

THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF THE LOMPOC  
[CALIFORNIA] APPRENTICE TEACHER SUPPORT  
SYSTEM: A FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT

JUAN NECOCHEA, PH.D.  
*California State University, San Marcos*

ABSTRACT

This article describes the experiences of a principal participating in the Lompoc [Calif.] Apprentice Teacher Support System (LATSS), a program connected to California's Beginning Teacher Support initiative. The program led to improved labor relations as a result of increased collaboration between union and management. Although supporting beginning-teacher support programs as a rule, the principal describes confrontations with LATSS over a master teacher's observations that a teacher successful at motivating hard-to-teach students was not meeting district teaching standards. Several potential, unintended consequences of LATSS are reviewed, including some that could lead to the homogenization of teaching and a possible reduction of learning opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds.

I was first introduced to the "new" Lompoc Apprentice Teacher Support System (LATSS) in 1989 as a recently hired principal for La Cañada Elementary School in the Lompoc [Calif.] Unified School District (LUSD). During the orientation meetings, I was informed LATSS was an outcome of improved labor relations in the district between management and the Lompoc Federation of Teachers (LFT), and that it was intended to increase collaborative activities as a new form of collective negotiations. Specifically, LATSS was partly associated with California's Beginning Teacher Support Program, which was designed to increase instructional effectiveness in the classroom by providing new teachers with guidance, mentoring, and support from experienced "master teachers" in the critical first years of teaching. In the LUSD, master teachers were released from their teaching duties to meet regularly with new teachers, observe their lessons, offer

suggestions, and ascertain that the Lompoc teaching “standards” were being met in the delivery of instruction and other teacher behaviors. In my first days on the job, I was informed I would need to collaborate with the master teacher in the evaluation process of new teachers, thus providing me with a “teacher colleague” with whom to confer confidentially about the teaching performance of new teachers. At this time, however, the specific evaluation activities expected of the master teacher and me were not very clear.

What was clear, nevertheless, was that support for LATSS appeared to be systemic, indicative of the overwhelming emphasis on collaborative activities by union leadership and management as significant steps toward improved collective negotiations in the district [1]. Additionally, there was an expectation in the district that collaboration between union and management, as reflected in LATSS, would result in the professionalization of teachers, for peer reviews were viewed as an important missing ingredient in the improvement of labor relations—and a much better teacher-evaluation process. For many in the district, therefore, LATSS was considered *avant-garde*, consistent with recent trends in collective negotiations in school districts, and necessary to the collaboration between union and management in school reform [1].

Although not clearly outlined at first, my role in LATSS (I was told) was to conduct “business as usual,” which implied an adherence to the district-adopted evaluation process, but with “help” from an experienced master teacher. Although not evident at first, there were some inevitable restrictions that applied to principals, primarily consisting of a more rigidly applied observation schedule, additional reports to be submitted, and regular conferences with the master teacher about the performance of new teachers. However, most principals, including myself, viewed these requirements as a small price to pay for the opportunity to confer and collaborate with an experienced teacher in the evaluation process of new teachers. Veteran principals, in particular, welcomed the expanded role of the master teacher, frequently commenting about how they will not need to “battle the union” if the necessity to dismiss a new teacher arises. Indeed, LATSS had the effect of reducing the “Lone Ranger” feelings of principals, who perceived the collaboration as a significant step in the right direction. In meetings, functions, and other district activities, I often heard the many stories of past teacher dismissals, which invariably resulted in mountains of paperwork, stressful moments, and feelings of prolonged battle fatigue as principals took on the union (and, at times, district administrators).

With LATSS, the “tough” decision of providing final recommendations to the school board for the dismissal of ineffective beginning teachers now rested with the Trust Agreement Panel, a newly selected multilevel group composed of management and union representatives. In collaboration with the master teacher, all documentation and teacher evaluation reports were to be submitted to the panel including the final Professional Development Review with our recommendations for retention or dismissal of new teachers.

Although LATSS offered many other possibilities for collaboration between management and the LFT, the “parking lot” discussions certainly focused on the advantages of working with the union to dismiss beginning teachers. The “assist-new-teachers” rhetoric or facade notwithstanding, LATSS was quickly perceived by most district employees as an evaluation instrument that at times resulted in a recommendation for termination of employment. This evaluative role of LATSS did draw some severe and ongoing criticism from some union members; however, since LATSS did not affect tenured faculty and union leadership extolled the virtues of increased collaboration, the great majority of teachers were supportive or remained silent.

