Lessons in Organizational Adaptation from the American Federation of Teachers: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

Once a promising cornerstone of the American democracy, today’s public education system is failing to equip many students for success in an increasingly competitive global economy. The education crisis has prompted citizens and politicians alike to design, advocate, and implement reforms. Underscoring the search for a panacea to fix the educational system’s ills, conventional wisdom argues that teacher unions are to blame for broken schools, allegedly because they place job security over student achievement. The following research project illuminates whether and how one teachers union, the American Federation of Teachers, has adapted to the demands of its organizational environment in order to maintain its legitimacy in the modern education reform discourse, and to project itself as a guardian of both teacher and student interests. The AFT has expanded and diversified its mission to respond to environmental shifts. Here, the organizational adaptations of the AFT are evaluated in light of its history and within the scope of the broader labor union movement.

Introduction

Significance

The future of America’s legacy as a democratic empire of economic and personal prosperity hinges on the quality of its public education system. Unfortunately, student performance is alarmingly inferior in the United States compared with that of our international counterparts. Of 36 developed nations, the United States ranks 9th in college completion rates, and 50 percent of novice teachers desert the profession within the first five years (National Education Technology Plan, 2010). Designed during the Industrial Era, the obsolete public school system is now desperate for an overhaul. From the A Nation at Risk (1983) report to the tear-jerking blockbuster Waiting for "Superman" (2010), from Brown v. Board (1954) to Race to the Top (2009), from charter schools to parochial schools, from tracking systems to merit-based pay—a myriad of silver bullets have targeted the problems in education. The types of individuals and groups that have and still do advocate for education reform run the gamut. Unfortunately, the recent eruption of programs spotlighting the enormity of the education crisis has prompted premature paradigms and inaccurate dichotomies. As a result, politicians and reformers are trapped in a general fog of conflicting ideologies. Underscoring the search for a panacea, conventional wisdom argues that teacher unions are to blame for broken schools. Skeptics are bent on castigating the unions for enhancing teacher benefits, allegedly protecting the status quo above educational quality. This research project examines the validity of the popular demonization of teacher...
unions by evaluating changes to the priorities, programs, and structure of the American Federation of Teachers.

Since its birth in Chicago in 1916, the American Federation of Teachers has worked to earn honor and rights for educators through organization and collective bargaining. The American Federation of Teachers (AFL-CIO) is a complex organization that is at once a labor union, political action committee, think tank, and publishing firm. Founded in pursuit of solidarity and political voice, teachers’ unions are self-professed manifestations of democracy. The AFT is comprised of five separate divisions representing teachers, paraprofessionals and school-related personnel, higher education faculty, public employees, and healthcare professionals. The union represents 1.5 million members in 3,514 local unions and 43 state federations.

For this project, I focus on the Teachers division, the original and largest branch of the AFT, which represents 850,000 teachers in traditional public schools, charter schools, and childcare facilities. This division of the AFT has endured the turbulence of economic depression, war, and social justice movements. Nearly a century past its genesis, the American Federation of Teachers upholds the belief that both protecting teacher interests and improving student achievement requires collaborative labor-management partnerships.

Purpose and Hypothesis
According to an Open System definition of organization (Scott, 1997), the structural and ecological levels of the American Federation of Teachers are assumed to naturally interact. It follows that the principal research question is layered and multi-faceted. Broadly, how have the AFT’s organizational structure and behaviors changed in order to build and preserve the union’s political clout in the modern education reform discourse? Amidst dramatic changes in the public K-12 education system and the greater social and political climate, has the mission of the American Federation of Teachers been fundamentally modified, whether formally or informally? If so, how has the AFT mission changed? If not, how and why has the institution resisted changed and maintained its legitimacy?

If the American Federation of Teachers exists today as an influential organization, then its core mission and functions must have adapted to match shifts in its environment. Similarly, if the environment around the American Federation of Teachers has changed, then the AFT has successfully leveraged its authority to impact the American public school system. These changes are manifested in the federation’s resolutions and legislative strategies, a few of which are highlighted here.

I hypothesize that teachers’ unions, contrary to conventional wisdom and skepticism, are conduits to high-quality teaching, and thus support a high level of student achievement. Teachers’ unions advocate for, and even provide, essential tools and resources for teachers to operate successfully for the benefit of students. I theorize that the American Federation of Teachers continues to champion education professionals as the basis for democratic public education today. In other words, the fundamental objectives of the AFT have expanded to include student interests. Moreover, the organization’s commitment to professionals is not necessarily divorced from an allegiance to students nor does it interfere with
teacher quality. To the contrary, I argue that the union has adapted and continues to adapt to the ceaselessly shifting demands of K-12 education by supporting teachers first.

