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Book Review / Compte rendu

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Beyond Compensation: Empowering Teachers' Unions to Think Beyond Bread-and-Butter Issues (2026) by Terence Ngwa. Myers Education Press, 2026, 176 pages. ISBN: 9781975507671

Shophika Vaithyanathasarma is a PhD student in Curriculum & Instruction at Boston College. Her work sits at the intersection of K-12 policy, teacher education, and schooling conditions. As an education columnist in Québec, she has written about how teachers navigate policy demands and opportunities for professional influence.

Teachers' unions are often understood primarily through their role in negotiating salaries, benefits, and working conditions. Yet this emphasis can obscure the professional, political, and social roles unions play within public education. Canadian teachers' unions have extended their advocacy to questions of professional judgment, educational resources, working conditions, and the conditions in which students learn. For example, the Alberta Teachers' Association responded to proposed school-library standards by advocating for teacher professional judgment, consultation with educators, students, and families, and protections for diverse students (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2025). The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario's 2007 "Close the Gap" campaign put preparation time, specialist staffing, and instruction resources at the center of provincial bargaining (Bascia & Rottmann, 2011). In British Columbia, the Teachers' Federation spent 14 years in the courts to restore stripped collective agreement language on class size and composition (*British Columbia Teachers' Federation v. British Columbia,* 2016).

In *Beyond Compensation*, Dr. Terence Ngwa, a longtime educator and organizational leader, challenges this narrow conception of teacher unionism by arguing for a movement away from an industrial model of unionism toward what Ngwa describes as "professional and social unionism" (p. 4). Although the book draws on the American context, this expanded understanding of unionism provides a useful point of comparison for examining teacher unionism in Canada. The review follows three threads in that argument: how unions extend advocacy to students' educational conditions, how teacher-voice reshapes labor-management relations, and how the question of accountability is important for all parties.

Ngwa situates teachers' unions within a long history of often-adversarial labor-management relations while arguing that their responsibilities have evolved alongside changes in public education and organized labor. Across the book, he also considers teacher development, professional voice, negotiations, political influence, protest, collaboration, and contemporary challenges to union organizing. This orientation is captured in his discussion

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of unions appealing to members' "sense of pride for their profession, social responsibility, and advocacy for students and their families" (p. 4). Rather than treating these concerns as separate from collective representation, Ngwa incorporates them into an expanded understanding of union activity.

To support this argument, Ngwa draws on historical examples, political and legal developments, research literature, quantitative indicators, union initiatives, and educators' own voices. These range from bargaining and labor-management collaboration to elections, protests, and political resistance. For example, during protests and strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Denver, Los Angeles, and Oakland, teachers raised concerns about class size, school funding, and student resources alongside compensation. A Canadian parallel appears in Bocking's (2022) study of the "No Cuts to Education" movement, in which teachers' opposition to government reforms included concerns about class size, staffing and the effects of policy changes on public education. These cases illustrate how collective action can address the conditions in which students learn as well as those in which teachers work.

Ngwa makes this connection especially clear when he writes that, "Teachers and their unions champion the needs of students, and the community stands with them" (p. 22). The West Virginia case provides a compelling illustration. Before engaging in a work stoppage, educators worked with school officials to help ensure that vulnerable students who relied on school food programs continued to receive assistance. Ngwa's discussion of the Chicago Teachers' Union extends the scope of union advocacy through its attention to affordable housing and student homelessness. Such examples strengthen his argument that teachers' professional interests and students' educational and social needs need not be opposing concerns. Collective organization can instead provide teachers with a means of raising issues that might otherwise receive insufficient public attention.

Teacher voice and labor-management collaboration provide another dimension of Ngwa's argument. He presents cases in which teachers and union representatives participate in decisions involving curriculum, professional development, hiring, school organization, and student achievement. For example, in ABC Unified School District in California, principals and union representatives met regularly "to discuss school issues, solve problems, and engage in site-based decision-making including textbook adoption, school schedules, and the hiring process for each school" (p. 84). Ngwa also discusses the labor-management partnership in Charlotte County Public Schools alongside improvements in outcomes such as graduation rates and Advanced Placement performance. These examples suggest that unions can contribute to educational improvement also by creating structures through which teachers' professional expertise informs institutional decision-making.

Importantly, *Beyond Compensation* does not romanticize teachers' unions or portray them as internally unified organizations. Ngwa's treatment of accountability operates in two directions. In discussing school vouchers and protections for students with disabilities, he argues that "Asking for accountability from entities that receive public money and seeking protections for the most vulnerable is not a matter of more wages or benefits for union members" (p. 31). Here, accountability becomes part of the social role he envisions for unions: using collective and political influence to scrutinize policies and institutions when students may not be adequately protected. Yet Ngwa applies a similar standard to unions themselves. He acknowledges that disagreements, leadership struggles, and failures of internal accountability can limit their ability to pursue professional and social goals. Discussing internal conflict, he writes that "union members themselves have been their own worst enemies" (p. 146). If unions are to hold governments and other actors accountable for decisions affecting public education, they must also maintain the internal trust, democratic legitimacy, and organizational capacity necessary to speak collectively.

One educator's statement, "I'm here to fight for the rights of my students and teachers" (p. 69), captures the book's central contribution particularly well. Accessible to educators, union leaders, administrators, policymakers,

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and scholars of education and labor, the book contributes to continuing discussions about what teachers' unions can and should represent. Interestingly, the reorientation Ngwa proposes converges with conclusions from Rottmann's (2008) study, though the two rest on different evidence. Rottmann' (2008) analysis of 20 teachers' organizations documents social justice commitments written in the formal mandates, which raises the question of what "professional and social unionism" adds to an established vocabulary. Even so, the book's strength lies in making a persuasive case for expanding the scope of unionism, particularly in the current political climate. *Beyond Compensation* asks readers to reconsider what counts as collective representation by connecting teachers' workplace interests to questions about student welfare, educational policy, and the governance of public education.

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