Nevertheless, this criticism did result in the funding of “process mentors” for each school site, which consisted of an above-and-beyond stipend of \$4,000 for tenured teachers from each school for the purpose of mentoring and offering unconditional support to beginning teachers. Differing from the LATSS teachers, the process mentors were classroom teachers with the added responsibilities of assisting new teachers in any way possible in a nonthreatening and safe environment. For the most part, process mentors helped new teachers in planning lessons, modeling instruction, acquiring materials and resources, providing feedback on lessons, and, at times, serving the special role of protectors for beginning teachers in trouble. Because of this unique role, process mentors often became the confidants of beginning teachers, who felt they could express their views without fear of retaliation or a negative evaluation report. This arrangement seemed to have resulted in many long-lasting friendships, unlike the master teacher, who was at times viewed with suspicion. In my own experience as principal, I perceived the support process mentors provided new teachers as indispensable. Good process mentors were worth their weight in gold, often going beyond the call of duty to assist beginning teachers in their new profession.

Before school started in my first year, the newly selected master teacher and I met on several occasions to clarify how the observations, feedback, and evaluations of my five beginning teachers were going to be conducted. After much discussion and negotiation, we decided to conduct parallel observations, feedback, and meetings with new teachers—essentially give a double dose of information. This double dose was to serve the additional function of providing for inter-rater reliability about the observations made. Additionally, we agreed to meet regularly to review our observations, note areas of agreement and disagreement, and decide what information will be presented by whom to the Trust Agreement Panel.

However, I seldom attended panel meetings because of my schedule, unless my presence was requested because of a difficult issue. Like most principals in the district, I was happy to allow the newly appointed master teacher to “carry the ball” in the entire process. My observations of new teachers were minimal, often relying more on the expertise and perceptions of the LATSS teacher. In my first

year as principal, all my beginning teachers did well—four “graduated” from LATSS and one was kept for an extra year of observation.

### DISMISSAL OF TEACHERS

The opportunity to test LATSS appeared early in my second year as principal of La Cañada School. One of my recently hired special education teachers was having severe difficulties controlling her classroom and executing her lessons. She appeared distraught, giving the appearance to her colleagues that she was on the verge of an “emotional breakdown.” Her instructional assistant refused to work with her, instead running to the union for protection and claiming undue stress and constant harassment. The deterioration in classroom decorum was vertiginous, requiring quick and decisive action.

The master teacher and I scheduled an emergency meeting to plan a quick resolution to the crisis. We notified the director of personnel and the LFT president, who came to the school to talk with us. As soon as we presented our observations, the LFT president promptly opted to “counsel” the teacher into resigning her position. After a quickly arranged meeting in my office, the LFT president met with the distraught teacher for approximately forty minutes to compassionately explain her current rights and options. A resignation letter was composed and signed on the spot, thus allowing the special education teacher to save face and avoid termination proceedings. From the discussions, it became evident to the teacher that she was not going to receive support from the union, thus reducing her opportunity to contest her dismissal and remain on the job. Although the resignation was quick, it was nevertheless a very painful experience.

However, I could see that the dismissal of ineffective teachers was greatly facilitated when the union and administrators collaborate in the process. Many believe this role expansion of teacher unions into peer reviews is necessary if teachers are to be viewed as professionals who are willing to “police” themselves, like doctors and lawyers [1]. Peer reviews, according to this argument, are a necessary condition if the professionalization of teachers is to become a reality. Allowing ineffective teachers to remain in the profession is damaging to everyone. Certainly, I welcomed union support in facilitating the quick resignation of the special education teacher and viewed this case as a significant test of collaboration.

My second test case came at the end of my second year at La Cañada School, in the dismissal of the Miller-Unruh reading specialist teacher. In many ways, the second case was more difficult because the reading specialist was actually performing well in all areas, except in the professional standard that required her to “work effectively with coworkers.” Since reading specialists are required to work collaboratively with all classroom teachers, this challenges their interpersonal skills and ability to relate to teachers with a wide variety of teaching and

personality styles. Consequently, this professional standard was much more carefully scrutinized for my reading specialist teacher and other support personnel at the school.

The reading specialist, therefore, was kept a second year in LATSS because she had received an “unsatisfactory” in this area, largely due to complaints from other teachers about her refusal to consider their input, failure to provide ongoing communication, and lack of alignment between the reading specialist, curriculum, and regular programs. Moreover, classroom teachers felt the specialist was arrogant, reflecting a “I know best because I am the reading specialist” attitude. The clash between the reading specialist and regular classroom teachers intensified toward the end of the second year, creating a very tense working environment that included the refusal by some teachers to send students to the reading lab.

As the end of the second year approached, the master teacher and I reluctantly decided to recommend the dismissal of the reading specialist teacher. We felt the reading specialist had “an attitude of superiority” in her dealings with others that would preclude her from working effectively with coworkers. This was a judgment call, we realized, that prevented us from presenting a solid case to the panel and gave the reading specialist opportunities to dispute our recommendation if she decided to fight the dismissal.

