At the heart of the Caucus of Working Educators is our drive to represent you, our fellow PFT members, at the negotiating table for an equitable and strong contract from the School District of Philadelphia. We share your frustration with working under a status quo contract for far too long. We recognize the disrespect shown to our union by the district’s attempts to impose contract terms. We join our voices to yours in fear that our deteriorating work conditions might somehow become permanent.

Many members have been concerned about both the lack of momentum in the contract talks, and the lack of transparency regarding the collective bargaining process. We believe that there are substantive steps that our entire union can take to address these concerns raised by teachers across the district.

Our Caucus recognizes that legal decisions and electoral politics play a major role in the collective bargaining process, affecting how and when the PFT negotiates and what compromises we might be forced to consider. However, the Caucus of Working Educators believes that a union’s success at negotiating does not originate with the courts, the legislature, or even the negotiators at the bargaining table. The key to our strength at the negotiating table lies with the power of our collective membership. Building that power requires a newfound commitment to member education and organizing, so that our 11,000 members are ready to mobilize behind their contract demands.

Too many of our colleagues are tired of waiting for a substantive update of where things stand, and too few have any idea what proposals are on the table. We believe that the membership should be engaged throughout the process—making sure that the negotiators are truly representing the priorities of the rank and file, and making sure that members are educated on the various issues being considered.

We will gain the best possible contract when we work to educate and empower our members, make renewed outreach to win public support, and provide meaningful opportunities for union membership to guide its leadership and to compel our district to an appropriate, fair, and moral result.

**What WE propose:**

- Cultivate timely interactions with and feedback from membership to focus the negotiating team on union demands for our next contract.
- Retain legal counsel, intimately involved with current contract negotiations, to continue to work alongside the Executive Board on behalf of PFT members.
- Complement our use of the legal system to defend against illegal overreaches with a proactive and multifaceted strategy—including internal organizing, stronger community partnerships, and carefully orchestrated actions—to keep the public on the side of educators in the political struggle that surrounds contract negotiations.
Two of our Commonwealth’s most pressing problems—its financial woes and its concerns with school performance—are both on some level purposefully manufactured, with compassionate responses and solutions to them being willfully ignored. Having allies in local and statewide elected office is a major part of our union’s strategy for dealing with these issues. The Caucus of Working Educators understands that expert political maneuvering, including some compromise, is often necessary to even get a fraction of demands met in this arena. However, eliminating or starving public schools is punitive, miseducative, inconvenient, damaging, and unsympathetic to teachers, children, and communities. When you attack educators, there should be consequences. The PFT must be willing to hold politicians accountable if they support laws and budgets that push “solutions” such as budget cuts, takeover, privatization, and closure—especially when triggered by schools’ failure to live up to misguided test-and-punish measures. This holds even for lawmakers to whom our union has promised donations and votes in the past, especially if they take positions in direct opposition to prior statements or acts made to earn such support from us. This requires not only a change in our current political strategy, but also an effort to build the “people power” necessary to make politicians understand the danger of ignoring educators’ voices.

What WE propose:

- Consistent public pressure for budgets that provide appropriate resources for school districts, as well as for laws and policies that avoid school closings and privatization.
- Withhold financial support and endorsements from, and create public campaigns against, politicians who propose, vote for, or otherwise assist in enacting legislation that attacks public education.
- Build alliances with other unions and organizations across the state, and use PFT resources and member advocacy to help change the balance of power in the state legislature.
- Work to recruit and promote educators and educational allies for political office and appointments to other positions of authority. This should include a new focus on building power within Philadelphia’s highly influential ward system.
Many PFT members feel disconnected from each other, and especially from PFT leadership. The PFT is the largest union in the city of Philadelphia, yet the true power of our 11,000 members has been locked away for too long. Why is this? Our Caucus has heard too many stories of PFT members misinformed or uninformed about campaigns, policies, and their own leaders; of poorly-attended events; of statements to membership with unclear calls to action (or none at all); and, of long periods of radio silence on topics important to teachers and the communities we serve.

