

The worst part about teacher cuts

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It's gloomy enough that the Bend-La Pine School Board might have to cut 48 teachers and 16 support and administrative positions. It would be awful if the district couldn't get rid of the worst employees.

To cut the positions, the district may not have to do much more than let attrition happen. John Rexford, the deputy superintendent, said it would not be out of the ordinary at the end of a school year for 50 teachers to move away, retire or come to the end of one-year contracts.

But if the district was forced to actually let people go, it's common sense that it should keep the better employees and show the worst ones the door. Unfortunately, the district's decisions must be made between different guardrails.

We'll focus on teachers. It's hard to think of a more important ingredient in education. The district had 751 teachers in the 2006-07 school year, according to the Open Books project. Rexford believes the number this school year is closer to 800 teachers.

Teachers in the district work under a contract, which specifies how teachers may be cut during a reduction in force. The district must consider four criteria: length of service, merit, certification required for remaining positions and competency — defined as ability to teach a subject or grade level. If a teacher is to be cut who has a greater length of service than another teacher, it must be justified by merit and competency.

The contract also specifies how teachers can be rehired after layoffs. Teachers who have been laid off have the right of first refusal "for all teaching openings for which they are qualified which occur within twenty-seven (27) months of the date of lay off."

Our question is a simple one: Why does length of service matter?

The provision is good for teachers who have greater length of service. It may be good for the teacher's union. How does it relate to quality of education in the classroom?

A teacher may be a better teacher because of length of service, but he or she doesn't have to be. So, length of service should be considered within the context of merit and competency.

Bend's length-of-service contract provision is not that much different than other teacher contracts in the state. That doesn't make it OK. It makes it more likely that Bend will accommodate mediocrity rather than require excellence.

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