Performance-Based Staff Layoffs in the Public Schools: Implementation and Outcomes

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In response to declining school enrollments, some local school districts are using performance criteria to determine the order of teacher layoffs. In this article, Susan Moore Johnson reviews efforts to implement such practices in four local school districts. The findings of the study indicate that performance-based layoff policies are not easily translated into practice. Furthermore, interviews with principals in these districts suggest that the unintended consequences of performance-based layoff practices may limit their educational worth.

As children of the baby boom filled school after new school during the 1950s and 1960s, administrators faced seemingly relentless demands for more space, programs, and staff. The credentials and expertise of hastily recruited teachers received only passing notice. One teacher recalls, "I was hired because I was alive." Contract renewal was virtually automatic for the teacher who reported to work and avoided charges of moral turpitude.

National public school enrollments peaked in 1971-1972 and began a sudden, accelerating decline, projected to continue through 1984. At first, reduced student numbers promised the opportunity for program improvement as more space and faculty time became available. Class sizes and pupil-teacher ratios declined noticeably. As inflation decreased the purchasing power of the school dollar, however, local budgets could no longer provide the same level of services. Diseconomies of scale made it impossible to reduce budgets proportionate to enrollment declines. Meanwhile, public opposition to the property tax that financed the schools grew, forcing school systems to


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review their personnel costs—typically 80 percent of the total budget—and to consider reduction-in-force as the primary response to fewer students.¹

Uneven patterns of enrollment declines meant that school systems in the same region faced dramatically different staffing demands. One Massachusetts school system, which hired seventy-five new teachers in 1971, reduced its staff by twenty-four positions five years later. Another system projected the loss of one-third of its enrollment by 1980, losing 500 students per year, while a neighboring system continued to grow.² One administrator remarked, "During the sixties. we were chasing warm bodies. Now we're telling good teachers to walk the streets."

In considering how reduction-in-force decisions might be made, educators turned first to industry. Since the 1960s, when state laws first provided collective bargaining rights to public school teachers, union organizing efforts, contract negotiations, and grievance procedures in public education have been cut from the patterns provided by private industry. However, while industry relies largely on seniority to determine the order of layoffs during a reduction-in-force, many educators observed that this particular industrial pattern will not fit the shape of educational organizations. Experience in teaching may not be synonymous with competence, and the criterion of seniority may not produce a diverse and flexible staff that demonstrates a range of teaching skills. It does not guarantee that schools can retain their best teachers.

While many educators advocate performance over seniority as the criterion for teacher layoffs, they express skepticism that it is possible in practice. In fact, a few states, including New York and California, prohibit such practices. The skeptics maintain that even if state laws were to permit performance-based layoffs, unions would staunchly oppose them. Further, they argue that arbitrators and the courts would probably reverse performance-based job decisions because they are regarded as subjective and unverifiable. Implicit in such arguments is the conviction that, given the choice, local administrators would keep their best teachers.

I began this study sharing that conviction. As an educator, parent, and citizen, I was dismayed by seniority policies that suggested administrative cowardice and incompetence. In reviewing the contracts of school systems throughout Massachusetts, I was surprised to find many that included performance criteria in their reduction-in-staff provisions and few that relied on seniority alone. I set out, therefore, to demonstrate that performance-based reduction-in-staff was possible.

I selected four comparable suburban school systems that had performance criteria in the reduction-in-staff provisions of their collective bargaining agreements and interviewed central office administrators, school principals, evaluation committee heads, and teacher association officers about their policies and practices. Collective bargaining agreements, evaluation instruments, minutes of evaluation committee meetings, and central office memoranda were examined.

It was my expectation that the experiences of these four systems would demonstrate

¹ The larger issues of resource allocation—whether school costs might be reduced in other ways—is an important one that is beyond the scope of this study.
that a school district confronted with staff cuts could be resolute and keep its best teachers, whatever their seniority. I assumed that a layoff policy based on performance would stimulate healthy competition among teachers and would yield a staff superior to one determined by the cutoff line on a seniority list. I anticipated that these four systems might provide models of success for other districts soon to face the problems of reduction-in-force.

While the findings of this study demonstrate that performance-based layoffs are indeed possible, they also illustrate that the existence of such policies does not guarantee automatic implementation. Local institutional factors including school committee and administrative leadership, community attitudes, and past practices in staff evaluations seem to determine whether the policies are successfully instituted. Furthermore, the interviews with principals indicate that such policies cannot be implemented without a price. From the principal's perspective, performance-based layoff practices have unintended consequences at the school site. The requirements for equitable procedures throughout the district compromise the autonomy of the local school site, as well as the role of the principal as protector, provider, and instructional leader. These practices also diminish the effectiveness of teacher supervision. These unintended consequences of performance-based layoff practices call into question their educational worth.

While no authoritative projections on the number of anticipated teacher layoffs exist, reductions are generally expected to increase as enrollment declines proceed to the secondary level, where teaching positions are more narrowly defined and staffing patterns are consequently more rigid. Whereas large districts with flexible staffing patterns may avoid extensive layoffs and satisfy necessary reductions largely by attrition, smaller districts and those with substantial enrollment declines will probably find that attrition does not meet reduction requirements.

Even if the number of teachers affected by performance-based layoffs is small in any one school or district, as it was in the districts included in this study, the character of staff relations may be dramatically changed by instituting these practices. Moreover, with a surplus of teachers and a shortage of teaching positions, administrators may be inclined to use merit appraisals in making other staffing decisions.

This exploratory study provides a view of the initial effects of performance-based layoff practices in four similar districts. The findings of the study may well require modification and elaboration as empirical data become available from districts that vary in size and character, but the issues raised by this study warrant consideration by educators in a variety of settings.

Common Policies: Different Practices

The four school systems selected for this study—Alden, Boland, Camford, and Devon— are all moderately sized suburban school districts that have experienced substantial enrollment declines. All four districts have reduced their total number of teaching

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positions, although staff reductions have affected only nontenured teachers in Devon and Camford.

