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When Two Rights Don't Correct a Wrong
By UCLA IDEA

For at least a century, Los Angeles has assigned inexperienced teachers to schools in the poorest neighborhoods. In 1928, a school district official said that an inexperienced teacher should be placed first in "the foreign, semi-foreign, or less convenient schools. After a few more years of satisfactory service, she may be placed in the more popular districts." Los Angeles now is trying to correct this policy-driven disparity. But it will have to try harder.

Within the past two weeks, a negotiated settlement and a court ruling on separate education lawsuits have addressed school policies that exacerbate racial disparities. Each, taken in isolation, has the appearance of a civil rights victory; however, when taken together, they show that correcting complex and engrained school inequalities depends on much more than a couple of agreements or rulings.

First, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled the state had been illegally designating interns as "highly qualified" teachers. Interns are teachers who lack full teaching credentials, but still have full responsibility for their students. The decision was a victory for civil-rights advocates because over 62 percent of interns taught in the poorest half of California schools.

Then, the Los Angeles Unified School District board reached a settlement with the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California. This settlement protects new teachers in some low-income and poor-performing schools from mass layoffs. Advocates also hailed this decision because teacher layoffs over the last two years have been concentrated in schools serving Los Angeles' poorest neighborhoods. These schools had entered the recent period of budget retrenchment with the highest proportion of new teachers. Seniority rules dictated that the district lay off these teachers first. The high turnover in some schools caused by budget cuts meant students saw a revolving door of substitutes, leaving many further behind in their education.

At first glance, the combined decisions seem contradictory. One decision tries to keep low-income schools from being overloaded with new and inexperienced teachers. And another tries to retain newer teachers in order to create and maintain greater faculty stability.

The decisions are not contradictory, but incomplete. What's missing is a coherent system of school policies that assigns an equitable mix of skilled, experienced teachers alongside more recent hires—generally younger teachers—who stay long enough to develop their professional craft and knowledge of local communities. "Any principal wants a mix of new and experienced

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teachers, you don't want any schools skewed," said IDEA Director John Rogers, adding that a set of measures to retain teachers would have allowed for these diverse campuses.

Overzealous news reports have said that the Los Angeles settlement could be applied throughout the country. However, the actual terms of the proposed settlement are unknown and must be approved. Also, LAUSD has unique teacher assignment rules; it is difficult for the district to transfer tenured teachers to other campuses without cause.

Fortunately, there are ways to achieve equitable teacher assignments without resorting to forced transfers of an aging teacher workforce. We know that teachers at all levels of experience are attracted to schools that have strong, inclusive leadership; allow time for planning, collaboration and skills development; provide adequate supplies and materials; and offer a professional salary.

By themselves, new rules governing teacher assignments will not correct a decades-long inability to properly staff schools in low-income neighborhoods. In the short run, enforcing new rules and procedures might be a way to manipulate a more balanced distribution of experienced teachers. But in the long run, maintaining diverse and highly competent faculties requires schools with attractive opportunities for effective learning and teaching.

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