

Winning in Baltimore: The Story of How BMORE Put Racial Equity at the Center of Teacher Union Organizing

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Historical Context: Baltimore and the Disinvestment in Black Education

Public school teachers around the country are engaged in strikes. They walked out of their classrooms and schools to gain attention from state legislators, and not just for better salaries and benefits for themselves (although most Americans agree that teachers need better pay). Teachers are calling our attention to a sticky problem in American public education funding: long-term inequitable distribution of funding that predictably falls along racial lines.

Maryland, just like every other state, faces this kind of inequity. For example, the state has consistently underfunded Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPSS) in violation of their constitutional definition of adequacy, upheld by the courts multiple times. Corey Gaber (2017), a teacher in Baltimore City schools, wrote in *Medium*: “When adding up this gross underfunding of BCPSS, which is nothing short of the crime of theft being committed against the predominantly Black youth who attend these schools, we reach a very rough education debt to Baltimore City of 3.2 BILLION DOLLARS!”

Appointed commissions have recommended equity in school funding across the state. However, even when a process to phase in millions of extra dollars was introduced in the early 2000s, the state halted the effort, claiming insufficient funds to provide equitable school funding because of the 2008 financial crisis. Since then, every spring, an assembly of hundreds of parents, teachers, administrators, and advocates rally for additional funding from the state to ensure that Baltimore schools can keep their doors open.

In reality, the funding inequity dates back to the Jim Crow period, during which Blacks paid taxes in Maryland but received nothing in return to fund their schools. There were Black schools, but because they did not receive public money, they had crumbling facilities, second- or third-hand books, and poorly compensated teachers (Baum, 2010). In this way, governments “reasserted Black inferiority and

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proclaimed white supremacy the cultural and economic law of the land and the preferred social order” (Rooks, 2018, p. 51). Not much has changed since. Nowadays, Black school systems still suffer from unequal funding and have inadequate facilities, like in Baltimore, where they cannot even provide heat in the winter for the students.

Part of the problem is that since the Jim Crow era, the state still has not invested in the city and its Black community. A clear example of this occurred when Spiro Agnew was governor of Maryland. Riots followed after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, and Agnew summoned Black leaders to the state capitol to demand that they help restore order, but he offered nothing to help the city or its Black communities (Baum, 2010). Agnew’s lack of investment reveals clear disdain for the city of Baltimore. Interestingly, Agnew went on to become Richard Nixon’s vice president and continued this policy of benign neglect of urban centers, which would impact cities like Baltimore for years to come. Without much further public investment in Baltimore since this period, the city opened to private investment, which did not yield the kind of tax funding that the city so desperately needed.

Maryland officials’ disdain for Baltimore became clear when the American Civil Liberties Union’s Education Reform Project appealed to the state for funds to fix its crumbling school buildings. In 2012, Maryland’s ACLU Education Reform Project, along with others, proposed leveraging bonds to pay for long overdue school renovations. The state agreed to the bonds only if the city’s school officials promised to shut down 26 of its 200 schools. Sheepishly, school officials agreed to this, but the process of closing schools has been more difficult than the city bargained for. The city used metrics of under-performance and under-enrollment to close schools. However—given the lack of investment in the schools and neighborhoods of Baltimore that had occurred over decades (Baum, 2010; Pietila, 2010)—these blunt instruments led to closures in low income and majority Black neighborhoods, a phenomenon now commonly known in Baltimore as the Black Butterfly (Brown, 2016). Coined by Dr. Lawrence Brown, a professor of public health at Morgan State University, this term was meant to describe visually how Black neighborhoods appeared on the map of the city, covering the east and west sides and appearing to him like an image of a butterfly.

In 2015, public outrage blew up when Freddie Gray, an unarmed Black man, died in police custody. Schools shut down while the city dealt with the public uprising. People poured into the streets demanding justice—not just in this case, but justice for the decades of disinvestment in Black communities that resulted neighborhoods where poverty was endemic and police brutality was a daily reality. The state, once again, responded with disdain for the city—the governor called the mayor to task for not getting her city under control and demanded law and order. A few days later, schools opened again, and teachers resumed their work without paper for photocopiers, without heat in the dead of winter, and without support for students experiencing trauma. In spite of this, teachers invested time and energy into discussions with their students about structural racism, the police and police brutality, intergenerational poverty, and how to get involved in making change in the city.

Suddenly, it seemed as if advocating for more school funding was important but not enough to ensure justice for the teachers and the children of Baltimore. The organizing work at the state level to ensure equity in funding was certainly on everyone’s minds, but there was a sense that more needed to be done and that the leaders at the helm were not going to bring more back to Baltimore. A change was coming.

