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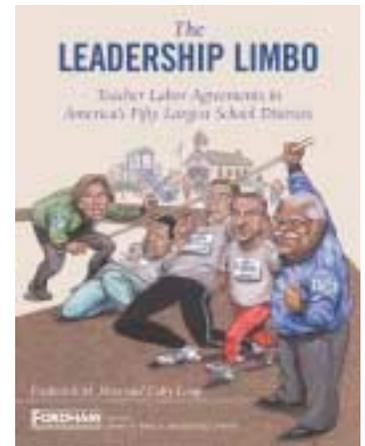


THE LEADERSHIP LIMBO

For decades, scholars and education reformers have warned that collective bargaining agreements between teacher unions and school districts make it hard for leaders to run effective schools—and that even in non-collective-bargaining states, school boards adopt policies that tie their hands in dysfunctional ways. This concern has reached a fever pitch in the No Child Left Behind era, as school principals complain about being held accountable for raising student achievement without being given the authority to get the job done.

Fordham's latest study, by Frederick M. Hess and Coby Loup, examines the labor agreements of the nation's 50 largest school districts. Are teacher contracts a barrier to effective school leadership? Which districts have the most and least flexible labor agreements?

"The striking finding of this study is that labor agreements in many large districts are neither truly flexible nor crazily restrictive; rather, they're ambiguous, silent on many key areas of management flexibility, not tying school leaders' hands outright nor explicitly empowering them to act in crucial parts of their domains," said Chester E. Finn Jr., Fordham's president. "We call this the 'Leadership Limbo.' But it's not all bad. Aggressive superintendents and principals could push the envelope harder than most do--and claim authority for anything not barred outright by the labor agreements. Of course, that would require them to be gutsy and imaginative--and to possess the political skills and fortitude to fend off the many ways the union would seek to punish them."



The Fortunate Five

Just 5 of America's 50 biggest school systems can boast of having flexible labor agreements:

- Guilford County Schools (Greensboro, North Carolina)
- Austin Independent School District (Texas)
- Northside Independent School District (San Antonio, Texas)
- Dallas Independent School District (Texas)
- Fairfax County Public Schools (suburban Washington, D.C.)

The Report's Main Points:

- Thirty, or more than half, of the 50 districts have labor agreements that are ambiguous. The collective bargaining agreements and the formal board policies in these districts appear to grant leaders substantial leeway to manage assertively, should they so choose.
- Fifteen of the 50 districts are home to Restrictive or highly restrictive labor agreements.
- Nearly 10 percent of the nation's African-American K-12 students population attend school in the 15 lowest-scoring districts—making these contracts major barriers to more equal educational opportunity.

- The study also found that districts with high concentrations of poor and minority students tend to have more restrictive contracts than other districts—another alarming indication of inequity along racial and class lines.
- The labor agreements of the nation's 50 largest districts are particularly restrictive when it comes to work rules.
- Most of these agreements are also quite restrictive when it comes to rewarding teachers for service in hard-to-staff subject areas such as math and science, with 31 actually prohibiting districts from doing so.

In short, a new age of teacher professionalism cannot take place without labor agreements that treat teachers as true professionals—and principals as true executives. It's time to abandon contract provisions that treat teachers like industrial-era auto workers. Does anyone doubt that teachers in Austin or Fairfax County are treated more professionally today than those in restrictive districts, such as Cleveland or Prince George's County? Teachers and their unions need to get on board the "flexible" contract train.