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Relationship-Building and Innovative Approaches to Teacher Pay

Ravenswood City School District, CA

In the heart of Silicon Valley, California lies Ravenswood City School District (RCSD), a small district that in recent years found itself struggling to attract and retain teachers as the cost of living skyrocketed and wealthier surrounding districts offered increasingly competitive compensation packages. In response, RCSD—which serves approximately 1,500 elementary and middle school students, 99% of whom identify as people of color and more than 50% of whom are multilingual learners¹—embarked on a journey to address its teacher retention challenges and reassert its broader ambitions of educational excellence. To do so, RCSD worked with the Ravenswood Teachers’ Association (RTA) to increase salaries for teachers and put in place an innovative career ladder designed to incentivize and reward strong performance. For the 23-24 school year, 80% of highly-rated teachers were retained.

District-Union Collaboration to Build a New Career Ladder

RCSD leadership and RTA began their joint work toward reimagining teacher compensation by reaffirming their shared commitment to improving teacher retention in service of fundamental improvements in the educational experience for RCSD students and families. As Ronda White, RTA President, explained, “We got a new superintendent [in 2020] who was part of the district since day one; a teacher, a vice principal, a principal. [She had] been around a while and was invested; she understood that if we can’t pay teachers well,” the district would continue to face retention challenges. “This super[intendent]’s . . . mindset [was], why can’t we pay teachers what they’re worth? If teachers want to do more, why can’t we pay them more? Every other job does it.” Helpful to the effort was the fact that White and RCSD’s new superintendent, Gina Sudaria, knew each other and actually co-taught earlier in their careers. They relied on their common classroom experiences and harnessed their shared commitment to students and their families as they set out on their work together.

While the presence of a home-grown, collaborative superintendent was helpful, the development of a productive district-union relationship in RCSD was by no means a foregone conclusion. According to White, she and Sudaria met at least once or twice a month to jointly solve problems and deepen their relationship.

They would share challenges and ideas, especially around the issue of teacher compensation. White explained that they would reflect together, “What do you want to do? What about this? What about that? There were a lot of meetings . . . [where we] looked at other district salary schedules.” This collaboration, which took place outside of formal negotiations, deepened White and Sudaria’s shared vision of what they were trying to achieve together. “[It puts us] in an optimal position to make [the new career ladder] happen,” White said.

“We want to make our communication loop as transparent as possible, so we use monthly team meetings as a chance to exchange on the ground information in real-time to proactively address matters. We do not use that time to negotiate. We use the time to problem solve and share ideas. Our HR director and RTA president communicate on a weekly basis about more specific issues as they relate to personnel that RTA needs to be aware of . . . [W]e are intentional about staying connected and there is a lot of consulting.”

- Gina Sudaria, Ravenswood Superintendent

When formal negotiations opened, Sudaria recounted a process that departed from traditional, adversarial bargaining. “We were outside of our normal space, we were negotiating in a living room. No table; circle intermixed—management [in] between RTA team members; [we used] chart paper. There was no taking [of] notes except for what was on the chart paper that we built together . . . There was [instead] brainstorming and possibilities,” Sudaria explained.

The collaborative, creative orientation of the formal bargaining process, supported by off-cycle, regular communication and information-sharing, meant that RCSD and RTA successfully negotiated 10% across-the-board initial salary raises for teachers and a new career ladder that tied subsequent salary increases to summative evaluation with relative ease.² RCSD’s new career ladder puts the career destinies of RCSD teachers in their own hands. As White explained, for teachers who are “always doing extra [to improve and become better teachers], why couldn’t [that] translate to more money?” A testament to the value alignment between RCSD and RTA, Sudaria likewise said, “It’s a new day, based on standards [and high] expectations . . . and you start hiring folks who have those same expectations . . . [The question is] how do you reward those individuals who are truly putting in the time and the work?”

Iterating on the Career Ladder

Both RCSD and RTA understood that the new career ladder would need to be iterated and improved upon, at least in the initial years. Sudaria said, “We knew we needed to improve upon it over time . . . [It is] not going to be perfect . . . [or] right the first time around.” For this reason, the CBA includes a soft launch and a pilot year.³ This approach allowed RCSD and RTA to jointly identify challenges in implementation, work to address those challenges, and then as White explained, “calibrate” to promote better implementation. Some of these challenges pertained to the underlying evaluation system, such as tardiness in setting goals. White explained that feedback and input from teachers was key: “One of the questions [we asked teachers]

was: How is the career ladder or the evaluation going?” Equally important were built-in structures for improvement. “For the [first] 2-3 years, every summer the negotiation team would meet and review the findings, and we would make adjustments as needed,” White said. One such adjustment was to norm around the evaluation scores across schools in the district. By testing, systematically learning, and periodically iterating the new career ladder, RCSD is both ensuring effective implementation of its program and additionally, modeling the continuous improvement ethos it hopes the new career ladder inspires in teachers.

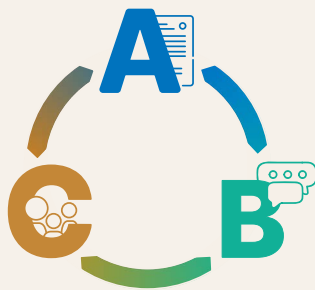
“Whenever you’re trying something new or innovative, you need to have checkpoints along the way to monitor implementation.”

- Ronda White, RTA President

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 RCSD story is illustrative of what is possible when the A, B, and C of teacher contracts are attended to with a focused commitment to the three design principles. Its agreement itself includes provisions—such as the new career ladder—that are student-focused, backed by research, and facilitate ongoing iteration.

The bargaining parties were motivated by a shared, student-focused purpose to improve teacher retention in order to bolster students' learning experiences and outcomes. They brought these shared motivations to formal bargaining that was collaborative, flexible, and transparent, and that was supported by frequent communication and information-sharing outside of formal bargaining. And the collective of relevant stakeholders was afforded varied opportunities to participate in both contractual policy improvement efforts and the bargaining process, including through the collection of feedback during the pilot year.

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

Looking Ahead

RCSD's fresh approach to teacher compensation looks promising. First, the CBA's career ladder creates a more attractive, motivating working environment for teachers. Second, its continuous improvement approach to the new initiative, enabled by the built-in flexibility of its CBA, allows for adjustments to be made according to real-time results and stakeholder input. While the effort is still in early implementation, it offers an opportunity for optimism about what is possible when district and union leaders work together to solve problems.

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 "About Us," Ravenswood City School District, Accessed January 3, 2024, <http://www.ravenswoodschools.org/Choose-Ravenswood/#:~:text=We%20are%20proud%20of%20our,our%20students%20are%20multilingual%20learners.>
- 2 Accordingly, clause 12.3.1(a) of the 2019-2022 collective bargaining agreement between RCSD and RTA states that: "Effective July 1, 2022, all RTA unit members shall advance three (3) vertical rungs from their July 1, 2021 career ladder placement;" and Clause 12.3.1(b) states that: "Effective July 1, 2023, vertical movement on the career ladder shall be based on the summative evaluation rating from the prior year."
- 3 See Clause 8.4.4 for the timelines.