

Husband-Wife Team Seeking Teacher Rights in San Diego : Education: They met as union activists in the 1970s and continue to demand equal say in training and curriculum for teachers.

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SAN DIEGO —

To many educators within the San Diego city schools system, Hugh and Gail Boyle are the “dynamic duo,” a husband-and-wife teaching team who during the last 15 years have influenced policies and reflected district trends more than any of their 6,000 colleagues.

In June, 1977, as head of the teachers union, Hugh Boyle led the first and only strike by city teachers, earning admiration from some--but recognition from all--for his willingness to challenge a recalcitrant school board.

As union president between 1982 and 1986, Gail Boyle maintained a feisty, at times acrimonious, relationship with trustees and schools Supt. Tom Payzant during frequent battles over wages, working conditions and grievance procedures.

But today, once again in the union’s top spot, Hugh occupies a centerpiece role in the joint effort by the San Diego Teachers Assn. and Payzant’s administration to explore uncharted waters of labor-management cooperation. The key goals are to give teachers an equal say in training, curriculum and other major educational issues.

Equally active on the cutting edge of public school reforms, Gail, a resource specialist at Wilson Middle School, wrestles with how to maintain longstanding labor rights while cajoling her peers to embrace new ideas for teaching and rewarding their increasingly multiethnic charges. Such ideas include trying unusual texts, using paper airplanes to teach math and keeping the same teachers with the same group of students through all three years of middle school.

The Boyles find themselves as emblematic of public education in San Diego in 1990 as they were during the confrontational times of the last two decades. Indeed, they met as union activists during the early 1970s and remain convinced that labor unions can be an enhancement to education, rather than the impediment often portrayed.

“Nobody said this or anything else comes easy,” said Gail Boyle, at age 44 already a 23-year veteran of elementary and middle school instruction. She joined the district in 1967 as a student teacher out of San Diego State University.

“We’re an association, long organized around (gaining members) and union contract issues, trying to change to one organized around teaching issues and questions of who teachers are and what they want to do” to improve schools.

Hugh Boyle, 57, admits that many teachers do not yet believe that principals or central office administrators will permit them to have important roles in deciding how a school should be organized and how best to teach mandated curricula. Some teachers doubt that even such new authority would guarantee gains in student achievement, he said.

“This is a large district (179 schools) and we’ve only just scratched the surface,” he said.

His reputation as a firebrand from the 1977 strike--he was ordered to serve 40 days in jail and pay a \$4,000 fine for contempt of court, a sentence later overturned by the California Supreme Court--has given the veteran high school English teacher room within the union to push school reform together with Payzant. He is careful to spend time dealing with less-cosmic concerns--dirty classrooms, dental benefits and membership dues--that teachers still find central to their overall morale.

“I want something to show for collaboration,” he said, looking ahead to the end of his term in two years. “I want to be able to say we’ve improved education for students in San Diego.” Still, he conceded that the jury remains out on whether the restructuring effort will take root.

The term “school restructuring” encompasses a large number of potential reforms. From the Boyles’ perspective, restructured schools would, among other things, encourage teachers to experiment with different ways of organizing their classroom by having principals reward flexible teaching styles; eliminate petty rules limiting telephone and copying machine use, which affects staff morale, and use teacher evaluations to improve instruction, not as a threat of dismissal.

Few area educators believe better risk-takers could be found for the effort.

“People are a little apprehensive (about restructuring) but I think they’re the right people at the right time,” said Marc Knapp, one of two San Diego teachers of the year for 1990. “We call them the ‘dynamic duo’ because while they have different personalities--Gail is a real active, task-oriented slugger, Hugh is more cerebral and less demonstrative--both are a pair of tough hombres.

“Not that anyone falls down and genuflects before them,” added Knapp, a member of the union’s board of directors. “I (among others) can be a real thorn in Hugh’s side at times, but I have huge respect for what he has done in seeing things down the road, out ahead of us.”

