

2nd Edit

By KIP MORALES

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Before I was a teacher at Alliance Patti & Peter Neuwirth Leadership Academy, I was an English teacher at Santee Education Complex. Alliance and Santee are just two miles apart and serve a similar population of students, but the schools might as well be on different planets.

I am not for or against unions; I am for collaboration and against division. At Santee, UTLA for the most part was the instigator of division, pitting the teachers against the administration and causing rifts between the teachers themselves—even causing some teachers to bully others.

I remember one time when our principal asked us to grade benchmark tests to assess our students' strengths and weaknesses. The union said, "no" even though you would think us teachers would have wanted to know where our students were.

The fact is: as a union teacher, I was expected to do less, not more.

I've been at an Alliance school, Neuwirth, for five years now, and all of us — teachers, counselors, assistant principals, principals — are rewarded for putting our students first and helping them to achieve as much as possible.

I am our English department's head, and I have had the freedom to spearhead other initiatives that make my school better: I created what we call the Framework for Effective Learners (FEL) to help our students to become the architects of their own educational success; created a chapter of Junior State of America (a civic engagement club) that is over 150 member strong at Neuwirth; and worked with students to found a chapter of the National Honor Society.

I first found out about UTLA's effort to unionize Alliance teachers when two union representatives knocked on my door in Torrance on a Saturday uninvited about a month or so ago. After I got over my initial surprise that they had my address, I asked them in to chat and found them to be polite but thoroughly unconvincing. They wanted me to start a union at my school.

The union reps argued that if a union represented us, our jobs would be more secure, we would be protected from our administration, and our voices would be heard. Everything they promised was attached to some act of division. They even admitted that their meetings are made up of disenfranchised teachers.

My response? At my school, we are a team, a family, whose voices are not only heard but acted upon; whose principal acts more like a big brother. My response? UTLA, as

it is today, would cause my school's culture to become fragmented and our jobs less secure.

Under UTLA, LAUSD teachers haven't gotten a raise in eight years. If I were paying someone about a million of dollars a month (as Los Angeles teachers are), I'd expect them to do the single most important part of their job — negotiate a contract. I can do and have done a better job than UTLA by speaking on my own behalf to my boss. Performance based pay will be here for Alliance next year, and I am certain that teachers who haven't disenfranchised themselves and I will leap at our salary.

Speaking of performance, the UTLA reps' job security claims hit a nerve in me. Even though I was a top performing unionized English teacher at Santee (my students first time CAHSEE pass rate was 78% while the school's average was 17%!), I got a pink slip at the end of my first year because of the "last in, first out" rules negotiated into the union contract. How is facilitating layoffs protecting teachers' jobs? In contrast, at Alliance, my reputation is based on what I do and the effort I put in. My job security is firmly in my own hands.

The reps' claim about "my voice" also hit a nerve. One of the greatest things about being an Alliance teacher is that my voice is heard loud and clear. During my time at Santee, I attended union meetings where my voice was consistently discounted. As a matter of fact--because a majority of teachers at Santee felt the same way about our voice, we passed a "No-Confidence Vote" regarding UTLA's representation of us.

All I can echo is this: A house divided falls. Until UTLA can achieve a track record of facilitating between all stakeholders successful collaboration that leads to highly effective schools, UTLA has earned no place as a middleman in Alliance, no place at Neuwirth.

I strongly encourage my Alliance colleagues to think twice before accepting the empty promises of UTLA. I strongly encourage my peers to chat with your principals, one on one, like you would a friend to work out your path to success collaboratively rather than through a divisive contractor.