The Caucus believes that member education and empowerment must be restored as core principles of our union’s leadership. The Executive Board works at the pleasure of, and for the benefit of, the rank and file. If members don’t feel they are adequately informed, then it is not membership’s fault that they are disengaged from the union’s actions—it is leadership’s responsibility to provide a better, more engaging system.

What WE propose:

- Make sure that members are educated about important PFT issues, and invited to help plan actions and activities based on them.
- Create venues for PFT members to quickly and easily understand, decide on, and participate in union affairs. This includes expanded use of digital and social media communications, as well as new and more inclusive PFT organizational structures.
- Revamp the PFT website to make it more useful and user-friendly, including more frequent content updates, elimination of errors and bugs, and improved information architecture.
- Update PFT policies to make our operations more modern, transparent, and responsive. Such changes may address union meetings and their content, elected leaders’ teaching responsibilities, consistent election procedures, and training opportunities for future leaders.
The School Reform Commission (SRC) was established by the state government as part of a predatory takeover of the administration of Philadelphia schools, and a concurrent effort to bust the teachers’ union. Through their purposeful under-resourcing of public schools, embrace of charter education, equating of test performance with school and student performance, constant churn of district leadership and policies, and disregard for student and staff welfare, the SRC represents the worst that the city and the state have to offer. A group that is starkly undemocratic, appallingly ineffective, and frankly mean-spirited in the face of public opinion, the SRC continues to blunder along a path towards total collapse, threatening to drag our city’s schools along with it.

The most public aspect of their malice and incompetence is in their hiring of a series of woefully inappropriate superintendents, including current Superintendent William Hite. Despite statements full of glowing generalities about shared sacrifice and student achievement, the decisions Dr. Hite has stood behind ultimately force only teachers and students to sacrifice, denying them tools and opportunities to achieve. District leadership has disregarded contracts in spite of legal mandates, and has colluded with opponents of public education. On their watch, hundreds of millions of dollars have been given to charter school operators in spite of research consistently debunking their claims of academic advantages. Dozens of public schools have been closed, and thousands of employees and students have disappeared from our rolls. Our union is tired of having Dr. Hite and the SRC ask us and the city’s children to do more with less, then watch as they reward and congratulate themselves for making the request.

Recent surveys and ballot measures have shown that PFT members and Philadelphia residents at large support the replacement of the state-controlled SRC by a local school board. The legal realities of this shift are difficult, but our Caucus believes political action will result in more reasonable administration of our city’s schools.

**What WE propose:**

- Lead campaigns for residents and their elected representatives to fight for a locally determined school board. Absent such a body, we must lobby our Mayor and Governor to appoint amenable future SRC candidates.
- Maintain a watchful eye for malfeasance and misfeasance on the SRC’s part, as evidence to recall members and nominate replacements friendlier to public education in our city.
- Regularly and publicly call upon the commissioners themselves to heed the will of their city as well as the elected Governor, and open the door to local school control by sending a vote for their own dissolution to Pennsylvania’s Secretary of Education.
- Demand a freeze on Dr. Hite’s current contract (through 2017) and 5-year contract extension (approved by the SRC in December 2015), pending City Council hearings on that renewal process and the lack of public comment on it.
Transforming What It Means to Be a Union Member

Just as 2016 is a difficult time to be a teacher, it is also a difficult time to be a union member. Both groups find themselves under siege from politicians, struggling to find support from the public. Meanwhile, the PFT has done little to change its tactics even as our membership has been nearly halved (from 20,000 to 11,000), our schools have gotten worse, our profession has been attacked, and our own district has taken the unprecedented step of trying to cancel our contract. While our legal strategy has managed to forestall some of the worst of these outcomes, it is time for a change that prepares our union to change the narrative and fight for a better future.

What would it take? The Caucus believes that union leadership must promote an environment for an empowered rank and file. Rather than simply emailing members and then wishing that more people turned out for actions, there are steps that could be taken to build a culture of engagement. When it comes to advocacy and planning, union leadership must better utilize Building Representatives and individual educators throughout the district who feel motivated to help build a stronger union presence in their schools and neighborhoods. These activist educators, equipped with access to thorough information and organizing training, would then be empowered to build relationships throughout their school communities and to plan actions responsive to the needs and interests of these communities.