After hearing our case, however, the Trust Agreement Panel decided to recommend dismissal of the reading specialist to the school board. Although the reading specialist was counseled to resign by her own union, she decided to have a “closed session” audience with the school board to provide them with her version of the case. At the end of a very eloquent presentation, she articulately stated that her unsatisfactory rating was due to the lack of consistent guidance, communication, and assistance from the school principal and the master teacher, who often misled her to believe she was doing quite well. The mixed messages she received were at fault, she said, not her performance as a reading specialist. She then requested a continuance in her current position, but provided the school board with a tentative resignation in case they opted for dismissal. The school board accepted her resignation. She had failed to persuade the school board that the Trust Agreement Panel, through master teacher involvement, had erred in recommending dismissal.

The news on the collaboration between LFT and administration in the dismissal of ineffective new teachers quickly traveled throughout the district. The efficient dismissal process of ineffective teachers had proven beyond the shadow of doubt that collaboration resulted in mutual benefit to management and union.

However, as more teachers were dismissed, criticism of LATSS also intensified, especially from traditional union members who felt the sacred rights of teachers were quickly eroding. Particularly distasteful was their perception that management and union leadership were in “cahoots,” making it impossible to adequately represent the interest of new teachers. Essentially, they argued,

beginning teachers are in a bind; they have no recourse if they need help from the union. Furthermore, traditional union members believe it is immoral to require new teachers to pay their hard-earned money for LFT membership and representation only to be “stabbed in the back” by union collaboration with management. This union tension appears inevitable. At the time this was written, however, LATSS appeared to be fully institutionalized and had become part of the fabric of the district.

### UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF LATSS

Like other principals, I felt LATSS insistence on consistently applying district standards across the schools was a positive aspect of the increased collaboration between LFT and administration. The LATSS program would guarantee that all teachers who graduated from it would be able to perform at high levels, ensuring standardization across all schools in the district. Besides individual observation, evaluation, and feedback of instruction, master teachers initiated monthly meetings with new teachers to discuss teaching standards, effective teaching strategies, and general issues related to LATSS. These meetings resulted in a strong message being sent to new teachers: you must meet the district teaching standards or else. On the surface, having high teaching standards for beginning teachers appeared to be a good thing that would result in significant improvements in the classroom. Additionally, in an era of school reform, who can argue against high teaching standards.

Although not obvious at first, this strict adherence to district standards has had some unintended consequences on the instructional program in Lompoc Unified School District. I believe rigid standards can have negative repercussions, such as the creation of a teacher “mold” for all instructional settings in the district. Teaching standards can create unhealthy uniformity, which can be detrimental in diverse settings that require a wide variety of teaching approaches and strategies as well as teacher personalities.

### THE SETTING

I had not given LATSS much thought in terms of possible unintended consequences until I was transferred to Maple High School, the alternative school in the district. As my colleague and I documented, Maple High School enrolls approximately 130 students who have often experienced failure in traditional high schools and are usually classified as the most difficult to educate—the “worst of the worst” [2]. Many of the students who attend Maple, therefore, have a long history of school failure related to drug abuse, attendance, discipline, teenage pregnancy, unstable homes, learning difficulties, disrupted educational experience, varying learning styles, or problems with the law. In short, traditional

school settings and instructional practices are often ineffective with the students who attend Maple High School.

At the beginning of my principalship at Maple High School, I hired a beginning teacher, Mr. Smith (not his real name) who, at age forty-five, had experience in a wide variety of occupations. He felt teaching would give him a “greater purpose” in life, allowing him to make an impact on difficult students and assist those who had made poor life decisions as young teenagers. I felt he was well-suited for an environment like Maple High School.

In many discussions, I told him Maple students required alternative instructional practices if he was interested in connecting with them in their life space, motivating them to do school work, and helping them become productive adults. More specifically, I asked him to think of activities that would increase attendance, excite students about school work, and help them in their interpersonal skills, especially those who wanted to find employment in the community.

Mr. Smith’s success with at-risk students was remarkable! I quickly noticed a dramatic turnaround in many students, particularly the most difficult ones, who were now attending school, writing in his classroom, reading, and participating in many of his classroom events. Furthermore, he felt it important for Maple students to work on their reputation by presenting a different face to the public. The community knew only the “bad” side of Maple’s students; it was time that they get to know the “good” side. With this purpose in mind, he had groups of students build a Christmas float and participate in a holiday parade, give presentations during Martin Luther King celebrations, participate in Rotary Club writing competitions, invite the town’s mayor to school events, just to name a few. The excitement at Maple High School was palpable, due largely to his activities, which often involved many students. Attendance also improved dramatically, pleasing both the school and the district office.

