

---

# Layoffs, Student Success, & Equity: What Districts Do Matters

Research One-Pager  
March 2023

---



**As hard as it is to believe, school districts that are having trouble getting and keeping teachers today could have the opposite problem soon.**

- With student enrollment declining and federal COVID relief funds running out, some school districts could have too many employees compared to their budgets in the not-too-distant future.

**If layoffs happen, how leaders react matters. Research suggests that typical approaches—like over-issuing “pink slips” and making seniority-based layoffs—can have unintended and harmful consequences.**

- The common practice of sending layoff (or “RIF”) notices to more teachers and staff than necessary can cause a host of problems. Threats of layoffs have been shown to negatively affect teacher mobility and performance (Goldhaber et al, 2016; Strunk et al., 2018).
- The common practice of first laying off teachers with the least amount of experience (aka “last-in, first-out”) can result in the loss of effective teachers (Boyd et al, 2011; Kraft 2015).
- Seniority-based layoffs can also mean letting go of a greater number of teachers overall and teachers working with students from low-income households, since newer teachers are paid less and are more likely to work in high-poverty schools (Boyd et al., 2013; Goldhaber et al., 2015).
- Finally, seniority-based layoffs can threaten the diversity of the teacher workforce, especially in school districts that have recently prioritized hiring more new teachers of color (TNTP, 2023).

## What Districts Do Matters

No matter how leaders go about dealing with possible layoffs, what they decide will have important implications not only for staffing and budgets but also for student success and equity.

Rather than default to standard approaches, leaders can align their responses to their specific staffing challenges and priorities for student learning in ways that protect the

greatest-need schools and most effective teachers. For example,

- **Carve out layoff protections for schools that need them.** Districts could limit layoffs in schools that serve large portions of students from low-income households, schools that already have high teacher turnover rates, or newly opened schools that are working to build a coherent culture and program.
- **Don’t rely on seniority alone.** In addition to experience, districts could consider using school-level enrollment trends, subject-area shortages, demand for programs, and evaluation ratings in layoff decisions. Evaluations should inform not just layoff decisions but also professional development and pre-service training.
- **Align reduction-in-force requirements with budget timelines.** States and districts could improve the timing and accuracy of budget forecasts and link layoff notifications to budgets to avoid over-issuing pink slips months in advance.
- **Create risk pools to deal with financial uncertainty.** Districts could pay into a shared fund designed to temporarily cover staffing costs during budget, revenue, or enrollment shocks.

## The Bottom Line

Layoffs seem unthinkable given how much teacher shortages have dominated the news during the pandemic. But if budget constraints and enrollment shifts create the need for layoffs, leaders will need to find better ways to deal with them if they want to avoid unintentionally harming teachers and students.

Interested in going deeper? Look on the next page for a list of cited studies and other relevant research.

Go Deeper at <https://caldercenter.org/>

Atteberry, A., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2017). Teacher churning: Reassignment rates and implications for student achievement. [Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 39\(1\), 3–30.](#)

Boyd, Donald, Hamilton Lankford, Susanna Loeb, and James Wyckoff. (2011)Teacher layoffs: An empirical illustration of seniority versus measures of effectiveness. [Education Finance and Policy, 6\(3\), 439-454.](#)

Boyd D., Lankford H., Loeb S., Wyckoff J. (2013). Analyzing the determinants of the matching of public school teachers to jobs: Disentangling the preferences of teachers and employers. [Journal of Labor Economics, 31\(1\), 83–117.](#)

Goldhaber, D., Lavery, L., & Theobald, R. (2015). Uneven playing field? Assessing the teacher quality gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. [Educational Researcher, 44\(5\), 293-307.](#)

Goldhaber, D., Strunk, K. O., Brown, N., & Knight, D. S. (2016). Lessons learned from the Great Recession: Layoffs and the RIF-induced teacher shuffle. [Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 38\(3\), 517-548.](#)

Goldhaber, D., & Theobald, R. (2013). Managing the teacher workforce in austere times: The determinants and implications of teacher layoffs. [Education Finance and Policy, 8\(4\), 494-527.](#)

Goldhaber, D. & Theobald, R. (2020). The COVID-19 crisis and teacher layoffs: Research on how to mitigate harm ([CALDER Policy Brief No. 20-0620](#)). Washington, D.C.: Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research.

Kraft, M. A. (2015). Teacher layoffs, teacher quality, and student achievement: Evidence from a discretionary layoff policy. [Education Finance and Policy, 10\(4\), 467-507.](#)

Strunk, K. O., Goldhaber, D., Knight, D. S., & Brown, N. (2018). Are there hidden costs associated with conducting layoffs? The impact of reduction-in-force and layoff notices on teacher effectiveness. [Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 37\(4\), 755-782.](#)

TNTP, Educators for Excellence (2023). [Rethinking layoff policy to protect teacher diversity.](#)