

Opinion Brief

The COVID-19 Crisis and Teacher Layoffs: Research on How to Mitigate Harm

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One of the unfortunate consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic is that the sharp downturn in tax revenues, in the absence of a federal bailout, likely foretells unprecedented cuts in state and local budgets. This will in turn mean large cuts in teaching positions across the country; indeed, [some projections](#) suggest that the number of teacher layoffs in public schools could be in the hundreds of thousands.

There is little doubt that this will have significant impacts on students. But we've also learned some lessons from the Great Recession, the last time that layoffs (and the threat of layoffs) were a prominent feature of the education landscape. These lessons won't allow policymakers to eliminate the educational harm associated with layoffs, but they do suggest concrete ways to mitigate the harm to students associated with painful cuts to educational budgets. Below we describe some of the research on the effects of teacher layoffs, and what it suggests about impacts on students.

Seniority vs. Performance in Teacher Layoffs

Research on teacher layoffs (and potential layoffs) during the Great Recession quite definitively shows that considering teacher performance when making layoff decisions is important if the paramount issue is minimizing the harm to student achievement. At the time, layoff decisions in most districts and states were [largely determined](#) by teacher seniority, because of either [state laws](#) or provisions in [collective bargaining agreements](#) (CBAs). On the face of it, this makes some sense, not only because teachers tend to view this system as [equitable and valid](#),¹ but also because there is good evidence that teachers *tend* to improve their performance or effectiveness as they [gain experience](#).²

However, teaching experience is not determinative of performance; [for example](#), many first-year teachers are more effective than the average experienced teacher, and vice versa. Thus, it's not rocket science to conclude that a layoff system that relies only on seniority will necessitate letting go of many effective teachers. This is borne out by research:

¹ The 2019–20 version of the California Teachers Association Organizational Handbook states, “The seniority system should be encouraged. The seniority system has demonstrated its equity and validity in protecting the rights of all employees. All personnel begin vesting in the system from the first day of service, and modification of the seniority system imperils job security for all employees” (p. 243).

² “Performance” generally refers to a formalized evaluation rating, whereas “effectiveness” implies the estimated impact of teachers on student test achievement. Henceforth we use “performance” to encompass both, except in describing the findings from specific research studies, where we distinguish between the two.

- A [simulation study](#) using data from New York City, by Donald Boyd, Susanna Loeb, Hamp Lankford, and Jim Wyckoff, illustrated that the average teacher laid off under a seniority-based system would be dramatically more effective (by more than one standard deviation) than the average teacher laid off under a system that uses only performance.
- Research [we did](#) using data on actual layoff notices and layoffs from Washington State illustrates that seniority was by far the greatest predictor of which specific teachers received layoff notices during the Great Recession. Moreover, consistent with the aforementioned simulation findings, we found that this process was not well aligned with protecting student achievement.³
- A [study](#) by Matthew Kraft of layoffs in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools that gave administrators discretion to consider multiple factors in layoff decisions resulted in the district keeping more effective and higher performing teachers than would have been the case had seniority been the sole criterion.

Budgetary, Distributional, and School Disruption Consequences of Layoff Processes

The above literature paints a pretty clear picture of the student achievement impacts of relying exclusively on seniority for making layoff decisions. But there are several other important considerations to take into account when determining the layoff process:

- The process used can have a dramatic impact on the number of teachers that must be laid off. This is a function of simple math: teachers are paid more as they gain seniority in nearly all districts, so a seniority-based layoff process will necessitate more layoffs to reach a particular budgetary goal than processes that rely on other criteria. Marguerite Roza, for example, [estimates that](#) a typical district needing to cut its budget by 10% has to lay off nearly 15% of its teachers when identifying teachers by seniority only. This figure closely matches findings from several of the above studies on using seniority versus effectiveness in making layoff decisions.
- Layoff processes can also influence which schools and students are most affected by layoffs. There is a [growing body of evidence](#) showing that teaching experience is not equitably distributed across schools or students. As a result, the impact of seniority-based layoffs will be disproportionately borne by disadvantaged schools and by disadvantaged students.⁴ This too is likely to have impacts on student achievement, as there is [good empirical evidence](#) that the movement of teachers in and out of schools, and the accompanying disruption to instruction, tends to negatively impact learning.⁵

³ Our [more recent research](#) has shown that the policy landscape around layoffs in Washington is largely unchanged since the Great Recession; over 90% of district CBAs in the state still specify seniority as the primary factor in determining the order of layoff notices. But there has been a much larger shift across the largest districts in the country, as tracked by the National Council on Teacher Quality's (NCTQ's) [TR3 database](#). In fact, [as reported by NCTQ](#), more of these large districts now use performance as the primary factor in layoff notices than use seniority.

⁴ Indeed, this has been the subject of [two lawsuits](#) in California.

⁵ A second distributional concern is related to the subject areas of teachers who are laid off. A prime example is special education; districts [tend to have a more difficult time](#) staffing special education classrooms, largely because

- The layoff process can create unnecessary churn of teachers across schools. [Research](#) from Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and Washington State, for instance, finds that far more teachers receive a layoff *notice* than are actually laid off. This happens because CBAs often require that districts provide notice to every teacher who *might* need to be laid off. But the receipt of a notice itself induces teacher mobility, creating churn across schools. And a [follow-up paper](#) also finds that the *mere threat of a layoff* (receiving a layoff notice, but not being laid off) appears to impact teacher performance.

Conclusions

Decisions about how to deal with an unfortunate need to reduce teaching positions are challenging. Using a seniority-based approach to determine which teachers receive pink slips has some advantages in terms of transparency and administrative ease. But the existing empirical research is quite clear that this is not the best approach for mitigating the harmful effects of layoffs on student achievement. And while we cannot say with any precision how layoffs would be distributed in specific school systems (as the distribution of teacher seniority can differ substantially by context), the evidence on the distribution of teachers across schools and students strongly suggests that layoffs based on seniority *alone* will tend to fall mostly heavily on higher-poverty students and students of color. These are the very students that [many observers](#) believe will be most harmed by the pandemic. All of this suggests the importance of careful consideration about the consequences to students of the processes that are used to determine layoffs.

[attrition rates from these classrooms](#) tend to be higher than from other classrooms, and as a result [there tend to be more novice special education teachers](#) than in other fields.