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Effective teachers

As Illinois school districts struggle with their second or third year of red ink, schools from Chicago to downstate Harrisburg are facing layoffs.

Given that teachers are the single most important factor in student achievement, it matters enormously how these decisions are made.

In just three years, effective teachers can bring at-risk students up to the level of their peers.

Beyond the classroom, schools today require teachers to take on a variety of tasks to support students.

(We all know the teachers in our building who keep the technology working and who are the backbone of the school sports or debate programs.)

Shouldn't these factors drive layoff decisions?

Too often they do not.

As it stands now in most districts, seniority drives layoff decisions.

Good people lose their jobs, strong teachers leave the classroom, programs are eliminated and entire communities suffer.

As painful as cuts necessarily are, that pain can be mitigated if leaders are allowed to make decisions with the best interests of school programs and children in mind.

To the outside observer, used to workplace decision-making that is driven by performance and skills, a strictly seniority-based layoff process is folly.

According to the New Teacher Project, three out of four teachers even agree that factors other than seniority should be considered.

We can and must work together to develop solutions to this problem.

In Indianapolis the teachers union worked with the district to reform its layoff system to develop a process that looked beyond seniority, to performance and school need.

We hope that district and union leaders in Illinois will come together to reconsider how they handle layoffs at the local level.

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What perhaps made sense in times of plenty requires rethinking in these difficult times.

It is also worth noting that "seniority first" is the default position by state statute.

That must change.

The state should be on record as supporting a layoff strategy that includes skills and performance alongside seniority.

Education is the single most important investment we make as a state, and most evidence confirms we are coming up short in Illinois.

As budgets drop, we are putting our children further at risk.

We cannot afford to compound this challenge by allowing the most important decision schools make — who will teach our children — to depend solely, or even primarily, on seniority.

District leaders and principals must be able to carefully consider a teacher's performance and the broader needs of the school as they make tough choices, and as we all endeavor to serve our students well.

Now is the time to truly put children first.

— *Robin Steans, executive director, Advance Illinois, Chicago*