

Last year, a mentor and former supervisor of mine, who was hugely influential to me despite us only working together for a year, passed away. Ron “Xhongo” Johnson taught me everything I know about restorative justice when I worked for him in a restorative justice diversion program in Dane County. Before that, he was a Black Panther, educator, and social worker in Milwaukee, where he helped run Harambee Community School. Through his work, I saw how dissatisfied Black & Brown communities in Milwaukee were with the education they were offered by religious schools and public schools, and I remain deeply sympathetic to the mission of Black & Brown communities having more control over their curriculum, school policies, and school leaders.

I say this to say I genuinely see the appeal of charter schools and the desire to use their flexibilities to advance equity. But Carmen Schools of Science & Technology has never lived up to that potential and continues to fail miserably, instead continuing to burn out staff and harm students - through staff turnover, misguided policies, and a lack of voice allowed for staff & students to advocate for change. I write this letter because future staff should know what they are getting into and future parents should know as much as possible - if we are to really have school choice in Milwaukee, parents need access to all the information.

Carmen’s old disciplinary policies were outdated, punitive, and reinforced the school-to-prison pipeline, treating our Black & Brown youth as if they were less trustworthy than their suburban peers, who would never face the kind of detentions or demerits our students used to receive, and less than human as the system focused entirely on extrinsic motivation. This is, frankly, unsurprising, given the inability for founder Patricia Hoben, a white woman from outside Milwaukee whose entire life was encased in privilege, to have any nuance needed to navigate the opinions of those in Milwaukee’s communities of color. Carmen students who tried to challenge this oppression were viewed as troublemakers. Carmen staff had no power to raise their voice without the protection of a union as multiple Carmen campuses had (and have) a workplace culture that bans dissent.

Fortunately, the new CEO, Jennifer Lopez, and other administrators have finally received some of this criticism and moved towards a more restorative approach. However, this culture of top-down decision-making where staff are treated as replaceable rather than experts sabotaged the implementation of restorative justice from the start. Some of our staff have worked in schools with successful restorative justice programs. None of us, save a small few on a committee, were given an avenue to raise our voice as Carmen refused to fund additional staffing or support or even training to implement restorative justice. Carmen families have witnessed disruptive and even violent behaviors on campus as Carmen refused to implement true restorative justice with fidelity, potentially turning off parents and staff from a genuinely needed philosophy change. Carmen staff who raised concerns were ignored and Carmen students had no support to get involved themselves.

The same issue applies to academics, as Carmen follows a misguided focus on test prep rather than building student interest in academics to prepare students for higher education, should they choose that. Inexperienced staff with a lack of curricular support had no choice but to rehash

what previous teachers did instead of finding ways to truly help our students nurture their passions. There was no transparency about what financial means we had for curricular support or supplies at the Southeast campus, at least, and administrators continue to make top-down decisions that remove electives and other programming that could help students discover passions that could carry them through college graduation. Continuously over my three years at Carmen, students complain about a lack of engaging classes to choose from and a lack of support for them to really figure out what they want to study in higher education. Parents need to know these conditions before choosing to send their children to Carmen.

Providing staff the security to raise these concerns and raise students' & parents' concerns without fear of retaliation was a driving factor in why I supported a union. If Carmen administration is genuinely bought into the mission laid out for Carmen, I have to believe they have no idea how their policies are playing out in the classroom for staff, students, and families. They will continue to have no idea if they do not give staff the protection to raise their voice.

What I've seen since the election has been an escalation in retaliation & shutting down of staff voice, especially staff of color. This calls into question the very sincerity of Carmen administration, who seem to focus on control rather than improving the schools. They don't seem to recognize that a union drive getting this far inherently means there are deep issues at Carmen Schools that need to be addressed, with no promises of improvement from administration. I suppose when you have a Board of Directors full of business CEOs and corporate interests, such as Scott Walker's ally and CEO of HUSCO Agustin Ramirez, rather than experts in education, there is an ideological block preventing Network from recognizing how a union could save them from certain collapse.

With a union, Network would know the real conditions for staff and students as we would have a voice to speak the truth - then Network can make the proper decisions on fixing our concerns regarding curriculum, discipline, and school culture. With a union, we can retain staff who will feel more satisfied that their voices are heard - experienced staff being the most important predictor of improving student outcomes. With a union, Carmen no longer becomes a target from public school advocates who distrust non-instrumentality charter schools as a way to undermine teacher unions and create a race to the bottom on teacher wages and benefits.

If Carmen really is some right-wing project to undermine education worker conditions and public education, this whole letter is a moot point. However, if Carmen Network's true mission was to give our students the best possible education and prepare them for success in careers or higher education after high school, Carmen needs to recognize the union drive for what it was - a cry for help and change by staff & students. Even staff who didn't agree with the mechanism of a union know there are deep-seated issues at Carmen - otherwise why would I be one of the oldest teachers at Southeast at 29 years old?

I implore Carmen administration to recognize the issues brought up this past year by staff. You must do more than a one-time bonus and a wage raise that pales in comparison to other schools in the area to retain the best possible teachers for our students. You must do more to create a workload that allows teachers to stay at Carmen, using their experience to be better

teachers every year for our students. You must do more to give staff and students a voice so you know what's really happening at your schools, instead of viewing critique or disagreement as intolerable. All of this is necessary if you want to live up to your own stated goal and the union's stated goal of equity as it relates to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and mental health.

If you do not make these changes, I think parents should know that they can find an education with far more experienced and qualified teachers, along with clubs, electives, and extracurriculars that can truly build student interest and passion to carry them through careers and higher education in the many other school choices they have in Milwaukee, including Milwaukee Public Schools. Carmen as it stands right now is a disgrace to the concept of school choice, taking advantage of Black & Brown dissatisfaction with the Milwaukee education landscape without offering an empowering education in return. Please demonstrate your sincerity and commitment to real improvement for the sake of students and parents that I've gotten to know and adore in my time at Carmen.

Sincerely,

Leland Pan

Social Studies Teacher, Carmen High School Southeast