

Black Teachers Hit Harder By CPS Layoffs

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Of the 22,000 teachers in the Chicago Public Schools system, roughly 50 percent are white, 24 percent are black and 19 percent are Latino.

Yet in the ongoing round of teacher layoffs, a larger share of black educators is losing their jobs: About 29 percent, or 137, of the 479 job cuts involve African-American educators, according to CPS records obtained by the Better Government Association.

Meanwhile, 49 percent, or 237, of those getting pink slips are white and 13 percent, or 61, of those laid off are Latino, the records show. The rest are Asian or multi-racial, or their race is not listed on records.

The Chicago Teachers Union is pointing to these numbers to bolster claims in two

pending federal lawsuits that black teachers were discriminated against in past years when they were laid off for budgetary, enrollment or other reasons.

“This is exactly why we need a monitor,” an outside person appointed to review the impact of any layoffs, “why we need the Board of Ed to go back and examine how it does layoffs,” said Robin Potter, an attorney representing black teachers and the CTU in both lawsuits.

Just recently, judges granted class-action status to black teachers in those lawsuits, meaning they can sue as a group and demand systemic relief.

For the past two and a half years, CPS has fought against the class certification.

Among the things CTU lawyers want: The creation of a court-appointed monitor to guard against discrimination in personnel decisions, and an end to “turnarounds” – when a school performs poorly and the entire staff is replaced by CPS to spur improvements in student achievement.

If the teachers ultimately win their court fight, some or all could be reinstated or receive back pay.

The two lawsuits stem from layoffs of more than 1,000 teachers and aides in 2011 because of budget reasons, and roughly 350 layoffs in 2012 from turnarounds.

In the 2011 layoffs, 40 percent of the educators laid off were black. That number was 51 percent in 2012. The lawsuits do not mention the race of other fired staff.

Potter said her side simply has to prove the 2011 and 2012 layoffs had a disparate impact on black teachers, whether it was intentional or not.

CPS officials will have a chance to argue that, even if past layoffs are found to be discriminatory, they had a business justification for the moves. Then, CTU lawyers can counter by showing that CPS could have pursued alternatives.

Asked about the recent federal court rulings, CPS spokesman Bill McCaffrey said “due to pending litigation, we cannot comment.”

However, McCaffrey said black teachers were only slightly disproportionately hit with layoffs in this current round.

Because layoffs this year were focused at schools losing enrollment, South Side

schools – hit hard by neighborhood population declines and an increase in school options – were most affected, according to a BGA analysis of budget data. These schools have above-average numbers of black teachers, according to Illinois State Board of Education records.

McCaffrey said principals at these schools followed the procedures set out in the teacher union contract when making decisions about who was laid off. Among the first to go, according to the contract, are teachers with lower performance ratings.

McCaffrey emphasized that CPS officials want a diverse teaching staff.

Studies have shown black students in particular benefit from black teachers. Nearly 40 percent of CPS' roughly 400,000 students – or 156,000 kids in all – are black. About 46 percent, or 181,000 students, are Hispanic. Nine percent, or 37,000 students, are white, while 4 percent are Asian.

Last year CPS began partnering with historically black colleges to recruit teachers.

Still, over the past decade and a half, the number of black teachers in CPS has dropped precipitously, from 40 percent in 2000 to less than a quarter now.

Nationally, more African Americans are becoming teachers, but they leave the profession faster than others often because they are not satisfied, said Richard Ingersoll, education policy professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

Minority teachers tend to teach in schools with high percentages of poor children, little autonomy in terms of what they teach and a lot of standardized testing. This creates a high-stress environment, Ingersoll said.

Layoffs also play a role in this turnover, he said.

The current CPS layoffs are part of \$200 million in cuts that the school system is undertaking to address its budget deficit. CPS board members approved a spending plan that includes massive borrowing and a \$480 million hole. CPS CEO Forrest Claypool has said that, if state government doesn't provide more relief, the district will have to make more job cuts mid-way through the school year. Classes begin after Labor Day.

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