

What Mike must get from teachers

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Mayor Bloomberg's decision to eliminate thousands of city jobs, in light of a \$4.1 billion budget gap, underscores the urgent need to spend taxpayer dollars as effectively as possible. That's why it's impossible to justify the current outlay of more than \$100 million a year on teachers who aren't teaching.

The need for reforms the mayor has called for is more urgent than ever. Some require state legislation; others could be negotiated with the United Federation of Teachers, whose city contract expired in October.

Those negotiations are underway, and the mayor announced last week that city teachers would get at most a 2 percent raise in their next contract -- or else face 2,500 job cuts. With the budget gap this severe and possibly getting worse, it's time for the United Federation of Teachers to support some vital reforms.

These include:

- * End compensation for teachers who aren't teaching. About 1,400 teachers are paid to be in an "Absent Teacher Reserve" -- at a cost of about \$74 million a year -- which doesn't require them to teach regularly. They should be compensated only for a six-month period while searching for a new job, not carried indefinitely on the payroll.

- * Quick termination for unsatisfactory teachers. Teachers charged with poor performance and other infractions (some 640 at the moment) are taken out of the classroom and paid for an average of nearly three years while their cases are considered. This process should be greatly expedited.

- * Use financial rewards to attract qualified teachers in hard-to-fill fields. Nearly one teacher in 10 isn't certified to teach his or her assigned subjects -- especially in special education, math and science. We should use targeted pay increases to help staff these areas.

- * Merit pay should replace seniority rewards. Ending pay hikes solely for seniority after 10 years would eventually save about \$285 million a year, enough to fund a substantial merit-pay program.

- * Kill the "last in, first out" rule -- which requires, in the case of layoffs, that the most recently hired teachers, no matter how good, be laid off first. It makes no sense to spend time and resources recruiting new teachers and then require that the newest teachers be fired first, without regard to merit, in tough economic times.

There is a broad consensus that the worst-performing schools should be closed. But when school closings mean the loss of teaching jobs, state law requires that layoffs take place on a "last in, first out" basis *systemwide*. In other words, teachers at *other* schools with less seniority must be laid off before teachers in the poorest-performing schools.

This means that teachers in the worst schools would be retained if they have sufficient seniority and added to the "Absent Teacher Reserve." From there they might find other teaching jobs within the system. If not, they'd be paid at taxpayer expense for the rest of their careers. Meanwhile, schools that are working well would have to lose some of their newer teachers.

It's a mind-boggling system -- designed to protect the worst-performing teachers, rather than the students and taxpayers.

Teachers should be judged on the basis of their performance, just as are other workers across the nation. The school system should be designed to provide the best education possible for its students -- not to put job security ahead of education.

It's time for the United Federation of Teachers and the Legislature to support these needed reforms. And taxpayers should remember that, if the mayor has to resort to layoffs, the current rules mean it won't be the worst teachers who get laid off but the newest teachers -- and some of the worst-performing teachers will be taking their jobs.

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