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BMORE Keeps the Fire Burning An Interview with Keysha Godwin

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Abstract

This interview describes the way in which a paraeducator working in Baltimore City Schools and member of the Baltimore Movement for Rank-and-File Educators (BMORE) went from staff member who knew nothing of the union to become a union leader.



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Keysha Goodwin, para-educator for Baltimore City schools and Baltimore Movement for Rank-and-File Educators (BMORE) caucus member, discusses her motivation to become involved in union organizing after a 2008 change in the Baltimore Public Schools' funding formula combined with the effects of gentrification affected the quality of teaching and learning conditions in her district and school site. Goodwin recounts the significance of BMORE's racial equity focus and its commitment to organize underrepresented educators in the Baltimore Teachers Union, including para-educators.

Interviewed by Dr. Jessica Shiller, Associate Professor of Education, Towson University

JS: What is your current role in Baltimore City schools?

KG: *I have been with Baltimore City schools for 15 years as an instructional para-educator. Currently, I am at a public charter, Furman L. Templeton Preparatory Academy, which is my fourth school. It is a public charter school, which means that all staff are part of the union. I am a special educator, and I work with special education teachers and students in 1st through 5th grade. I do small group instruction, help plan lessons, analyze data, and help with assessments of the children at the school.*

JS: Instructional para-educator?

KG: *Yes, I am part of a group called PRSPs, which stands for paraprofessionals and school-related personnel. There are para-educators, like me, in this group as well as non-instructional school staff such as secretaries, technology staff, and Family Community Engagement Specialists. The PRSPs and the teachers are the two groups that form the Baltimore Teachers Union.*

JS: Thanks for making that clear, I didn't know that the union was made up of teachers, paras, and personnel that were non-instructional.

KG: *That's right, and we have slightly different issues that we face, but we are all represented by the union.*

JS: How did you get involved in the Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU)?

KG: *Well, at the start of my career, I wasn't involved. I really wasn't even aware of the union and wasn't a member. That was when you "worked to the rule." You didn't do anything extra unless you were paid. When I started to see a negative impact on my classroom, then I got involved. My class size started to increase, we were starting to see teachers and staff leave mid-year, and did not have the resources to support learning.*

JS: What was an example of one of those resources?

KG: *The school was very low on supplies. Simple things, like copy paper. We would have to buy this ourselves if we needed some.*

JS: When did this start to happen?

KG: *About six years ago. When the new funding model came into being in 2008, problems started. We have something called Fair Student Funding, which means that the dollars follow the student. Each student gets a base amount of funding (about \$5400), and money is added to that amount if the student is an advanced student or a struggling student. Additional supplemental amounts were added for special education students and English language learners. The money allocated for each student then went to that student's school, and more funding would follow a special education student, for example. It was supposed to give schools more flexibility, but if you are at a school with low enrollment, that meant less money. Plus, the determinations around whether to give a school more or less money was based on student test scores, which we know are tied to student income, and would give schools with lower test scores less funding.*

There is a new formula that gives a set amount based on the amount of concentrated poverty, but that is problematic too. It's measured by the number of students who receive benefits like SNAP (food stamps). The old way of measuring families entitled to free and reduced-priced meals captured more students and gave the schools more funds. So, now schools are struggling. So, not only are schools not getting what they need, we also discovered that the district was using Title I money to cover other shortfall areas, leaving even less money to support the instruction of the kids who needed it.

JS: Wow, that must have had a serious impact at your school.

KG: *At all schools and the district! We started to see temporary workers hired to do things that PSRPs and teachers were supposed to be doing. As a result, I have seen the quality of education decline. I started to see the quality of education decline since I grew up. Schools weren't teaching kids all the skills that I learned like writing and grammar, and really engaging them in the classroom. I noticed that neighborhoods were changing too. People I knew weren't able to afford to live in the communities where they grew up, I saw schools starting to close. Schools with prominent names of well-known African Americans were being renamed, therefore losing that history.*

JS: So, that is when you joined the union?