Methodology and Evaluation Criteria

A modified Leavitt’s Diamond (1965; ctd. by Smith, Norton & Ellis, 1992) was used to examine the ways in which the American Federation of Teachers, embedded in an elaborate network of social, political, cultural, and psychological forces, has been both a product and an agent of change (see Figure 1, Appendix). Data for this project was gleaned from information in the public domain, AFT publications, and the University of California, Davis online library database.

Evaluating the degrees of “change” in the organizational environment and within the AFT’s structure and mission is necessarily a qualitative analysis. It is impossible to apply a quantitative metric that would be comprehensive enough to reflect phenomena as dynamic as “social change” or “political change.” Rather, as in most social sciences, the data used here is “soft” and intangible.

Nevertheless, we can turn to the hard sciences to help us examine organizational adaptation. In biology and evolutionary ecology, an “adaptation” is defined as the process or feature by which an individual or species increases its chances of survival. With this scientific definition as a model, I use “adaptation” of the American Federation of Teachers to mean any observable change that increased or increases its opportunities to thrive as a powerful force in education policy and reform. The term “observable change” is left intentionally ambiguous in order to encompass a range of changes both implicit and explicit, both informal and formal; for instance, observable change might include changes in the language of the organization’s mission, in the tone and content of AFT presidential speeches, or in the union’s policies and programs.

The described metric for adaptation serves as the elemental framework for analyzing historical events. By building a chronology of the union’s development, with special attention given to the leadership styles of selected AFT presidents, a comprehensive, unbiased, nonpartisan portrait of the AFT emerges.

History of the AFT

The American Federation of Teachers, like other teachers’ unions, was originally created to increase professionalization for educators and democratization in the workplace. During the first half-century of its existence, the AFT’s chief objectives were to increase compensation for teachers and to grow a constituency. From the beginning, the union adopted an integrative approach to negotiation that focuses on mutual benefits for both labor and management (Koppich, 2005). The first teacher contracts developed standards to prevent “arbitrary and capricious actions of the employer” (Koppich, 2005), and gradually expanded to include other rights. Collective bargaining for employment-related issues in education gained momentum during the social revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Since then, the American Federation of Teachers has adapted its mission to include systemic education reform in addition to promotion of the teaching profession.
Albert Shanker (1974-1997)

Albert Shanker was the driving force behind the advent of collective bargaining on behalf of public education as a whole, which included both teachers and students. An intellectual and lifelong activist for education reform and a strong union supporter, Shanker is often credited as the pioneer and savior of modern teachers’ unions. As President of the United Federation of Teachers in New York City (1964-1984) and later the American Federation of Teachers (1974-1997), Shanker embodied the “stable leadership” (Koppich, 2005) necessary for the union to “outlast successive administrations.” Shanker married unionism with student interests in public education for the first time, and in effect, reinvented the role of the American Federation of Teachers.

During his presidency, Shanker published his reform ideas in over 1,000 weekly “Where We Stand” columns (published in the New York Times) and traveled nearly 500,000 miles every year campaigning for and commenting on various education reforms. Shanker’s most noteworthy act as AFT President was his endorsement of the A Nation at Risk report, released in 1983. The union’s confession of the validity of a Republican-sponsored report that labeled teachers’ unions as education reform barriers was an “enormous departure from past AFT policy” (AFT, 2007). Historically, teachers’ unions insisted, “higher compensated, organized teachers better prepare students for the challenges incumbent on the modern workforce” (Pantuosco et al., 2010). For decades, the AFT as well as the National Education Association (NEA) had invested its resources in securing autonomy for teachers and disconnecting salaries from performance. Now, A Nation at Risk denounced the union-supported tenure system and accused teachers and their unions of resisting reforms beneficial to students.

In response, Shanker assured his audiences that tenure attracts high-quality teachers who might otherwise lose interest in the low-paying profession. Instead of eliminating the tenure system that many believed protected incompetent instructors, Shanker proposed the revolutionary idea of peer review. He argued that, in this way, teachers’ unions could operate like craft guilds. Peer review would allow for teacher involvement in decisions regarding textbooks and curriculum, in addition to classroom responsibilities. Aware of criticism that the union resisted student-centered education reform, the AFT softened its militant stance and instead “urged its affiliates to establish higher standards” and to “bargain cooperatively rather than contentiously with management” (Eberts, 2007). In 1985, as part of the campaign to simultaneously promote teacher professionalism and teacher quality, Shanker delivered three critical speeches outlining the changes to be made in the AFT’s mission and operations.

