

Coming soon from WE

Summer Reading Series

Book clubs to focus on racial justice

By Shaw MacQueen

As teachers and education advocates, we need to stay informed and engaged in conversations about bringing social justice into our schools and school systems. Last summer, WE partnered with TAG Philly to host eight book clubs to discuss current and historical issues in schools and labor movements. **We are excited to be offering a new round of book talks for summer 2015.**

As a facilitator and participant in three of last summer's groups, I was able to meet incredible people, and have deep conversations about topics such as the history of the civil rights struggle in Philadelphia and social justice-oriented organizing tactics. These groups played a powerful role in framing my continued work with WE and in my classroom.

For our 2015 series, we will be selecting books that follow the theme of confronting structural racism. In order to come together as educators, parents, community members, and students to fight for a better education – and life – we need to be able to view our struggle through a lens of racial justice. Our success as educators depends on our ability to grapple with these issues in our classrooms, our District, and our union.

More information, including book lists and sign ups, will soon be on www.workingeducators.org. We look forward to reading and learning with you this summer!

Friday, May 15th, 7-11 PM

WE Anniversary Partay

Local 22 Union Hall

415 N. 5th St.

It's been an incredible first year for the Caucus! Come join us as we celebrate with great food and drinks, live music, and family friendly fun and crafts activities. No cost to enter, but donations will be accepted to cover food.

Thursday, May 21st, 5:30-8 PM

"Crenshaw: a film by Lena Jackson"

Penn GSE Center for Educational Leadership

3440 Market, Room 501-502

What are the consequences of school closure? How does it affect students' education and daily lives? Join the Caucus of Working Educators, Alliance for Philadelphia Public Schools, and Philadelphia Writing Project for a screening of "Crenshaw: A Film by Lena Jackson," followed by a discussion with the creator. The documentary takes you inside another district under siege — and the community activists who stood up for public education. \$5 suggested donation.

Workshops at annual Education for Liberation Conference hosted by WE members

The Education for Liberation Conference, hosted in April by the Teacher Action Group (TAG Philly), is a powerful event for many in the Philadelphia education community. The event allows educators, together with students, parents, and community members, to take part in workshops and trainings around social justice education.

This year, members of the Caucus of Working Educators planned and facilitated six of the workshops, on topics ranging from teaching about Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter to "Hip Hop in the Classroom." Resources from some of these sessions will be available soon at the website of the Caucus of Working Educators, www.workingeducators.org.

Session on building union power sparks dialogue on race

By Tamara Anderson

At this year's TAG conference, I was a co-facilitator on a session titled "From CHI to PHL: Lessons on building power, unions, and community." Our main emphasis was how race is connected to, and integral to social justice unionism in regard to the core organizing processes and practices. Vital questions reverberated throughout the discussion: How does Philly differ from Chicago? How often do we have conversations about race in all-white spaces, or with individuals/colleagues who look like us? How do we push through the discomfort and into more discomfort?

At the end of the session it was decided that we cannot rely solely on individual conversations in order to organize effectively, and that we must be willing to dive into discussions of race, especially as it applies to bias, racism, structural racism, systemic racism, and social justice unionism.



News, updates, and information for Philadelphia teachers from the **Caucus of Working Educators**

Spotlight: Who WE are

WELCOME to the first edition of WE News, the newsletter of the Caucus of Working Educators. With these pages, we hope to empower all members of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers through information, communication, and opportunities to take action. For our first edition, we want to give a primer on why we exist, what we hope we can do for you, and some of the issues and projects we have taken on.

Platform of the Caucus of Working Educators

WE work to defend and transform public education in Philadelphia. As a caucus within the PFT, we seek to support and energize our union as well as work alongside the students, families, and communities of Philadelphia.

What WE work for:

Member-Driven Union

WE work to respond to, represent, and amplify the voice of our members. We believe that the true power of our union to make change comes from strengthening the web of relationships between members, not from waiting for or responding to top-down decisions.

Transparency, Accountability and Shared Decision-Making

WE believe in open governance, communication, and information exchange within the School District of Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, and all institutions that influence public education. Those most affected by the decisions concerning public education must be at the table as decision-makers, namely educators, parents, students, and school community members.

Defense of Publicly Funded Public Education

WE support measures that ensure every student has access to a high quality, fully-funded public education, regardless of family income, racial background, or neighborhood. We demand increased funding to meet students' actual social, emotional and academic needs, as well as make up for the lasting impact of racial discrimination and economic disinvestment that has left our schools under-resourced.

Transformed Curriculum and Autonomy to Teach, not Test

WE support the reclaiming of teacher autonomy and professional discretion to develop a transformative curriculum and pedagogy that promotes critical thinking, creativity, and compassion in our students. We work to stop the over-reliance on state-mandated high-stakes testing and curriculum as a means to sort, label, and punish students, teachers, and schools.

Education for All

WE are a social justice caucus that opposes institutional racism and organizes with students, parents, and other working people to hold schools and government accountable for providing a quality education for all students. We work to stop the attacks being waged on low-income students and communities of color, massive layoffs of school staff, and the punitive policies which push students into the school-to-prison pipeline.

Strong Contract and Rights of Members

WE believe that our working conditions are students' learning conditions. We must have a strong agreement between the PFT and the School District that ensures that we are respected, supported, and compensated fairly to provide for the best learning environment for our students.

Opt Out Movement Grows

Parents still have time to opt out of Keystones

By Dave Thomer

This year the families of over 500 students chose to withdraw those students from the PSSA tests. This was a major increase over 2014, when only 20 students were removed from the testing. The test refusals in Philadelphia are part of a national movement; for example, over 155,000 students refused to take standardized tests in New York state. Now many of the families that opted out of the PSSAs are turning their attention to the Keystone Exams.

