



Protecting Access to a High-Quality, Diverse Teacher Workforce:

How Minneapolis Teachers Achieved District-Level Change to Layoff Policy

EDUCATORS FOR EXCELLENCE 2023

At 3:35 a.m. on a Friday morning in March 2022, the leaders of Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) and the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) reached [consensus on a teachers contract](#) that was years in the making. The deal closed out a three-week teacher strike that had gained national attention and more than a year of the district operating under an expired contract.

Among the many pivotal changes to the contract was a new provision exempting teachers who are members of underrepresented populations from seniority-based layoffs, also known as “last-in, first-out” (LIFO) layoffs because teachers newest to the classroom are laid off first. In practice, this change means that teachers who meet one of a set of criteria will keep their jobs regardless of their accrued seniority—or lack thereof—if layoffs occurred. Enshrining this protection in the teachers contract took a community coming together to advocate for, support, and educate on the importance of teacher diversity in MPS classrooms. For many of the stakeholders involved, this was a hard-fought and emotional win.

Does this apply to my state or district context?

Background

Starting in 2019, Minnesota stopped requiring districts to use LIFO to make educator layoff decisions, instead allowing district and union leaders to determine how to make these decisions as part of their local union contract negotiations. As of 2021, MPS was still utilizing LIFO to decide who kept their jobs and who was let go. If your state requires LIFO at the state level, click [here](#) to read about how an advocacy organization approached changing state-level LIFO policy in Oregon.

Advocacy Approach

MPS teachers, with the support of E4E-Minnesota and other local organizations, led the charge to push MPS and MFT to take action to protect teacher diversity by exempting members of underrepresented populations from layoffs in their local union contract.

Solution

The final language in the [MFT-MPS 2021-2023 contract](#) expanded layoff policy criteria beyond just seniority to prioritize teacher diversity. Example categories used included teachers who are among populations of underrepresented licensed teachers, teachers who graduated from Grow Your Own programs, and teachers in racially isolated schools.

To learn more about the national landscape of seniority-based layoffs and whether your state requires them, visit SoAllStudentsThrive.org.

2017

[Minnesota lawmakers modify state layoff policy](#) to neither require districts to use nor prohibit districts from using seniority as an approach to layoff decision-making, thus leaving the decision to local education leaders.

2019

The state begins implementing the 2017 change to layoff policy, but MPS opts to continue using LIFO.

The union proposes a memorandum of agreement (MOA) that would protect teachers from seniority-based layoffs in the district's 15 most racially segregated schools, but the MOA is not adopted.

JAN
2022

MFT-MPS contract negotiations begin.

MAR
2022

MFT teachers go on strike for three weeks.

MFT and MPS reach a tentative deal that includes an expansion of layoff criteria to protect teacher diversity. The protections become effective right away.

Local Context and Grassroots Support for Change

Minneapolis, Minnesota, is located in the heart of the Midwest in a state with deep diversity across multiple dimensions—race, class, and political affiliation. In addition to being an urban city with deep divisions [by race and class](#), it found itself at the center of the racial reckoning in 2020 as the site of George Floyd’s murder. In 2017, [Minnesota lawmakers modified state layoff policy](#) to neither require nor prohibit that districts use LIFO as an approach to layoffs, thus leaving the decision to local education leaders. The public school system, which enrolls nearly 30,000 students, has recently experienced significant decreases in enrollment and corresponding budget issues, leading to “Reduction in Force” (RIF) notifications, or notifications to teachers of potential layoffs, in recent years.



“Having teachers of color that looked like me changed the way I thought about school. I felt cared about in a different way, and now I am studying to be a teacher so that I can inspire students the way my teachers of color inspired me.”

ALAYSHA, recent Minneapolis Public Schools graduate





“My key reflection is that keeping public attention on what is happening with the negotiations the whole time is key. People tend to only pay attention during the escalation, like the strike, but it was crucial there was understanding of what led up to that moment.”

