

EDUCATION WEEK

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Online Teacher-Contract Database Launched

Unions worry that information could be misinterpreted.

By Vaishali Honawar

A new Web site gives users instant access to teacher-contract data in the nation's 50 largest school districts, but teachers' unions are warning against taking some of the information at face value.

The database does not offer any information that is not on the public record. But it brings together in a single, searchable site collective bargaining agreements, school board policies, laws pertaining to teachers, and teacher handbooks for the 50 districts.

"Much of this information is not readily available right now," said Kate Walsh, the president of the National Council for Teacher Quality, the Washington-based advocacy group that created the database. Even those who work closely on education issues, she said, often know very little about collective bargaining agreements and their contents.

Ms. Walsh said that, besides policymakers, she hopes parents and journalists will use the database to inform themselves. She said her organization hopes to add 50 more districts within a year.

Along with viewing copies of teacher contracts, visitors to the Web site can search for specific data such as salaries, tenure, and leave, and they can compare information across districts.

For instance, it takes just a few keystrokes to find out that a teacher in California's Fresno school district gets an average of 60 minutes to prepare for class each day, while a teacher in the state's San Diego schools gets an average of just nine

minutes. Another quick search reveals that California's Long Beach district, which enrolls 92,000 students, pays the highest starting salary for a first-year teacher with a bachelor's degree—\$47,653—while a teacher starting out in the New York City district, which has 1.1 million students, makes \$44,849.

Information on class sizes, grievance procedures, transfers, and benefits will be added in the coming months.

Only Part of the Picture

The database, which was launched Jan. 4, has raised some worries among the national teachers' unions. Officials contend that some of the data are not as simple to interpret as the Web site makes it appear.

"One concern we have is that as people look at the contracts, they should not draw conclusions without enough information," said Bill Raabe, the director of collective bargaining and member advocacy for the National Education Association.

For instance, he said, a database search might reveal that not all districts have policies on class sizes in their teacher contracts. But not all state bargaining laws include class size as an issue for labor negotiations, and the district could have its own policy on class size, or there could be a state law dealing with the issue, he said.

"Having information in one place is great,

At Your Fingertips

A database unveiled last week culls information from teacher contracts in the nation's 50 largest school districts. Users can sort through it to find out about salaries, leave, professional development, and a host of other provisions. Among the tidbits:

Highest starting salaries for teachers with a master's degree:

New York City: \$50,353
 Long Beach, Calif.: \$47,656
 Fulton County, Ga.: \$47,400
 Prince George's County, Md: \$47,279
 Montgomery County, Md.: \$46,463

Off-classroom duties for

but as people look at **teachers:**
 the database they Fresno, Calif: Bus arrival and
 have to understand departure
 that it is part of the Broward County, Fla.: Recess
 whole picture," Mr. Detroit: Off-campus events
 Raabe said. Milwaukee: Study hall, hall
 monitoring

Ms. Walsh said that Anne Arundel County, Md.:
 while she Supervising student arrival,
 understands the departure

concerns, it is also **Sick leave for teachers:**
 important for people Hawaii (statewide district): 18
 to find information days
 on teacher contracts Jordan, Utah: 10-15 days
 more easily than Dekalb County, Ga.: 12.5 days
 they have been able Mesa, Ariz.: 11 days
 to until now. Dallas: 5 days

Although unions SOURCE: National Council for Teacher
 maintain their own Quality

searchable databases of such contracts, they are
 not open to the public.

"Our mission is not to bash teacher unions. ...
 There is no agenda other than this is important to
 know," said Ms. Walsh, who has often differed
 with the unions on such issues as teacher
 certification.

Ms. Walsh said what surprised her as her
 organization worked on the database was how
 little influence collective bargaining agreements
 have on some aspects of education such as the
 length of the school day.

It took the teacher-quality council's staff nearly a
 year to collect the data for the 50 school districts
 and organize it—something even Mr. Raabe
 acknowledges is a "huge project."

Obstacles in Vetting

Checking the information for accuracy presented
 its own problems. While some unions and districts
 agreed to vet the information, others simply
 refused to respond to the NCTQ's request, Ms.
 Walsh said.

In fact, only seven union locals—those in Brevard

County in Florida, Granite and Jordan Counties in Utah, Guilford County in North Carolina, Houston, New York City, and Philadelphia—agreed to verify the information. Eleven districts failed to respond.

Some locals said they would have been happy to cooperate, but the requests were either not received or had fallen through the cracks.

A spokeswoman for the Detroit Federation of Teachers, for instance, said her union did not receive any of the requests from Ms. Walsh's office, which sent out at least two, one in September and another in November.

"This is a matter of public record, and we have nothing to hide. We give that information to the public all the time," said DFT spokeswoman Michelle Price.

If there are any errors on the Web site, Ms. Walsh said, districts and unions can fill out a feedback form on the site and request a correction.

The group will also regularly update the site with new agreements and archive old ones.

Observers lauded the Web site as "truly innovative," and hoped to see more in coming months.

"I'd like to see, moving forward, queries that allow users to find out which unions bargain on issues directly related to curriculum and instruction," said Russlynn Ali, the executive director of Education Trust-West, the Oakland, Calif., branch of the group that promotes rigorous academic standards, especially for disadvantaged students.