

Will Seniority-Based Layoffs Undermine School Improvement Efforts in Washington State?

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The Obama administration is investing \$3.5 billion to turn around some of the country's lowest-performing schools, including over \$50 million in Washington State.¹ In Washington, 18 schools, among the bottom 5% of schools in the state, received School Improvement Grants (SIGs) to implement one of three options:

- **Transformation:** Replace the principal and improve the school through comprehensive curriculum reform, professional development, extended learning time, and other strategies.
- **Turnaround:** Replace the principal, screen existing school staff, and rehire no more than half the teachers; adopt a new governance structure; and improve the school through curriculum reform, professional development, extended learning time, and other strategies.
- **School Closure:** Close the school and send the students to higher-achieving schools in the district.

Some SIG schools replaced principals and at least some teachers in an effort to reverse persistent low achievement. These principals and teachers were specifically chosen to bring new energy and vision to the school. Many teachers in SIG schools are newly hired, chosen on the basis of high ability and commitment to education of disadvantaged children.

At the same time, however, the fiscal crisis will likely force districts to lay off teachers to close severe budget gaps, and many of these newer teachers may find their jobs gone at the end of the year. If districts use a "last in, first out" seniority policy when making teacher layoff decisions, teacher layoffs may have a disproportionate impact on SIG schools. This is because in Washington's SIG schools about 23% of teachers are in their first three years of teaching, nearly twice the proportion of new teachers in their districts of residence (see Table 1).²

Table 1: In Most WA SIG Schools, Higher Proportions of Inexperienced Teachers

District	SIG School Name	Total # of Teachers 2010-2011	# of Teachers < 3 Years Experience	% of Teachers < 3 Years Experience
Grandview	Grandview M.S.	41	3	7%
	DISTRICT-WIDE	185	28	15%
Highline	Cascade M.S.	36	13	36%
	Chinook M.S.	33	11	33%
	DISTRICT-WIDE	1,014	171	17%
Longview	Monticello M.S.	26	2	8%
	DISTRICT-WIDE	349	18	5%
Marysville	Totem M.S.	39	10	26%
	Tulalip E.S.	18	3	17%
	DISTRICT-WIDE	592	51	9%
Seattle	Cleveland H.S.	46	14	30%
	Hawthorne E.S.	23	3	13%
	West Seattle E.S.	25	7	28%
	DISTRICT-WIDE	2,684	372	14%
Sunnyside	Sunnyside H.S.	77	15	19%
	DISTRICT-WIDE	339	60	18%

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Tacoma	Angelo Giaudrone M.S.	39	11	28%
	Jason Lee M.S.	36	8	22%
	Stewart M.S.	38	20	53%
	DISTRICT-WIDE	1652	152	9%
Wellpinit	Wellpinit E.S.	13	1	8%
	DISTRICT-WIDE	37	4	11%
Yakima	Adams E.S.	39	7	18%
	Stanton Academy (H.S.)	18	4	22%
	Washington M.S.	39	8	26%
	DISTRICT-WIDE	803	72	9%

Tacoma School District as an Illustration

To illustrate the potential impact of seniority-based layoffs on SIG schools, consider what might happen in the Tacoma School District, home to three SIG schools. Assume that Tacoma has a budget shortfall equivalent to 5% of total teacher salaries.³ The most recent data available from OSPI shows that Tacoma spent about \$106.7 million on teacher salaries in 2010-11. To close a 5% shortfall, the district would have to cut \$5.3 million. If the district made these cuts by laying off teachers with the least experience and newest teaching certificates, it would need to lay off 117 teachers—about 7% of its teacher workforce. But these layoffs would not be evenly distributed across the district's schools. In fact, 37 of these teachers (32%) work in the district's SIG schools. Nearly half of the teachers at Stewart Middle School would be laid off under this scenario (see Table 2).

Table 2: Teacher Layoffs Severely Concentrated at Tacoma's SIG Schools

Name	Total # of Teachers 2010-2011	# of Teachers Potentially Facing Layoffs	% of Teachers Potentially Facing Layoffs
Tacoma School District	1,652	117	7%
Angelo Giaudrone Middle	39	11	28%
Jason Lee Middle	36	8	22%
Stewart Middle	38	18	47%

In reality, Tacoma and other districts will face budget scenarios and decisions that are far more complex than this simple example. Nevertheless, the point is clear: SIG Schools employ a disproportionately higher share of the inexperienced teachers in their districts. Under current policy, these teachers will face a higher risk for layoffs, potentially destabilizing schools and undermining turnaround efforts.

1. U.S. Department of Education, press release, March 26, 2010; available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/washington-receive-more-50-million-turn-around-its-persistently-lowest-achieving>.

2. Percentages are based on preliminary data on teachers in the 2010-11 school year collected by OSPI in the S-275 personnel reporting system. OSPI finalizes the data at the end of the school year. We identified teachers by their duty root codes (31-33) and linked them to schools by their major teaching assignment.

3. We chose 5% because it is consistent with discussions of what districts had shared as the scale of layoffs. See D. Boyd, H. Lankford, S. Loeb, and J. Wyckoff, *Teacher Layoffs: An Empirical Illustration of Seniority vs. Measures of Effectiveness*, Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2010; available at <http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/1001421-teacher-layoffs.pdf>.

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