



# Red4EdNC

December 2018

## Searching for the “Easy” Button for Teacher Unity and Power

Angie Scioli, Wake County Public School Teacher

We were waking up, but we didn't quite know how to put our feet on the floor. It was the summer of 2013, and a critical mass of talented [teachers](#) at my school had just awoken from our fairly privileged oblivion to realize that all was not well in education policy in North Carolina. The new supermajority was eviscerating cherished assets in our educational establishment: pre-K seats, the Teaching Fellows scholarship, valued teacher assistants, precious instructional materials.

In a flurry, we established an advocacy group, [Red4EdNC](#) and I wrote an open letter to NC suggesting we all wear “Red4Ed on Wed.” to show our collective anger and force change. I recall Wake NCAE president Larry Nilles meeting with us that first week. He suggested that we should embark upon a grassroots organizational strategy at our school. It would entail holding one-on-one meetings with our teachers, building relationships across departments, and constructing capacity for future collective action.

After he left, we were kind of confused and incredulous: “Who has time for THAT? We're busy teachers for goodness sake!”

“Why do all that when we can just form a website and [Facebook](#) page and wear our new t-shirts on Wednesday?”

The opening salvo in the search for the “teacher unity easy button” was declared.

And so we did those very things: we started a website, sold [500 t-shirts](#) statewide, [wrote](#) articles, and attended [protests](#). For good measure, I agreed to be a primary subject in a [documentary](#), where the producers shadowed me for a year and made a [movie](#). The film pulled back the curtain on a teacher's daily struggles, raising awareness of the unsustainable “hero teacher” narrative that infuses the public discourse on teaching. It seemed certain we would achieve great things by informing the public who would then vote in a manner reflecting that new insight.

The 2014 election cycle, however, provided little consolation or reassurance; nor did things not improve in 2015. Attendance at protests faltered. The crowd at our weekly Red4Ed picture noticeably waned. We regrouped. Maybe these “outsider tactics” were overrated. So we embarked on developing an “inside game.” I accepted a fellowship with the [Hope Street](#) group, learned more about policy, served on work groups and commissions; we decided a specific bipartisan policy [proposal](#) for creating career pathways for educators could build “inside networks” that could lead to better education policies. “[Project Ignite](#)” was born. A different easy button was conceived: skipping unity altogether and going straight to power and policy.

At first, [lobbying](#) was surprisingly easy. An actual classroom teacher lobbying for a specific policy proposal is somewhat of a unicorn, so I was welcomed and granted a hearing. Republican leaders set me on a path to gain key supporters in the Senate and House, and I was checking them off my list at a good clip. I met with the Superintendent's office - they were supportive. One senator suggested we should get the proposal to bill writing! Was it really going to be THIS easy? I was getting smug.

Then the phone stopped ringing and General Assembly leaders no longer returned emails. I was eventually called to a meeting and told there were no funds for the [\\$1.7 million](#) pilot project. The next week, however, I read in the paper the General Assembly had a [\\$357 million](#) surplus. I was confused. Where had we stumbled?

I floated a theory by a General Assembly staffer who works closely with elected members: Was it possible that when Republicans saw our group name, Red4EdNC, they assumed we were REPUBLICANS for better ed policy in NC? And then someone Googled us, figured out our mission, and they "ghosted"? "Entirely possible," she said. That is how deep our echo chambers are; the protest group we founded in 2013 was entirely outside the awareness of the people we sought to influence. Amazing.

Back to the drawing board - with a new appreciation for unity. Finding the "teacher unity easy button" was really not so easy! But wait, they were finding it in [West Virginia](#), [Oklahoma](#), [Arizona](#) . . . we could see the throngs of teachers in their respective state houses, wearing red, taking collective action and forcing concessions! How were they doing this? Through what process were they determining and articulating demands? How could we replicate that in NC?