We need to reiterate to the public the value of professional educators and the connection between teachers’ working conditions and students’ learning conditions. The job of spreading that message shouldn’t fall upon the PFT president or the Communications Director; the best spokespeople for our union are the individual educators themselves. Every member should feel educated on the issues we face, and receive instructions and advice on how to talk about these issues.

What WE propose:

- Commit to member education and modern organizing strategies, to build our capacity to be united and powerful in our public actions and messaging. With that information and skill set, members can take more ownership of the union and thereby strengthen it.
- Take responsibility for ensuring that every school has an elected PFT Representative and Building Committee.
- Plan actions and activities in a way that is both flexible and responsive to educators’ needs, and that allows those with motivation to take on leadership roles.
- Provide all educators with up-to-date and comprehensive information on political issues, district policies, and union business.
- Strengthen PFT coalitions with parents, community members, and organizations throughout the city, so that we will not stand alone in advancing the narrative that educators’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions.

Information provided by the Caucus of Working Educators of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers for our fellow PFT members during the 2016 union election

http://workingeducators.org
http://pftelection.org
Community Involvement and Team-Building

Community advocacy groups such as POWER and Parents United for Public Education are on the front lines of organizing on issues that affect our schools, our students, and our lives. Recent important projects to address these issues and return power to Philadelphia’s children, families, schools, and communities have risen from the efforts of small organizations and driven individuals. The PFT needs to do more than merely cheerlead for these movements; we must be ready to provide manpower and political power to them.

For rank-and-file members, most of our awareness of PFT-supported events—such as those for campaigns like Fight for 15 and Black Lives Matter—has been limited to last-minute invitations to show up followed by news releases after the fact. By contrast, our Caucus has used a multifaceted turnout strategy to direct members to rallies, town halls, and press conferences. We feel strongly that these same methods could be put to use for the union at large.

Our union has to be ever vigilant for students and parents, and actively seek opportunities to build public support for their interests. Conversely, groups and individuals who wish to utilize the power of the PFT for their initiatives must know how to approach our union, feel comfortable in doing so, and be convinced that we can share responsibility, not just common ground. PFT partnerships must be a two-way street: If we want allies to listen to and show up for the PFT, they need to know that we can do the same for them.

What WE propose:

• Ongoing search, assistance, and promotion for grassroots community groups supporting pro-teacher, pro-student, pro-school, and pro-community campaigns.

• Work to build PFT presence at events for these campaigns with strategies like broader, earlier communications about them; transportation coordination; prior rank-and-file organizing to identify potential leaders interested in these campaigns; and, inviting members to participate in planning shared events.

• Deepen our campaign for well-planned community schools by improving our internal organizing on the issue, better educating our members on the concept, and championing models that aid schools and communities without undermining educators or outsourcing services.

• Leverage relationships with our fellow unions. This can build collective power in school buildings, as well as across the city and region in contract negotiations. This can also develop educational opportunities for our children by strengthening and modernizing appropriate career and technical education programs; supplying real-world content applications to academic subjects; and, making personal connections with students, introducing them to post-graduation career paths while giving unions an apprenticeship and membership pipeline.
Everything that matters can’t be tested. We believe that schools should be welcoming places for all children and providers of educational engagement on many different levels. To these ends, district and government support for data-driven, test-and-punish education must cease. The push to base student, teacher, and school progress on standardized test results wastes money, constricts curriculum content and time, and induces needless stress.

These false measures of academic achievement create an environment for students’ grade advancement at any cost in order to preserve schools. Students should not be made disengaged and depressed by a constant stream of skill drills and cut scores. Teachers and school administrators should never consider risking their livelihoods and freedom by engaging in academic fraud to inflate pass rates or graduation statistics. Unfortunately, when Philadelphia teachers began to embrace the potent national opt-out movement, the PFT leadership was reluctant to support them or defend those who faced discipline for exercising their right to inform parents of opt-out procedures—a right that even our school district has since affirmed.

