

The NJ Labor Management Collaborative “holds space” in Atlantic City

By Kimberly Crane



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Educators are less stressed and more productive at work when they are valued and respected by their administration. Administrators and board members are more comfortable partnering with staff when their wide range of experience in education is recognized and appreciated. When educators collaborate, student achievement rises.

This ideal scenario is being fostered through the New Jersey Public School Labor Management Collaborative (LMC) guided by the New Jersey Collaborative State Partnership. The partnership includes the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA), the New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA), the New Jersey Association of School Administrators (NJASA), and NJEA.

On Nov. 7-9, just prior to the NJEA Convention,

educators and association leaders from across New Jersey came together with administrators and school board members at the Atlantic City Convention Center to work toward a common goal: increasing student success in public schools.

NJEA Deputy Executive Director Denise Graff Policastro opened the event.

“The innovative work you are doing here today—and throughout the year—demonstrates a real commitment to the collaboration needed among educational partners to make our public schools work for every child,” Graff Policastro said.

The three-day event was financed through partner funding with the National Education Association (NEA). In 2021, NEA approved a \$1.5 million in funding to help expand the New Jersey Public School Labor Management Collaborative in the state. NEA committed an additional \$1.5 million over three years to fund and grow the initiative nationwide.

“Our recent pre-convention workshops are the first effort to sustainably grow labor management collaborative

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partnerships across the state of New Jersey,” said Mike Ritzius, the NJEA liaison to the LMC.

In addition to Ritzius, those facilitating the event included NEA Fellow for the LMC LeShaun Arrington, NJPSA Executive Director Karen Bingert, NJPSA Professional Learning Coordinator Heather Moran, Education Consultant Stefani Hite, and California Labor Management Initiative Director Gustavo Morales.

Who’s in the collaborative?

NJEA, NJPSA, the New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA), and the New Jersey Association of School Administrators (NJASA) comprise the New Jersey Collaborative State Partnership.

Representatives from eight New Jersey school districts were present: Clifton, Cherry Hill, Hillside, Highland Park, New Brunswick, South Brunswick, Trenton and Westampton. Representatives from NEA and the Delaware State Education Association also participated.

“Our group found the workshop experience very valuable,” said Highland Park Education Association President Keith Presty. “We took away strategies and insights that we can easily turnkey to our district’s leadership teams and committees.”

Presty said that he and his team are looking forward to future events.

Participants brought varying levels of experience with labor management collaboration. Several of the participating districts already have district leadership committees in place that meet once a month and individual school building teams that meet bimonthly. Other districts in the group are taking their first steps to institute leadership teams in their schools.

“No matter where a district is in the process, they are welcome to join the collaborative,” Ritzius said.

“Including educators as decision makers on district leadership teams offers the best opportunity to maximize student outcomes,” Arrington said. “The Labor Management Collaborative is a venue where education stakeholders come together to build understanding and solve problems in a safe space with equal voices.”



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District leadership teams

A school's district leadership team or committee should include members from every represented unit within the school's structure—that includes educational support professionals. Union members and leaders, school administrators, board members, parents, and sometimes students, work as partners on issues affecting the district as a whole.

For example, a district leadership team might generate solutions to concerns such as a lack of substitutes, the flow of students and staff around construction, school start and end times, how to best support student and staff's mental health, or how to develop positive messaging to support a bond referendum.

Items a labor management team would not handle include contract disputes, personnel, budgets, curricula, or many of the other issues that are already addressed by standing committees—though concerns with those topics may be touched upon for reference.

Those who work in education know that there is no shortage of challenges. Addressing concerns by gathering the collaborative input of all local education stakeholders, each with different perspectives on the issues, provides quicker, more effective solutions.

Collaborative partnerships in education lead to greater employee retention, educator empowerment, more effective communication among stakeholders, and an increase in student success.

LMC macro curriculum and competencies

Labor management collaboration is more than just getting together and talking. Building a sustainable collaborative requires intentional practices. The New Jersey Collaborative State Partnership has developed the LMC Macro Curriculum as a guide for achieving increased student success.

As stated in that curriculum, "Research indicates that effective collaborative partnerships in education lead to greater employee retention, educator empowerment, more effective communication among stakeholders, and an increase in student success."

The LMC Macro Curriculum competencies are:

- Commit to an organizational structure that follows sustainable collaboration.
- Empower participants.
- Establish a shared purpose.
- Broker knowledge.
- Ground decisions in evidence and reflection.
- Establish a shared purpose and knowledge brokering with community stakeholders.

NJCSP holds itself accountable for its work through the curriculum guidelines and its efforts to introduce more districts to collaborative work. 📍

Join the collaborative



The next NJ Collaborative State Partnership workshop, "Growing Your Collaborative Practice" will be held on March 4 at the NJPSA/FEA Conference Center in Monroe Township, Middlesex County.

To learn more, scan this QR code, or email one of the contacts below.

NJ Collaborative State Partnership contacts:

Michael Ritzius, NJEA Liaison to the Labor Management Collaborative, mritzius@njea.org

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What does it mean to hold space?

Holding space for someone is a practice of centering the other person's experiences while being fully present without distractions. It is important to create a physically and emotionally safe space, listen without judgement, and offer empathy without sharing assessment or advice.

Using this practice for a group involves the same principles but will look somewhat different than an informal conversation or group sharing session. When planning a meeting where you are holding space for a group, you may use developed meeting structures such as Open Space or World Café, similar to those found in The Art of Hosting (see link below), or you may establish guidelines of your own.

It is important to plan the meeting structure with a clear, common goal in mind. The structure you chose will influence how the group will accomplish its goal. Discussion should highlight the expression of personal experiences and ideas, promote equity among speakers, encourage honest dialogue and foster empathy.

It is important to have people who are trained and experienced with holding space guide the dialogue in the meeting. A written agenda explaining the topic or issue, an outline of the discussion structure and length, and how to harvest the discussion outcomes is helpful and can be provided in advance.

You can learn more about holding space using Open Space, World Café, and The Art of Hosting methods at artofhosting.org.