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Budget Bind Turns Spotlight on Reserve Teacher Policy

By [JAVIER C. HERNANDEZ](#)

The announcement this week that the New York City school system [must cut \\$185 million](#) from its current budget has renewed a push by the Department of Education to convince the teachers' union of the need to end the contentious policy of keeping teachers whose positions have been eliminated on the payroll.

A report issued this week by a teacher recruitment organization estimated the cost of the so-called [teacher reserve pool](#) — nearly 1,400 educators who have lost their classroom assignments because of shrinking enrollment, school closings or the elimination of programs — at \$74 million this year. The teachers in the pool have been unable to find other schools to hire them — some have refused to shop around — and generally spend their days as substitutes or doing needed nonteaching tasks.

On Thursday, Schools Chancellor [Joel I. Klein](#) said he would like to set a limit on the time teachers can spend in the pool before they are placed on unpaid leave. But the teachers' union called instead for a freeze in the hiring of any new teachers so that vacancies could be filled from the reserves.

“Millions of dollars can be saved and thousands of kids can be served if we just let them teach,” said [Randi Weingarten](#), the president of the union, the [United Federation of Teachers](#), who was surrounded by nine reserve-pool teachers at a news conference at the union's headquarters in Lower Manhattan.

Currently, teachers can remain in the pool indefinitely; most find jobs within one school year. The report estimated, for example, that fewer than 1,000 would be left without classrooms by June. The pool has swelled largely because of a change in hiring practices in 2005 that ended the automatic transfer of teachers who lost their jobs to other schools, according to seniority.

In a letter to Ms. Weingarten on Thursday, Chancellor Klein dismissed the call for a hiring freeze. He called reassignment of reserve-pool teachers “a discredited practice, which harmed our schools for decades,” and asserted that a return to it “would once more require schools to accept teachers regardless of whether principals and faculty believe they are the best candidates or good fits for positions.”

Reserve-pool teachers interviewed on Thursday said their status amounted to a “blacklist” because principals balked at their higher salaries and, in some cases, questioned their credentials if they came from schools that had been closed. Because the reserve teachers are paid by the city under the current system, Ms. Weingarten said, principals have little reason to want to hire them permanently and assume the cost.

Ms. Weingarten said principals should be given more incentives to hire more expensive, more experienced teachers. (The city already pays the difference between a new teacher's salary and a reserve teacher's salary in the first year, and half the difference in the second year.)

Marsha Welikson, a teacher for 23 years who was placed in the pool in August when her job at Public School

114 in Rockaway Park, Queens, was cut for budget reasons, said she applied for 55 jobs over the summer. In addition, she sent e-mail messages and faxes to principals at several schools, even if they were not advertising openings. She said that she did not land a job interview, which she attributed to discrimination based on age and salary.

“I feel like after having all this experience and knowledge and so much I can share with colleagues and students, I’m being thrown around and treated like I don’t exist anymore,” she said in a telephone interview. “It’s very demeaning.”

Every school day, Ms. Welikson, a former math coach, shows up at P.S. 114 for her assignment. Some days, she teaches pre-kindergarteners; this week, she is filling in for the gym teacher.

“They’re lucky that they have me because I wear many hats,” she said.

But several teachers in the reserve pool say some principals make it clear they do not want them in a classroom and instead fill their days with menial work assignments, like taking attendance or sweeping the gym floor.

Deborah Williams, a teacher for 15 years, has been without a permanent post since 2005. She said she applied for 45 positions over four months and got only two interviews. At her salary level, \$78,000 a year, she said principals seemed reluctant to choose her when they could find cheaper labor elsewhere.

“I blame the union and the school district for taking away my rights to seniority,” she said. “It just makes it impossible to get on a school’s payroll. That’s all I want.”

Timothy Daly, president of the [New Teacher Project](#), a nonprofit organization that recruits and trains new teachers, said he had concerns about forcing reserve teachers back into the classroom, calling such a move a “bad solution educationally.”

His group found in an April report, updated and reissued this week, that the teachers in the reserve pool who did not get new jobs were more likely to have unsatisfactory ratings than other teachers, and he said he worried that these teachers might end up disproportionately in schools with large populations of poor and minority students, which tend to have more vacancies.

“In the old system, the kids who were most vulnerable had teachers who were not worthy of being hired elsewhere,” he said. He advocated allowing teachers to spend only a year in the pool before being put on unpaid leave.

[Betsy Gotbaum](#), the city’s public advocate, said that given the large expense of the reserve-pool program, the city should put these teachers into classrooms immediately to reduce overcrowding. If the teachers had performance problems, she said, it would be up to principals to manage them.

“If the teacher isn’t doing well, then you write them up,” she said. “It’s certainly better than not using them at all.”

Jennifer Medina contributed reporting.

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