

Teachers run their class like a real company, complete with labor union

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Image 1. Students clean airplane parts in a class at Aviation High School in Queens, New York. The class prepares students for careers in aviation while also simulating a union shop. Image by: Jackie Molloy/Education Week tk

Two leaders take charge in the workshop full of airplane parts. The leaders are called foremen.

Shop workers in white coveralls use a sandblaster and other power tools to clean airplane parts.

A sign posted nearby in all capital letters reads, "THIS IS A UNION SHOP." The sign says workers have the right to make complaints.

This isn't a real company, though. It's a classroom, and the workers are high school students.

Class Prepares Students For The Workforce

Aviation High School is in New York City. Students prepare for jobs working with airplanes. For the past six years, teachers José Vaz and Antonio Pepenella have created unions in their airplane cleaning and repair classes.

A labor union is a group of workers with the same type of job. They join together to protect each others' rights and improve pay and work conditions.

Now, Vaz and Pepenella say students take charge of their learning experiences.

"People in general tend not to like to be told what to do," Vaz said.

The experience also gives students a sense of what unions do, said Vaz. He is the school's leader for the New York City teachers' union.

Students can become airplane technicians at Aviation High School. Some go start work right after high school and join a union.

More than 7 in 10 airline technicians or mechanics in the United States belong to a union.

A recent survey shows more than 6 in 10 Americans approve unions. It's the third-highest number since 1970.

The survey found that support for unions is strongest among people between ages 18 and 34.

In Vaz and Pepenella's classes, students elect officers. This includes the foremen and a union representative who's in charge of enforcing the class contract, or deal. The representative protects students' rights and handles conflicts between classmates.

"You speak for the class," said 10th grader William Padilla, the union representative who helps students who feel they are being treated unfairly. "They come to me."



Concerns About Unions

Unions can cause debate. Yet Pepenella and Vaz said parents have not complained about their class. That may be because they teach in New York, where many people support unions.

Colin Sharkey offered a different opinion, though. He heads a non-union group for teachers. Sharkey said students in the class might realize they do not want to be members of a union.

"Students might feel like that model of 'we all must agree' doesn't fit what they're looking for," he said.

Students Speaking Out

Most shop classes in the school have student foremen. Only a couple other teachers ask students to choose a union representative. Having a representative makes sense to Pepenella.

"If you have a contract, you need to have someone to enforce it," Pepenella said.

For example, the student contract states there will be two quizzes and a final exam during the 21-day course. One year, Vaz decided to give another quiz. The class had been behaving badly. The union representative put a stop to it.

"We want to hear their voice," Pepenella said. "It really does matter."

Other students have negotiated moving a test from Friday to Monday. Certain homework projects have been cancelled as a trade-off for better class behavior. Normally, students stand for the 2 1/2 hour class to imitate a real workshop. Yet the class won the right to sit.

The contracts reset at the start of every class.

Resolving Conflict

The foremen are managers. That means they're not protected by the union. That led to clashes between the student union representative and one foreman, Vaz said.

For example, when one student skipped class, the foreman wanted to punish the student harshly. However, the union representative protected the student, arguing it was the student's first offense.

They worked out a better punishment. The student had to come to class early the next week, Vaz said.

These leadership roles help classmates work with each other to solve problems, Pepenella said.

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Class Prepares Students For The Workforce."
- Which selection from the section supports the conclusion that support for unions is growing?
- (A) A labor union is a group of workers with the same type of job. They join together to protect each others' rights and improve pay and work conditions.
 - (B) More than 7 in 10 airline technicians or mechanics in the United States belong to a union.
 - (C) A recent survey shows more than 6 in 10 Americans approve unions. It's the third-highest number since 1970.
 - (D) "You speak for the class," said 10th grader William Padilla, the union representative who helps students who feel they are being treated unfairly.
- 2 Read the section "Concerns About Unions."
- Which sentence from the section shows WHY some students might dislike the idea of unions?
- (A) Yet Pepenella and Vaz said parents have not complained about their class.
 - (B) That may be because they teach in New York, where many people support unions.
 - (C) Sharkey said students in the class might realize they do not want to be members of a union.
 - (D) "Students might feel like that model of 'we all must agree' doesn't fit what they're looking for," he said.
- 3 What caused José Vaz and Antonio Pepenella to create unions in their airplane cleaning and repair classes?
- (A) The teachers had gotten upset that the students in the class were behaving badly and refusing to complete scheduled quizzes or assignments.
 - (B) The teachers had gotten many questions from parents about when they were going to add some lessons about unions to their classes.
 - (C) The teachers wanted to know whether the students in the class thought the rules were fair and decided unions were the best way.
 - (D) The teachers wanted to show students how to take charge of their learning and prepare them for the work they might start right after leaving school.
- 4 According to the section "Resolving Conflict," how do the class unions protect students?
- (A) The union representative negotiates with the class foreman to work out fair rules and punishments.
 - (B) The union representative gets to tell the class foreman when students have to come to class.
 - (C) The union foreman is protected by the union so they can create their own rules that help the students.
 - (D) The union foreman comes to class early each week to create new rules for the class.