Teachers Union and the Rise of Baltimore Movement of Rank-and-File Educators

For many years, the Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU) argued for more funding and increased salaries for its members. It was so committed to the latter that it negotiated a contract that included merit pay. Neoliberal school reform advocates across the country hailed the 2010 contract that promoted school choice as “progressive.” Many teachers were unhappy with this contract negotiation and thought it ignored many of the issues that were important to teachers. After teachers voted against the contract in the first round, the American Federation of Teachers—the national teachers’ union—sent in organizers to persuade teachers to agree to the contract. The superintendent of Baltimore city schools at the time, Andrés Alonso—who was instrumental in expanding alternative certification programs (i.e., Teach for

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America)—rallied those teachers, in particular, to support the contract, which promised items consistent with his neoliberal approach to reform.

Although the union issued a public statement expressing excitement about the new contract, city teachers were much more divided about the contract than the press let on. Mirroring union members around the country that were disaffected with their leadership, many Baltimore teachers wanted their union to fight for more than the bread-and-butter issues for teachers. They wanted a union that would fight for better conditions for teachers, students, whole schools, and communities. These teachers wanted a social justice union, focused on justice for Black students from whose neighborhoods we have disinvested for too long.

Like union leadership in other cities, the BTU's leadership had been the same for many years, elected by a tiny slice of the rank-and-file membership. Only 1,200 of 6,000 members voted in the 2016 election, giving then-president Marietta English her eighth term in the position. In that election, teacher Kimberly Mooney lost to English by a small margin, suggesting dissatisfaction with current leadership. Veteran teacher Mike Miazga, who voted for Mooney, was quoted in the *Baltimore Sun* as saying, "I make more money than I thought I would ever be able to make as a teacher, but there are too many things I don't hear coming from the BTU. I feel like their focus is not the focus of the teachers and students a lot of times, and I wanted a different voice" (Green, 2016).

This discontent was not lost on a small group of teachers who decided to come together informally. They began by learning. They read common texts, visited union caucuses in other cities (e.g., Caucus of Rank and File Educators in Chicago), and regularly discussed their vision for Baltimore schools. Through this process, they built durable relationships with each other, reached out to others, and began to identify leaders among them. This group called themselves BMORE (Baltimore Movement of Rank and File Educators).

BMORE Development: Stories of Building Consciousness and Relationships

During the formation period, it was important for us to get a strong sense of who we were as a group. One key piece of that was to think about who we were in relation to a Black city, like Baltimore. As a group, we spent a lot of time talking and thinking about race. We knew that race equity and Black leadership were important qualities for us. Still, it took us a while to figure out what that meant, and specifically what about Black leadership in Baltimore was significant for us. We also needed to stay secretive and closeted for a long time because—as a small group—we knew that members of our initial group would have an outsized impact on how we would eventually be perceived. So, when establishing our own identity, we tried very consciously to avoid being co-opted. For example, one group that we wanted to avoid was strident leftists. There were often older white men connected with Marxist organizations who would attend our meetings, but we had to consider whether they would alienate would-be allies, like younger teachers of color. There were also young neoliberal teachers who favored market-based ideas to improve the union who were ideologically opposed to unions, and, lastly, there were those whose animosity toward union leadership was nothing but thinly veiled anti-Blackness.

We also used this slow period to build relationships with each other, bringing food and drinks to book club gatherings where we read about similar efforts around the country. Developing inclusivity and commitment was crucial because there is a long history of folks claiming to be supportive of social justice movements and then turning elsewhere when presented with an opportunity to rise through the ranks. We were set on this not happening to us, and on building a solid community of educators who made decisions democratically. It meant that we would eventually be comfortable saying, "Cristina, can you handle that?" "Natalia, can you represent us at this event?" "Corey, can you write up something on this issue?" Over time, we were able to rely on each other, knowing that our team would handle it well without having to peer over each other's shoulders. Now we have a steering committee with seven people representing elementary, middle, high school, traditional schools, charter schools, teachers, and paraprofessionals. Five of our seven members are people of color, and that is intentional.

We first developed our knowledge base, and that happened in discussions and reading together. In our group we did research on the history of underfunding, which allowed us to properly frame the facilities issue in the context of decades of state abdication of responsibility. Through our discussions, we realized that our working conditions were severe and that we needed to address them. Teaching can be such an overwhelming and isolating profession that it's easy to not even know what's going on elsewhere in your school, much less across the district. Consciousness grew tremendously as a result of listening to stories from teachers around the city. Teachers of English learners explained, for example, that they work to protect families from Immigration and Customs Enforcement outside of the building. Students learning English were also being asked to take the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers test, and their teachers were being evaluated, in part, based on those results. We also gained greater empathy for the work of Black paraprofessionals, who shoulder a disproportionate load of the behavior management side of teaching with a third of the pay.

