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Report

LIFO - A Fight for Fairness 5/31/2011

Write a Note

by Philadelphia Federation of Teachers on Tuesday, May 31, 2011 at 5:14pm

At one time, before collective bargaining, getting a job depended on who you knew. It was a chaotic, corrupt system.

I am still hoping that the school district can avoid teacher and staff layoffs.

But in the event that layoffs are necessary, I believe it's better to have a system in which decisions are based on certification first and seniority second, instead of allowing the superintendent and principals to decide arbitrarily.

The current system puts the needs of students first. By using certification as the first criteria, the district keeps the teachers it needs to serve students. Using system seniority ensures that administrators can't discriminate against certain individuals (based on their age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, for example) or play favorites by getting rid of anyone who has ever voiced an opinion that conflicts with the administration or who stood up for students' or their co-workers' rights.

Although there are systems being tried across the country, there isn't yet a reliable and objective, mutually agreed upon evaluation system designed to determine who is an "effective" teacher.

The district's rationale for abandoning seniority is simple: it is an effort to pit union members against each other, to get us sniping and backstabbing to keep our jobs. Laying off the most senior teachers saves more money and leaves administrators with what they believe is a more malleable workforce that will not stand up for their own rights.

The fact is that good schools need a mix of both new and experienced teachers. New teachers often bring energy and fresh ideas to the classroom, while veteran teachers bring knowledge of what works based on years of experience.

Eliminating last-in, first-out opens our profession to favoritism and discrimination – the very things the current system was developed to end. At one time, before collective bargaining, getting a job depended on who you knew. It was a chaotic, corrupt system.

Abandoning a fair and objective system without a consistent, mutually agreeable system to replace it, would reduce 16,500 PFT members to at-will employees (like charter school employees who work on one-year contracts), subject to the whims and biases of individual school and district leaders invested with excessive power.

If layoffs become necessary, you can bet that the PFT will fight with every legal means necessary to ensure that when teachers and staff are recalled to their jobs – which they absolutely will be – that the process to bring teachers and staff back is conducted with same fairness and transparency as the process used to make cuts.

Ten years from now, when today's new teachers have become the seasoned, experienced voices in the system, they will be glad that the union did not give up a system that demands fairness and objectivity over discrimination and capriciousness.

We want every certified teacher and qualified staff member willing to make a commitment to working in Philadelphia public schools to have the opportunity to do so. United we stand, divided we fall is more than a slogan. It is the reality.

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