In January at the National Press Club, Shanker proposed a national exam for the licensing of novice teachers, and declared that only teachers who passed the exam could become members of the American Federation of Teachers. Mandating a national licensing exam could not guarantee effective teaching but would support the professionalization of teaching. In April at the New York State United Teachers convention in Niagara Falls, Shanker called for a “second revolution” in collective bargaining that would improve the whole public education system. Shanker acknowledged the charges that the AFT was uncharitable to education interests
beyond the teaching profession. He offered a classical definition of a professional: someone with a liberal-arts examination. Additionally, a professional completes an internship under the guidance of a mentor and participates in peer-review. A teacher deemed “professional” by these criteria is rewarded with autonomy and higher compensation. In essence, this second speech declared professionalism as the organizing principle for the AFT. In July, Shanker gave a third decisive speech at the QuEST conference. He suggested that excellent teachers, in lieu of merit pay could receive extra pay be competing their national board certification. Shanker believed that pairing salary premiums with national board certification would prevent favoritism and unwarranted penalties.

Shanker strategically countered attacks on the AFT and other teachers’ unions. Aware that the AFT was often perceived as singularly concerned with teacher benefits over educational quality, Shanker offered solutions like peer assistance and review, teacher-run charter schools, and standards-based reforms. Under Shanker’s leadership, the American Federation of Teachers successfully adapted to the demands for improving public education via teacher quality. In effect, the AFT began to consider American students as symbolic members of its constituency. Acting on behalf of public education reform in addition to teacher professionalism helped the union survive and ascend to its current position of power today.

**Sandra Feldman (1997-2004)**

Prior to becoming president of the AFT, Sandra Feldman was the UFT’s executive director and AFT vice president. During her tenure as AFT president, Feldman was also elected to the AFL-CIO executive council, vice president of Education International and a board member of numerous charities. With Feldman as president, the American Federation of Teachers adapted to environmental challenges through organizational change, although the changes were incremental compared with the sweeping alterations implemented by Shanker. Nevertheless, by the time she retired, the AFT’s membership had grown 17 percent.

During her presidency, Feldman’s personal mission was to revive the labor movement but to make minimal changes to the AFT’s programs and policies. She re-focused the AFT on organization, a trademark that had faded in the later years of Shanker’s tenure. Recognizing the danger of extinction, the American Federation of Teachers created a “Futures Committee” in 1993 and the “Futures II Committee” in 1998 to review the past and present challenges facing the union and to assess the union’s prospects for meeting the evolving demands of its members. The first committee’s vision statement underscored that “to guarantee [the AFT’s] future, [we] must improve not only the working conditions of our members but also the effectiveness of the institutions in which they work” (emphasis added). The Futures II Committee expanded the recommendations of the first committee by advocating a four-part plan for the AFT: 1) foster a “culture of organizing”; 2) amplify the union’s political campaigns; 3) strengthen the workplaces of AFT members; and 4) re-commit the union to democratic education and human rights domestically and internationally. To realize the plan proposed by the Futures II Committee, Feldman added several executive council committees and the office of executive vice president, an unprecedented addition to the union’s governance structure.
In the San Francisco Unified School District, Superintendent Waldemar Rojas implemented a district improvement process coined “reconstitution.” Reconstitution presented criteria for identifying low-performing schools based on student achievement and “controllable” factors like daily attendance and dropout rates. Based on these criteria, nine schools were declared “reconstitution eligible,” meaning they had one year to improve or would be reconstituted. Reconstitution essentially translated to the firing of the entire school staff and the hiring and training of new staff. The AFT intuitively opposed the harsh policies of reconstitution. In response, the United Educators of San Francisco (the AFT local) negotiated a tentative agreement on an alternative school-improvement process intended to “lead to the elimination of the need for reconstitution.” These recommendations were mirrored at the national level in the AFT’s “Redesigning Schools to Raise Student Achievement” (RSRSA), an initiative currently called the “Center for School Improvement” (CSI).

The Reconstitution craze in San Francisco precipitated similar movements across the nation, and ultimately secured a segment in the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). Reconstitution nurtured the belief that teachers’ unions stand in the way of education reform. Specifically, public education reformers upheld the conviction that the voucher system hindered educational quality. In the April 2000 “Where We Stand” column, Feldman countered this accusation by challenging America to “guarantee educational adequacy for poor children.” To achieve this, the American Federation of Teachers began advocating for “quality early childhood education, smaller classes and a richer curriculum taught by fully qualified and highly skilled teachers” (Feldman, 2000). Feldman argued that abandoning the voucher system—subsidizing per pupil spending at private schools—would save some students but ignore the greater majority. Instead, she pushed the AFT to campaign for funding for research-based solutions.

