

Making Tough Layoff Decisions in Pittsburgh Public Schools Due to Economic Necessity: Potential Solutions in Addition to Seniority



Nothing in our schools matters more to students and their future success than our teachers. We value teachers and know that they are the SINGLE most important school factor in a child's success. Performance should matter when adults make decisions that impact our students. Pittsburgh faces severe budget cuts — and must lay off nearly 400 teachers. While this is unfortunate and inevitable, the situation could be made worse if layoff decisions are based only on teacher seniority. Relying on seniority alone means our students stand to lose great teachers — and great teachers stand to lose their jobs — simply because they have taught for fewer years in PPS.

Although Pennsylvania state law calls for the use of seniority only in determining layoffs, **it also allows local unions the flexibility to negotiate criteria other than seniority when making layoff decisions.** In fact, at least three other school districts with teachers' unions — including Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and Montgomery County, Maryland — currently go beyond their state laws to use factors in addition to seniority to make layoff decisions. Nearly 75% of states either require teacher performance to be a major factor in layoff decisions or allow teacher performance to be considered along with other factors.

The Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT) and Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) have been collaborating for three years to develop effective teaching mechanisms that help all teachers to improve and that develop, identify, and reward effective teachers. **We have more data than has ever been available about which teachers are having the most impact in the classroom** — this data has informed which teachers receive bonuses and should also help inform tough staffing decisions. **We strongly believe PPS and the PFT should use this information to help make the most informed decisions we can for our students.**

Potential Solutions the District and Union Could Work Together to Implement:

While we believe there are many options for including effective teaching along with seniority to make tough layoff decisions in the best interest of our students, the following ideas illustrate that there is much room for finding an agreement:

- **Incorporate RISE (Research-based Inclusive System of Evaluation):** The PFT and teachers worked together with the district to develop RISE, the classroom observation component that has been implemented in every PPS school for two years. Currently, there are four levels of ratings given to teachers: distinguished, proficient, basic, and unsatisfactory. They could agree that basic and unsatisfactory RISE ratings be included in the equation, but not to the exclusion of seniority. Within this idea, they could agree that only some of the 24 components of RISE would be included — components they feel are the most important and essential indicators of effectiveness. They could also factor in other effectiveness criteria, such as value-added measures (VAM), so that senior teachers with low classroom observation ratings but high (VAM) scores would not be laid off.
- **Protect excellent teachers:** PPS and PFT could agree that teachers who are currently on improvement plans — meaning they have been rated unsatisfactory and are no longer being evaluated within RISE — would not be protected over teachers with excellent ratings but less seniority.
- **Minimize impact on students in high risk schools:** PPS and PFT could agree that teachers in target schools facing the largest percentages of layoffs — which happen to be in high-poverty schools and that have been historically hard to staff — could factor in RISE ratings along with seniority to maximize the presence of great teachers and minimize the amount of turnover in those schools.

A+ Schools asks for courageous leadership from the union and district. We believe they can work together now — as they have done successfully in the past — to find a way to make layoff decisions that uphold the importance of seniority while also keeping our teachers who help their students learn the most, regardless of how long they have taught in the district.

We ask them to consider doing this to support what is in the best interest of our students by:

1. Keeping our best teachers in front of our students
2. Avoiding the disruptive effects that seniority-based layoffs will have on some of our most vulnerable schools — like King, Westinghouse, and Faison — where 40% of teachers are likely to be laid off
3. Valuing effective teachers at ALL levels of experience