The teachers’ contracts of these four systems include similar reduction-in-force provisions. Each provides that seniority will determine the order of layoffs only if measures of performance and qualifications do not discriminate sufficiently among the staff members. The Camford contract requires only that differences in performance be demonstrated, while the contract language of Alden, Boland, and Devon requires that those differences be “significant” or “substantial.” The language of collective bargaining agreements is typically the result of long and hard negotiations. When a school district administration has negotiated the right to reduce its staff by performance, one might expect that it would exercise that right. However, the following brief accounts of actual evaluation and layoff practices indicate that there are wide differences in the applications of these provisions.

The Alden school administration anticipated severe student declines and projected staff reductions of 25.8 percent by 1978-1979, resulting from the closing of one elementary school and the curtailment of underenrolled programs. When these projected staff cuts were first announced it was unclear how they would be made. The contract stated simply that the school committee would “retain those teachers whom it deems most qualified.”

On the initiative of the Alden Teachers Association, procedures for layoffs were negotiated and finalized in February 1978. These procedures are unusual in that they require all reduction-in-force decisions to be based solely on written evaluations. While this requirement guarantees some objectivity and accountability, it places great demands on the writing skills of evaluators and great faith in the judgment of the director of personnel, who reads them and recommends layoff decisions.

The Alden director of personnel outlined a procedure to be used by evaluators in writing evaluations and conducted workshops to train principals in preparing complete, fair, and legally defensible documents. After all evaluations had been submitted, he began his assessment with the least senior teacher and read the five most recent years of evaluations for all teachers in vulnerable disciplines. He scored each evaluation on a scale of one to five and computed an average score for each teacher. All teachers subsequently laid off had composite scores below 2.8.

Of the 25.8 staff reductions, sixteen ultimately affected nontenured teachers and seven affected tenured teachers, one of whom had twenty-two years seniority in the sys-

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1 The Alden contract states: “Unless, within the discipline, there is a significant difference in the teachers’ performance as evidenced by evaluations from up to the previous five years. length of service . . . shall prevail.” The Boland contract reads that “seniority . . . shall govern provided that teacher qualifications and performance are substantially equal.” In Camford, “professional training, competency, proved performance, as well as the needs of the System, shall be reviewed. If the above factors are equal, the most junior teacher(s) within their discipline shall be laid off first.” The Devon contract provides that seniority will prevail “unless the Committee determines that there is a significant difference in the teachers’ performances as evidenced by evaluations during the previous five years.”

2 The Alden evaluative instrument includes no checklist or scale. There are only blank spaces in which each teacher is evaluated according to eight criteria. These include: organizing and planning for instruction, pedagogy, attention to individual pupil needs, extent of student involvement in learning, evaluation of student progress, contributions to the general life of the school, interpersonal relationships, and professional development.
tem. Seniority was a deciding factor in only one of the teacher layoffs, when the director of personnel determined that the evaluations did not reveal a "significant difference" in the performances of a group of art teachers. Of the seven layoffs of tenured teachers, only two have been contested through grievance procedures.

The size of the Boland School District, thirteen schools in all, has provided flexibility during a period of staff reductions. Although twenty-five certified positions were dropped for 1978-79, attrition prevented layoffs from affecting more than a few tenured teachers. Although there is general agreement among administrators and the Boland Education Association officers that performance will be the primary factor in determining the order of staff reductions, the layoffs that have been made do not unequivocally establish such a precedent.

In 1977 two industrial arts teachers were laid off from a fully tenured department. The final decisions in this case were made on the basis of seniority when the Boland director of personnel could not determine a substantial difference in competence among the teachers. Principals involved in that decision report that the teachers were "quite exceptional" and "equal in ability." Therefore, they concluded, it was appropriate to allow seniority to determine who would be laid off.

A second layoff decision in 1978 provides similarly inconclusive evidence. The home economics department, which was entirely tenured, was to be reduced by .6 of a position. The least senior teacher, with nine years of experience, had been appointed department head. Several teachers, including the department head, were not included in the pool from which the layoffs were made because of their superior performance ratings. When it became apparent that there could be no final decision based on clear performance distinctions, the three least senior teachers from the pool were required to accept 80 percent teaching schedules.

Boland administrators contend that the prominence of seniority in these two decisions was "happenstance" and that subsequent decisions will be largely determined by competence. Because the administration has in the past used evaluations to dismiss tenured teachers and to withhold salary increments for unsatisfactory performance, the expectation seems warranted.

There have been as yet no layoffs of tenured staff in Camden. The contracts of two nontenured teachers, both the least senior in their departments, were not renewed for 1978-79 because of staff cutbacks. Because regular evaluations were available for all nontenured staff, it would have been possible for the administration to rely on performance records in making those decisions. That they did not is revealing.

Unlike Alden and Boland, where the annual evaluation of tenured teachers has been a standard practice for many years, tenured teachers in Camden are not formally evaluated. There is nothing in the contract that provides for the evaluation of either tenured teachers or administrators; nor is there a standard instrument for evaluating tenured staff. One principal noted, "There are as many forms of evaluation as there are schools." Another explained that the K-12 directors have established individually preferred methods of evaluating staff: "Some have developed their own criteria, some require self-evaluations, and some teachers evaluate the supervisors."

On December 6, 1977, the superintendent of Camden schools wrote to his administrative staff requesting that they conduct evaluations of tenured staff. Few complied. One junior high principal chose to limit the number of teachers evaluated to ten in
order to complete the job "thoroughly and properly." An elementary principal who did not complete any written evaluations explained that there was no standard instrument available and that "it didn't seem too pressing." Clearly, until Camford conducts system-wide evaluations of all staff, no performance-based layoffs of tenured staff will be legally defensible.

Devon cut fifty-seven positions between 1977 and 1978 and anticipated twenty to thirty additional reductions in 1979. Layoffs have not yet affected tenured teachers. All layoffs of nontenured teachers have been determined by seniority, and there is general agreement that seniority will prevail in tenured layoffs as well.

