Ivy Academia Charter teachers join UTLA

Educators organize to have a collective voice on professional issues.

Teachers and counselors at Ivy Academia Entrepreneurial Charter Schools, a K-12 school on three campuses in Woodland Hills, will now be represented by UTLA. They sought membership in UTLA for the same reason so many educators value belonging to a union: to have a stronger voice on campus.

Kelly Mancuso, an Ivy middle school teacher, said that there was talk of unionizing off and on for a few years, but that this year seemed like the year to do it.

“The ball really got rolling because there were so many top-down decisions forced on teachers,” Mancuso says.

This year, administrators scheduled 13 furlough days (a 6.5 percent pay cut for teachers). When Prop. 30 passed, Ivy management delayed restoring those days and ultimately restored only some of them.

“Another impediment of new unpaid duties that were not related to the employees’ core teaching responsibilities. Teachers had no say in accepting these new duties and no way to protest if they were having on their work with students.

“Our focus needs to be on our students, on our classrooms,” Mancuso says. “The extra time they were requiring was impacting our teaching, planning, and grading time—everything we do for our students.”

Like most nonunionized charter educators, Ivy Academia employees sign annual “at will” contracts and can be fired for no cause.

“We can’t advocate for our students without fearing for our jobs,” Mancuso says. “It’s tough to speak your mind when you are constantly afraid of being fired.”

Many Ivy employees began to see that ensuring a collective voice for educators was the best way to strengthen Ivy Academia. A group of Ivy teachers began organizing in September, reaching out to coworkers and finding connections among employees at the three campuses.

“We started slowly because we were not sure what the reaction would be,” Mancuso says. “But when teachers heard what we were doing, they were interested and much more receptive than we thought they’d be.”

UTLA members from nearby schools supported Ivy teachers in the process. UTLA teachers from Granada Hills Charter High School and Woodland Hills Academy met with Ivy staff to talk about how teacher participation in key decisions can strengthen a school’s culture and academic program.

Brandon Zaslow met multiple times with the Ivy teachers to share his perspective as a union teacher at Granada Hills, the largest unionized charter in the U.S. and a highly competitive, top-ranked school.

“We talked about how, under a union, schools can continue to meet goals for innovation while putting into place rules and procedures that are helpful to those goals,” Zaslow says. “The Ivy teachers became excited about the possibilities and raised their expectations of what they might be able to do. It was about finding their voice.”

By December, 54 out of 56 Ivy teachers and counselors had signed a petition requesting representation by UTLA, and on February 6 Ivy Academia management approved the employees’ request for union recognition. Now, as UTLA members, the Ivy educators have a bargaining committee of six educators who will begin bargaining their first union contract with management. The teachers and counselors’ primary goal is to have a strong and effective learning environment for Ivy students.

More than 75 chapter chairs from the Valley West area signed a collective letter not only congratulating Ivy teachers and counselors but also offering support as they begin their negotiations.

Valley West Area Chair Colleen Schwab hosted meetings at her school where Ivy teachers discussed their priorities for negotiations.

Some of the concerns teachers want to address in bargaining include a fair teacher development and evaluation process, job security and a reasonable probationary period, just cause and due process rights, limits on unpaid duties, and a system for teachers to have an ongoing voice to advocate for the needs of students.

“When teachers are organized in a union, the benefits are realized by the entire school community,” says Ivy teacher Mary Cypher, who works at the elementary school. “A union gives teachers a voice and the ability to take part in the decision-making process so vital to the effective running of the school.”

The Ivy organizing committee will also continue to build on the staff’s critically important connections with the parents at the school.

“The parents I’ve talked to are very positive about our forming a union,” Mancuso says. “They know we are organizing for the right reasons. They see how hard we work and they want us to have the resources and support to continue to work that hard.”

UTLA now represents more than 900 educators at independent charter schools in the Los Angeles area, including conversion charters such as El Camino Charter, Palisades Charter, Granada Hills Charter, and Birmingham Charter high schools and Pacoima and Montague elementary schools as well as startup charters at the Accelerated School and Global Academy.

What do you think of John Deasy’s leadership?

UTLA members will be voting in April.

UTLA members will have a chance to weigh in on what you think of Superintendent John Deasy’s leadership in an all-member vote in schools from April 2 to 10.

The UTLA Board of Directors and the House of Representatives scheduled this Districtwide vote so that the voices of the classroom professionals of L.A. can be heard on a question that is central to the future of the District:

Do LAUSD’s teachers and health and human services professionals have confidence in the leadership of Superintendent John Deasy?

Regardless of your position on the question, it is crucial that you and all of the teachers at your school participate in this vote. Every educator’s voice must be heard.

The vote will be on the same ballot as the Initiative for the Schools L.A. Students Deserve. Read more about the initiative and the voting timeline for both votes on page 14.

New UTLA Teacher Evaluation Rights Toolkit online

UTLA has created a seven-page Teacher Evaluation Rights Toolkit to offer guidance to members and to protect against any attempt by LAUSD to exceed the parameters of the recently ratified Evaluation Agreement.

In Superintendent John Deasy’s “Guideline to Principals,” he advised principals to give student test data a weight of up to 30 percent even though, under the agreement, any preset percentage level, no matter how high or low, is prohibited. The District’s own Policy Bulletin 5335.1 to Principals on Teacher Evaluation acknowledges this by entirely omitting any mention of percentages.

The toolkit, which was created by UTLA staff and attorneys, has a collection of documents and advice that will be helpful in holding Deasy and LAUSD to the terms of the agreement. Last year, when the superintendent initiated his spurious “Districtwide Teacher File Review,” UTLA provided every chapter chair with a Member Defense Toolkit, containing the necessary forms and step-by-step instructions for our members to be able to assert and preserve their negotiated rights. Because UTLA members responded together, we were able to undercut that unfair intrusion on our professional rights.

Even if you are not being evaluated this year, it is a good idea to become familiar with the elements of the new toolkit. The kit includes:

- Timeline for members being evaluated this year.
- Letter for each member to submit to the principal, asserting your support for Stull deferrals and for data not to be used inaccurately in evaluations.
- Letter of appeal/objection to the principal to use if he or she asks you to revise your Initial Planning Sheet to include a data objective that goes beyond what is allowed in the contract.
- Sample objectives for members to use as a reference prior to the conference with the principal in which the Initial Planning Sheet is revised.
- Form to request a deferral of Stull evaluation.

The Teacher Evaluation Rights Toolkit can be downloaded at www.utla.net/nod/3990.