Payzant credits Hugh with turning around more than five years of acrimony to work out a first-ever four-year contract that not only covered wages and grievances but established procedures for advancing educational reforms. The Panasonic Foundation had promised the district a long-term financial commitment to help pursue reform, but only if longstanding labor tensions were addressed.

“One of the biggest problems has been in perceptions among teachers that I now have Hugh in my pocket, and among my principals that Hugh now has me in his pocket,” Payzant said. “The fear of one

side dominating or manipulating the other remains one of the biggest challenges to restructuring and a new collaborative relationship.”

As for Gail Boyle, Payzant maintains he never took her attacks as union president personally.

“At that time, the public ground rules were clearly based on pressure, conflict, target the superintendent and the like,” Payzant said. “But even then, away from the cameras she very much enjoyed talking about instructional issues, about how to do a better job in really caring about children and becoming more of an advocate for them.”

Board President Kay Davis has taken her share of stiletto-like barbs from both Gail and Hugh Boyle during eight years as a trustee.

“I think they have realized, along with us, that the old ways of doing business are not going to work any longer in an urban district,” Davis said. “But there would not have been a chance in hell to get anything started without the chemistry between Hugh and Tom (Payzant).”

Both Boyles trace their fervor for reform to individual teaching experiences.

Hugh Boyle spent 11 years--1977 to 1988--teaching English at San Diego High School between terms as association president. He had come to San Diego from Connecticut in 1967 and first took part in an experimental program at Hale Junior High.

“At San Diego High, I saw what was happening to too many kids,” he said of the heavily Latino downtown-area school. “My own kids went there and did well but I saw others after four years unprepared for the future, and that really has colored my outlook.

“There’s been nothing in the traditional (educational) system to make a person a better teacher if someone is not (motivated) to do it on their own. The evaluation system has been set up to get rid of people, instead of having the goal of improving instruction” by getting teachers to work at improving themselves.

“We need to raise the expectations of teachers just as we are trying to do with kids.”

Gail Boyle took a look at her own style after she returned to teaching at Mann Middle School in 1967 after her union presidency.

“For years I believed the system was OK, that failure was not my responsibility but that of parents or someone else,” she said. “But I realized that what I was doing in the classroom wasn’t working for everybody, and I knew that education, as a system, was heading in the wrong direction.

“And being very practical, I couldn’t continue in the same way.”

Gail Boyle experimented with giving her regular English students the same materials--the same novels, the same questions, the same chance to write and produce plays--as her advanced, gifted class. Although she moved at a slower pace with the regular class, she found that the students gradually responded to challenging material, a big change from recall work and multiple-choice answer sheets. She could see that they learned to think on their own.

“She is a wonderful teacher,” said Maruta Gardner, her principal at Mann. “She is a great model for other teachers, particularly because at times she herself struggled, had to make adjustments, was not flawless. She was terrific to watch.”

Now at Wilson Middle School, one of several schools where teaching experiments are under way with a heavily Latino, black and Asian student population, Gail Boyle is trying to show teachers that they can work with administrators to enhance instruction without sacrificing union protections.

In essence, she hopes to prove that the union’s collaborative philosophy can pay off.

“For example, I’m in charge of (improving) discipline this year,” she said. “But the (administration) has to realize that there isn’t just one way to force teachers to do it. One method may work great if a teacher is assertive, but may fail miserably if the teacher isn’t.

In her view, when the San Diego district picks up on a new or interesting idea about teaching, it traditionally has mandated the technique for everyone despite research that shows no single method is going to work in all classes, given the diversity of the 122,000 students who make up the nation’s sixth-largest urban school system.

Both the Boyles believe they can find a new balance between legitimate labor concerns and the pressing need for teachers to change.

“Unions are an easy scapegoat,” Gail Boyle said. “Sure, we have incompetent people within the union but we also have great people, like Janet Gabay (1990 National Teacher of the Year).

“Problems in schools fall not just on teachers but on everyone--parents and principals and superintendents as well.”

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