

Teachers Approve New D.C. Contract: Seizing an Opportunity

By Rick Hess on June 3, 2010 9:35 AM | [No Comments](#) | [No TrackBacks](#)

Members of the Washington Teachers' Union (WTU) officially signed off on the new [D.C. collective bargaining agreement](#) yesterday. More than 75 percent approved of the agreement that the union negotiated with D.C. Chancellor Michelle Rhee. The final vote was 1,412 to 425, and the agreement now goes to the D.C. Council for what is expected to be a rapid final approval. I've [previously argued](#) that the deal is a good one, delivering crucial improvements in terms of teacher evaluation, assignment, and compensation. It includes a voluntary, big-dollar pay-for-performance system, one in which teachers could make an additional \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year. The agreement is expensive and less of a radical shift than Rhee's initial vision, but it represents remarkable progress in a city where decades of contracts traded big raises for little or no meaningful change.

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Rather than rehash my previous discussion of the agreement, I'll just offer two thoughts here. The first is that buying teacher support for this agreement was not cheap. As Bill Turque [pointed out](#) Tuesday in a sharp *Washington Post* article, the agreement awards teachers a 21.6 percent salary bump through 2010, boosting average D.C. teacher pay from \$67,000 to \$81,000 a year. When districts were awarding hefty pay increases in the past decade, it would've been nice if they'd used those dollars to purchase some real reform in the manner the D.C. team did here. (On that front, there's a fascinating story to be told about how Rhee and her team scrambled to find the \$30 million-odd needed at the last minute to fund the full deal and get the sign-off from D.C.'s CFO. That's one tale an enterprising journalist would do well to pursue—I suspect a search would reveal a bunch of eye-opening insights into district budgeting.)

The second thought has to do with the role that the tight budgetary environment played in this. One reason big district investments in contracts in the past haven't deliver a lot of reform leverage is that teachers and their unions felt entitled to steady, substantial raises. There was no sense that they had to sacrifice for their extra dollars. One of the potential silver linings in the ongoing financial crunch, as Rhee has demonstrated, is that teachers and their unions are suddenly more amenable to some horse-trading. It's no coincidence that a negotiation that stretched over nearly three years finally got done when districts across the land are dialing back raises and cutting jobs. As Tom O'Rourke, a veteran D.C. history teacher told the *Post*, "A lot of people say they like [the contract]. They like the money." Bill Rope, a third grade teacher at D.C.'s Phoebe Hearst Elementary, said, "If you look across the country and see what's going on ... this union better take the money and run." Judy Leak-Bowers, another D.C. third grade teacher, opined, "It is probably the best we are going to get. I'm pretty confident that most teachers I know are going to go along with it."

Reform-minded legislators, superintendents, and school boards: be advised. Whether in the midst of contract negotiations or struggling to find the dollars to protect teachers from cuts in salary or positions, this is the opportunity to ask teachers to meet you halfway. There's never been a more opportune time to ask teachers to help rethink anachronistic policies governing evaluation, pay, or seniority, and there's never been an easier time for union leaders to make the case for compromise to their members. This is a win-win opportunity, if the parties seize it. Teachers, policymakers, and district leaders would do well to emulate Rhee and the WTU and not let this moment pass them by.

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