The district talks about “differentiation” without granting teachers the flexibility or the resources to identify and address students’ individual needs. The future cannot bear the hidden costs of these policies, which go beyond massive financial investment in testing and related systems. They also include the growing population of young people who are unable to continue their schooling or contribute effectively to society after graduation.

What WE propose:

- Conduct consistent lobbying and action to eliminate test-and-punish initiatives from education policy on the local, state, and federal level.
- Support full adoption and promotion—on the part of both the PFT and the School District of Philadelphia—of procedures for families to opt their children out of standardized testing.
- Advocate for the development of content and objectives for independent student projects currently required to replace opted-out testing.
- Demand that student test performance and grade retention does not automatically trigger punitive action against teachers, principals, schools, or the district.
- Rebuild and revise remedial education formats (e.g., alternative school, summer school) to offer underperforming students appropriate paths to timely grade advancement and graduation.
- Examine inclusion initiatives and understaffing issues that threaten to stretch the concept of differentiated instruction to the breaking point in some classrooms.
What kind of classroom would you like to see your own child walk into after Labor Day? Imagine the materials and the beautiful classroom. Think about the people in the room and their excitement to build a community together. Consider the meaningful curricula mapped out for the year, and the ways that the school’s professionals will be able to work together to support your child’s unique needs.

We all know that our schools are suffering. Educators and students walk into decaying buildings every day, confronting safety concerns while dealing with overcrowded classrooms that leave student needs unaddressed. No wonder our students struggle to meet standardized metrics when they face these and other burdens on a constant basis. Even worse, these conditions pose a physical threat to students and educators alike—our crumbling buildings, lack of nurses, and the threat of school violence means that just entering some of our schools means putting oneself in danger. There are solutions out there, but we need to fight for them. The Caucus of Working Educators will work tirelessly, both in public and at the negotiating table, to promote district policies that better protect students and staff from harm.

What WE propose

• Demand hiring of more non-teaching assistants, nurses, psychologists, counselors, school police officers, and special education teachers.

• Help teachers address needs regarding classroom climate, including supporting teacher collaboration, providing access to useful professional development, and ensuring that teachers have manageable class sizes and adequate planning time.

• Revise the district’s “acceptable use” policy on technology to address the growing influence of mobile devices and social media on school climate, and balance that with their use in educational endeavors.

• Involve OSHA and independent contractors in environmental audits, and compel the district to binding action on “sick” or otherwise unsafe buildings.

• Push for improved facilities management and work from maintenance vendors, to keep buildings clean and environmentally sound.
Fighting for Services for Students with Special Needs

Philadelphia serves a substantial and diverse population of students with special needs. These students require specific services such as learning support classrooms, language education, and one-on-one assistance. Such services are essential to more than just the students who access them. They benefit our schools and communities by ensuring that students are positioned for success, and by protecting educators from bearing the burden of student needs they are not equipped or trained to address.

Many of these services are legally mandated under federal and state law. However, PFT members across the district have stories of schools where these laws are being violated. Some schools lack special education and ESOL teachers; others find those teachers given unmanageable caseloads or forced to abandon their own jobs to cover classroom vacancies. The state and the district get away with this because parents are unaware of their legal rights, and because the public is unaware of the scope of the crisis.

Our Caucus demands that our union must do more to address these challenges. The PFT needs to continue to stand up for students whose rights to a thorough and efficient education are being quietly taken away.

What WE propose:

• Build a public campaign to document violations of state and federal laws regarding students with special needs, and to inform the public of their rights and means for redress.
• Fight for caseload reductions for learning support teachers and other educators serving students with special needs.
• Oppose expansion of charter schools, which have consistently failed to provide services to students with special needs, often compelling these students to return to increasingly overburdened public schools.
• Support educators of all categories by providing opportunities for support, training, and collaboration around serving students with special needs.
• Demand that the district modernize systems for documentation and progress monitoring regarding students with IEPs. This will protect educators from being overwhelmed by paperwork, and will create more meaningful metrics than those provided by the district’s shifting lineup of multi-million-dollar vendors.