Like Camford, Devon's evaluation practices are uneven. School committee policy requires that all nontenured teachers be evaluated three times each year, and that tenured teachers be rated every third year. Some administrators meet these standards, but many do not. One principal explained that he has not had the time to conduct the evaluations, and there is no monitoring by central office to assure that he comply. Furthermore, a variety of evaluation instruments and approaches is used throughout the districts.

The pursuit of a standard evaluation process has been further complicated by the pilot experiment at the elementary level of an evaluative instrument and process. Volunteers for the pilot were assured that the experimental evaluations would not be included in their permanent files and that they would not be evaluated for another three years. These teachers may well teach six years without having had any written evaluations included in their records, making it impossible to consult the contractually specified five years of evaluations in the event of a performance-based reduction-in-force.

Several Devon principals contend that they would fight seniority layoffs in order to save an outstanding teacher. Two speculated that they could use written evaluations to document the excellence of one teacher over the shortcomings of another. However, the absence of system-wide evaluations would confine their efforts to rating the faculty of only one school and therefore make such decisions subject to grievance by the Association.

Although there are common policies for reduction in staff written into the collective bargaining agreements of the four school districts, different practices are being implemented. Performance will likely play a prominent role in the layoff decisions in Alden and Boland while seniority will probably determine layoffs in Camford and Devon.

The Determinants of Practice

Teacher unions and associations are most often blamed for the prevalence of seniority layoff practices. However, no administrator or teacher association officer interviewed for this study reported poor relations between labor and management. All were characterized positively—"good," "cooperative," "accommodative," or "excellent." The teacher organizations of these four school systems have never pushed for straight seniority language in their contracts. The president of the Alden Teacher Association believes that the administration has the right to "get rid of someone who is not good—as long as our judgments agree." The Camford Teacher Association president explains that the CTA has never fought for straight seniority because they recognize that such a provision would be unfair to young, competent teachers.
In 1976 the Devon Teacher Association membership failed to ratify a contract because of disputes over reduction-in-force language similar to that in the Camford contract. They opposed the provision not because they favored seniority, but because they lacked confidence in the system’s evaluation procedures. During ratification sessions, teachers shared stories of inequitable evaluation procedures. One teacher claimed that he had not been observed in ten years, yet evaluations had been submitted about his work. The teachers feared decisions that might be made on political grounds or on the basis of incomplete evaluations. The language was subsequently renegotiated to provide that seniority would prevail “unless the Committee determines that there is a significant difference in the teachers’ performances as evidenced by evaluations during the previous five years.” Because such evaluations were not available, both parties understood the language to imply seniority practices.

Conventional wisdom holds that the more adverse the labor-management relationship, the more fervently teachers pursue seniority. Because all school districts included in this study had cooperative relationships, this opinion cannot be assessed. It is clear, however, that teacher organizations are not invariably opposed to performance-based layoffs. The experiences of Camford and Devon suggest that cooperation between the teacher association and the administration may lead to an avoidance of conflict and consequent administrative reluctance to impose standard evaluation procedures.

The second supposed deterrent to instituting performance-based layoffs is legal review. Arbitrators and judges, it is said, will overturn job decisions based on subjective judgments of competence. Because layoff decisions for tenured staff have only begun to reach the courts, there is no certainty that performance-based layoffs will be upheld. Decisions in related areas, however, suggest that while the courts will insist on procedural protections, they will not interfere with decisions on substantive grounds. Past decisions to dismiss tenured teachers for cause, to withhold salary increases for unsatisfactory performance, and to lay off nontenured staff indicate that the judgments of school boards will be upheld if they conform to the collective bargaining agreement and provide due process to affected teachers. Holley and Feild, in a review of court cases involving performance evaluations in education, concluded that “judges are reluctant to give more weight to their own personal judgment than they are to the professional judgments of experts in a given discipline, especially when these judgments are given in a setting which is procedurally fair and equitable.” Similarly, Rosenberger and Plimpton, in their review of teacher-dismissal cases, found that the courts regularly upheld the school system’s performance evaluations in such areas as knowledge of subject matter, teaching methods, effect on pupils, and personal attitudes. Like the courts, arbitrators customarily refrain from interfering with the prerogative of school committees to base job decisions on performance judgments.

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It provided that the committee consider “professional training, evaluations, and the needs of the system” in determining layoffs. Seniority would be the determining factor if teachers were judged to be equal according to these criteria.

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It is clear, however, that while arbitration and judicial grants considerable latitude to school administrators, they require procedures for making decisions be established. In many cases, the actual meaning and implementing teacher's job will be based on how well the teacher's job is performed. The use of such procedures for dismissing teachers is necessary to protect the teacher's right to due process. The opportunity for teachers to

These procedural standards present unusual demands for a school district that does not tightly coordinate evaluation practices and that endorses a variety of procedures in its schools. Legal standards were promulgated with the expectation that they would

Administrators in Alden and Boland are well informed about their legal right to conduct performance-based layoffs as well as their legal obligation to guarantee equitable procedures. In the past, Alden has successfully withheld salary increments for unsatisfactory performance and has dismissed tenured teachers—five were removed for incapacity in 1976. Similarly, the Boland director of personnel has expressed confidence in the school district's legal right to use performance ratings in making job decisions. In May 1978 nine teachers were notified that salary increments would be withheld for unsatisfactory performance. The decisions were not challenged. In each of two prior years, a grievance went to arbitration challenging the right of the school committee to withhold salary increases of teachers at the maximum salary level for reasons of performance. The school committee was upheld in each of these decisions. While the right of a school board to base job decisions on performance is not likely to be overturned, the legal demands for equitable procedures require unprecedented rigor and standardization in teacher evaluation practices.