When I asked students why the dramatic change had occurred, they said Mr. Smith cared, listened, provided them with hope, and related to them at their level. Many said he was the strictest but best teacher they had ever had because he was also a lot of fun. Simply stated, he was not like the other teachers they had had throughout their high school career. He truly wanted to help “bad kids.” These were the reasons why they read in his class, wrote the essays he required, and participated in all these public events that were very difficult for students who had “walked in the shadows” of the community. The students wanted to be part of a “good” thing—improving Maple’s reputation in the community.

I am not sure how Mr. Smith was able to accomplish all he did in such a short time. He somehow had the right mixture of qualities. As Duffy eloquently wrote in his description of effective teachers, “magically” Mr. Smith was able to balance “round stones” in dealing with the daily exigencies and dilemmas that Maple students brought into his classroom [3, p. 777]. To name a few “round stones” he balanced, Mr. Smith had high expectations for students while adjusting instruction to their academic levels, was a strong disciplinarian while

compassionately helping them with multiple difficulties, insisted on attendance while understanding the need to stay home to deal with personal problems, believed students should be accountable for their behaviors while helping many deal with legal problems by running interference with the police and courts, believed students should meet graduation standards while encouraging them to work on individual projects, and more. I am certain, however, that his impact at Maple High School was profound, particularly for the many “hopeless, throw-away” students he helped turn around. Above all, Mr. Smith was willing to do things for students, even for those whom others perceived as undeserving. It was his willingness to listen to students and go the extra mile that eventually made converts out of many at-risk students.

Since I viewed Mr. Smith’s teaching performance as remarkable, I was shocked when I was informed that he was not meeting the district teaching standards because he was inventing his own curriculum, devising his own teaching strategies, introducing unconventional instructional practices, and deviating from the designated lesson-planning format. In disbelief, I heard the LATSS master teacher inform me that regardless of his effectiveness with Maple students, Mr. Smith might be dismissed unless he learned to follow the district’s teaching standards—which implied the implementation of traditional instructional practices. There was no room for “exotic” instructional practices in the district, I was told, and all teachers had to follow the same teaching standard. In my initial directions to Mr. Smith, I had told him he must follow the guidance and advice of the master teacher and just modify the requirements to meet the needs of his students. Evidently, this was much simpler said than done, and I found myself increasingly embroiled in a disagreement over his performance in the classroom and his qualifications as a LUSD teacher. I found myself pitted against the union defending a classroom teacher whose dismissal was advocated by LATSS. Many master teachers said Mr. Smith would have been dismissed if I had not intervened so strongly on his behalf.

At the crux of my argument supporting Mr. Smith was my contention that the reason Maple students had experienced academic failure was precisely due to the Lompoc-standard instructional practices, which were ineffectual at this school. Our students demanded teachers with special personalities, instructional practices that were hands-on, fast-paced, meaningful, and intrinsically motivating for students with a history of failure in school. Furthermore, I argued, none of my other teachers would currently meet the district teaching standard. If anything, Mr. Smith’s teaching style, although slightly more extravagant, was consistent with that of the tenured teachers at Maple High School. Maple was a successful school precisely because the teachers were so different from the “teacher mold” of the district.

The LATSS master teacher argued that even beginning teachers at Maple High School must follow the district standard. Furthermore, according to this argument, Mr. Smith was having difficulties because of the conflicting messages I



sent him, asking him to be creative in implementing alternative instructional practices.

This stalemate lasted for almost two years, requiring a change of master teachers, with the creation of many hard feelings as I went on record that I would not support a recommendation for dismissal. I argued, when there are differences of opinion, the principal—as the leader of the school—must have the final say on the retention of a new teacher. Additionally, I argued, the principal is the only person appropriately trained and certified to evaluate teachers, not the master teacher. LATSS argued that since teachers work for the district—not for individual schools—they must meet the district teaching standard or be dismissed. This conflict was unresolved when I left the district in 1997 to accept another position. A few weeks after I left, Mr. Smith informed me he had decided to leave the school because he believed his working conditions and employment would be in jeopardy without my presence.

As I reflected on the events that had transpired and the possible effects of the increased collaboration between union and management, I started to distill certain unintended consequences that had not been initially obvious. These are discussed below.

#### Loss of Principal Authority

As long as I agreed with the master teacher, the retention or dismissal of new teachers was a fairly smooth process. However, when there was disagreement, I was given an added layer (Trust Agreement Panel) and an additional individual to whom I had to justify my decisions. Without LATSS, Mr. Smith's retention at Maple High School would have been routine, rather than incurring the hard feelings, constant justification, defensiveness, and significant increased paperwork because of the disagreement between the master teacher and myself. Indeed, I felt the loss of authority should have given principals a wake-up call to at least discuss the issue openly. Although I had been appreciative of LATSS' support in the dismissal of two ineffective teachers, I felt the master teacher had meddled by interfering with the recruitment and retention of the teachers I needed for Maple High. If defending Mr. Smith had exacted a toll on me, how much longer could I stand up to LATSS simply to regain the authority that heretofore had been the sole domain of principals? I felt bruised in my interactions with LATSS on this occasion—fighting both the union and administration on behalf of an excellent teacher.

