

Opinion: A school district without a teachers' union

By Joe Mathews

What would a California school district be like if it jettisoned its teachers' union?

That question, once hypothetical (conservatives saw it as fantasy, liberals as a threat to teachers to questions), is now real. With the death of Justice Antonin Scalia, the U.S. Supreme Court is now divided 4-to-4 on the validity of the funding model for teachers' and other public employees union. So if the country elects a Republican president this fall, the likely result would be a new conservative justice who would vote to weaken teachers' unions so much that some might disappear from some school districts around the country.



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What would that mean for teachers, schools, and parents? It's impossible to know for sure. But California offers one fascinating example of such a future: the Clovis Unified School District.

Clovis Unified is by far the largest school district in California without a teachers' union. Centered on the city of Clovis (pop. 100,000) and swaths of Fresno, it's the 16th largest school district in California (smaller than Riverside, bigger than Stockton), with 42,000 students, 49 schools, and

5,000 employees. It also happens to be one of California's most representative districts. About half of its children are on free and reduced lunch, and there's no ethnic majority among the student body.

Parents, teachers, and administrators in Clovis are proud of their schools. But they don't brag—publicly, at least—about their lack of a teachers' union. This isn't because they want a union, I've found on visits. It's because they're skeptical that Clovis' one-of-a-kind structure could be a model for anyone else.

Clovis Unified teachers and administrators see their district as having a peculiar history that gave it an effective method of governing itself. This history starts with Floyd "Doc" Buchanan, the district superintendent from 1960 until 1991. In the 1970s, California's teachers' unions won the right to represent teachers in districts throughout the state, but Buchanan, who was deeply respected by teachers, resisted. And teachers voted against union representation.

But that wasn't the end of the story. Instead of a union, Clovis' teachers and the district formed a "faculty senate"—the goal was to have something worthy of a university—to give teachers more of a role in the governance of the district. Teachers were elected to represent each school, and in turn elected officers for the senate, which served as "advocate for teachers at all levels of policymaking, procedures and expenditures, in partnership with our administration, fellow employees, and community as a quality education team."

Clovis Unified could only be so different. In California, state law governs most of what happens in school districts, including matters such as teacher tenure and firing.

But, as the faculty senate evolved, the teachers it represented exerted more power, by forming committees, often

jointly with the district, for everything from benefits and wages to the school calendar and curriculum. "If there's a committee, we're on it," says Duane Goudy, the faculty senate president. "If there's a meeting, we are part of it."

Among the many advantages of this committee system: It forces the district to come to a consensus on issues. And this method of governance provides crucial flexibility in bad times. During the Great Recession, the district avoided layoffs of full-time employees and cuts to the length of the school year because the teachers on committees agreed to impose a 2 percent pay cut and three furlough days on themselves.

For this system to succeed it requires great openness among administrators; the superintendent has an open door. This also breeds closeness to the community. For example, while it's now routine to find school campuses closed after-hours throughout California, Clovis Unified prides itself on keeping its school campuses open so that neighborhoods can use them on evenings and weekends.

Of course, there are drawbacks. Privately, teachers say committee meetings can feel endless and waste time. Clovis' method of governing itself is so different that it can be hard for administrators hired from outside the district to adapt. And even staunch believers in the faculty senate approach wonder whether a system that relies on face-to-face meetings and relationships can survive as the district continues to grow. They say it's already hard to make changes quickly because so many people have to be consulted.

But the system is likely to endure, in part because the district gets results. Clovis Unified performs above average academically and does well in attendance. Teachers shower praise on the district in surveys.

For the rest of us, Clovis Unified suggests that school districts without teachers' unions won't be hells-or

paradises. They could even be places where teachers have the power to be true partners in running school districts—with all the responsibilities and headaches that come with it.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.