Implementation studies have demonstrated that we should not be surprised when federal policies are not always implemented at the local level. That implementation practices vary widely from district to district and that they are amended to fit the particular needs of the local institution have been well documented. The findings of the present study indicate that contracts, though negotiated locally, offer no more assurance of implementation than policies negotiated in Washington. Contract negotiations are conducted, in part, before a public audience, and the agreements reached may be designed for public approval. The policies may bear little resemblance to ac-

(New York: American Arbitration Assoc., March 1970-December 1977), include no cases in which the performance assessment of a school committee was reversed for substantive reasons. Some were reversed on procedural grounds.

tual practices because they do not fit the priorities held by the school committee, the district superintendent, and the traditions set by past practices.

Not all the contract provisions have the full backing of the school committees, the communities they represent, or the superintendents. In fact, the Alden and Boland school committees were reported by all those interviewed to be unified in their determination to lay off teachers by competence, while the committees of Camford and Devon were reported to be divided in their support for performance-based layoffs. Such differences may reflect community values. While the populations of Alden and Boland are largely professional, Camford and Devon both have substantial numbers of municipal and industrial workers who might be expected to support traditional seniority practices.

In Devon, for example, the superintendent reported that three of the nine members of the school committee favored seniority layoffs, while six others supported competency-based layoffs. Two principals contended that the school committee's support for performance criteria was a public posture assumed to pacify taxpayers expecting policies of teacher accountability. However, one principal predicted that the school committee would not defend performance assessments if they were challenged in any way. He suggested that while it may be politically expedient to negotiate performance-based reduction-in-force policies, it may well become politically necessary to rely on the clear-cut simplicity of seniority.

There are also important differences among the superintendents' attitudes toward performance-based layoff practices. The superintendents of Alden and Boland were said to be unserving in their determination to implement performance-based layoffs. Those of Camford and Devon were reported to be less committed, more ambivalent. The superintendent of Devon stated that while he preferred performance criteria over seniority, Devon had yet "to test the quality of the evaluation system." The superintendent of Camford notes that performance-based layoffs will not be easy: "It leads to intraprofessional uneasiness."

It is worth noting that the superintendents in both Camford and Devon have worked in their systems for many years and have themselves acquired considerable seniority. By contrast, in Alden and Boland, the superintendents are relative newcomers, free from longstanding commitments to traditional practices and to senior staff members.

Alden and Boland are atypical of most school districts in that they have long monitored the performance of tenure teachers and penalized those whose work was unsatisfactory. Both systems have evaluated tenure teachers annually, withheld increments for unsatisfactory performance, and dismissed teachers for cause. These past practices now provide the foundation for the standardized evaluations required by performance-based layoff policies. By contrast, the tenure teachers of Camford and Devon have neither been regularly evaluated nor disciplined for poor performance. Consequently the introduction of standard evaluation practices in Camford and Devon during a period of staff reductions would be both administratively difficult and disruptive.

Therefore, while interference by teacher organizations, arbitrators, and the courts cannot account for the reliance on seniority rather than on performance in Camford and Devon, certain interrelated institutional factors—past evaluation practices, and
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Alden and Boland are atypical of most school districts in that they have long monitored the performance of tenured teachers and penalized those whose work was unsatisfactory. Both systems have evaluated tenured teachers annually, withheld increments for unsatisfactory performance, and dismissed teachers for cause. These past practices now provide the foundation for the standardized evaluations required by performance-based layoff policies. By contrast, the tenured teachers of Camford and Devon have neither been regularly evaluated nor disciplined for poor performance. Consequently the introduction of standard evaluation practices in Camford and Devon during a period of staff reductions would be both administratively difficult and disruptive.

Therefore, while interference by teacher organizations, arbitrators, and the courts cannot account for the reliance on seniority rather than on performance in Camford and Devon, certain interrelated institutional factors—past evaluation practices, and
community, school committee, and administrative leadership— seem to determine the actual layoff practices. Some who are familiar with implementation studies will consider it more notable that practices in-Aldem and Boland conformed to the negotiated policy than that those of Campford and Devon varied from it. Such a conclusion implies either that school districts are usually mismanaged or that the practices required to institute performance-based layoffs are contrary to the way schools work and therefore must encounter considerable resistance in their implementation.

Unintended Consequences: The Principal's Perspective

Performance-based layoffs introduce requirements for standardizing, regulating, and rating that create new strains at the school and district levels. While industries may be tightly controlled, schools are notably lacking in coordination, predictable outcomes, and centralized control of instructional matters. In their survey of San Francisco Bay Area elementary schools, Stanford researchers found that agreement between principals and superintendents in describing typical district organizational and educational policies is "quite limited." Also, "the particular level of agreement distinctive to principals in the very same district, in describing district rules or educational policies, is very low." Moreover, the more influential district offices do not exercise their influence through regular bureaucratic channels and do not impose greater uniformity on their schools." Critics of education assume that this lack of agreement and control indicates incompetence and irresponsible management—that any properly run organization would operate in a more centralized, organized, and predictable fashion. However, recent theoretical analyses of schools and school districts as "loosely coupled systems" suggest that the absence of tight linkages, or "couplings," among the parts of the school organization may be functional in ensuring the flexibility necessary for the task of education.

The characteristically loose administrative control of the teaching activities in schools may be functional in certain respects, but it does not adapt well to the rigor imposed by central offices in implementing performance-based layoffs. Teachers must be evaluated competitively and rating procedures must be standardized across schools. Building and department administrators must coordinate their evaluations to assure reliable ratings, substituting the collective interests of the school district for the particular concerns of their individual schools.

The principals interviewed for this study expressed different concerns than did their central office counterparts. While system-wide administrators spoke of uniformity, control, and compliance, principals talked about flexibility, autonomy, and diversity. In many respects, the objectives of central office administrators were seen to interfere with the objectives of building principals. The principals' story catalogues the unin-


tended consequences of instituting performance-based layoffs. It suggests that there is something in the nature of teaching and evaluation, in the roles of principal and teacher, and in the traditional organization of the school district that accounts for the reluctance, ambivalence, and resistance of building principals to embrace the task of competitively assessing teachers' work—a responsibility that is thought to be routinely accepted by supervisors in business.

