

Paul Viskanta
Paul.Viskanta@du.edu

Paul Viskanta is a doctoral student in the Curriculum and Education program at Denver University. He is a 17-year veteran of Los Angeles Unified and served as Chapter Chair at Daniel Pearl Magnet High School.

Regardless of what happens in the days leading up to the January 10 strike date the Union of Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) has called for, there is a deep structural inability for the leaders of Los Angeles Unified to understand the change in mindset that is required to build a true partnership with the hardworking educators in the district. Even where there are successes, the district, regardless of who is in the superintendent's chair, can't get out of its own way to build on what works in the sprawling urban district of 734,000 students and 26,500¹ teachers.

During the 2008-2009 school year, I was part of a group of teachers that fought the change of Birmingham High School in Lake Balboa to a charter model.² The fight was difficult and disruptive, but ultimately led to the independence of the school that is now Daniel Pearl Magnet High School. The school, now in its 10th year, is an example of what should be celebrated in the district but isn't. During its ten years, the scrappy school of just under 400 students has had a consistent 100% graduation rate, a valued metric of success which former Superintendent Michelle King made a focus for improvement during her recent administration. Its focus on journalism has won its program numerous awards for students and its journalism teacher Adrianna Chavira, who has a list of over 30 awards represented on the lengthy page of the school website.³

¹ These are rounded numbers, Wikipedia

² <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jul/01/local/me-charter1>

³ <https://www.thepearlpost.com/about/>

The journalism program also acts as a link for students to our nation's most recent history, enabling students to see themselves as having the ability to affect the world around them. The late Daniel Pearl's parents are celebrated each year for their courage and dedication to the memory of their son with "Daniel Pearl Music Days,"⁴ an event with participants in 140 countries. The students are taught about the important work of Daniel Pearl not only in its award-winning journalism program, but throughout the curriculum, making connections to ideas of social justice and the importance seeking truth in our society.

Even with such successes, the school struggles to remain sustainable. With LAUSD assigning teachers using a formula based on number of students attending, it struggles to keep a staff so that it can offer the courses required for students to graduate. Course selection is limited, and it is only able to offer one foreign language, Spanish, and has limited electives for students to explore. It does not have adequate facilities for physical education classes. This is the fundamental problem that LAUSD struggles with that leads to such deep-seated distrust and even hostility among those seeking to educate its students: Why doesn't it support and strengthen what is right and good in the district? Daniel Pearl Magnet High School should have been slowly scaled up and given the resources to make it stronger, yet it has been often left to fight on its own to provide a comprehensive high school experience for its students. This is a credit to its staff and the two principals who have led the school.

The issues with LAUSD are deeply structural. While the school board and the 7 superintendents that have revolved through the position in the last 10 years have been unsuccessful in creating an enduring focused, achievable vision for the district, the inability for the organization to trust its teachers and build a successful partnership to flatten hierarchies and

⁴ <http://www.danielpearlmusicdays.org/>

share authority continues to be resisted throughout many levels of the district. One of the teacher's central narratives during the nearly 2-year contract negotiations that are hurdling towards the possible strike is that teachers should be respected with a substantial voice in decision making throughout the district. The question that must be addressed by those in administrative positions - this includes the current superintendent who entered his position with a hostile stance - is why does the district fear sharing decision making with teachers, who are those who work most directly with the students on a daily basis and know their school sites and population of student's best? This fear of partnership runs deep. One of the biggest recent reforms was the creation of the Pilot Schools model with the "Thin Contract" that notably limited teacher tenure rights at these schools.⁵ There is no evidence that these schools are performing better, in fact one of these schools has had a recent teacher turnover rate of 1/3 of the staff, markedly different from a school like Daniel Pearl.

As the teacher's prepare to strike, UTLA has presented the central question for LAUSD in a compelling and straightforward fashion, arguing that the lack of desire and eagerness to partner with teachers, who are professionals in their field, can only be ideological. The argument for the inability of LAUSD to authentically partner with its teachers is compellingly made by the 98% vote of 81% of the teachers⁶ to authorize the possible strike, and on December 15 a crowd of thousands⁷ marched in support of the UTLA bargaining position, which was built over the last 4 years from the bottom up with grassroots organizing and stakeholder dialogue. Superintendent Beutner should see this work of teachers as a gift, helping the district come to terms with its failings in truly partnering with its educators in the service of the students of Los Angeles.

⁵ https://www.utla.net/sites/default/files/LA_MOU_Pilot_School_Agreement_2009.pdf

⁶ <https://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-edu-teachers-strike-authorization-20180831-story.html>

⁷ <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-teachers-march-20181215-story.html>