While the AFT’s fundamental mission was not dramatically revised during Feldman’s tenure, the union did make modest adjustments to respond to increasing hostility from public education reformers. In order to adapt to escalating demands for improving teacher quality, the American Federation of Teachers created the RSRA/CSI initiative as a resource to provide “technical assistance, professional development, and information” (AFT, 2010) for educators, parents and the community. The AFT rebutted charges that the organization was anti-reform by offering solutions that promoted quality teaching and teacher professionalism.


Ed McElroy, as he was called, was AFT secretary-treasurer and president of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers prior to being elected AFT president. While on the executive council of the AFT, McElroy helped launch the first Futures Committee (1992) and amend the AFT’s constitution. Predisposed to state interests, McElroy impressed his unique personal character upon the union. At the same time, the Bush administration impelled the AFT to augment its political activity. The combination of McElroy’s personality and the pressures of the Bush administration changed the course of the American Federation of Teachers.

During his relatively brief tenure, McElroy focused on broad trade union issues. Under his leadership, the American Federation of Teachers temporarily
stopped issuing education reports in order to more fully invest its resources in building the union’s political capacity. The AFT increased its activism in elections at both state and federal levels, and expanded its legislative department into three divisions that focused respectively on political action, federal issues, and state issues. Additionally, McElroy introduced SAPOs—State Affiliate Political Organizers—who were devoted to managing funds reserved for state initiatives.

The American Federation of Teachers demonstrated its growing political power by responding to the No Child Left Behind Act. McElroy articulated this mission in an AFT publication, Moving Every Child Forward (2004): “Where provisions work against—not for—students and schools, the AFT is working to change them. We will continue working with Congress, the U.S. Department of Education and others to ensure that NCLB’s promised benefits reach every child” (2004). The AFT informally adapted its mission to address its perceived flaws in the NCLB act. The union focused its recommendations in the areas of assessment and accountability, school improvement interventions, staffing, and funding. Moving Every Child Forward (2004) expressed the union’s commitment to “work tirelessly to remedy the problems with NCLB.” With this mission established, the AFT continues to leverage its growing political clout to influence the legislation today.

Randi Weingarten and the AFT Today

Before becoming AFT president, Weingarten was UFT president, AFT vice president, and chair of New York City’s Municipal Labor Committee (MLC). Upon being elected AFT president, Weingarten initiated efforts to push education reform and innovation to the top of the national agenda. In recent years, the education reform discussion has concentrated on the perceived problem of teacher quality, or rather, what some people consider teacher inadequacy. Reports funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation combined with negative media coverage on allegedly failing teachers and seemingly apathetic unions mandated a response from the AFT. In several keynote speeches, Weingarten (2004) expressed the union’s eagerness to negotiate any issue except for vouchers in an effort to make changes that are “good for kids, and fair to teachers.”

Refusing to yield to accusations that teachers’ unions compromise actual teacher quality and thus hinder student achievement, the union has responded with an initiative called A New Path Forward. The plan, as introduced in Weingarten’s speech at the National Press Club in January 2010, details four approaches to “quality teaching and better schools.” The main components of the AFT teacher development and evaluation proposal are: basic professional teaching standards, standards for teacher assessment, implementation benchmarks, and teacher supports, all within the context of strong labor-management relationships. The AFT has made it a part of its mission to advance quality public education through shared responsibility and commitment between labor and management. Grounded on the premise that teachers need “tools, time, and trust” (Weingarten, 2010) to succeed, the initiative emphasizes a continuous improvement model for teacher evaluation. The model calls for multiple measures of teacher effectiveness, implementation standards, and standards for teaching and learning conditions.

Released in October 2010, the film Waiting for “Superman” demonizes teachers’ unions and heralds charter schools as the seemingly simply cure for
America’s public schools. In response to the audacious claims of the movie, which draws conclusions from only a handful of unfortunate anecdotes, the AFT has created a website: www.aft.notwaiting.com. The website explains the omissions in and discrepancies of the film, and the union’s positive efforts to reform education. Additionally, as the face of the AFT, Weingarten has been aggressively defending the integrity of the union in numerous public appearances, from NBC’s Education Nation to an interview on Larry King Live. In each appearance, Weingarten insists that the American Federation of Teachers is part of the solution to improving schools for students as much as for educators.