KG: *Yes, it is. I started paying my union dues, but I got really involved when I went to a meeting about gentrification. George Mitchell, a local activist, held a community meeting about it with an organization called the Teachers Democracy Project (TDP). They did a presentation and were talking about all the issues that I cared about. They really spoke to me and I started to get involved. The Baltimore Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (BMORE) caucus formed out of some of the teachers in the TDP, and they asked me to join them.*

JS: I know the Teachers Democracy Project. TDP was the organization that really started discussions around the city around school closings. They were on the ground, supporting the community fight against the closing of Langston Hughes Elementary, and became a presence in the city in 2014-15 or so. They raised issues around charter schools, privatization, and community control of schools. They took teachers and para-educators to Chicago and Philadelphia to hear

about what was going on there in the fight for social justice in schools. I know that inspired a lot of TDP members to form the BMORE caucus. They learned a lot from CORE in Chicago, especially. Once that formed, what really attracted you to the BMORE caucus?

KG: *The BMORE caucus talked about fighting for racial equity, and they also wanted to represent those who were unrepresented. Before BMORE, the same BTU leaders had been in power for decades, and had been up to all kinds of shenanigans. There was cronyism and nepotism left and right. We didn't find out until later that the old union was approving district changes. They approved budget cuts to schools, changes to the curriculum, more testing when there was a state law that reduced the amount of testing that could be done in classrooms. There was no transparency with union members.*

JS: Sounds similar to the old leadership in some of the teachers' unions around the country. Before CORE took over in Chicago, for instance, they were up to the same things. That old union leadership focused on getting their teachers salary increases, but not much else. It sounds like the BMORE caucus is taking things in a new direction. Is that right?

KG: *Yes, definitely. One thing I approved of right away was how quickly they got to work. The school district said that they were going to perform unannounced formal observations of teachers this year, and BMORE leaders pushed back right away. They argued that unannounced formals were going to undermine teachers' ability to do their work as professionals, and the observations would put them more on edge than ever before. We are already having a hard time holding onto teachers. So, I was impressed by that. Now, I sit on union committees: the Charter School Committee and Organizing Committee. Also, I am reaching out to fellow PSRPs to educate them about the work of BMORE Caucus so that they have a better understanding about us. It's hard because I also work full time, but I reach out to ask many people as I can during my lunch hour and after school hours.*

JS: That's amazing. It must be a challenge, what keeps you going with BMORE?

KG: *Now that we are in power at the BTU, we have the support of the national: AFT. We have attorneys, we have power at a larger scale behind us. We can really get things done. As I said, we are holding the district's feet to the fire for compliance with the More Learning, Less Testing Act, which regulates the percentage of time dedicated to assessments. There is also the Protect our Schools Act, which prevents more privatization of schools. Every time there are new policies, BMORE pushes for community engagement to increase awareness, accountability, and transparency. I think that people are starting to see that this is a new regime that is not going to let the district get away with just doing what they want with policies for our schools.*

JS: I know winning that leadership was hard fought.

KG: *Yes it was. BMORE worked hard to win the election. The old BTU leadership tried to suppress voting. They discouraged teachers and PSRPs from voting, and didn't even tell them about the elections. Voter turnout would be pretty low, but in the spring 2019, the BMORE caucus changed that. They launched a social media campaign and we went door knocking, which got a whole new group of people engaged. All that outreach about the election and about BMORE worked. The old*

union leadership contested the results, but they lost in the end. Now that BMORE is in power, we are realizing that there is still a lot left from the old union leadership. For instance, a lot of the old staff members that used to work for the union under the previous leader, Marietta English, are still in those positions. This is challenging because previous staff don't always support the work of the BMORE caucus and they are not used to the ways that BMORE operates. We work hard every day, and push hard to address racial inequity. The old union staff seemed to have given up on that a long time ago.

The leadership of the PSRPs is still in place actually, and letting things happen that really shouldn't, like exploitation of PSRPs. PSRPs are being asked to become long-term substitutes without the salary that they should get for stepping into that role, and being asked to administrate testing for hours on end with kids, for example. The district is trying to cap our salary increases, and we already don't make enough as it is. I am trying to talk to other PSRPs about this, and hope to take over leadership at some point. I am the education representative of my community association and I will get there at some point.

JS: Regime change is hard.

KG: Yes, but BMORE keeps us going. They help keep the fire burning. Their work ethic really energizes me, and now that we are in power, we have a platform to really challenge the system. I know that BMORE has our back if we want to push back against our administrators, the district, or the state. For example, before BMORE was in charge, administrators took advantage. They tried to play teachers against PSRPs. The district also took liberties, and tried to move Title I funds to pay for other budget needs, instead of advocating for the state to provide the funding that we need. But we are organizing against that. My goal is to get more cohesiveness between the PSRPs and the teachers so that we can push back even harder. It will take time, but I am inspired.

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