.”

- Dr. Mark Benigni, MPS Superintendent

In leveraging an MOU to codify the extended-day initiatives, MPS and MFT not only promoted academic innovation but also experimentation in their contracting approach. The MOU provided the flexibility and nimbleness required to effectively pilot new programs and to pivot accordingly based on the results.

In the first year of the extended-time program at Pulaski Elementary School, students, teachers, and administrators felt the impact of full-district buy-in to the program. Robert Kosienski, Jr., President of MPS's Board, originally skeptical of the program spearheaded by teachers, was "impressed by the MFT's leadership, as well as the leadership of Pulaski's teachers and administrators, in helping to implement the school's extended day. And he . . . began to realize that student achievement in the district has steadily increased because teachers, administrators, and the Board of Education 'have all bought into the fact that we need to work together.'"<sup>8</sup> By the time the next collective bargaining period came around, the extended-time schedule made it into the contract itself and extended to all schools in the district.

## Meriden and the Pandemic

The extended-time program, supported by the strong district-union relationship, appears to have worked. Student academic achievement has increased, and Meriden administrators, teachers, and students have reaped the benefits of their collaborative relationships.<sup>9</sup> For example, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, leaving many schools short-staffed or inoperable, MPS and MFT were able to pivot quickly. Mancini-Averitt recalled, "I was in on the decision to close, and when we opened back up, I was in on that too . . . I went in with three non-negotiables: everyone gets paid; everyone stays employed; and teachers cannot dual teach. [W]e created a school district, right there on a Sunday, from the bottom up [by talking through] what would work and what wouldn't."

Bronk believes that difficult times, like the pandemic, are part of the defining moments of Meriden's district-union relationship. "We band together to do what's best for the district, and [during COVID-19] we felt it was important for our kids to continue to have school every day. It took a lot of convincing on multiple stakeholders' parts that it was important to do particularly when other districts were not." And as Dr. Alvin Larson, MPS's Director of Research and Evaluation, noted, "When COVID closed schools in mid-March 2020 . . . about 65 percent of students remained 'in school' during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, there was little loss of instructional time."<sup>10</sup>

## The Post-Pandemic Paradigm

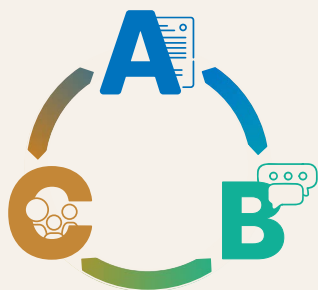
Post-COVID, MPS's Board, administration, and MFT continue to cultivate strong relationships, seeking to sustain the successful procedures, roles, and language created by MPS stakeholders throughout their collaboration. Bronk reflected, "The biggest issue [with contract negotiations] is . . . misunderstanding or misinterpretation of language or process and butting heads with others who have a different interpretation. . . . It's that gray area where conflict resides and where the real work takes place. Any time I get a chance to clarify language in a contract, I try to take advantage of it because that can reduce your workload and reduce conflict." Mancini-Averitt sees the contract similarly; the contract formalizes the informal relationship-building that goes on every day. Because of this, she shares, it is important to consider who she has at the negotiation table and how their version of the contract would play out in the classroom: "It's always [about] making sure you're meeting the needs of the many and not the needs of the few, by putting the right people at the table and asking yourself: Do we have actionable items, do we have the talking points, are we being realistic, and do we have the votes on this?"

One of the current strategies Mancini-Averitt and Bronk leverage is informal joint work to co-develop the agenda items that end up at the negotiating table. As Mancini-Averitt explained, “Prior to negotiations, I talk with the central office. The past couple of years, I said to Lou [Bronk] we need to do this, and he said no, we [the district] aren’t on board. And a week before we started negotiations [following additional conversations,] he said, ‘I think you actually have something there; bring a proposal.’” This was the approach Mancini-Averitt used for introducing a proposal for a new salary schedule. The district “told [MFT] what they wanted, and then [MFT] used it to bring forward a proposal that would make both sides happy.” The trust and confidence the parties have in each other, generated through an intentional effort to build stronger working relationships over time, supports this joint informal work.

