

Massive layoffs force teachers to re-evaluate careers

By [Andrea Billups \(Contact\)](#) | Sunday, August 9, 2009

It's turning into a long, pink-slip summer for thousands of the nation's teachers caught in mass layoffs as school districts struggle to control their finances during the deep recession.

While some teachers ousted in the spring have been rehired as school systems find more money, including funds from the current economic stimulus package, other teachers have been forced to move where the work is. Some have even changed careers as what once was a wide-open job market is closing its doors.

The nation's largest teachers union, the National Education Association, has estimated that about 34,000 teaching jobs will be lost this year.

In Lake Oswego, Ore., first- and second-year teachers faced the luck of the draw as those slated for firing were chosen by lottery in an effort to be fair. The district's human resources director said in media accounts that the sad process made her stomach hurt.

In South Florida, Broward County schools are facing shrinking enrollment and budget, and announced plans last month to lay off nearly 400 teachers, with 50 or 60 expected to be rehired.

In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School district in North Carolina, officials used a system of seniority and performance evaluations to let go more than 1,100 staff members, including teachers, amid protests from students and parents to save veterans who they argued are the heart and soul of their classrooms.

In Los Angeles, where the massive 694,000-student district has struggled with its finances for years, its teacher force was the hardest hit. About 6,000 educators — many working in high poverty schools — got the ax before federal stimulus money and intense outrage resulted in the rehiring of about 4,000.

Randi Weingarten, the president of the 1.4-million-member American Federation of Teachers, called the teacher layoffs "terrible" with a grave impact on both schools and people.

"Teacher layoffs equal eliminating classes and/or increasing class sizes, both of which are terrible for kids instructionally," she said. "You can't move forward on reform if you have pulled out the supports and the basic instructional plan that exists right now. That is why the stimulus funds were mostly devoted to stabilizing the current education structures."

The mass firings in Los Angeles sparked backlash among the rank and file who joined union leaders to spearhead protests, school camp-outs and even hunger strikes designed to tell school officials and the public that kids and schools are being shortchanged in the financial crunch.

The president of the United Teachers of Los Angeles union, A.J. Duffy, was arrested in his protests to keep jobs in his district where negotiations continue on bringing more fired teachers back before the new school year begins.

Mr. Duffy, who said the employment crunch was the topic of much discussion at the National Education Association's annual summer conference in San Diego, called the current climate a "crisis."

"It's a very severe problem, but we have made some progress," he said, noting that some smaller districts have fared better than massive urban districts. He said charter and other school choice options have taken away money from public schools.

"This crisis has given the forces of privatization the opportunity to paint teachers in the worst light possible and make proposals to privatize public education here, which would be a tragedy," he said. "Instead of fixing public education, my school district seems willing and hellbent for leather to privatize education."

Julie Van Winkle, a five-year veteran middle school math and science teacher from Los Angeles, said she was devastated after learning that her job teaching sixth and seventh grade is now gone. Ms. Van Winkle, who spearheaded protests at local schools, said she was planning to buy a house this summer, but that dream is now off the table with her financial future uncertain.

Out of 65 classroom teachers at Liechty Middle School, 41 got pink slips, she said. She has been forced to register with the district as a substitute as class sizes at her former school are being increased and administrators struggle to do more with less.

"I cried when they took that picture," she says of her new substitute ID card photograph. "It's very demeaning. You kind of have expectations as a teacher who got high evaluations, who has never had a problem with an administrator or parent, who works well with colleagues ... I never thought I would be in a situation where I couldn't be a teacher."

It's not only teachers who will be hurt by the economics, adds Ms. Van Winkle, 28.

About 90 percent of the students at Liechty receive free and reduced price lunches, a benchmark of poverty, and many are English language learners. Yet Ms. Van Winkle says she loved her students' energy, their desire to move ahead.

She talks fondly of the teacher camaraderie there and wonders how some kids without solid home lives and on the vulnerable cusp of adolescence will achieve — or even stay in school — with so much upheaval and loss of continuity. She majored in German in college, but later got her teaching certification and quickly embraced making an impact on her inner-city students.

"It's crazy to me that something like this can happen to uproot so many schools in areas where kids arguably need more support than in other areas," she added. "I can't believe that people who are interested in civil rights haven't gotten more involved in this situation. The schools here that are being uprooted the most are in areas of low socioeconomic status with mostly black and Latino students" who face increased class sizes and new teachers filling in the gaps.