#### Role Reversal

In Mr. Smith's case, I believe a role reversal occurred between the union and the office of the principal—I had become the protector of a union member from the onslaught of the master teacher and LATSS. The informal organizational pressures to stop my efforts on behalf of Mr. Smith were intense. Under the Trust

Agreement, I was to allow LATSS to run its natural course, which implied active collaboration with LATSS in the dismissal process. However, since I refused to collaborate, the process appeared to be short-circuited, thus making it impossible for the panel to recommend dismissal of Mr. Smith to the school board. This role reversal, however, exacted a heavy price in terms of my reputation and credibility as a principal in the district, a price I was willing to pay at that time. But how much longer could I have persisted?

### No Place to Go

Traditionally, teachers who were having difficulties in the classroom sought the protection of LFT when pressured by management to improve instruction or threatened with dismissal. With LATSS, first-year teachers who were in trouble often felt they had no recourse or place to go, for seeking assistance would attract undue attention and possibly be viewed as a sign of weaknesses of ineffectiveness. Certainly, as I look back at the two teachers who were dismissed from La Cañada School, the collaboration between management and union made termination procedures much simpler because the protective role of LFT was not present. Furthermore, the perception was that if other teachers agreed with management in the negative performance of beginning teachers, they “must be really bad.” Although site or process mentors often made heroic efforts to help teachers in trouble, they could provide little protection to teachers targeted for dismissal.

### The Homogenization of the Teacher Corps

LATSS has resulted over the years in the inevitable homogenization of teachers, as the socialization process took its toll on those who were different, who either self-selected themselves out of the system, or were dismissed through LATSS. In my view, the standardization of the teaching process has resulted in the creation of uniformity or a teaching mold that has served as an organizational filter to dispose of undesirable variations. Stated differently, those individuals who subscribed to the mold were successful, while those who did not received strong sanctions to conform or face termination. Teacher behaviors deemed “effective” became easier to identify as LATSS became institutionalized in the district, for master teachers and principals appeared to have reached consensus over time on instructional practices that were considered desirable or in conformity with the district standard. Indeed, both administrators and union leaders often mentioned with pride the positive effects of the Lompoc teaching standard, for it had helped to weed out ineffective or deviant teachers from the ranks, they said.

The selection process for Lompoc teachers occurred at two different levels: organizational and individual. From the organizational perspective, the master teacher, principal, and process mentor were primarily responsible for ascertain-

ing that newly recruited teachers acquired and conformed to the norms, values, expectations, and behaviors that would guarantee their success as teachers in Lompoc Unified School District. Those who resisted or deviated significantly from the referent group or standard were either pressured to conform, dismissed, or invited to look elsewhere. From an individual perspective, those who felt their views deviated significantly from the organizational mold either never bothered to apply or quickly self-selected themselves out of the district's teaching ranks. Both organizational and self-selection served to guarantee the inevitable homogenization of teachers, governed by the tenet that good teachers must look and act like successful LATSS graduates.

Furthermore, LATSS appeared to "Hunterize" the delivery of instruction by requiring that new teachers apply the seven steps to effective lessons advocated by Madeline Hunter [8], further contributing to the homogenization of teachers. This consistent application of formula teaching was an effort to teacher-proof instruction and provide a format that can be easily evaluated.

#### Reduction of Risk-Taking

The real or imaginary perception of strong sanctions against deviant teacher behaviors resulted in a dramatic reduction of risk taking on the part of teachers. Indeed, beginning teachers often expressed fear of LATSS, thus increasing their desire to play it safe and do as they were told. Instructional practices not sanctioned by LATSS were quickly abandoned in favor of safe strategies, particularly those advocated during the mandatory LATSS meetings.

#### Increased Conformity

Related to the reduction in risk-taking behaviors, there were tremendous pressures to conform to acceptable instructional practices in the district. Conformity with accepted practices consistent with the district standard was the order of the day. Certainly in my case, LATSS wanted me to pressure Mr. Smith to conform to the district teaching mold and inform him that nonconformity with district-mandated curriculum and lessons plans would result in dismissal. To guarantee conformity, an action plan was designed for him that specified with sufficient detail the necessary steps to remain on the job. Soon, however, it became obvious he was not going to meet the objectives of the action plan because he felt by doing so he could not meet the needs of students.

In discussions with the master teacher, I informed her that Mr. Smith was extremely effective with hard-to-reach high school students, often getting reluctant students to fully engage in his instructional program. Her response was that he was not implementing the district curriculum, not following district-mandated lesson plans, and engaging in instructional practices (e.g., building a float for the Christmas parade) that were inconsistent with the district standard. The message was loud and clear: conformity at all costs.

