

## Teacher Unions, New Unionism and Shifting Cultural Metaphors

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### Abstract

*Problem Statement:* Since the 1980s, classical industrial unionism has been transforming itself in terms of redefining basic value system and strategies they use. Teacher unions are no exception. This paper draws on a study of a teachers union to initiate school-based change in a single state in the United States. The research was conducted as part of a broader initiative to examine the role of "new unionism" in local and state school reform.

*Purpose of the study:* The purpose of this study is to portray the past, present and future images of teachers unions from the perspectives of three clusters of important educational policy agents in the state of Minnesota: Bureaucrats or state educational officials, teacher activists or union officials, and policy participants (business, legislature and school superintendents).

*Method:* A qualitative research design was used to collect data.. As part of the study, representatives of involved union employees, internal and external stakeholders of education were interviewed on two occasions about the role of the union in promoting school reform.

*Findings and results:* Analysis of data revealed an internal culture conflict within the union between the image (and practice) of union employees who were balancing traditional role obligations and efforts to become "new union" activists for school change. At a later point, other relevant policy actors from a number of sectors (elected and appointed officials, state education agency employees, district administrators and representatives of business groups) were also interviewed about the role of teacher unions in school reform at the state level. As part of the data collection, we elicited metaphors to reflect the cultural position of the union in the past, in the present, and as anticipated in the future. The data

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illuminate the way in which culturally embedded expectations about educational actors shift during periods of educational reform, and implications are drawn for the role of unions in influencing change.

*Conclusions and recommendations:* Four topics emerge: Unions are “returning to their roots”; there is ambivalence about admitting unions to the playing field of change agents; reluctance to view unions as forces for positive change is most pronounced at the political level and least at the local level; and unions need to consider multiple strategies for evolving as leaders for change.

**Keywords:** Teacher unions, new unionism, school/educational reform, metaphors, unions as change agents.