The broader impact of the recession on the teacher work force is unknown. A decade ago, researchers at the U.S. Department of Education predicted a massive and looming teacher shortage from baby boomer teachers retiring in record numbers. That has yet to materialize.

A newer report released this year by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, described teaching careers as "collapsing at both ends."

It said beginners were being pushed out over low pay and tough work environments — costing districts a fortune to rehire and retrain. Committed veterans with enough years for retirement and a pension were being encouraged to leave, even as some are in their 50s and nowhere near wanting to quit.

"The economic downturn is really just a year old, and we just don't know the impact," said Richard Ingersoll, a professor of education and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education who studies the education work force. "Teacher turnover rates have been fairly stable over time."

He said current trends are "contradictory," but added that teacher shortages remain in math and science. "We've never really had a shortage in the sense that we produce too few teachers. It's too many leaving long before retirement. There has become this kind of a revolving door in particular kinds of schools."

Michael Petrilli, vice president for national programs and policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington, D.C., says he believes the predicted shortages are a pending challenge. Thought by many to be a stable career choice, teaching now takes its own deep hit in an economy that stubbornly refuses to correct, he said.

Some cries of shortages are "overhyped as a strategy of unions to raise teacher salaries because there aren't enough teachers," Mr. Petrilli says.

"We are having a lot of young teachers laid off," says Mr. Petrilli. "We are getting close to this cliff with the baby boomers and we are not replenishing the troops. That is not a great strategy and remains an impending challenge."

Some of the current spate of layoffs, particularly in districts where they are based solely on seniority, penalize good, young teachers who may have entered the profession through alternative avenues, like Teach for America, rather than a traditional four-year college teacher training program, he adds.

"These young enthusiastic types, once we lose them, they are lost forever," he said, with some of the best and brightest getting frustrated in the employment fray. Midcareer teachers, some switching careers as they look to give back after years of working in corporate jobs, also get hit when layoffs occur.

Bess Keller, issues director at the National Council on Teacher Quality in Washington, D.C., says one concern of layoffs is that it creates larger class sizes.

"There is some evidence that class size counts in the early grades, and especially for minority kids," she said.

Layoffs based on years of experience, which occur in most districts, often are not good for teacher quality, she said, but they are considered most fair. "They tend to cause less disruption because there is not the implication about your quality when you are laid off on the basis of seniority.

"I do worry about promising teachers cut off at the beginning of their careers and never coming back," she added. But a tighter job market also has an upside: more applicants means that districts who are hiring can be choosier in who they bring into their classrooms, which can only

strengthen quality.

Despite the current challenges, interest in Teach for America, the national program designed to recruit college and midcareer candidates to teach in urban and high-poverty schools, is at an all-time high, said Rhonda Stewart, regional communications director.

"We have actually seen a surge in interest," Ms. Stewart said, noting that the organization will place its largest corps in its nearly 20-year history with 4,100 new TFA teachers heading out this fall to 35 districts nationwide.

"Not only are people undaunted, really what we are seeing is that the economy is motivating people to take a closer look at what is most important in terms of a career. Many people are saying they want a way to give back."

She adds: "As the population of school-age children continues to grow and the number of high school students going to college increases, there is no question there is a really a great need for a large number of teachers throughout the country."

Interest in education as a field of study also remains steady, reports Ken Hansing, a career counselor at the University of Georgia, which hosts one of the nation's largest teacher preparation programs. He says enrollment for teacher education students continues to remain steady, but notes that teachers who are employed are staying put amid the uncertainty with some veterans putting off retirement plans a bit longer.

"I think our students are very determined," said Mr. Hansing. Most new graduates are looking for jobs now that their timing is bad but remaining optimistic that there will be openings for them in the future, he added.

"I'm overwhelmed with the enthusiasm," he said. "I'd be disappointed if many decided not to pursue education because of the economy in this one particular year."

In the meantime, many new grads are finding work as substitutes, where they can gain real time experience as they await a classroom of their own. "I think the long-term outlook is good," he said. "There will always be a shortage of math, science, and special education students."

Ms. Weingarten looked beyond the impact on education alone. She decried the human toll that has hurt the nation's educators the most. Good people are now being penalized for trying to do good, she said.

"This is where the rubber hits the road. ... when somebody gets laid off, they have a family to feed. It's not simply about their aspirations to be a teacher and wanting to make a difference in the world," she said.

She said for the most part these teachers have said they want to teach — not to get rich but to make a difference.

"And now, they have gotten kicked on the chin for it," she said.

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