



# THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

*Week of March 5-9, 2012*

## **No Education Recovery in Sight**

By UCLA IDEA

It is almost upon us—March 15.

March 15 is the now annual ritual when tens of thousands of teachers and other school employees will be notified that they may be laid off because school districts lack sufficient funds to guarantee their employment in the coming school year. The original purpose of the law requiring a March 15 notice was to provide education workers with some control over their plans in the midst of fiscal instability. Before the law, many districts waited until as late as September to tell teachers if they would be rehired. But in these times of worsening budget crisis, March 15 has also become a deadline for public negotiation between local school boards and state lawmakers. Districts use the March notices to highlight the severity of their budget cuts and how dire the situations can become for students without budget reprieve from the state.

Districts across the state are preparing worst-case scenario budgets should the November ballot initiatives fail. In Long Beach, for example, one proposal has the district eliminating AVID college-readiness program, middle and high school sports, elementary arts, librarians and counselors, increasing class sizes, reducing the school year by 20 days and sharing principals among schools.

“A lot of people believe when they read these things that we’re crying wolf. This is not crying wolf,” said board member John McGinnis.

Districts must make tough decisions based on tough estimates that will influence their teacher workforce months from now. They simply don’t know how many teachers they can afford. Furthermore, the November election—which likely will include one or more revenue-producing initiatives—comes after the start of school. Gov. Brown has signaled that the failure of these initiatives will mean further cuts to public education. How much risk can districts take in the face of this uncertainty by guaranteeing jobs they might be unable to fund? And how much uncertainty can teachers take and still find their careers attractive or tolerable?

The yearly apprehension that teachers feel has taken its toll on morale. According to the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher released this week, since 2006, the percentage of teachers who do not feel secure in their job has jumped from 8 percent to 34 percent. Teacher job satisfaction fell by 15 percent to a 20-year low, with only 44 percent surveyed saying they were satisfied with their job.

The survey also revealed that lower job satisfaction was more likely to occur in schools that had experienced previous layoffs, cutbacks to the arts, after-school programs and social services, increased class sizes and were dealing with students in poverty.

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For many years researchers and experts have offered evidence that the way to recruit and keep the best teachers in any school, but particularly urban campuses, is to focus on working conditions—smaller class sizes, more support systems, professional development and opportunities for leadership, time for collaboration, etc.

These conditions depend on a secure and sufficient teacher workforce; and yet, the survey also revealed that 29 percent of teachers (a 12-point increase) said they were very or fairly likely to leave the profession. With more teachers leaving and less entering the profession, California is primed for a shortage in the near future.

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