The principals interviewed from the four school districts were those recommended by central office administrators as being particularly interested in, or well informed about, the issues of evaluation and reduction-in-force. They were not representative of principals in the system but rather were regarded as exemplary. The fifteen principals interviewed are all former teachers, having three to seventeen years experience before assuming administrative positions. Most (64 percent) taught in the same districts where they are now administrators. Several principals have remained in the same buildings where they taught, assuming supervisory responsibility over teachers who were once their peers.

Principals often perceive themselves as instructional leaders and regard managerial responsibilities as annoyances that interfere with their real work. As one Camford principal described her role: "I am supportive, a helper, a catalyst. I give the teachers what they need to do their job well." Similarly, an Alden principal considered it her responsibility to be "the instructional leader of the school." She sought to maintain close involvement with the classroom teachers, building trust and "supporting good teaching with resources, money, and ideas."

The principals interviewed did not talk like cool-hearted managers, dissatisfied with the efficiency or productivity of their staff. They were convinced that teachers work hard and show considerable intelligence, imagination, caring, and stamina. They spoke of building trust among the teachers, recognizing differences among children, and encouraging spontaneity and diversity in the program.

Principals traditionally have had considerable autonomy to run their schools. In exchange for the freedom granted them by the central office, principals are expected to keep their schools running smoothly. It is the principal who assures student discipline, responds to parental complaints, oversees evaluations of special-education students, schedules teaching assignments, supervises fire drills, and monitors the collection of milk money. As many have noted, however, principals do not have extensive powers. The principal must rely on the loyalty and good will of his teachers when they are urged to attend yet another evening PTA meeting, prepare the holiday assemblies, or administer burdensome system-wide tests. One Devon principal characterized her position: "A principal can't be strictly management and run a good school. I need the teachers' help and advice. I can't make decisions in a vacuum. I have to maintain a certain level of trust if I expect the school to function well." Therefore, because principals see a large part of their role as facilitating effective instruction, and because they must rely on the cooperation of their teachers to run the schools well, they have typically fostered collegial relationships with their staffs.

18 In all school districts except Alden. I interviewed both elementary and secondary principals. In Alden, where staff layoffs had been substantial at the elementary level, I interviewed all elementary principals.

These relationships may be strained during periods of teacher observation and evaluation. In his ethnographic study of the role of the principal, Wolcott observed that the act of evaluation "conflicted blatantly with the ideal of democratic administration in which most principals preferred to present themselves among their teacher colleagues as a first among equals." 17

In Alden, where staff layoffs have affected all elementary schools, principals were particularly concerned about the effects of these layoffs on administrator-staff relationships. One principal complained that his relationship with teachers had become difficult, that they had become more aggressive in challenging his observations or in making themselves known. There are "hard dealings over single words" in the written evaluations, and disputes over what constitute strengths and weaknesses. "The relationship changes subtly, but it changes."

The Alden experience suggests that maintaining an intermediary position between teaching and management will be difficult for the principal who evaluates teachers for layoffs. Alden principals found that they could no longer provide protection or even reassurance for their staff as they anticipated layoffs. One principal called in a very competent teacher who was "devastated by the unbearable amount of tension." He assured her, "Over my dead body, you'll go out. Don't you know where you stand?" Later, in recounting this incident to the director of personnel, he was told that if he offered reassurance to any teachers he would be open to charges of unfairness.

The principal's inclination to reassure, protect, and defend his or her teachers continues to be strong, particularly if those teachers have been hired by the principal. The superintendent of schools in Devon explained how principals resist rating their staff. "They say, 'Everybody's good to excellent,' or 'I was told to get super staff members. I did it. Why do you now expect me to knock some of those people?" A Devon elementary principal who regards himself as a "tough supervisor" nevertheless assured his teachers that he would protect them. "I know my people are good. And every other principal knows the same thing. They would do the same and protect their people."

Principals in all systems expressed concern about the effects of performance-based layoffs on the morale of teachers. The one Boland secondary principal who argued that staff reductions would not affect teacher morale—"good teachers are above that"—was the exception. One Alden principal reported that he had never seen morale as bad: "This tension will, in the long run, be counterproductive to the teaching and learning process."

Improving the quality of instruction through teacher supervision is regarded by central office administrators as a primary responsibility of principals and department heads. However, some principals and department heads neglect to observe classes, either because of laziness, embarrassment, uncertainty, intimidation, or because they choose not to violate norms protecting the teacher's privacy in the classroom. 18 This is not unusual. 19

18 Lorrin, Schoolteacher, p. 169.
19 John M. Meyer and Brian Rowan, "The Structure of Educational Organizations" in Meyer et al., Environments and Organizations, p. 81.
Teachers unaccustomed to being regularly observed often find that the presence of a principal in the classroom itself provokes considerable anxiety, even when constructive advice is the aim. One newly appointed Devon principal found that all twenty-eight teachers in his new school had received similarly positive evaluations. When he explained to the staff his procedures for observing and evaluating them, they were visibly upset. His secretary finally explained, "They're very upset because you're in the classroom."

All the principals in this study reported that, while some of their peers neglected teacher evaluations, they observed classes regularly. Several characterized themselves as teachers of teachers. One Alden principal noted that "a teacher thinks of kids as 'good,' 'better,' and 'best,' and assumes that everyone is capable of improvement." She suggested that principals regard teachers in the same way and find it difficult to give up on one who might improve.

However, improvement may not be easily achieved when the tension routinely aroused by observation and supervision intensifies as job decisions come to depend on the results of the evaluation process. School policies almost uniformly list two conflicting purposes of evaluation. In Boland, for example, they are: (1) to be used by the teacher as a means of self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses for self-improvement; (2) to provide an objective and comprehensive record for evaluation of teaching effectiveness which can be used as one of the criteria when re-appointment and/or the withholding of increment is being considered.

