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# Unleashing the Potential of Your Teacher Contract to Make Positive Change for Yourself and Your Students

Did you know that despite the fact that approximately **90% of teachers favor additional pay for teachers who work in hard-to-staff schools or subject areas, teacher contracts in nearly half of the nation's largest school districts don't do so?**

This is just one example of the disconnect between what teachers want and the policies often contained in their contracts—sometimes called collective bargaining agreements, or CBAs. As the policy documents that govern the teaching profession—and, by extension, student learning environments—these contracts can serve as a powerful lever for change for public K-12 teachers and students. But too often, they don't act as that lever, instead keeping schools stuck in the past while the rest of the world moves forward.

So what's typically covered in teacher contracts? And how can we leverage them to transform teaching and learning?

## What Teacher Contracts Cover

Teacher contracts represent hard-fought improvements to teacher compensation and working conditions. They also touch upon the majority of what happens in classrooms. They are not only employment contracts but also impact the conditions in which students learn.

Teacher contracts almost always set teacher salaries and benefits, class size caps, teacher placement and layoff policy, and a “grievance” process that follows if the contract is broken. They also often, but not always, determine the length of the workday and teacher evaluation processes.

Teacher contracts must follow state law. For example, **Illinois law requires** teachers to be paid at least \$40,000 annually. Contracts must follow this, but can set pay beyond that. States can also prohibit certain policies from being covered in teacher contracts. For example, **Connecticut law** prohibits the length of the school day from being covered in teacher contracts.

## The Potential for Transformation in Teacher Contracts

Teacher contracts hold the potential to enable dynamic, student-centered, modern classrooms designed for the learning of tomorrow. They can—and must—be flexible to answer calls for what **teachers and students need now**, and responsive to **what they need as we learn something new**.

They hold the potential to transform teaching and learning through rigorous teacher leadership pathways, flexibility for school-level decision-making, strategic compensation structures, and evaluation and professional learning systems that grow and reward highly effective teachers.

**Where We Agree** provides a collection of modern contract ideas that can help do just that, along with case studies of school systems that have successfully implemented them.

## Learning about Your Own Teacher Contract's Policies

Given the potential of teacher contracts to transform teaching and learning, knowing how to find and understand your contract is crucial to achieving change for yourself and your students.

**Finding Your Contract:** Your contract will be on your union's website. Look for dropdowns like "Your Rights" or "Important Documents." The website might include contracts for other employees, like nurses, or old versions, so be careful to find the most recent contract for teachers.

**Understanding Your Contract:** While teacher contracts can be lengthy and challenging to read, reading them in full will give you the best understanding of them. Many policy issue areas intersect, so you may need more than just reading any given section to give you a full understanding of the relevant policy. If reading the entire contract isn't feasible, follow these steps to learn about your contract:

- 1. Look for and read union-created resources that summarize your contract's policies.** Often, your union will produce high-level summaries or FAQs about your contract, changes made to it, or the policies most frequently asked about. Reading these is the best way to learn about your contract's policies.
- 2. Explore your contract's contents on your own.** Tips for doing so include:
  - Use the table of contents or "CTRL + F" or "command + F" to find specific policies
  - Don't skip definitions sections—understanding the definition of relevant terms is essential for understanding policies.
  - If the policy you're reading refers to other sections of the contract, find those sections and read them too. Otherwise, you won't fully understand the policy.
  - Always check your understanding of a policy with your union representative.
- 3. Visit [Where We Agree](#) for resources to help you understand your contract and inspiration for changes to seek.** Check back periodically, as new content will be added over time.

## Making Your Voice Heard in Your Contract Negotiation Process

Teacher-inspired contract change IS possible! For example, in 2022, Minneapolis Public Schools teachers **successfully advocated** for modifications to their layoff policy to protect progress made in diversifying the teacher workforce.

Follow these steps to make your voice heard in your own contract negotiation process:

- 1. Find out the timeline for contract negotiation.** Teacher contracts are "renegotiated" every few years. You can find the dates between which your contract is in effect on its first page, which will give you a sense of approximately when renegotiation will occur. However, contract negotiations often begin well before—or sometimes after—the current contract's expiration, and changes can be made to the contract outside of the negotiation process. So, check with your union representatives to confirm the timeline.
- 2. Ask your union representative how to get involved in the negotiation process.** Many unions conduct surveys of teachers or hold extra meetings around negotiation time to inform negotiating priorities.
- 3. Visit [Where We Agree](#) to learn about how other school systems have achieved contract change.**