

**Communication Strategies to Increase Union Member Commitment and Participation**

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## **Research Question**

How can we expand member participation to build the strength of our union and promote teacher retention?

## **Rationale**

Union members are more likely to report greater overall wellbeing and life satisfaction, less anxiety, and greater job satisfaction than non-members (Blanchflower & Bryson, 2020). Considering their positive impact on job satisfaction, labor unions should be regarded as a key factor in teacher recruitment and retention, especially as school districts across the country face daunting teacher shortages. Active member participation is crucial to a labor union's existence, strength, and ability to influence employers (Monnot et al., 2011) and may have a positive correlation with teacher retention.

Methods of union participation vary widely and include attending meetings, working on committees, assisting with campaigns, voting in union elections, reading union literature, and participating in work slowdowns (Monnot et al., 2011). Each year Toledo Federation of Teachers (TFT) holds a number of events to promote community building and solidarity amongst members including walking in the annual Labor Day Parade, University of Toledo football tailgate party, annual end-of-year golf outing, and Third Thursdays at the TFT union hall, among others. In addition, TFT provides opportunities for members to engage in political action on issues vital to the success of educators, students, and public schools as a whole including postcard writing parties, petition drives, and presentations on topics of concern to members.

Member participation is a common concern of TFT leadership. Novice teacher attendance at events is much lower than that of veteran teachers. A core group of highly active veteran members are the most consistent participants in union sponsored events.

## Literature Review

A positive correlation exists between union commitment, which is viewed as an attitude, and union participation (Kelloway & Barling, 1993). Actual behaviors, such as union participation, are determined by attitudes (Sverke & Kuruvilla, 1995). Attitudes are comprised of a person's beliefs that are formed by exposure to information. Therefore, if a union carefully selects and disseminates information to members they can help mold their beliefs, raise their level of union commitment, and positively influence member participation.

There is evidence that measurement of a member's belief in unions can predict union commitment. According to Gordon et al. (1980) member commitment to their union involves several factors including a sense of pride in the union, willingness to fulfill day-to-day duties to protect the interests of the union, willingness to expend energy beyond regular member duties, and the member's belief in the ideals of unionism. In a study of union commitment amongst letter carriers over a ten-year period, Morin et al. (2021) found that the stronger a member's beliefs are about the ability of unions in general to effect positive change in society, the stronger their commitment was to their own union. Another study suggests that union instrumentality, the belief that the union is a tool to secure personal benefits, is a basis for union commitment among young workers (Hennebert et al., 2021). It may be beneficial to share evidence with members of the value unions bring to society as a whole as well as specific successes the TFT has had in securing better wages and benefits.

Research into member beliefs about unions, knowledge of how a union functions, and perceived benefits of membership can give clues as to what information the union should regularly share with members to influence their union commitment and participation (Sverke & Kuruvilla, 1995).

## Methodology

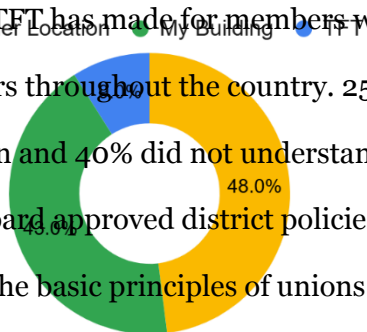
Survey data were collected from 44 Toledo Public Schools teachers across all grade bands in a variety of school buildings. Teachers were asked to rate several statements regarding their attitudes about the value of unions in general, as well as the perceived value of Toledo Federation of Teachers on a 5-point Likert scale. Teachers were also asked how knowledgeable they feel they are in regards to various areas of the TFT collective bargaining agreement, their understanding of basic functions of the union, and their interest in learning more about TFT history and the TFT contract. In addition, respondents answered questions about their communication with members of their building committee and preferred methods of communication. The survey was implemented using Google Forms and data was placed into tables and charts for analysis.

## Data Analysis

A review of the survey responses gives important insight on areas for TFT to consider in communications with members as well as determining what information needs to be disseminated. 88% of responses indicated that members agree or strongly agree that unions are beneficial to society as a whole, a sign that many members would feel a strong sense of commitment to TFT as well. 50% of teachers age 35 or younger demonstrated that their union commitment may be based on union instrumentality, the ability of the union to serve as a tool for personal gain. It may be beneficial to show these novice members evidence of the recent

