



Education

[Comments](#) 30 | [Recommend](#)  1

Julia Steiny: Reback fought for her teachers for four decades

01:00 AM EDT on Sunday, October 3, 2010



In 1966, Rhode Island passed its teachers collective bargaining law, allowing teachers' unions. The following year Marcia Reback, who just announced her retirement, began teaching elementary-school students. Two years later she joined the executive board of the Providence Teachers Union, becoming its president in 1973. And in 1992 Reback became president of the state's Federation of Teachers.

Although, she was never "Reback" except in the paper. Marcia was always "Marcia."

In 1990, I was a hopelessly naive new Providence School Board member. Marcia offered to help me out. We first met at the old Plantations Coffee Shop on Main Street, where I politely tried to pay for our coffees and muffins. But no. Marcia insisted we go Dutch. Always. There would be no favors between us. We were in a conflict — labor and management — each on opposite sides.

A group called Parents for Providence Public Schools, or 3PS, had introduced me to school politics. With them, I worked on a white paper that pleaded for 12 changes in the Providence teachers contract that we felt stunted the quality of education. Marcia was not pleased with my out-of-the-blue appointment to the board, but was patient with me because, as she pointed out, I didn't know a thing.

Which was true. And she was one of my best teachers. Her knowledge was and is still vast. She's scary smart, so I drank in the information. I was frantically reading Education Week cover to cover, along with whatever else people handed me. I knew enough to know that by sipping coffee with her, I was a minnow swimming with sharks.

But I liked her. Especially in those first years, her unusual charisma and sheer political clout fascinated me.

My defining moment with her, and perhaps with teachers' unions in general, came only months after my appointment. The Martin Luther King Elementary School PTO had asked Marcia to come to answer some questions at its monthly meeting. My little twins attended the school, so that meeting conjoined my professional,

political and personal lives.

The white paper spurred most of the parents' questions. For example, parents had long been enraged by the mobility of the teachers in the midst of the school year. Teachers could retire at any time without notice. A substitute filled the vacancy until the teacher with the most seniority who'd bid on the job took it. And that started a domino effect of vacancies rippling throughout the system. Teachers could keep putting their names on lists and thereby shop the schools, taking new vacancies as they became available. Our parents' group, 3PS, had found a kid whose third-grade classroom had 16 teachers in one year. The parents wanted the movement kept to only two times a year.

Marcia argued for the teachers' right to take any vacancy. Her encyclopedic knowledge of contract language, state law and district regulations allowed her to quote verbatim answers the parents didn't want to hear. The more she explained, the more the parents fretted that the labor/management conflict was heavily stacked against their kids. Which it is.

When Marcia had had enough, she outted the elephant in the room. The interests of the teachers and kids are not the same, but were sometimes in direct conflict with one another. And when their interests diverge, she said, "I represent the teachers." And shrugged. Who could argue with that?

When their interests converged, on lower class sizes, for example, Marcia was very proud of going to bat for the kids.

But parents were flipping out. Clearly their rights, and the kids' rights, were easily and legally trumped. Marcia put an end to the discussion by putting her hand on her chest, in a gesture of sincerity and apology, again stating the painfully obvious, "I represent the teachers."

Way back in 1966, teachers' unions had been saviors. Administrators could fire teachers for getting married or pregnant. A principal might keep his wife happy by ditching a teacher to hire her brother. Teachers were underpaid and exploited, and the situation begged a good fight. The new labor leaders turned to the automotive and textile industries for model contracts. So in its day, the industrial labor/management paradigm was right.

But many years later, I can say for certain that no high-quality school will ever flourish with a fight at its foundation. Schools need to function like super-families, communities where decisions are made in the best interests of all. Us/them won't work because it's not a community paradigm, but a fight. Neither the interests of the kids nor the adults can be fulfilled at the expense of the other. We now know that the old industrial paradigm can fatally undermine the strength, flexibility and healing properties of a healthy school community.

A union fights for its own. That's its job. And to my mind, Marcia was the most formidable warrior in the conflict. The traditional union community will never find her equal. Marcia is rightly proud of her life's work.

But fighting is the wrong paradigm now. School, however raucous and hectic, is peacetime work. It's time for a change.

So congratulations to Marcia for her long service. I wish her the best in her retirement.

Julia Steiny, a former member of the Providence School Board, consults on schools and government initiatives, such as Information Works!, Rhode Island's school-accountability project. She can be reached at juliasteiny@gmail.com, or c/o EdWatch, The Providence Journal, 75 Fountain St., Providence, RI 02902.

