

'We want to bring back some of the joy of teaching.'

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RICHARD STUTMAN, *Boston Teachers Union president*

Union hopes to show and tell

In a first, Boston teachers' unit opens own pilot school

By James Vaznis

GLOBE STAFF

Like a Hollywood studio promoting what it hopes will be a blockbuster hit, the Boston Teachers Union has plastered large signs at subway stops and along the sides of buses trumpeting today's opening of its own elementary school.

In the ads, a silver-haired 28-year veteran of the city's school system smiles widely in front of a brightly colored playground set and exclaims that at Boston Teachers Union School in Jamaica Plain, "We are working to create the best school for students and teachers to share the gift of education."

The media blitz, unusual for a new district school, under-



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Grade 6 Spanish teacher Rianna Good prepared for today's opening of Boston Teachers Union School in Jamaica Plain.

scores the high stakes for the oft-criticized union as it sets out to prove it can foster, not impede, innovation and educational achievement.

To execute this experiment

— the first of its kind in the state — leaders have made a seemingly unlikely choice, adopting a type of school that the union has often been ac-

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Teachers Union set for show and tell

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cused of thwarting in the past. Their school will be one of the city's 22 semiautonomous pilot schools, which operate under fewer union contract provisions than other district schools.

The union has drawn the ire of some business leaders and politicians by voting against proposals to transform other schools into pilots, because of concerns about lengthened workdays and relaxed rules for hiring and dismissing teachers. In June, Mayor Thomas M. Menino grew so frustrated with the union that he reversed his long-standing opposition to charter schools, which have no unions at all and have been fiercely criticized by teachers.

Union officials have repeatedly denied obstructing pilot school growth, arguing that they see merits in the concept but that members have disagreed with the details of certain proposals.

They say that at their pilot school, teachers will have an opportunity to showcase what they can do when their voices are heard. Pilot schools can ignore district-imposed programs, which teachers often deride as misguided, one-size-fits-all approaches to boost test scores that may not actually help many students master the necessary material.

"We want to bring back some of the joy of teaching," said Richard Stutman, the teachers union president. "You want people to reach their own professional potential by allowing them to do things differently."

Some at the Boston Teachers Union School call it a "liberation project."

The school will have no principal. Instead, two longtime district teachers — Berta Rosa Beriz, who's featured in the subway ads, and Betsy Drinan — are overseeing the school as co-teacher leaders. They see their job, they say, as helping teachers to teach while also spending time in the classroom themselves. The school is partnering



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Sue Lin readied her "primary transition" classroom to welcome kindergarten and first-grade students at the Boston Teachers Union pilot school opening today in Jamaica Plain.

with Simmons College.

"The prime relationship in a school is between a teacher and a child," Drinan said. "That's the moment that needs to be protected and enhanced."

The teachers union won the right to open the school when it negotiated a contract with the city four years ago, as part of a deal that allowed the city to open seven pilot schools. Since then, however, teachers have rejected several proposals to convert their schools into pilots, exercising a right given to them under the contract but upsetting Menino and other city leaders.

After walking through several classrooms yesterday, Menino said he was impressed, noting the quality of the teaching staff.

"It will give the union an opportunity to show what reforms they may want in the system," Menino said.

The mayor, however, will continue seeking legislative approval to convert underperforming schools into union-free charters, which would be under the jurisdiction of the School Committee.

The union school will deviate only slightly from the teacher contract. The school day will be 30 minutes longer than at most district schools, and teachers will attend a weekly two-hour staff meeting — all of which will entitle the educators to extra pay.

Pilot schools traditionally can

hire teachers from outside the district, but the union school sought only internal candidates. Most of its 12 teachers have taught in the district for less than a decade and most are in their 30s.

The school is starting off small, with 150 students, who are enrolled in kindergarten, and the first and second grades,

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JOY DE PALM, teacher

as well as in Grade 6, which kicks off the middle school program. The school will eventually top off at Grade 8.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, who toured the school yesterday, said the union is taking a "big risk," but she applauded its entrepreneurial spirit. Boston, she said, is the second union, behind New York City, to open a school that she knows of.

"Things go wrong in a school all the time," Weingarten said. "Naysayers will be rooting for it to fail, and they will already have the press releases written if a school like this can't succeed."

In Boston, the Pioneer Institute, a strong charter proponent and a teachers union critic, said

the union-run school could be successful because decisions would be made by the school's staff rather than by a district administrator.

"The schools have a better sense of what a child's academic needs are," said Jamie Gass, director of the research institute's Center for School Reform. He added, however, that the union school will need to show MCAS success before the experiment is replicated elsewhere.

By early this week, most of the classrooms were nearly set for the first day of school today.

In a first-grade classroom, a message welcoming pupils was already written on a large pad of lined paper that rested on an easel. The names of each pupil hung on a bulletin board in front of the classroom along with a complete schedule of activities that included story time, math, and music.

Upstairs, in a sixth-grade classroom, teacher Joy De Palm had arranged her desks in a semicircle to encourage lively discussions about literature and history. She said she liked being part of creating a school.

"I've never been asked my opinion before," said De Palm, who taught in New York City for 11 years before coming to Boston a few years ago. "I like when we don't agree on something we can have a spirited debate, and there are no consequences for disagreeing."