## The ABCs of CBAs in Action

CPRL and E4E’s research “Designing Contracts for the Modern Classroom: The ABCs of CBAs” explores what is possible when teachers contracts—both what they contain and how they are built—are aligned to the modern classroom such that they are motivated by a shared, student-focused purpose; leverage flexible, transparent design; and enable authentic stakeholder participation.

### What are the ABCs of CBAs?



**Agreements** that are backed by research, keep students at the center, and promote shared decision-making and problem-solving.

**Bargaining**, both formal and informal, that encourages transparency, collaboration around shared interests, joint problem-solving, and building stronger relationships among people working together to educate students.

A **Collective** that is inclusive, supported, and strategically engaged through a diversity of opportunities for participation in the building, implementation, and improvement of teacher contracts for the modern classroom.

The ABCs of CBAs is reflected in much of MPS and MFT’s shared work. MPS’s flexible, functional use of MOUs empowers it to pivot and iterate on educational policies without being constrained by the formal collective bargaining timeline or rigid contract. There is a long-standing tradition of collaboration between bargaining parties in MPS—characterized by regular communication, co-creation of bargaining agendas, and mutual respect—which remains resilient even in the face of systemic shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic. And it is evident that MPS is committed to engaging its collective of stakeholders in ways that earn their trust and support, and which builds their capacities as well.

**To read more about the ABCs of CBAs, [click here](#).**

## Authors



Liz Chu, *Executive Director*  
Molly Gurny, *Senior Director, Legal Strategy and Policy*  
Tong Koh, *Evolutionary Learning Associate*  
Kyra DeTone, *Project Associate*

Evan Stone, *Co-founder and CEO*  
Chiara Grabill, *Chief Growth Officer*  
Jill McLaughlin, *Senior National Policy Manager*

## Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.meridenk12.org/district/>.
- 2 Mark D. Benigni, Erin Benham, “When Our Teachers Learn, Our Students Learn,” Albert Shanker Institute (November 1, 2016): <https://www.shankerinstitute.org/blog/when-our-teachers-learn-our-students-learn>.
- 3 Mark D. Benigni, Barbara Haeffner, “Meriden Public Schools: Here Students Succeed,” Scholastic Edu Blog (September 14, 2017): <https://edublog.scholastic.com/post/meriden-public-schools-here-students-succeed>.
- 4 Mark Toner, It’s About Time: Lessons from Expanded Learning Time in Meriden Conn. (AFT, October 2014): [https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Alliance-Districts/Convening/It\\_is\\_About\\_Time\\_lessons\\_from\\_Expanded\\_Learning\\_Time.pdf](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Alliance-Districts/Convening/It_is_About_Time_lessons_from_Expanded_Learning_Time.pdf): 1.
- 5 “Improving Education Through a Focus on Partnerships,” The Social Side of Education: How Social Aspects of Schools & School Systems Shape Teaching & Learning (April 8, 2016): <https://www.shankerinstitute.org/event/social-side-education-how-social-aspects-schools-school-systems-shape-teaching-learning>.
- 6 Mark D. Benigni, “Innovating Through District-Union Collaboration,” EduTopia (May 3, 2017): <https://www.edutopia.org/article/innovating-through-district-union-collaboration-mark-benigni/>.
- 7 Mark Toner, It’s About Time: Lessons from Expanded Learning Time in Meriden Conn. (AFT, October 2014): [https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Alliance-Districts/Convening/It\\_is\\_About\\_Time\\_lessons\\_from\\_Expanded\\_Learning\\_Time.pdf](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Alliance-Districts/Convening/It_is_About_Time_lessons_from_Expanded_Learning_Time.pdf).
- 8 Jennifer Dubin, “Moving Meriden: In Connecticut, a Road Map for Union-District Relations,” American Educator (Winter 2013-2014): 35.
- 9 Mark D. Benigni, Erin Benham, “When Our Teachers Learn, Our Students Learn,” Albert Shanker Institute (November 1, 2016): <https://www.shankerinstitute.org/blog/when-our-teachers-learn-our-students-learn>.
- 10 Alvin Larson, “Effects of COVID-19 on Students’ Academic Achievement, Behavior, and Social-Emotional Well-Being,” Albert Shanker Institute (June 23, 2022): <https://www.shankerinstitute.org/blog/effects-covid-19-students>.