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# 1,116 city teachers flunk out

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More than 1,100 nontenured Chicago teachers -- including many who struggle to control their classrooms -- are being kicked out of their schools under a new procedure that lets principals dump teachers with the mere push of a computer button.

Chicago public school principals last month finally got to drop nontenured teachers the way their suburban counterparts do -- without any hearings or due process.

They merely had to sit at their computers, pick one of six reasons from a drop-down menu -- including the kitchen-sink category of "other" -- and press a button to "not renew" the job of any nontenured teachers they chose.

As a result, some 1,116 teachers -- more than one of every 10 now working toward tenure -- will get letters next month telling them not to return to their schools this fall, Chicago public school officials said Thursday. However, they are free to apply elsewhere in the system.

More than half of those bumped had problems with classroom management or teacher-pupil relationships, and nearly half struggled with instruction, according to the reasons checked off by principals and obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times.

Some dismissed teachers are rookies, but many others are veteran teachers who were never able to persuade a principal to assign them permanently to a classroom. The Chicago Teachers Union agreed to the 2003 deal because it finally put 5,000 of such unassigned teachers on a tenure track.

"I think it's a good thing," said John Butterfield, vice president for high schools at the Chicago Principals Association and principal of Mather High School. "I'm sure it will be used by principals across the city -- I hope judiciously."

## NEW FIRING RULE

### WHAT PRINCIPALS SAY:

"It gives principals a lot of leverage. . . . I wouldn't like it if I were a teacher." -- Principal Ronald Shields, Copernicus School.

"This is an easier way for principals to get rid of that dead weight." -- Principal Harry Randall, Yates School.

### WHAT TEACHERS SAY:

"These principals don't want to do any work. They just want, with the wave of a finger, to hit the computer and say 'I want to get rid of [you].' -- Ted Dallas, vice president, Chicago Teachers Union.

"There's no more administrator abuse for 5,000 people who were in teaching positions but not on the tenure track," Deborah Lynch, former president, Chicago Teachers Union, who negotiated the contract change.

### WHY TEACHERS WERE FIRED

**% of fired teachers in trouble for each reason\***

#### Reasons checked

<b>Classroom failings</b> (Management, teacher-pupil relationships)	<b>55%</b>
<b>Poor instruction</b> (Planning; methods; knowledge of subject)	<b>46%</b>
<b>Lack of responsibility</b> (Attendance; tardiness; professional judgment)	<b>38%</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>26%</b>
<b>Poor communication</b> (Parent conferences, staff relations)	<b>24%</b>
<b>Attitude</b> (Lack of cooperation, respect for others)	<b>20%</b>

\*Teachers may be cited for more than one reason

**SOURCE:** CHICAGO BOARD OF EDUCATION

## No reason needed

But some teachers weren't so sure.

"You have a situation where you can be fired for just breathing," said veteran teacher Debra Ford of Robeson Achievement Academy. "You're going to create tension in a school. You're going to have a bunch of teachers walking around afraid for their jobs."

To please principals during their four years of probation until tenure, "You'll have people who are robots," Ford said. "That does not make [for] a good school."

The dismissals follow word that roughly 800 Chicago teaching positions may be trimmed next school year because of declining enrollment and a staffing formula crackdown. Schools CEO Arne Duncan said many of those roughly 800 trimmed teaching positions may overlap with the 1,116 nontenured teachers dropped by schools, but some will not.

But in the end, Duncan said, he expects the new tenure procedures will improve teacher quality. It gives Chicago principals powers similar to suburban principals. Now Chicago principals can drop non-tenured teachers within three years without giving them a reason; fourth-year teachers must be given a reason.

"This is about empowering principals to build and recruit great teams. It's about teacher quality at the highest levels," Duncan said. "This will encourage people of the highest caliber to come to Chicago because they know how serious we are about educating our children."

Chicago Teachers Union Vice President Ted Dallas called the round of dismissals "the biggest ever" to hit Chicago public schools, although Deborah Lynch, the previous CTU president who negotiated the deal, disagreed. Lynch said it's not unusual for 1,000 teachers a year to be displaced.

## Stigma fears

The new rules make Chicago a less attractive place to work, create instability in schools, and "add chaos to the system," Dallas said.

Dallas said he feared some teachers might be "stigmatized" by the process, and unable to find new jobs even though they may have been dropped because of declining enrollment rather than teaching deficiencies.

"One of the checkoffs is not 'Oh, I have to get rid of a teacher . . . because of budget cuts,' " Dallas said.

Rookies need time to develop, but the new process makes it too easy to fire them, Dallas said.

"These principals don't want to do any work. They just want, with the wave of a finger, to hit the computer and say 'I want to get rid of [you].' They don't want to justify why they are getting rid of [you]," Dallas said.

Lynch said the new procedure finally put about 5,000 full-time basis subs on a four-year track toward tenure. "We ran into teachers in every single school who were full-time-basis subs, some as many as 10 to 12 years, and their clock was not ticking toward tenure," Lynch said.

This ends the "administrator abuse" of such people, she said.

## Paperwork scrapped

Previously, said Chavez Principal Sandy Traback, the dismissal of even unsatisfactory rookie teachers could involve a monthslong process that "put the principal on trial," requiring them to meet certain deadlines and file certain paperwork.

Now, said Traback, "I don't even have to give a reason. . . . It's totally amazing to me that this became part of the [2003] contract."

However, unlike the multi-step dismissal process, the new tenure rules merely provide a way to remove a teacher from a school, not the whole system. Teachers who are rehired by other schools before fall classes begin do not lose a day toward tenure.

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