

I Am a Taxpayer, Too

The current teacher strike in the Harlem School District puts me in a unique position, because I am not only an employee of the District, but I am also a taxpayer residing in the District.

Throughout the negotiations process, the Harlem School Board has maintained that, in spite of a surplus budget in the neighborhood of \$11 million, it is offering teachers less than a cost of living increase in raises (and make no mistake, the last Board offer on the table comes nowhere near the current cost of living increase for most teachers) because of a fiscal responsibility to the taxpayers in the District.

And as a taxpayer residing in the District, I can appreciate those efforts – to a point.

As an eight-year employee of the District, I can tell you that Harlem’s “race to the bottom” for teacher wages in the last three years has all but decimated the District. Entire departments within the District have been running under-staffed, or staffed with under-qualified teachers, for years. More important, over 120 teachers have left the District in the last three years, largely due to seeking employment elsewhere for better wages.

The bottom line is that the level of income the District is offering is simply not enough to a) attract and b) retain well-qualified teachers – especially with eight other districts in the surrounding area offering so much more.

Computers for every teacher, after-school tutoring, and changing start times may or may not improve student achievement, but one thing certainly does: study after study has shown that one of the most effective tools in improving student achievement is staffing classrooms with experienced, highly qualified teachers. This fact keeps bringing me back to questions in my mind, not just as a school employee who cares deeply about education, but as a taxpayer in the Harlem District:

Shouldn’t the *main* responsibility of the School Board to the taxpayer be ensuring that they are providing the best possible education they can to the taxpayers’ children? With an \$11 million surplus, and a current salary schedule that drives the best of the best away, can’t we afford to put more of that surplus into teachers’ salaries so that we *can* attract the best of the best? Ultimately, if the District continues to drive the best of the best away with their rigid adherence to the weak salary schedule, aren’t they doing all of us taxpayers a disservice, both fiscally (weakening property values by eventually creating a school district that no one wants to move into) *and* educationally?

Seems to me the win-win situation for both the teachers and the taxpayers would be for the Harlem School Board to simply start spending some of the surplus we taxpayers gave them on something that matters the most: teachers. And the biggest winners of all? The kids.

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