### Inequitable Treatment of Beginning and Tenured Teachers

Since LATSS applied only to beginning teachers, tenured teachers were not required to comply with the same teaching standard and requirements, thus engendering some apprehension and hard feelings. New teachers, in particular, were resentful of what they perceived as an unfair double standard. At Maple High School, in particular, the perception of inequitable treatment was very strong because of cohesiveness of the group and the feeling tenured teachers would not do well under LATSS. Participation in LATSS, therefore, was viewed as an unfair rite of passage into the teaching ranks and regarded as brutal, unrelenting, and completely unnecessary. Mr. Smith certainly felt his behaviors were consistent with those of other teachers in the school, but his teaching practices were unacceptable solely because he was a beginning teacher participating in LATSS. Some first-year teachers confronted an intense dilemma at times: whether to follow the suggestions of their senior colleagues or the requirements of LATSS. This dilemma created unnecessary stress that often was not easily resolved.

### Students Immune to the LATSS Mold

The question I posed to the master teacher on several occasions while principal at Maple High School was: "What happens when students are immune to the LATSS mold?" In other words, it is possible the success of LATSS actually contributes to student failure at Maple by decreasing or eliminating the type of instructional practices needed in alternative settings with at-risk students.

The current traditional system operates with a limited number of school structures and instructional practices that, taken together, define the parameters under which students will be successful. These structures and practices predetermine the students (e.g., English-speaking, middle-class, white) who will experience success in the current educational system. Likewise, fairly accurate predictions can be made of school failure based on student profiles that differ from the established parameters of success [4, 5]. A full-blown implementation of LATSS, I believe, will actually contribute to delimiting the parameters of success for the type of students who currently attend the Maple High School because new teachers will be socialized to deal with a traditional student profile.

It should be axiomatic to classify the LATSS teaching standard as excellent, but not for all students under all circumstances, and certainly not for those attending Maple High School when I was principal. Our students simply did not fit the LATSS mold. Supporting this stance, several teachers who had successfully graduated from LATSS in the Opportunity Program were abysmal failures with their at-risk students. Although they successfully met all the requirements to be released from LATSS, their students remained unmotivated, often displayed out-of-control behavior, and were frequently absent. One teacher had to go on

medical leave because of the mental stress created by misbehaving and miscreant students.

### Above the Law

LATSS essentially placed master teachers above the law, holding them accountable to no one. Nobody was directly responsible for evaluating the effectiveness of master teachers in performing LATSS duties. In an era of accountability, I was amazed to discover master teachers were not supervised or evaluated by anyone in the district. Although they collaborated with principals in evaluating first-year teachers and presented their findings to the Trust Agreement Panel, no formal mechanism existed for evaluating their performance or holding them accountable.

This perception that master teachers were above the law created some resentment among other district employees, particularly when there was an impression of impropriety or extreme rigidity on their part. The question arose, “Who is evaluating the evaluator?”

## DISCUSSION

In another study, my colleague and I documented the unique transformation in labor relations experienced by the Lompoc Unified School District as it made the transformation from adversarial to collaborative negotiations [1]. A culminating event of this transformation occurred in 1995, when the three employee associations and management engaged in joint, face-to-face negotiations, which we labeled Inclusive Collaborative Negotiations (ICN). However, the journey to ICN was tumultuous, with the district experiencing many years of in-your-face, adversarial, antagonistic, and bitter negotiations that usually resulted in hard feelings, strained relations, and suspicion for those engaged in collective bargaining. However, some key individuals—the LFT president, the district superintendent, and the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA) president—saw the adversarial and hostile relationship between unions and management as counterproductive to the essential mission of the district. In their search for a “better way,” these individuals reflected a willingness to let “bygones be bygones,” take risks, chart new territory, and engage in trustworthy behaviors that generated mutual respect and credibility as they entered into collaborative relationships.

The establishment of the Lompoc Apprentice Teacher Support System (LATSS) was the first major structure that launched the district toward collaboration and significantly contributed to the creation of more positive labor relations. LATSS was the brainchild of Jim Brown, the superintendent between 1986 and 1989, who actively sought union collaboration in an effort to reform education by increasing the professionalizations of teachers. Essentially, LATSS was modeled after the program in *Toledo*, whose major emphasis was to “change from the

traditional protective stance of unions to a position in which the union works with the administration to improve or remove the least effective members of the teaching force” [6, p. 164].

The development of LATSS, then, is consistent with the trend of professionalizing teachers as they become partners with management in an effort to improve instruction through the implementation of peer reviews [1, 6]. In the Lompoc Unified School District, the scope of the union’s role was expanded (through the creation of master teachers and the Trust Agreement Panel) into areas that had traditionally been solely the purview of administrators (e.g., teacher evaluation and recommendation for retention/dismissal).