One realization we came to is that NC teachers must unite and demand change. And though collective bargaining is technically illegal in this state, those laws, under the right circumstances, could be changed in a matter of days. It was up to us to create those circumstances.

While NCAE / Organize 2020 began planning the May 16th March, Red4Ed launched the idea of holding a NC Teacher Congress soon afterwards that would meet and articulate demands. We rebranded, relaunched with a new (incredible) [statewide board of advisors](#), and handed out 5000 cards at the march to drive people to our website. We followed up with Facebook Live videos, issued a [Declaration in Defense of NC's Public Schoolchildren](#), and obtained teacher signers from 104 different school districts in NC. Throughout the summer of 2018 we planned for statewide press conferences, polished our Teacher Congress plan, and conducted outreach. We would follow up the press conferences with a big campaign to have each school start a faculty Facebook page, where collective action would be planned and carried out. The teacher unity (not-so) easy button was in grasp!

Imagine our surprise at the low teacher attendance at our eight statewide [press conferences](#) (though media coverage was significant) and, after a week, only thirty schools had formed faculty Facebook pages. Thirty. There are over 2500 schools in NC. Participation at my own school was particularly instructive. We planned our press conference for noon, during the lunch hour on a teacher workday, on the sidewalk right outside our K-12 school. We had worked hard all week to make teachers aware of the event, handing out handbills at our opening meeting and leafleting cars in the teacher lot. All they had to do on Friday was step outside and wear red. With over 250 teachers on our campus, getting 100 to come out should have been a snap. When the day was sunny and a mild 80 degrees, it seemed destined the event would be well attended. About thirty showed up. I walked through the halls of my school, amazed that so few of my colleagues wore red or had any intention of participating. Clearly, I had missed something.

The hard truth is, there is not an "easy button" to teacher unity and power. Unity and power does not come from social media nor is it solely idea-driven. Instead, it comes from real

RELATIONSHIPS--shared vision and action spring forth from those authentic connections. In all the writing, lobbying, strategizing, I had failed to forge authentic relationships in my school that would have propelled us to collective action. In the end, Larry Nilles (and the other talented organizers I have met with since) was right from the start.

Collective action must begin at our schools. We need to meet, one-on-one and together. We need to know what our shared vision is and what gifts we each can bring to the work. We must build capacity for collective action, training new leaders and bringing people to an awareness of the potential power of a membership-based union that represents a majority of teachers in NC.

Once we build a firm foundation at our schools, unity across organizations is equally important. This is why Red4EdNC, [NCAE / Organize2020](#), and [North Carolina Teachers United](#) leaders are meeting and working together in a concerted effort to leverage our collective abilities to lead teachers in this grassroots organizing work.

Ironically, maybe all our hard work has led us to finally finding the easy button. Setting aside a few minutes each day to talk with the talented teachers in my school, getting to know them better, old friends and new, and discovering the varied perspectives and abilities they bring - that is going to be energizing and thought-provoking work. Getting together more often to share the small victories we experienced with our students in a given week will bring joy and camaraderie to our building. And, working across organizational lines with other dedicated and amazing education advocates is already proving to be rejuvenating.

Be brilliant, not just smart. Smart people learn from their own experience; brilliant people learn from the experience of others. If you are just waking up to the need for collective action in NC, trust me. The “easy button” to teacher and unity and power in NC is not a new and shiny object, but an old reliable tool that takes the shape of concern, care, relationship, and shared vision. And you can use it to reach out to the teachers in your building to build a movement that will ultimately result in a strong, powerful union capable of getting real improvements in teaching and learning conditions in NC.

Won't you join me on this new journey? Red4EdNC, NCAE / Organize 2020 and North Carolina Teachers United are holding joint regional meetings in January. There will be a meeting near YOU. Can you reach out to a few teachers at your school and plan to attend? We would love to meet you, join hands, and walk forward together to forge a new level of unity and teacher power in NC, with deep roots and unlimited potential.