HEATHER ANDERSON, Advancing Equity Coalition



Research shows that [all students](#), but [particularly students of color](#), benefit from having teachers of color. However, in MPS, [63% of students are people of color, while only 32% of teachers are](#). To diversify the teaching population, Minnesota passed the [Increase Teachers of Color Act](#) in 2021, tripling the investment in recruiting teachers of color across the state. However, because state law still allowed districts to utilize LIFO—and many districts chose to do so—education leaders were simultaneously undermining their own efforts to diversify the workforce. As of the 2021-22 school year, Minneapolis’ union and district leaders still had LIFO enshrined in the teachers contract as the primary mechanism for determining who would be laid off. State investments in diversifying the teacher workforce



have been working, with teachers of color being disproportionately represented among new teachers in Minneapolis. Leaving a seniority-based layoff provision in place would undermine this progress.

Years before the teachers contract carved out protections that prioritized a diverse workforce, advocacy groups across the city and state had been highlighting the expansive gaps between students and teachers of color and were working tirelessly to engage the community around closing this gap. They built an awareness among the public of the research demonstrating the academic improvement that students, especially students of color, had when they had a teacher of color at the front of the classroom and about teachers’ contracts and why they’re important.

Past Teacher Diversity Advocacy Work in Minnesota

Educators for Excellence-Minnesota had been engaged in issues around teacher diversity in Minneapolis since 2014 and published a paper in 2015 focused on closing this gap. The Coalition to Increase Teachers of Color and American Indian Teachers was instrumental in the passage of the Increase Teachers of Color Act. The Advancing Equity Coalition advocated for a broad range of equity issues across the state, and in 2020, protecting teachers of color was its biggest platform position.

Key Conditions

District and union view protecting teachers of color as important priority

Although the nuances of their perspectives differed at times, MFT and MPS leaders agreed that protecting and expanding the district’s workforce diversity was a priority. In 2019, the union proposed an MOA that would protect teachers from seniority-based layoffs in the district’s 15 most racially segregated schools. However, this MOA was never finalized and did not become a part of the contract. In 2020, the district conducted a [Comprehensive District Design](#) process, which shed light on many issues around equity in the district, including the need for more teachers of color in its schools. In early 2020, MPS and the MFT agreed that teacher diversity in the district was critical and that something needed to be done to protect it in the contract. However, it took the relentless advocacy of MPS teachers and pressure on the MFT leadership in order for change to become reality.

Internal pressure: Teachers willing to challenge the status quo

In early 2020, a slate of candidates called the *Inclusion Revolution* ran for leadership positions in the MFT election. They highlighted inclusion and teacher diversity as the central theme in their campaign and brought this issue front and center in all MFT discussions. Although they lost the election, their

presence and courage changed the conversation in pivotal ways through the entirety of the contract negotiations and strike. Additionally, after they lost, they continued to attend union meetings and join committees to ensure that their voices were heard and that the issues they fought for were a part of the union platform—recognizing that the union was a key lever for change.



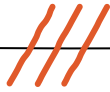
The MFT contract negotiations platform included protecting underrepresented teachers, along with increased pay and better mental health support. Teachers had voted to strike if necessary. The district and MFT came to an impasse, and the strike began in March 2022.

However when the teachers went to the strike line, materials from the MFT no longer included the protections for teacher diversity. Many of the *Inclusion Revolution* candidates, as well as many other teachers, immediately noticed this exclusion. These teacher advocates started a petition and demanded a discussion with union leadership to understand what had happened behind closed doors that resulted in the deprioritization of this key issue. This pressure worked, and when the strike ended and the draft contract was voted on, protections for teachers from



“As a educator of color, I see the power of representing our students—it is about academics as well as cultural competency and leadership outside of the classroom.”

ALEX LEONARD, MPS high school guidance counselor



underrepresented populations from layoffs were included for all schools, not only the 15 originally proposed by the MFT. The contract specifies that this provision is not intended to be in place forever—the goal, ultimately, is a diverse workforce that matches the demographic representation of the students it serves, for which such exemptions are not necessary. It specifies, “Language which refers to this Article will no longer be in effect once the teachers in the District reflect the diversity of the labor market and the community served by the District.”