"The assistant superintendent of Devon schools explains the objectives of evaluation in two separate memoranda: the difference between them is revealing. In addressing the nontenured elementary staff in October 1977, he emphasized the self-improvement aspects of evaluation:

I have prepared this memo to help you better understand the purpose for evaluation in the Devon Public schools. First, our major goal is to assist each teacher with the improvement of instruction. As such, it is a means by which you and your principal can get together and share ideas to improve upon the teaching-learning cycle. Second, it is a process used to help you take a look at what you are doing so that you might ask yourself, "Is there a better way to teach this material?" Third, it is an opportunity for you to receive feedback about your performance in the total school setting.

In a memorandum written to elementary principals in July 1977, the same assistant superintendent stressed the other face of evaluation: "Teacher evaluation is in actually a process of research, and as such requires the collection of data and the sorting of that data to form a conclusion."

But since reduction-in-force has been introduced in Alden, the emphasis in the evaluative process has shifted from the first purpose to the second. One principal characterized his evaluation role as changing from "coach to umpire." He believes that he is perceived less as helping a teacher improve than as judging whether a teacher is "out or safe."

Once principals could treat teachers as individuals with particular personal needs and learning styles. They are now under pressure from central office administrators to deal with all staff uniformly and to make all criticism very explicit. Judgments that once were spoken must now be committed to writing. A Camford principal observed:
that in times of growth: "Evaluations could be indirect and hard judgments could be
couched in nice words. The philosophy was one of amelioration. Now, no matter how
nice and supportive you are, you will be seen as the one who has to make the decisions.
You can't simply think about how to help everyone. You have to think, 'Who is it that
I can do without?'"

Reporting all strengths and weaknesses rather than selected ones further interferes
with the objective of instructional improvement. Three years ago in Alden, principals
could comment freely on whatever criteria seemed appropriate. Some criteria received
more attention than others, and any balance preferred by the principal was accept-
able. Now all criteria must receive comment on each evaluation. While some factors
may not seem important now for supervision, they may prove important five years
from now for job decisions. One Boland principal resisted directions from central of-
fice administrators to make him a "tougher" evaluator because of his philosophy of
how people change. "Everybody builds on strengths. I should identify those strengths
and then help the teachers to build on them. I don't think they can correct
weaknesses."

This shifting purpose of the written evaluation troubled administrators at all levels.
The Devon superintendent recognized that layoffs require "a different kind of concept
of evaluation. . . . Now you intend to use evaluations that have traditionally been used
for personal improvement to fire someone." An Alden principal expressed similar
thoughts: "We always talk about evaluation for growth. And this works when there
aren't big stakes. However, when it comes to the evaluation document, this is not a
growth experience, definitely not. When you come down to sorting out the goods, the
greats, the wells, and the quite wells, it's a very different story."

New requirements for uniform procedures and reliable ratings threaten conven-
tional patterns of organization within the school district. Traditionally, the building
principal could exercise considerable discretion in shaping the unique character of a
school. Variation from building to building was acceptable as long as it was not ex-
treme and the parent community was not dissatisfied. The central office exercised few
controls and the principal acted as an advocate within the larger system for his or her
students, staff, and programs.

Recently, there are increasing efforts to coordinate programs and policies among
schools. This is due, in part, to the procedural requirements for mandated programs
such as special education. It may also be a response to demands for public account-
ability during a period of falling test scores and tight finances. But coordination is also
essential for the successful implementation of a performance-based reduction-in-staff
program.

The importance of coordinating evaluation procedures becomes clear when we con-
cider how written evaluations might be used comparatively within a district. If no
system-wide comparisons of ratings were required, rater reliability would not be a con-
cern. As one principal explained, "If the evaluator inflates all scores, no one suffers. If
the evaluator is tough on everybody, that is okay. But when the scores of different
evaluators are compared, then there is trouble."

Some principals were skeptical that evaluation could ever be fair, given the
"priorities and ticks" of the individual principals. One Boland principal had seen ex-
clusively laudatory written evaluations submitted by principals and department heads concerning teachers he was convinced were capable of improvement. He knew of department heads who never observed classes and yet submitted written evaluations. One Devon principal who strongly advocated performance-based layoffs changed his mind when he considered how his evaluations might be compared with those of other principals. He explained facetiously:

I am building-oriented and I am pigheaded. I did the work to recruit the staff for my building and I know what my building needs and I don't want to leave it up to someone else to decide who will be here. And I know that guy at the other school on the other side of town. I've heard that he is an easy marker. I know that someone on my staff that would get a C from me would probably get a B from him. And so I mark all of my people higher because I don't want to lose my people while his stay on. I want to steer my own ship.

Despite such declarations of independence, the additional threat of layoffs of principals provides central office administrators with a new lever of control. Just as teachers are becoming more responsive to principals' expectations, principals are conforming more to system-wide policies. Where once principals selected who would teach in their buildings, transfer practices now determine the composition of the staff. Alden teachers have been reminded often that they work for the town of Alden rather than for the particular school. The extensive teacher transfers made in the spring of 1978 emphasized that fact. Subsequently, the principals in Alden were all moved to different buildings. The espoused reason was to revitalize the system in which the least-senior principal had served eight years in the same building. The Alden director of personnel notes that this change will also provide another set of staff evaluations, thus assuring more equity in layoff decisions.

In Boland and Alden, the formal evaluations written by central office administrators for principals and department heads are used to redirect the attention of school principals to system-wide needs. Boland's personnel director believes that this practice is forcing principals to adhere to the requirements for standardized procedures. Boland's superintendent wrote in one evaluation that the principal sometimes had "difficulty seeing how [his school] fit in the overall picture of the school system." When this same principal defends the quality of his staff, he is told, "If you have so many good people, maybe you should send some of them to other schools."

