



Week of Sept. 10-14, 2012

## Teacher Contracts: Stories of Discord and Respect

by UCLA IDEA

Since Monday, teachers in the nation's third-largest school district, Chicago Public Schools, have been on strike. More than 26,000 teachers and other school personnel have been out of the classrooms since contract negotiations broke down over issues that are familiar to schools across the country. The strike takes place in a climate of disputes over the use of standardized test scores in teacher evaluations, in teacher hiring and firing policies, in the expansion of charter schools, in merit pay and more. Although Chicago teachers remain out on Friday, there are optimistic reports that a settlement is close and hopes that teachers will be in their classrooms soon.

This strife, affecting schools nationally has been exacerbated by a wave of reformers who see teachers (through their unions) as responsible for the slowness of reform and school improvement. Teachers, on the other hand, see the reformers as supporting schemes that are neither supported by their own experience nor by research. Further, they believe that the current reform agenda ignores key deficits found in large urban districts with high concentrations of low-income students: large class sizes, too few social workers, inadequate wraparound services for students in poverty, diminished opportunities to learn music, arts and foreign languages, and more. In Chicago, for example, some schools have more than 40 students in classrooms as early as kindergarten. Thousands of students are without libraries, counseling or arts education.

Chicago's tensions also are found in many California school districts, but not always to the same degree. In places like Los Angeles Unified, district officials and union leaders are talking about developing new systems to evaluate and support teachers. There is not much agreement to date, but at least they are still talking.

As talks continue, it will be essential for all parties to recognize the importance of maintaining civil relationships and, from the teachers' perspectives, resolving longstanding structural problems without jeopardizing teachers' working conditions or professional autonomy. When the California Department of Education released this week a 90-page report charting a path toward better education and quality teaching, they included the key recommendation that collaborative relationships between labor and management are necessary to retain and recruit good teachers.

*Greatness by Design: Supporting Outstanding Teaching to Sustain a Golden State* is noteworthy not just for its rhetoric but also for its practice of more collegial interactions between teachers and management. The report is the product of a task force on teacher excellence that included both classroom teachers and district officials and was co-chaired by Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond and Long Beach Unified Superintendent Chris Steinhauser. A central theme of the report is the importance of focusing attention on conditions that enable educators to reach their full potential.

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"The most successful evaluation systems are those that rely upon research-based best practices to help teachers and administrators improve their craft. Collaboration is key to developing these systems, with all parties focused on the ultimate goal of improving student achievement," said Steinhauser.

Trust and respect between teachers, administrators, parents and students, along with the tools to teach and learn, are essential for meaningful school improvement.

In New Haven, Conn., education officials and the teacher's union there have just agreed on a three-year landmark contract that addresses issues similar to those that thousands of Chicago teachers are striking over—including health benefits, use of standardized test scores, and longer school days. "I think fundamentally what we managed to do here in New Haven is step back from the politics and focus on our shared objectives and goals... We agreed that we needed to work hard together to figure out solutions, and it wasn't one side imposing on the other," said Assistant Superintendent of Schools Garth Harries.

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