TIME 100

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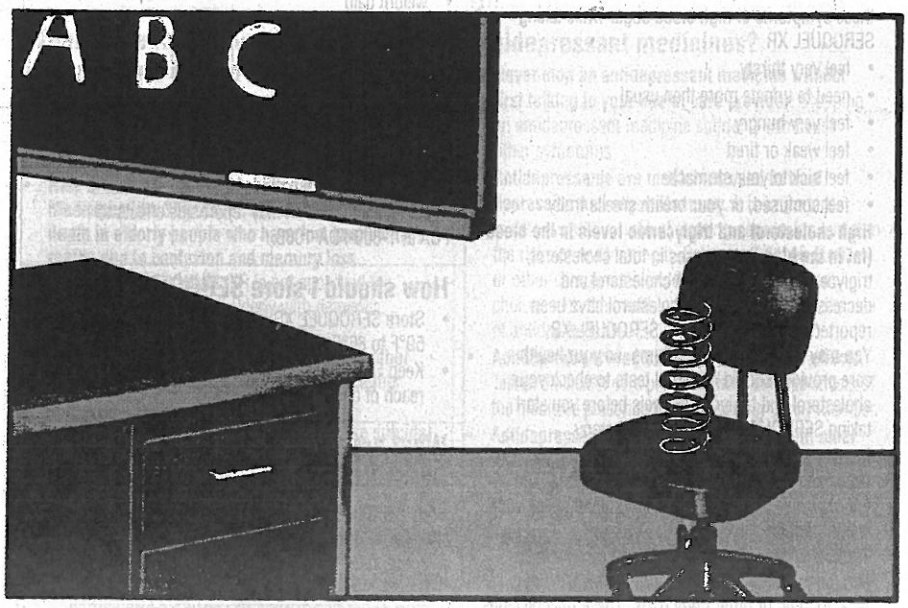

The Great Brain Drain. Why are we firing some of our best teachers?

By Michelle Rhee

CHRISTINE SIMO IS THE KIND OF TEACHER CHILDREN TEARfully cling to at the end of the school year. Last year, Simo's first-graders in her Las Vegas–area public school had to say goodbye for good, after her principal told her, also through tears, that Simo was being pink-slipped because of a pervasive policy known as last in, first out. LIFO, as the policy is called, dictates that when teacher layoffs occur because of budget cuts, the last teachers hired have to be the first ones fired, regardless of the quality of their work. Simo, 46, had gone through the rigorous process of getting National Board certification and had glowing reviews from parents. But she was new to the district last year, having moved for the sake of her husband's military career to Nevada after a decade teaching in Florida. That made her first in line when word of layoffs arrived in April, despite her success. "I was saddened and disappointed," says Simo, who has since left public education for a private school. "I was not ready to pack up my boxes and leave."

Thousands of great teachers around the country were LIFO'd last spring, and as we head back to school with our budgets still in disarray, thousands more may face the same fate. Aside from the loss of sheer manpower, this antiquated policy hurts our children in several ways. When districts make seniority the sole criterion for layoffs, they wind up losing some of their most effective teachers. A study by researchers at the Urban Institute found that only 13% to 16% of teachers laid off in a seniority-based system would have also lost their jobs based on an evaluation of their effectiveness in the classroom.

Rhee, one of the 2011 TIME 100 and a former elementary-school teacher, was the chancellor of the Washington, D.C., school system and is the founder and CEO of StudentsFirst, a nonprofit advocacy group

Even worse, LIFO disproportionately affects disadvantaged students. Schools located in low-income communities are typically staffed with the newest teachers—the very ones targeted under last in, first out rules. LIFO creates more teacher turnover at these schools and exacerbates the achievement gap between poor kids and their wealthier peers.

Finally, LIFO is inefficient. New teachers get paid less, so more of them have to be laid off to get to the required budget cuts. While the facts support eliminating LIFO, the most powerful argument is simple: our kids deserve the best teachers. And that means evaluating them based on their performance in the job, not just their years on the job.

It's clear that LIFO must go, and despite entrenched interests that are fighting change, it can be done. When I was chancellor of Washington, D.C., public schools, I negotiated a contract with the local union that got rid of LIFO and had the support of 80% of the district's teachers, who are no longer wedded to this antiquated policy.

We've seen some progress, as Florida, Indiana, Michigan, Nevada, Ohio and Tennessee have eliminated their LIFO policies in recent months. But about a dozen states still follow it, and while most others let districts choose whether or not to let seniority reign, many unfortunately do. That's why StudentsFirst is launching a Save Great Teachers campaign to rally parents, teachers and neighbors to eliminate LIFO and take this important step toward making our public schools work for our students rather than just for the adults in the system.

Teachers are the most important school-based factor for student learning, more so than class size or dollars in the system. Any parent knows this, and numerous researchers have documented it. Studies published by Stanford University found that if a child in the first grade has an ineffective teacher, she'll learn half as much in one year as she would with a good teacher. If she has an ineffective teacher three years in a row, she'll likely never catch up. Knowing what's at stake—and how students suffer—should we really be showing effective teachers the door? Let's dismiss this misguided policy instead. ■

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