In Camford and Devon the situation is somewhat different. Several principals said the Devon central office has long supported the autonomy of individual schools and principals. One recalled, "When we were hired as principals, we were told that we were the queens and kings in our own buildings. We would call the shots." Recently, however, there is more talk of "centralized authority, articulation and coordination of everything both vertically and horizontally, more budgetary austerity, and much more teacher accountability." One principal saw this trend as a "grave mistake. . . . The superintendent's responsibility is to make it possible for the principals to run the schools. They have no business running the buildings themselves."

In Camford, as in Devon, the principals are thought to be "strongly attached to the identity of the individual school." Although teachers on leave are now notified that they cannot expect to return to their original buildings, such efforts to put system-wide
interests above local school interests are still rare. Principals and department heads are not formally evaluated by the central office, and there are few efforts to coordinate their practices. This, the Camford Teachers' Association president contends, reflects the superintendent's unspoken preference for educational diversity over standardization.

School administrators' resistance to performance-based layoffs cannot be ascribed to professional cowardice or ineptitude. While there may be chickenhearted bunglers in their ranks, the principals interviewed seemed quite able to take hard stands and administer complex programs. They seem to have anticipated that strict procedural controls cannot be imposed on schools without a price. In the case of performance-based layoffs, that price may include a change in the principal's role from advocate to adversary, a deterioration of teacher-principal cooperation, diminished teacher commitment, increased distrust and dissembling in supervision, and a loss of identity, autonomy, and flexibility for the local school.

The theoretical view of schools as loosely coupled systems is supported by the evidence from these four school districts. For example, the Camford School Committee required that teachers be evaluated, the superintendent recommended it with ambivalence, and many principals simply disregarded the task. Devon administrators disagreed about whether the primary purpose of teacher evaluation should be professional improvement or job decisions. Boland principals refused to rank order teachers although it was in the interests of central-office personnel practices to do so.

There are, as Deal and Colatti note, organizational advantages to loosely coupled systems. They can readily adapt to changing conditions, free the administration from the "duties of overseer," lessen the "strain of negotiation and compromise," reduce the time and money costs of coordination, and provide individuals the autonomy to "go their own way." The introduction of strict procedural controls in Alden and Boland limited these freedoms, pursuing the benefits of accountability and coordination at the expense of school site autonomy and flexibility. Principals could no longer adopt different evaluative procedures as their supervisory needs changed; evaluators would be required to spend considerable time observing classes and writing detailed evaluations; and evaluators would be required to coordinate their ratings and practices across schools.

The decision makers in these four districts may not have formulated the advantages and disadvantages of implementing performance-based layoffs before electing one policy over another. Devon's acceptance of seniority as the deciding criterion was not a purposeful effort to preserve collegiality. Alden's commitment to keep its best teachers was not expected to jeopardize the principal's traditional role. However, after the first year of tenure-staff reductions in Alden, the personnel director acknowledged that "the process has a tremendously negative impact on the staff and supervision." Nevertheless, he concluded, "There is no alternative in a contracting industry."

For those assessing the practices of local school systems, there remains the complicated problem of distinguishing flexible policies from laissez-faire neglect and well-coordinated practices from ill-advised constraint. The administrators who expressed

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\[\text{Deal and Colatti, pp. 17-19.}\]
ambivalence about performance-based layoffs did not endorse straight seniority. Most, in fact, adamantly opposed it. These principals supported the school system’s efforts to dismiss incompetent teachers, and in several instances they decried the politics of a school system that seemed to make dismissals impossible. However, the principals’ concerns about the unintended consequences of performance-based layoffs suggest that it might be wise to reach some compromise between the performance and seniority criteria.

One solution would be to group all teachers into one of three or four clusters on the basis of performance. Within a cluster, which would presumably include teachers of comparable competence, seniority rather than performance would determine the order of layoffs. Administrators would not be forced to make minute and perhaps invalid distinctions among teachers’ performances and teachers whose performance was satisfactory would not be unnecessarily preoccupied with the issue of job security. Providing some certainty for a large part of the staff might well ease some of the organizational strain of implementing performance-based layoffs, while guaranteeing that outstanding teachers would be retained. Support for this approach can be drawn from research on the assessment of teacher effectiveness and from the testimony of principals in this study.

Underlying a performance-based layoff system is the assumption that teacher effectiveness can be defined, observed, and measured. However, after eighty years of research, there is virtually no consensus among either educational psychologists or practitioners about what constitutes effective teaching. Researchers have tried to discover the personal prerequisites of teaching success, such as teaching experience, training, and grades—characteristics now generally acknowledged to be “pedagogically weak variables.”

Researchers scrutinizing the classroom behaviors of teachers have focused on such things as personal warmth, enthusiasm, and indirectness. Thus far, however, research has not yielded a composite description of the effective teacher, but only recommendations for particular behaviors. Rosenshine and Furst observe that “a complete list of educational ‘shoulds’ can only be guessed at . . . research in this area has barely begun.”

Efforts to correlate measures of student achievement with particular teaching styles and practices have also been inconclusive. While there may be “no more obvious truth than that a teacher is effective to the extent that he causes pupils to learn what they are supposed to learn,” the assessment of schooling outcomes is complicated by ideological issues. Should students be trained to succeed on tests, socialized to function

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14 Fifty studies of the relationship between teacher behaviors and student achievement are reviewed in Barak Rosenshine, Teaching Behaviors and Student Achievement (London: National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales, 1971).
in an industrial society, or motivated to love learning? McNeil and Popham note: "The teacher may be labeled ineffective not because his pupils failed to achieve, but because the achievement was in directions that were not valued by the rater."

Despite the similarity of the evaluation forms from district to district, there are important and telling differences in the performance criteria they list reflecting the lack of consensus about what is required for good teaching. For example, the Boland evaluation form includes the item, "teacher consistently assists pupils in appraising their own work"; no comparable item appears on the evaluation forms of the other three districts. The Devon instrument alone includes the item, "displays a contagious enthusiasm for teaching," while the Camford form asks whether the teacher "provides guidance in pupils' personal problems," a service that is not evaluated in the other districts.