As was mentioned above, LATSS permitted selected tenured teachers, working collaboratively with principals, to be released from their teaching duties for the purpose of participating in the evaluation and retention of new teachers. Furthermore, the master teacher is also partly responsible for inculcating the “Lompoc standard” in the new recruits. Those who acquire the Lompoc standard are recommended for retention; those who do not are recommended for dismissal. These recommendations for retention or dismissal are then forwarded to the Trust Agreement Panel, composed of union members and administrators, which makes the final recommendations to the school board. LATSS, as a peer-review process, has had a number of critical outcomes that have contributed to the journey toward collaboration, such as increasing the professionalization of teachers, building credibility, and providing opportunities for authentic multi-level (teacher and administrator) collaborations.

The stakes of LATSS were rather high, for there were many uncertainties and risks involved in the roles and established patterns of relationships in the district. For example, LFT received harsh criticism because of the active role it has played in the dismissal rather than the protection of union members’ jobs. Similarly, a few administrators have questioned the involvement of teachers in an area they perceive as “sacred” to administrators—the evaluation of teachers. This criticism was stronger when there were perceived problems with the way master teachers conducted themselves in the evaluation process.

Driven by the diversity of the students at Maple High School, I have noted other possible, unintended consequences of LATSS which, I believe, have resulted in a significant reduction of risk taking, experimentation, and variety of instructional practices by beginning teachers in the district. For schools dealing with a growing number of “alternative” students who may be immune to the LATSS mold, this dramatic reduction in the variety of instructional practices and experimentation may be disastrous by contributing to significant student failure for those who “march to the beat of a different drummer.” Most interesting to me was the role reversal that occurred when I found myself protecting the job of Mr. Smith, who I found to be extremely effective with Maple students, although somewhat unorthodox in his approaches and unwilling to conform to the LATSS

standard. Even as I won this battle, however, I felt as if I had lost the war, for the professional scars and bruises from the many encounters left a lifelong probability that I might give in next time. In many ways, it is much easier to just go along with the recommendations of the master teacher. As I left Lompoc Unified School District, there was talk about changes that needed to be made to LATSS to ensure these types of conflicts do not resurface.

In spite of these unintended consequences and reservations, the tremendous success of LATSS is palpable, thus receiving systemic support from all quarters of the organization. For the first time, tenured teachers felt validated and acknowledged for the expertise they possessed, administrators felt supported in their efforts to dismiss ineffective new teachers, and management observed an immediate improvement in labor relations. The support for LATSS was axiomatic when it survived the deep budget cuts generated by California's financial crises of the early 1990s, when other popular programs were systematically eliminated—e.g., music and art. The survival of LATSS in times of budgetary turmoil sent a strong message to organizational members that the collaboration between management and LFT to evaluate first-year teachers was strongly supported by the district.

However, I am compelled to raise an important caveat here: The Lompoc standard needs to be greatly expanded to nourish and socialize new teachers to become creative and compassionate individuals who possess the ability to implement effective instructional practices with alternative students, like those who attend Maple High School. There needs to be a realization that not all students benefit from the current Lompoc standard. Divergent learners, in particular, also need excellent teachers. Thus, we need to nourish the spirit of teachers like Mr. Smith, whose “teaching beat” might be best suited for students like those who attend Maple High School, often with learning difficulties (at least in traditional settings), kinesthetic strengths, short attention spans, short tempers, a history of drug/alcohol abuse, poor self-esteem, and a long record of school failure exacerbated by poor attendance and a negative attitudes toward school. To Mr. Smith's credit, he was expert at getting reluctant learners to read, write, do academics, and behave in school, often for the first time in their academic career, rather than pushing difficult students out of his classroom or out of school altogether. Simply stated, Mr. Smith was able to excite and motivate Maple High School students to do well in the assignments he provided them, a near-miraculous exploit, for many students had given-up on themselves and school and were merely going through the motions.

Over the winter 1998 break, I had an opportunity to have a lengthy conversation with Mr. Smith about his success with Maple High School students. Essentially, I was interested in knowing what he specifically did to succeed in areas where most teachers, especially beginning teachers, floundered. I taped this interesting conversation for later use. Some of his unconventional responses are worth citing here:

Maple High School students needed to have real-world educational experiences. For example, what I did for them included cross-age tutoring, working on floats with real deadlines, mural projects, student store, producing videos with rap music, and others. I tend to accept that kids need to “re-image” themselves. They had reputations in this community, which they had earned with their misdeeds. They came to Maple for real reasons, usually related to their “bad person” status—flunking classes, vandalism, cussing teachers, drug abuse, cutting classes, adjudication, etc. This status can either paralyze or prepare them for life as an adult. I believe that most of them needed to be encouraged and helped in changing their reputation, they were not the person they wanted to be; they wanted to be contributing members of society. However, often they did not have a chance; the entire society had established a niche for them, where it was impossible for them to get out. They were young criminals, hoodlums, good-for-nothing, the worse-of-the-worst” in the district. I wanted to change their future. I wanted them to contribute to society in meaningful ways. It was all about making a choice, once given real opportunities. In my room the premise was simple: it was all about competency, confidence, and character, and I used these three values in all my teachable moments. Also, I don’t believe that you can raise the self-esteem of Maple High School students without some true accomplishments, like the Christmas Float that won first place and the Martin Luther King presentation that was given during the Celebrating Diversity community event. A true accomplishment, it is real, it is tactile, it is theirs, they own it, they know that they are better people when they accomplish real things. I also believe that the relationship that the teacher has with students is the most important thing, even more than the subjects or content areas. Students want us to care, to be interested in them, to help them find themselves. It is very hard for us to have predefined standards and apply them, particularly since students at this age, they are defining their own culture, their own personality. The students knew that I was different, that I wasn’t playing by the rules, that I was willing to risk my own job on their behalf.

Finally, I believe that I modeled forgiveness and high expectations. I saw me in them. I also don’t fit very well into a mold. I am somewhat eccentric. We all make mistakes. Our life should not end because we make mistakes. Not once did they disappoint me when we had public performances, some of them with hundreds of people in the audience, to include dignitaries. This was extraordinary, to have the “bad kids” make other people get emotional, even cry.

Sure they read and wrote in my classroom, but they did it for themselves, for real reasons. They all had stories they wanted to tell. I simply gave them authentic opportunities to tell their stories. This, I believe, is the secret to my success [7].

As principal of Maple High School, the only explanation I could develop for Mr. Smith’s evaluated failure to meet the Lompoc standard in his teaching is that something was dead wrong with the process as it pertained to his performance.



Then, in my musings, I wondered whether the long waiting list of diverse students who had requested entrance to Maple High School was, indeed, a reflection of or related to the inevitable teacher homogenization partly produced by LATSS.

To conclude, the unintended consequences of new teacher support programs need to be recognized and addressed. In Lompoc, LATSS needs to contribute to the socialization of effective teachers for the most difficult students, the type who attend Maple High School. LATSS, in my view, needs to effectively address the possible negative consequences of the mechanisms that may result in lack of teacher preparedness to meet the needs of diverse and difficult students. The recognition that LATSS may contribute to a significant reduction in the variety of effective teaching practices is, I believe, an important first step in developing a teacher-support system that truly celebrates the polychromatic world of students. Mr. Smith's ingenuity and ability to inspire difficult students need recognition, best given when individuals like him are invited to LATSS meetings to share their expertise, their formula for success, and thus become integral members of the new-teacher support team. LATSS is good. LATSS needs to be better. LATSS needs to help beginning teachers address the needs of the most difficult students.

\* \* \*

Dr. Juan Necochea is an assistant professor at California State University, San Marcos. Previously, he has been an elementary and secondary school principal for the Lompoc Unified School District in California.

## REFERENCES

1. Z. Cline and J. Necochea, Inclusive Collaborative Negotiations: A New Labor Relations Paradigm in the Lompoc Unified School District, *The Journal of Collective Negotiations in the Public Sector*, 26:4, pp. 303-332, 1997.
2. J. Necochea and Z. Cline, Lessons in Learning from Continuation Schools, *Thrust for Educational Leadership*, 26:1, pp. 30-33, 1996.
3. G. G. Duffy, Teaching and the Balancing of Round Stones, *Phi Delta Kappan*, 79:10, pp. 777-780, 1998.
4. J. Murphy and K. S. Louis, *Reshaping the Principalship: Insights from Transformation Reform Efforts*, Corwin Press, Inc., Thousand Oaks, California, 1992.
5. R. W. Rumberger, Chicano Dropouts: A Review of Research and Policy Issues, in *Chicano School Failure and Success*, R. Valencia (ed.), Falmer Press, New York, pp. 64-89, 1991.
6. J. J. Gallagher, P. Lanier, and C. T. Kerchner, Toledo and Poway: Practicing Peer Review, in *A Union of Professionals: Labor Relations and Educational Reform*, C. T. Kerchner and J. E. Koppich (eds.), Teachers College Press, New York, pp. 158-176, 1993.
7. Telephone interview with "Mr. Smith" (pseudonym), January 1998.

8. M. Hunter, *Improved Instruction*, Tip Publications, El Segundo, California, 1976.

Direct reprint requests to:

Juan Necochea, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
California State University  
San Marcos, CA 92096-0001  
e-mail: [necochea@mailhost1.csusm.edu](mailto:necochea@mailhost1.csusm.edu)