The District has confirmed that state law gives parents or guardians two options for withdrawing their students from the tests. They may go to their child's school and review testing materials, and then declare in writing that the test violates their religious beliefs—although they are not requested to specify their beliefs or objections. Alternately, parents can write a letter to the school requesting that their child not take the test. Students who opt out using either method do not take the test and are not given a score.

This information was made public in advance of the PSSAs; the District is expected to confirm soon that both options will also be valid ways for parents and guardians to opt out of the Keystone Exams. Therefore, parents and guardians who wish to opt out of the Keystone Exam still have time to schedule a review of the test materials or to send a letter to their children's schools before the exams begin on May 13. Students expected to graduate in 2017 or later who opt out will be required to complete the alternative "project-based assessment" in order to fulfill the Keystone graduation requirements established by state law.

Educators and families who believe

Feltonville Teachers Exonerated

In January, several teachers at Feltonville School of Arts and Sciences faced possible disciplinary action from the district for sharing information with families about how to opt their students out of standardized testing. Below is a summary of the full story from teacher and PFT Building Representative Amy Roat.

On January 20th, the members of our Building Committee met with our principal and told him that some of our members had been discussing Opt Out with parents and teachers since November, because we believe that standardized testing was hurting our kids and our profession. We see it as our obligation to be forthcoming with parents about their rights. We expressed that it was not a personal attack on him or anyone else, but rather an ethical stand we needed to take for our students.

The next day, six members of our staff received a notice of an investigatory conference scheduled for a few weeks later. The memo stated that we violated school district policy by distributing information about opting out during the course of the school day without the approval of the principal. At that time, we contacted our PFT staffer, who spoke with us individually and prepared us for our conference. He gave us good advice and patiently answered our questions.

Our PFT staffer's preparation for, advice about, and demeanor during the investigatory conferences were superb. There may have been a very different outcome

that the Keystone graduation requirement is onerous and that the emphasis on standardized testing has hurt students, schools, and communities have been working to spread the word on opt-out possibilities. The Caucus of WE maintains an Opt Out Page (www.workingeducators.org/opt_out). The activist group Opt Out PA maintains a Facebook information and discussion page at [facebook.com/groups/OptOutPennsylvania/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/OptOutPennsylvania/).

had it not been for this terrific staffer.

In March, the District reversed course and made information on parent rights to Opt Out available to all families. Soon after, we were officially cleared by the District, who cited "insufficient evidence that these letters had been distributed or discussed with parents during the course of the school day."

It was a roller coaster, especially as it was so drawn out. Some days we felt strong and empowered, but on others we felt vulnerable and anxious. Luckily, when one of us felt weak, someone always stood up to bolster us. Many teachers, especially those in the Caucus of WE, checked in and gave us encouragement and support. It was invaluable.

Unfortunately, there have still been a small number of incidents where principals have disciplined teachers for sharing Opt Out information. However, all teachers and administrators must know that **the District has determined that parents have a right to this information**, and it remains to be seen whether anything will come of these incidents.

First Edition of WE News

Thanks for reading our first issue! We welcome any and all feedback, as well as suggestions for future editions of WE News. We can be reached at contact@workingeducators.org.

Got a burning question about union issues, education politics, or social justice in both the classroom and the school district? Let us know what questions you think we should be answering in future issues of WE News.

Excited to take a more active role in advocating for Philadelphia schools? Consider joining the Caucus as a member, by visiting our website, www.workingeducators.org.

All material in this newsletter is produced and edited by volunteer members of the Caucus of Working Educators. Any questions, clarifications, or corrections can be addressed to contact@workingeducators.org.

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Q: What exactly is a union caucus?

A: A caucus is simply a group of people with shared concerns within a political party or larger organization. Our caucus seeks to support and further the mission of our union by tapping into the group's biggest resource: their members! By participating, you elevate your union as a whole by connecting with other members and getting involved with union matters.

Q: Is this kind of work allowed?

A: Yes! Caucuses are an integral part of union work, and are actually quite common in all kinds of unions. Most urban teacher unions have multiple caucuses within their union, including Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, Newark, and New York. (The current leadership of the PFT actually belongs to their own caucus. It's called the Collective Bargaining Team, or CBT.)

Q: What do you believe in?

A: In brief, we believe in a social movement union that is grounded in its membership. Working Educators ARE the union, not just served by their leadership! For more details, check out our platform.

Q: Who can become a member of the Caucus of Working Educators?

A: To become a full member, you must be a current or retired member of the PFT. We also accept non-PFT individuals as associate members, who participate in events but do not vote on caucus matters.

Q: If I join the caucus, am I still a member of the PFT?

A: Yes, very much so.

Q: Does being in a caucus undermine the current union leadership?

A: Not at all! We are proud to be PFT members, and the Caucus of Working Educators is a way to support our union and its leadership. We believe that a union's strength lies in its members, and the caucus seeks to increase that strength by empowering the rank and file.

Interested in taking a more active role within the union? Still have any questions?

Contact us at contact@workingeducators.org or visit our website, www.workingeducators.org

Caucus F.A.Q.s

Why I joined: Karina Hirschfeld

Counselor, Science Leadership Academy



I joined because I believe that an energized union has a better shot at fighting back against a reform agenda that is not interested in educating the "whole" child. A strong union is needed to put the brakes on practices that harm students and destroy our communities.

Why I joined: Peggy Savage

Teacher & Building Rep, Richmond Elementary School



It is crucial that we strengthen our union and our school communities by marshaling the passion and innovation of all working educators. We want to build a member-driven union whose mission is to ensure a great education for our students and ensure the viability of teaching as a life-long career.