



Week of June 11-15, 2012

Teachers Lose 5%. Students Lose a Week. What's Next?

by UCLA IDEA

After months of impasse and on the verge of final layoff notices, Los Angeles Unified and its teachers union reached an agreement. United Teachers Los Angeles agreed to a 5-percent wage cut, which would manifest in 10 furlough days. Five of those days would be instructional days, meaning that students would lose a full week of class during the 2012-13 school year. The board approved the measure, which now awaits a vote by UTLA membership.

No one thinks shortening the school year is a good idea, especially for low-income, minority students struggling to close achievement gaps with peers. But, LAUSD, like most California school districts, faces an untenable budget crisis due to long-term patterns of underfunding and the state's current fiscal crisis. To avoid layoffs for more than 4,000 teachers, and to prevent eliminating adult education, elementary arts and other programs, Los Angeles teachers are poised to take on far more than their "fair share" of economic sacrifice so that classes—some of the most crowded in the nation—will not balloon further.

Some would have preferred to see larger class sizes. Late last month, when Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney unveiled his education plan, he bristled at the idea that small class sizes lead to better teaching and learning conditions. Thinking back to his days as Massachusetts' governor (but not to the small classes of his own elite private schooling), Romney said, "The schools in the district with the smallest classroom sizes had students performing in the bottom 10%. Just getting smaller classrooms didn't seem to be the key."

Eric Hanushek with the Hoover Institution at Stanford University agrees. In a Los Angeles Times article, Hanushek said a better option would have been to lay off ineffective teachers, even at the expense of increasing class size. "Instead of trying to deal with both the fiscal problem and the quality problem, the education establishment has tried to minimize the impact on adults, leaving the students to suffer the most."

Romney and Hanushek build their arguments on partial truths. First, there are many reasons aside from class size for a school district's students to perform in the lowest 10 percent. For example, a smaller class size may help students in low-performing school districts achieve "better" than they would in more crowded classes, even if they don't overtake students in high-performing (usually affluent) school districts. No, small classes are not a single "key;" however, class size stands among many factors that are necessary but not sufficient for high performance.

Also, "larger class sizes" look quite different in California than they did in Romney's Massachusetts. We're past the point where a classroom will increase from 20 students to 22 students. Some high school English classes are hovering closer to 40 students. At this point, teachers become

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overwhelmed. They cannot fully attend to students' individual learning needs and differences while maintaining basic classroom routines and keeping up with grading and paperwork.

Hanushek vastly overestimates the number of "ineffective teachers" and inflates their impact compared with other factors (poverty, disparities in school funding, etc.) that depress student achievement. More importantly, he offers a simplistic and much disputed method for identifying those who don't teach well. Numerous studies have questioned that method—"value-added" teacher-assessment—which is Hanushek's preferred test-driven, teacher-accountability tool.

With value-added evaluations, teachers can swing from most- to least-effective from one year to the next—making the measures unreliable for high-stakes decisions such as teacher pay and retention. In fact, most proponents of the method caution that it should be just one factor in a more nuanced and layered system for fair and accurate evaluation. Unfortunately, underfunding and staffing shortages (demands on teachers' and administrators' time, for example) make it nearly impossible to sustain the professional supervision, mentoring, and teacher development needed for professional improvement and assessments.

Los Angeles teachers have agreed to a 5-percent pay cut. Perhaps they'll agree to another next year. And students will perhaps lose another week next year. Despite the claims of Romney and Hanushek, there is no magical alternative that avoids student suffering with existing funding. The one real alternative would be a fairer state and national tax structure coupled with a rational system of school finance.

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