**Discussion**

Today, the teaching profession is 80 percent female, “highly credentialed, considerably more senior, and increasingly unionized” (Belfield, 2005). Class sizes are 30 percent smaller, and teachers’ pay is more uniform with minimal variation based on performance. Unions represent 67 percent of the nation’s 3 million public K-12 teachers (Eberts, 2007), and advocate for both direct and indirect reforms. The American Federation of Teachers, along with like-minded teachers’ unions, espouse a new collective bargaining model called “reform bargaining” (Eberts, 2007). Reform bargaining breaks down the adversarial stereotype of labor-management relations and instead, encourages teachers (labor) and administrators (management) to shoulder educational issues in tandem.

Union-sponsored reform may lack the vigor and influence of the collective bargaining trend in the 1960s and 1970s because of the ambiguity of goals, organizational under-capacity, and the challenge of reaching a consensus (Eberts, 2007). Nonetheless, unions like the AFT relentlessly insist that they are allies of reforms that profit students and teachers alike.

The American Federation of Teachers’ original mission was “to represent the economic, social and professional interests of classroom teachers.” Compare that to its current mission, which is much broader:

> To improve the lives of our members and their families; to give voice to their legitimate professional, economic and social aspirations; to strengthen the institutions in which we work; to improve the quality of the services we provide; to bring together all members to assist and support one another; and to promote democracy, human rights and freedom in our union, in our nation and throughout the world. (AFT, 2010)

Clearly, the mission of the American Federation of Teachers has expanded, diversified and adapted to a modern world with complex demands. Today, the top AFT priorities are to:

1. Build a more vigorous organizing union.
2. Create a stronger political voice for members and working families.
3. Strengthen the institutions where people work.
4. Strengthen the bonds at every level of the AFT.

To realize these expansive and intentionally ambiguous priorities, the AFT governance structure strategically coordinates its human resources. Following the lead of the union’s president, the AFT executive council is split into three branches—council committees, program and policy councils, and standing
committees. This distribution of power allows the union to utilize its expertise for broad actions.

Additionally, since its inception, the AFT has strived to attract and engaged members in order to build a politically powerful union. This sub-goal is defined in a 7-Point Plan, which is devoted to: membership lists, voter registration, political finance, issues identification, candidate selection, and voter assessment. For the AFT to scale up its political capacity, it must communicate effectively with its members. To this end, the AFT has outlined “10 Rules for Member Communications” (2010):

1. Issues take precedence before candidates or parties.
2. Give members information, not instructions.
3. Credibility and objectivity are essential to overcome members’ cynicism.
4. Downplay partisanship.
5. Union leadership must protect member interests.
6. Address issues that matter in the workplace of members.
7. Action needs to be “of, by, and for” members.
8. Informed membership leads to increased participation.
9. Use modern methods of communication.
10. “One size does not fit all.”

The information highlighted in this research project supports my hypothesis that the American Federation of Teachers exists today as an influential organization, and that its core mission and functions have adapted to match shifts in its environment.

Possible Prejudices

The motivation for this project was to understand how the union has maintained its legitimacy via organizational adaptation, and consequently, evolved into a force of change in the national education environment. My research confirmed that the American Federation of Teachers adapted to and led the way for other teacher unions to respond to this environment. However, it is important to acknowledge that my research provides just a snapshot of the AFT’s activities and inherently omits some changes to the union that may or may not have been adaptive. As an intern for the AFT, I am inclined to hold a positive impression of the union. Some of the data used for this project was retrieved from AFT archives or publications, hence making the research vulnerable to the AFT’s own propaganda.

Some rivals claim that the union’s mission has remained rigidly focused on teacher benefits at the expense of student welfare. While the “Hollywood” portrayals of teachers’ unions seen in sensational media ventures like Waiting for Superman should be digested with a grain of salt, some scholars agree that teachers’ unions “prefer investments in resources which affect [teacher] working conditions, rather than investments which would most clearly raise student achievement” (Hoxby, 1996, ctd. in Belfield, 2005). An economic model suggests that the extensive spending on teachers by teachers’ unions has an adverse effect on academic performance (Belfield, 2005). These critics contend that unionized teachers are less effective and production, and therefore hinder student success.
Future Directions

The American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, is a bureaucratic organization. Its leaders represent the collective voice of its members, although the union itself is not technically an elected government entity. Therefore, to extend this study, it would be informative to closely examine how the AFT coordinates individuals within its governance structure to endure internal (institutional-level) challenges.
References


Appendix

**Figure 1.** Concept Map of Interaction Between the AFT and its Environment. Adapted from *Leavitt’s Diamond: A Model of an Organization* (1965; ctd. by Smith, Norton & Ellis, 1992).