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September 22, 2009

New Leader of City Teachers Is Ready for His Test

By **JENNIFER MEDINA**

This is not the kind of man who walks into a room unnoticed. [Michael Mulgrew's](#) stature — six feet tall, 230 pounds, size 48 — demands attention. His voice, trained in years of childhood theater, booms from his chest. He is just what central casting might expect when searching for the part of union president.

But Mr. Mulgrew cuts quite a different figure from those who came before him as president of the [United Federation of Teachers](#), the New York City teachers' union, one of the most powerful labor positions in the country. And the distinctions are not just physical.

His predecessor, [Randi Weingarten](#), was known for her work-around-the-clock ethos and frequent news conferences, and seemed to relish rising to the balls of her feet and shouting to make a point. Ms. Weingarten rose to become leader of the [American Federation of Teachers](#), the U.F.T.'s parent union, just like her forebears, the labor giants [Albert Shanker](#) and [Sandra Feldman](#).

Mr. Mulgrew, 44, projects a sort of easy confidence, routinely described as down to earth and the No. 1 person to hang out with at a party. Even now, years after he stopped working in construction, he is happy to spend a weekend mixing concrete. But what members of his union, the nation's largest local, most want to know is whether his regular-guy manner will serve them

in negotiations, and battles, with City Hall and the State Legislature.

He answers with a belly laugh. "I'm not the kind of person you want to ignore," he said.

Mr. Mulgrew was elected interim president by the union's executive board in July, just in time for negotiations with the city over the next teachers' contract and amid steep budget cuts both in the city and state. But he is also taking the reins at a time of intense debate over education, with officials from [President Obama](#) on down calling for changes that have long been anathema for the unions, including more [charter schools](#) and using student test scores to judge teacher effectiveness. The union's influence could wane as education officials across the country move to bring their policies in line with the Obama administration's.

"This is a time of huge, huge challenges," said Leo Casey, the vice president of high schools for the union. "Leaving aside the huge budget gaps, he also has to figure out how to mount a response to the charter school movement that accepts the best of what they should be, but really turns back the attempt to use charter schools to privatize education."

Like Mr. Shanker and Ms. Feldman, Ms. Weingarten appeared to hand-pick her successor. And so far, Mr. Mulgrew has staked out many of the same positions as Ms. Weingarten, offering cautious praise for some of Chancellor [Joel I. Klein](#)'s changes to the system, but criticizing his "relentless focus on data at the expense of everything else."

One education official who spoke only on the condition that he not be identified for fear of angering Mr. Mulgrew — or his predecessor — contrasted the two by saying that Ms.

Weingarten often seemed to be calculating several moves ahead when she spoke. Mr. Mulgrew, the official said, says exactly what he is thinking.

Asked to respond to the comparison, Mr. Mulgrew gave another belly laugh:

“I can’t answer that one without getting myself in trouble — maybe it’s a good idea people believe you say what you’re thinking.”

Mr. Mulgrew also differs from his predecessors in one key way: he is the longest-serving classroom teacher ever to head the union, something that could help him earn the respect of veteran members who are often the most active members. (He also happens to be the first non-Jewish leader in the 49-year history of the union.)

Mr. Mulgrew needs to win a unionwide election next spring to secure the presidency. While he is expected to have broad support, the union, which has 228,000 members, also has its share of internal dissent.

“We’re not expecting any major change — it’s still the same machine that is running the U.F. T.,” said James Eterno, who is making a long-shot bid to challenge Mr. Mulgrew. “In some ways, it does not matter who the head is, you know that they are going to toe the line and not fight for many changes for teachers.”

A native of Staten Island, Mr. Mulgrew went to work as a carpenter after graduating from Saint Peter’s High School for Boys, eventually using the income to help pay his tuition at the [College of Staten Island](#), where he graduated with a degree in English literature. He lives on Staten Island.

He attributed much of his ambition to his mother, who raised four children on her own — his parents divorced — while juggling jobs as a waitress and bookkeeper.

Two of Mr. Mulgrew’s siblings also became teachers. Although he has never married, he has a

daughter, Meghan, 22, who is studying business at Fordham. While still working in construction after college, he got a job as a substitute teacher at [William E. Grady Vocational High School](#) in Brooklyn. He quickly decided he wanted to teach full time, but he was eager to stay out of woodshop.

“There was no way that after all that work and college I was going to teach shop,” he said over a grilled chicken salad lunch this month. “I just wasn’t interested in that. If I wanted to stay in construction full time, I would have done that.”

At Grady, where he was hired full time in 1993, he taught computers and film, working with students who were at risk of failing or dropping out. He made friends at the school quickly, even offering to help build kitchen cabinets for one colleague.

By the time he became the union chapter leader in 1999, career and technical education was falling out of favor, both locally and nationally. When the principal moved to cut a program focusing on heating and plumbing, Mr. Mulgrew fought back by filing a formal complaint and seeking help from the local plumbers’ union. They responded enthusiastically, explaining that they were desperate for new apprentices with basic skills.

“It was obvious that this is what we had to do,” he said. “Nobody understood what career and technical schools were supposed to do, but when we had entire classes graduating with reading and math skills and the ability to work, nobody could argue with us.”

In 2005, Mr. Mulgrew was recruited to become the vice president of the career and technical education division of the union, working in the union’s headquarters near Wall Street. He quickly impressed teachers and principals at the technical schools, in large part by coming to

visit often and worrying about the small obstacles.

It took him several years, but he eventually secured a new train for students to work on at [Transit Tech Career and Technical Educational High School](#) in East New York, Brooklyn. As he prepared for a large protest against budget cuts in front of City Hall last year, he made sure that a school's step dance troupe would have the sound equipment they needed. And when students at [Automotive High School](#) in Brooklyn were unexpectedly stuck without a graduation site in June, he arranged for them to use the auditorium in the union's building.

“There's a real sense of honesty and passion there, and that's no small thing,” said Melissa Silberman, the principal of Automotive, who sought Mr. Mulgrew's help in developing an engineering program at the school.

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