

Let Teachers Bargain Like Equals, Our Students Are Counting on It

By: Johnnie R.S McKnight

Massachusetts asks teachers to do one of the hardest jobs in society, and then makes it nearly impossible for them to bargain for the conditions to do it well.

I was talking with a union colleague recently when I said something that's been weighing on me for a long time: it shouldn't be this hard to create a safe, stable, and productive working environment for the people who educate our children.

It shouldn't be this hard to come to the bargaining table and secure fair wages, affordable health care, and the basic dignity of a sustainable career.

Yet in Massachusetts, public sector strikes have been illegal since 1966. That means the most powerful tool workers have, the ability to withhold labor is off the table. Negotiations can drag on for months, sometimes years, with little urgency to resolve them. Without meaningful leverage, unions are often left waiting, hoping for movement, rather than negotiating as equals.

Teaching is not just a profession; it is a public service that takes a real toll. On any given day, educators are managing far more than lesson plans. They are supporting students dealing with trauma, instability, and challenges that extend well beyond the classroom. They are navigating overcrowded classrooms, rising expectations, and constant demands, and then going home to care for their own families.

Burnout is not hypothetical. It is happening in real time. We see it in the number of educators leaving the profession, in unfilled positions, and in classrooms stretched beyond capacity. When that happens, it is not just teachers who feel the impact, it is students and families as well.

Here in Springfield, there is reason for optimism. We have a diverse School Committee that reflects the community, and a superintendent who has shown a commitment to moving the district forward. But public education cannot depend on who happens to be in leadership at a given moment. School committees change. Administrations shift. Superintendents come and go.

What remains are the teachers.

The educators who have spent 20, sometimes 30 years in the same buildings, showing up day after day, not because the job is easy or the pay is high, but because they believe in the work. They understand the quiet victories that don't make headlines: the shy student who begins to speak up, the child who starts the year several grade levels behind and ends it on track, the moment confidence replaces doubt.

That kind of transformation takes patience, consistency, and trust. In some ways, it resembles the long-term mindset of an investor like Warren Buffett, recognizing potential early and allowing

it to grow over time. The difference is that teachers are not building portfolios. They are building people.

If we are serious about the future of our schools, then we must be serious about how we treat the people doing that work.

That starts with fair and functional collective bargaining. Negotiations should be timely, balanced, and grounded in mutual respect, not prolonged processes where one side holds all the leverage. When strikes are illegal and carry penalties like fines, bargaining stops being negotiation and becomes endurance.

No one is eager for disruption. Strikes affect families, routines, and learning time. But the absence of any real leverage creates a different kind of disruption, one that unfolds slowly, as educators burn out and leave, and as systems struggle to replace them.

Massachusetts should pass proposals like “An Act Uplifting Families and Securing the Right to Strike for Certain Public Employees,” which would establish a structured timeline for negotiations and create a more balanced process. The goal is not conflict. The goal is accountability, on both sides to reach fair agreements within a reasonable timeframe.

At its core, this is about partnership. Teachers should not simply be participants in decisions that shape their working conditions; they should be equal voices at the table. The people closest to the classroom often have the clearest understanding of what students need to succeed.

Every profession begins with a teacher. Every path to success passes through a classroom. If we want strong schools, we need strong educators, and that requires systems that treat them with fairness, respect, and a genuine voice in the process.

When teachers are supported, students are better served. And when students succeed, entire communities move forward.