A review of the four evaluation forms also reveals the measurement problems inherent in assessing teacher effectiveness. The Alden form does not include a scale, but instead requires evaluators to provide their own language for each criterion. The three other districts use scales ranging from "needs improvement" to "outstanding" or "superior." The Boland scale includes three grades, while Devon provides four and Camford has five. All allow for additional comments. No instrument advises the evaluators how to distinguish among the various levels of performance. The lack of consensus among researchers and the diversity of evaluative instruments are predictable, given the range of views about what schooling is and ought to be. One might, however, anticipate consistent standards in the assessments made by an individual evaluator. Yet in response to the question, "Could you rank order the teachers in your building?" most principals responded that rank ordering was both impossible and ill-advised. One Boland principal who confidently asserted that he could rank order his staff, later chuckled and suggested that his rankings would probably differ from Monday to Friday. Another said that he could rank order his staff, but that he couldn't justify it with "hard evidence." A Devon principal said that the "intuitive dimensions" in evaluation would make it impossible to defend the hierarchy he created. If asked why number one was ranked above number two, he might say, "He cares more about the students." However, when asked why number two was ranked above number three, he might offer a different reason based on a different criterion, such as "He works more effectively with other teachers. To someone from the outside, it would seem to be based on caprice." He went on to explain: "The truth of it all is that you evaluate different teachers differently. For some, you are giving particular consideration to their age. For others, you are looking at how they function on a team, because they work on a team. For another, you concentrate on teaching style because that is the most outstanding factor. All the time you are looking at the need in the building for a variety of teaching styles and values."

Principals generally did find it easy to identify both the superior and the incompetent teachers. One Camford principal's comments are typical of the others: "I think that I could rank order the teachers in my building, but I wouldn't have much confidence in the process. It is easy to identify the weak ones and the superstars. But there
is a large gray area in the middle that probably couldn’t be ranked. I have more confidence in a cluster system that would require me to place a teacher with others, but not to rank them.”

An Alden principal also spoke of his staff in three clusters, characterizing those in the first group as “noticeably outstanding.” Those in the second group he called “good solid teachers who stay, give, do everything that has to be done.” Those in the third group are clearly less effective, both in the classroom and in the larger school.

Because school systems are now just beginning to lay off tenured teachers, it is not clear how narrowly a system such as Alden’s will define and pursue a “significant difference” in performance. Most principals in the four districts reported that there remain a few teachers whose performance is poor. Yet in all systems of this study that number falls far short of the projected staff cuts. Soon staff reductions will affect teachers who are judged to be quite competent. At that point, one might legitimately challenge whether the goal of retaining superior teachers warrants the discontent, distrust, and dissent that may be fueled by the process of performance-based layoffs, particularly when the distinctions among those teachers become slight and uncertain.

The Boland personnel director outlined the following scenario as the “best hope for performance-based layoffs”: “Ten teachers are eligible for a reduction-in-force. The first seven are clearly not vulnerable because of their outstanding performance. They would be set aside. From among the last three who had similar evaluations, the reduction-in-force would be determined by seniority.” This plan may offer the most reasonable and realistic resolution.

It seems worthwhile to speculate briefly about the long-range effects of performance-based layoffs on community-school relations, labor-management dealings, and the informal social and work organization of the schools. Performance-based layoffs are in part a response to the public cry for accountability, but layoffs may soon affect competent teachers—those whom parents are satisfied with and perhaps beholden to. What will be the consequences of performance-based layoff practices? Parents may be drawn into the fray of disruptive and divisive layoff controversies. Performance-based layoffs may undermine community confidence in the schools as respected teachers lose their jobs. Performance-based layoff practices may alter day-to-day assumptions about the appropriate role of the public in school business.

It is also important to consider how the continued pursuit of performance-based layoffs will affect labor-management relations within a school district. The teachers’ association leadership and central office administration in each district in this study maintained flexible working relationships, informally averting controversies and resolving grievances, without resort to ritualized combat. As management exercises its right to retain teachers on the basis of competence, the unions shift slightly to more impersonal exchanges, uncompromising stances, and formal defenses. Labor-management relations, prized for their accommodative nature, may be profoundly altered.

Finally, and perhaps most troubling, are the potential long-term effects of performance-based layoffs on the informal organization of schools. The requirements for uniform procedures were shown, even in the short run, to alter the role of the principal, undermine staff morale, and threaten the autonomy of the teacher. principal,
and local school. Little is understood about what holds a school together and makes it feel like a good place to learn, yet one might guess that the answer is somehow tied up in the informal cooperative relationships between principal and teacher, teacher and teacher, and ultimately between teacher and student. The legal standards for procedural fairness require a rationalized approach to teachers and their work. But the work itself is not rationalized. Teaching machines have not replaced people; personal interaction seems crucial for successful schooling. Sorting, scoring, and ranking performance objectifies the relationships between teachers and administrators, just as it does those between teacher and students. In an institution that, at its best, promotes acceptance and inclusion, performance-based layoffs introduce competition and exclusion.

A central theme in Lortie's research was teachers' concern for "inclusiveness"—"reaching all students in one's charge.""7 The ideal teacher accepts all children as unique and having potential. He or she would encourage all children to succeed and reject no one who makes a serious effort. The comments of principals in this study suggest that they often regard teachers as the teachers regard students—as unique and capable of success. It seems that maintaining support for teachers may be essential if they are to continue to work effectively and enthusiastically with children. When teachers are treated impersonally, without regard for who they are and what they need, this may threaten the foundation of effective schooling.

It is ironic that the requirements for maintaining a superior teaching staff may violate basic notions of what should happen in schools. A practice that looks so right and so responsible from one perspective may look counterproductive from another. School administrators and policy makers might well approach strict performance-based layoffs with caution and a spirit of moderation, for in this instance, the interests of accountability and the interests of children may not coincide.

"7 Lortie, p. 111.