There was also a lot of invisible work that we needed to do to add to our common knowledge base. Bouncing different potential ideas off of other teachers we knew allowed us to craft something quickly that accounted for a variety of perspectives. Talking on the phone with principals we knew gave us another angle when considering a solution that worked for all people on the ground in school buildings. Without this prior invisible work, we couldn't have churned out such a thoughtful list of demands that caught on and allowed concerned citizens to channel their outrage into a tangible path forward.

Creating a Platform for Racial Equity

In many ways, the circumstances of teaching in Baltimore are the hardest that they have ever been, which leaves limited energy for organizing. But our group came to see that the issues are so pressing that they need organizing in order to solve them. In January 2018, the temperatures dropped below freezing for days on end. There were schools across the city without heat. There were reports of teachers and students in classrooms wearing hats, coats, and gloves to make it through the school day. One teacher even launched a GoFundMe page to raise money for winter wear. This was a crisis. The school board got an earful from community members at their January 10th meeting and still had no solution to offer. This was a great first organizing opportunity for BMORE. We reacted quickly, and it taught us how to do a campaign in a short period of time. Learning how to be public and loud was the next important piece of building the movement that we started, and having an immediate outrage to respond to was a teachable moment.

We put out a set of demands in English and Spanish about the school temperature, which asked for transparency, communication, a clear plan, and to close schools if the conditions were too cold for students and teachers. The district answered the demands, and eventually the governor stepped in to provide emergency funding. This campaign put us on the map and got us working in coalition with many other groups around the city.

After the temperature crisis subsided, BMORE returned to our October conversation about doing a Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Baltimore, like many other groups of teachers in other cities had done. We were all 100% behind the idea and terrified of taking on another project on our own. Committing to something that extended beyond our current capacity forced us to reach out for partnership with other groups we admired from afar. Originally, we thought we'd get some T-shirts and do a single event. The response was so overwhelming that we ended up having an entire week's worth of events, culminating in our Black Teachers Matter panel discussion at a local elementary school. Our panel raised awareness about the loss of Black teachers in Baltimore, which stands now at only 40% in a district with a student population that is over 80% Black. The week garnered enough positive attention that people now know BMORE. With our name on the map, other groups are now reaching out to us, eager to partner and inspired by the work we're putting in. This makes us think BMORE can be the kind of group that connects the dots between the people on the ground doing real work in the community and lifts the voices of those who are traditionally and systematically ignored.

Building BMORE Power in the Present and Future

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The ongoing challenge that we faced was the nitty-gritty of organizing. After the campaign and the panel, we received a lot of attention. Black-led community organizations embraced us, but we needed to expand our base of teachers. There was general support, but not consistent energy to move folks to add an additional obligation after their school days. In many ways, we needed to remain true to what we started, and we continued to build relationships with teachers. We knew that it took the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (Chicago's social justice teacher caucus) years before they were ready to take over their union leadership, which they did in 2010. We recognized that the work was slow. If we just got everybody involved in BMORE—without considering that the people most likely to join up would be those with the most resources, time, and lack of discrimination on the worksite—we knew that we would likely attract a high number of liberal white teachers. Over time, this new membership could create a white space that was no longer safe for educators of color to join and speak out. We were and are very conscious of staying true to our original goal for Black leadership. After all, we are in a Black city.

So, rather than simply expanding our base of teachers, BMORE decided to build power. We ran delegates for election so that we could be represented at the American Federation of Teachers' national convention in Pittsburgh in 2018. We submitted 850 petition signatures from BTU members to amend the BTU constitution to make voting more accessible. We were a regular presence at school board meetings and smaller work groups, adding teacher voice to conversations around curriculum, teacher evaluation, and the recruitment and retention of Black teachers in the district. Finally, we put together a slate for the next BTU election in 2019 and won, ousting the eight-term president and her leadership team to usher in a new era of teacher leadership aimed at transforming the BTU from a service union to a social justice union.

We believe educators should be proactively leading the efforts to advocate for, protect, and improve our profession *and* the communities where our students live. Public education serves the common good, and labor unions do the important work of protecting it from exploitation and privatization. We understand that public education is a tool for liberation and essential to a functioning democracy. We will work to counteract Baltimore's history of structural racism by intentionally promoting the voices and leadership of educators of color within our group. We intend to amplify the power of the people through relationship building and providing educators the tools to organize their schools and communities

Author Biography

Jessica Shiller *is an associate professor of education at Towson University and is the editor of The Urban Education Justice Project: <http://wp.towson.edu/urbanedemproj>.*

The Baltimore Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (BMORE) *is a diverse group of educators committed to advancing quality public schools and to transforming the Baltimore Teachers Union from a service union to a social justice union.*

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