



THEMES in the NEWS

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Beware the Ides of March

By UCLA IDEA

Before California's teacher layoff law was enacted, school districts might wait until late August, determine whether their budgets required layoffs, and fire teachers with little notice. Thus, the March 15 deadline began, in part, as a humane act to notify teachers who might be laid off. Those teachers who didn't receive a notice needn't spend a summer of worry, and those whose jobs were on the line were at least notified. However, legislative delays in approving the state's budget and ongoing underfunding have transformed the early warning into an annual ritual—a wrenching experience for tens of thousands of teachers and for school administrators trying to plan for a new school year.

In the last three years, 30,000 teachers have been laid off because of budget cuts, and this year, more than 19,000 notices were issued statewide.

Los Angeles Unified alone issued about 7,000 notices—that is more potential job loss than when Toyota closed down its NUMMI factory in northern California. The actual number of teachers to be laid off might be smaller because districts now send out notices defensively in order to protect themselves against even the slightest error in their estimates. Also, some relief might come from a special election in June to extend tax hikes—if the measure manages both to get onto the ballot and to pass. If not, California schools would likely bear the brunt of budget cuts because schools were largely spared in the governor's proposal earlier this year.

The implications of teachers' job insecurity are profound. Whether new to the profession or well established in it, the yearly job threat takes its toll: a cohesive professional workplace and school culture translates directly to students' education and wellbeing; and there is great disruption not knowing whether valued colleagues will return—whether years of reform plans will collapse because key teachers will be gone. The issue is further muddied by politicized arguments about *who* should be fired, distracting from the real and greater problem of schools needing more, not fewer teachers. Instead of California districts sending out notices to remove 19,000 teachers, they should be sending out contracts to hire 19,000 more teachers.

By 2019, California is projected to enroll 381,000 more students than today. At current staffing ratios (already among the worst in the nation), this would require an additional 18,317 teachers. However, because California has one of the worst student-teacher ratios of the nation, the state would need to add 128,831 teachers just to meet the national average. These figures do not account for California's aging teaching force and a disproportionate number of retirements in the next few years.

The annual layoff ritual stands in contrast to what Californians should demand from their education policymakers: Add to and stabilize the teacher workforce; attract outstanding candidates to the field; and retain outstanding teachers in a sought-after profession.