

## Canadian Teacher Unions' Responses to Reform

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- 1 Canada is a country where educational jurisdiction takes place at the provincial rather than the federal level. This presentation draws on research on three Canadian provinces to illustrate what decision-makers can learn from how teachers' unions engage with educational reform.
- 2 Teachers' organizations are often accused of obstructing educational reforms. But the reality is that, because teacher union members are teachers, these organizations can provide valuable feedback on the actual conditions of teaching and learning in classrooms and schools; they are privy to reports from the front lines of educational delivery; often, the reforms they resist are often those that are enacted without taking teaching and learning conditions into account, and without this understanding, such reforms are likely to result in policy failure and/or unintended consequences.
- 3 This presentation draws upon Carter, Stevenson and Passy's (2010) typology of teacher unions' relationships with educational reform in order to understand what these organizations' responses to reform can tell us about the details of reform implementation. The three types of responses to reform identified by Carter and his colleagues are *resistance*, *rapprochement*, and *renewal*. Teacher unions around the world respond to educational reform in all of these ways, and the three Canadian examples help illustrate those responses.
- 4 The longstanding *resistance* of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) to provincial reform initiatives can be understood as evidence of teachers' concerns about policies they believe would result in poorer quality teaching and learning. On the other hand, the Ontario Teachers' Federation's initiative to provide technical assistance in aid of local implementation of government-led reforms in the early 1990s is an example of *rapprochement*: that is, it exemplifies the federation's general agreement with reform programs initiated by decision-makers, and working alongside them enabled the OTF to help build the capacity of educators to support reforms they had a role in shaping. Finally, over many years, with changes in provincial governments, the Alberta Teachers'

Association (ATA) worked sometimes independently, sometimes with government, and sometimes with other partners, keeping the ATA focused on the enactment of longer-term educational goals, that were developed with regular input from teacher members: this is organizational *renewal*.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Nina Bascia is Professor and Chair in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. She has published nine books (including *Teacher Unions in Public Education* and *International Handbook on Educational Policy*) and numerous articles and book chapters. Her research focuses on the intersection of educational policy and teachers' work. A major focus of her work is teacher unions, and she has conducted studies of over three dozen organizations in 11 countries.