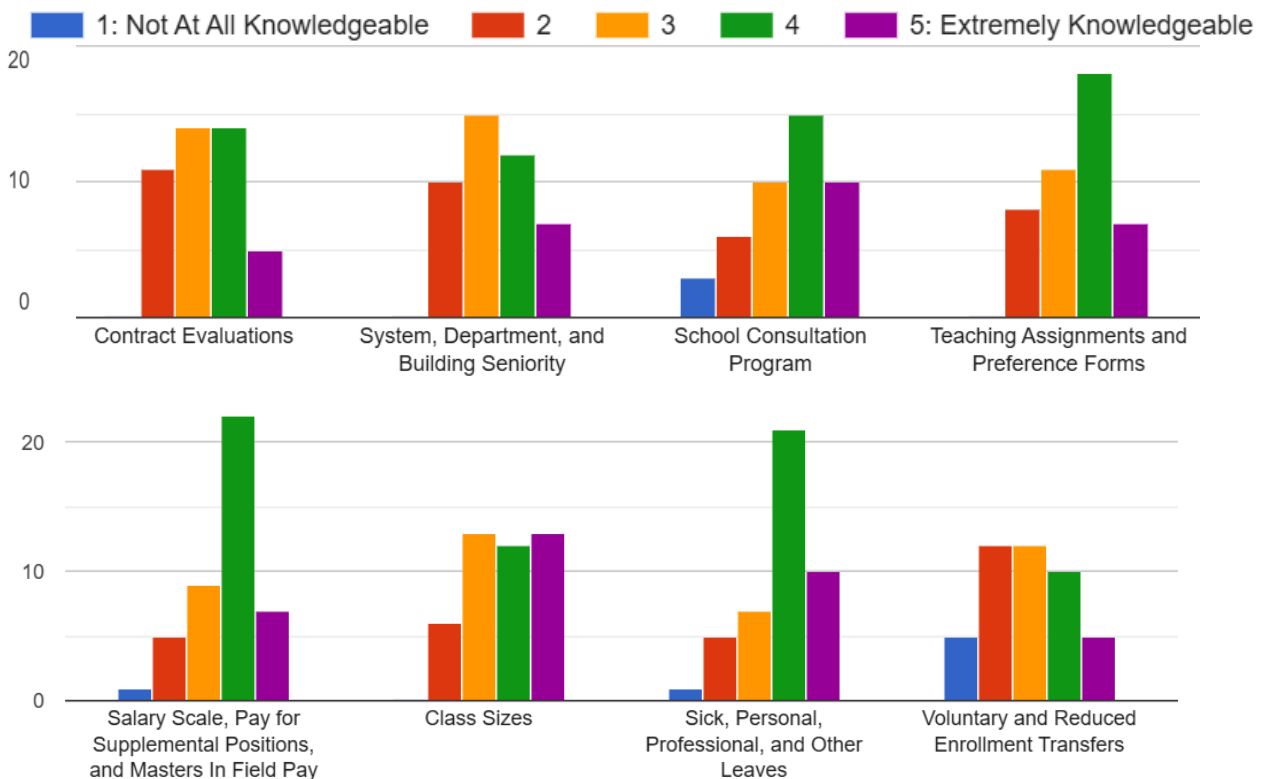
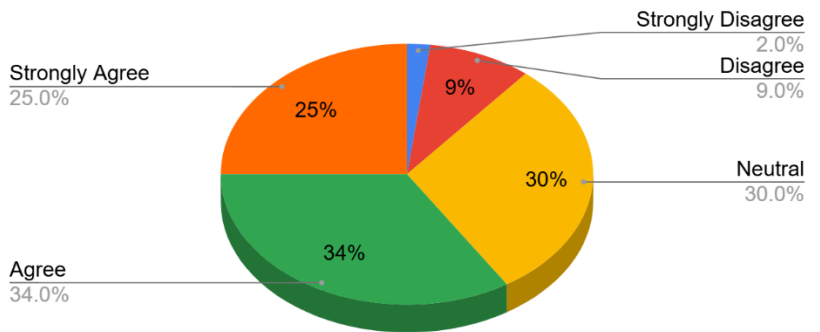
### Preferred Location for Informational Session

gains TFT has made for members while also informing them of the benefits unions serve to workers throughout the country. 25% of respondents were not confident in their ability to define a union and 40% did not understand or were unsure of the differences between the TFT contract and board approved district policies, indicating that providing opportunities for members to learn the basic principles of unions and how they function would be beneficial. 61% of teachers responded that they would like to learn more about the history of TFT and a staggering 77% wish



to learn more about their rights in the TFT contract. The survey highlighted that convenience of meeting locations should be carefully considered when planning presentations. When asked where they would prefer to attend an informational session about a union related topic, 43% of respondents preferred to meet at their own school building while only 9% indicated the TFT office as their preferred choice of locations. 48% responded that they would be equally likely to attend at either location.

**There are Differences Between the TFT Contract and District Policies**



## References

Blanchflower, D. G., & Bryson, A. (2020). (working paper). *Now Unions Increase Job Satisfaction and Well-being*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved May 1, 2025, from <https://www.nber.org/papers/w27720>.

Gordon 1980

Kelloway & Barling 1993

Morin et al. 2021

Sverke & Kuruvilla, 1995

Hennebert, Fortin-Bergeron, Doucet Understanding Union Commitment Among Young Workers 2021

The Impact of New Member Orientation Programs on Union Member Commitment: Evidence from a National Study in a Post-Janus Setting