Stephen Sawchuk, a former federal education beat writer, turns his inner policy
gEEK to digging around in the weeds of the teaching profession. Join him as he
explicates the policy and the politics that surround legislation, teacher contracts,
and the teacher-quality continuum from preparation to evaluation.

L.A. Teachers Seek to Put Evaluations to a Referendum
By Stephen Sawchuk on November 15, 2011 10:35 AM | 44 Recommendations

A collection of Los Angeles teachers plans to force a vote among the district's teaching corps
that, if passed, would require their union to advocate for "teacher-led" changes to the teacher-
evaluation system—and for a moratorium on layoffs while it's implemented.

The teachers, part of a coalition called "Teachers for a New Unionism," are making use of a
 provision in United Teachers Los Angeles' constitution that allows for a bargaining-unit-wide
referendum if 500 signatures are gathered. Today, they'll be turning over some 630 signatures to
UTLA President Warren Fletcher.

Once the signatures are certified by the union, a process they estimate could take a week or
more, the question would be put to the full membership. If it passes, the resolutions would
override existing UTLA policies on these issues.

"What we are attempting to do is fully democratize our own union from within," James Encinas,
a teacher at Westminster Elementary School who'll be delivering the signatures, said in a release.
"We are tired of watching our leaders fail to truly listen and lead on reform issues."

Teacher evaluations are already expected to be a major subject of looming contract negotiations
with the district. So far, though, UTLA hasn't been very specific about what it wants such an
evaluation system to look like—other than that it eschews the use of student test scores as an
element, something that Superintendent John Deasy supports.

The bottom line, it appears, is that these teachers are trying to pressure the union to move much
more quickly on this issue. And, they also want the union to create something of a hold-harmless
for the first 2.5 years of the new system's implementation, so that teachers aren't in jeopardy of
losing their jobs to future staff reductions. (The link between the two isn't entirely clear, but
presumably a new evaluation system could inform layoffs, so the teachers want to be sure it's
reliable first.)

A few things of note here. Many of the teachers involved in this effort are active in something
called NewTLA, a caucus within UTLA's House of Delegates that seeks to encourage more rank-
and-file members to become active in union leadership and governance.

It's important to note, however, that this initiative is not a formal NewTLA project. (I wrote a bit
about NewTLA in an Education Week story earlier this year.)

The effort is receiving logistical support from something called the Future Is Now Schools,
essentially a spin-off of the Green Dot Public Schools, a Los Angeles-based charter-management
organization whose schools are all unionized. One of FIN Schools' projects, called New Unionism, has goals quite similar to those of NewTLA, and its director, Michael Stryer, was a founding member of NewTLA. (He is on a yearlong leave of absence from classroom teaching.)

"It was the view of many members that UTLA has not really taken a proactive role in developing a revised evaluation system that is fair and meaningful," Stryer told me. "One thing many teachers realize is that if they don't pay a major role in the development of an evaluation system, it will be imposed from the outside in one way or another."

FIN schools receives support from a number of philanthropies, including the Ford Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the New Schools Venture Fund.

UTLA officers were busy in other negotiations when I reached out for comment, so I'll be sure update this post when they get back to me for their take.