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Economics test: In this crisis, why should teachers be a protected class?

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Earlier this month, United Teachers Los Angeles President A.J. Duffy purposely disrupted a school board meeting to dramatize his plea to save teachers' jobs. Only a few days later, teachers, parents and students participated in more than 100 events across the state aimed at protesting teacher layoffs. Now it's time to step back from all this hysteria over possible layoffs and take a realistic look at where things stand.

First, a little background: By March 15, school districts in California were required to send out reduction-in-force notices (RIFs) to any employee whose job might be in jeopardy come fall. The unions are referring to these notices as "pink slips." Now, everyone knows that a pink slip means "You're fired." But it is very clear that these RIFs are nothing more than an alert to a possible layoff -- sort of the difference between a bullet to the head and a warning shot. Still, the California Teachers Assn. went so far as to have a day dedicated to alerting the general populace about the RIFs, calling Friday, March 13 "Pink Slip Friday" -- once again leading all concerned to believe that all teachers receiving RIFs would be shown the door.

The simple truth is that no one knows what will happen because there are just too many wild cards in the deck. As Los Angeles Unified School District Supt. Ramon C. Cortines pointed out in an e-mail sent to all teachers, the ultimate fate of the state budget will not be known until budget initiatives are voted on during the May 19 election. Also, there is still no hard information on when federal stimulus money will rain down on L.A. Then there is an early-retirement incentive package that could induce many highly paid veteran teachers to retire, thus allowing newer, lower-paid teachers to keep their jobs.

In all honesty, it is certainly possible that some teachers will have to be let go. Although no one would diminish the seriousness of a job loss, we must be realistic. Our state is in dire financial straits -- why should teachers be a protected class? This is especially true in light of the following inconvenient fact: In 2003-04, the LAUSD had 747,009 students in its system, and those students were taught by 36,180 teachers. By 2007-08, the student population had shrunk 7%, to 693,680, but the teaching force had decreased only about 1%, to 35,785. In 2003-04, the student/teacher ratio was 20.64 students per teacher. In 2007-08, it was 19.38 students per teacher. If we went back to the 20.64 ratio of 2003-04, we would need only 33,597 teachers -- 2,000 fewer teachers than we have now. (Unions hate the thought of fewer teachers -- it means less money in the form of dues for them).

A very troubling aspect of the layoff scenario is that if teachers are let go, it will be done by seniority. This means that an ineffective teacher on the job for three years gets to keep his or her job over a wonderful teacher who has been on the job for two years. This would be damaging to kids and devastating to the laid-off teachers, many of whom would seek out new professions. But the unions don't seem to care about teacher quality as much as longevity.

This archaic system is exacerbated by the tenure or "permanence" scheme insisted on by the unions. Under this set-up, once a teacher has been in a school for two years, he is essentially given a job for

life. Getting rid of bad teachers is almost impossible. If we could dismiss poor teachers instead of being forced to keep them, the system would improve greatly. The next time a union official starts talking about "the children," please ask why the union insists on this system, which clearly does not benefit children.

In Los Angeles, we have some of the highest-paid teachers in the U.S. -- most of whom have a world-class health plan in a state whose economy is falling apart, where the unemployment rate tops 10% and whose citizens are already among the most taxed in the country -- whining about the possibility that a few jobs may be lost.

It is unfair to paint all teachers with the union brush. But it would behoove those who dissent from the UTLA and CTA party line to let their union know how they feel, and perhaps seek alternatives.

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