External pressure: Advocacy groups engaged throughout the strike

Throughout the negotiations, advocacy groups continued to fight for the need to include protections for teachers of color in the negotiations, but the base of support and community awareness that had been built for years was crucial. Throughout the strike, many external groups worked to hold the union accountable. The Advancing Equity Coalition hosted watch parties for the live negotiations as a way to involve Minneapolis citizens and educate them on the contract. The Racial Justice Network actively advocated around this issue and added its support

for protecting teacher diversity. WE WIN Institute and the NAACP held a press conference during the strike to increase the external pressure. E4E-Minnesota members continued to both pressure and support the union during this time as well. These stakeholders advocated for both the voice of teachers of color and the impact on the district’s most underserved students to remain front and center in union and district negotiations.

Keeping the pressure on: Defending the contractual change

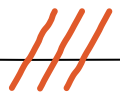
The MFT-MPS contract became national news again in fall 2022 as many right-wing media outlets started to cover a lawsuit by [Judicial Watch](#) that challenged the legality of the contract provision. Many of the external groups continued to defend this contractual provision, and national union leadership has supported it as an anti-racist measure. [The lawsuit was dismissed](#) in January 2023 because the plaintiff lacked legal standing, as she was not laid off herself.

In February 2023, principals received their budgets in a process called budget tie-offs. As part of this, it will



“When the Inclusion Revolution slate ran for MFT leadership, it ruffled a lot of feathers. I don’t know if they thought they could win, but it helped make the union more accountable.”

SHARITA BENSON, former MPS teacher





"I hold union values and anti-racist values at the same time. We are at a crossroads when it comes to defining how unions support teacher diversity and student equity."

NAFEESAH MUHAMMAD, former MPS teacher and member of the Inclusion Revolution slate

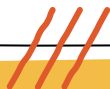


become clear how many teachers they can employ the following year, and the possibility of reductions at the school and district levels will become more real for MPS teachers. This will be the first time the new process for laying off teachers will be in place. Federal COVID-19 ESSER funds have been filling the budget gaps in Minneapolis and around the country, but those funds are scheduled to expire in 2024. This, coupled with decreasing enrollment and the recessionary climate, creates the potential for school closures and layoffs in Minneapolis. While it is a huge win that these protections for teacher diversity have been secured in the MFT-MPS teachers contract, it will be important for the challenges to not unravel this important work.



"No one did end up getting laid off last year, but enrollment continues to decline; COVID money is ending, and the economy is generally not good, so having this contract is a huge win for protecting Minneapolis teachers of color in the coming years."

PAULA COLE, Executive Director, E4E-Minnesota



How teachers can do this type of work in their communities

Engagement of stakeholders is key. MPS teachers knew they needed to understand the union contract priorities and where they came from, what the union bylaws and the constitution allowed in terms of engagement in the negotiation process, and who on the MPS and MFT negotiation teams were fighting for or against this change. To build understanding of key context and ultimately advocate for change, teachers can:

- Go to union chapter meetings
- Educate themselves on contracts
- Participate in union leadership elections
- Understand who is leading the union in different roles and how they were elected or appointed
- Speak truth to power even when it goes against the culture of their union
- Attend contract negotiations and make sure they are public
- Know they can propose a change to a union contract through an MOA at any time
- Organize like-minded union members and bring information back to their people so they know what's going on and how to become involved

And for those who aren't educators, support teachers by promoting these steps among educator networks and help make them aware of their power and impact.

Educators for Excellence is a teacher-led organization that ensures teachers have a leading voice in the policies that impact their students and profession. Visit [E4E.org](https://www.e4e.org) for more information on how to get involved in teacher advocacy in your area and if you have questions about advocacy efforts, please contact info@e4e.org.