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# Looming Layoffs at Schools Imperil Bloomberg's Legacy

By FERNANDA SANTOS and SHARON OTTERMAN

Mayor **Michael R. Bloomberg's** threats of teacher layoffs have had a ring of déjà vu. He used the same threat last year to squeeze more money from the federal government and to press his case for abolishing the state law that protects the most senior teachers from losing their jobs.

The strategy yielded a partial victory — \$800 million in stimulus money, which, when combined with a pay freeze, took layoffs off the table, but did nothing to alter the seniority law.

The law still stands, and when the **mayor again raised the prospect of layoffs**, skeptical observers wondered if he was running the same play all over again. But those layoffs came a big step closer to becoming reality on Friday, when the mayor put them in his executive budget, saying they were needed to balance the city's finances.

In proposing to lay off 4,100 teachers, Mr. Bloomberg turned a political third rail into fair game. He is taking on the teachers' union amid an incendiary national debate over the impact of public employees' benefits and protections on state and local governments.

Unlike Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey, who has called leaders of his state's teachers' union "political thugs," or Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin, now nationally famous for cutting bargaining rights for

most government workers, Mr. Bloomberg has, for now, aimed his public criticism elsewhere. He blamed the state during his budget presentation on Friday, saying it paid 45 percent of the city's education costs in 2008, but in the next fiscal year, it will pay only 39 percent.

Still, the union and the mayor are at odds like never before. The mayor was able to avoid giving teachers a pay raise last year, because their contract expired in October 2009. There is still no contract. And now they are facing pink slips for the first time since the 1970s.

Michael Mulgrew, the union president, described the mayor's announcement on Friday as the "smoke and mirrors" of an administration trying to save face after threatening layoffs for months. "The teachers have been hearing this since January," Mr. Mulgrew said.

After negotiating generous raises into its previous contract, the teachers' union sat out the 2009 mayoral election, and then was pressured into making important concessions last year because of the state's Race to the Top grant application, agreeing to an increase in the charter school cap and the creation of a statewide teacher evaluation system.

But it still has very powerful allies in the Democratic majority in the Assembly, which could make it difficult for Mr. Bloomberg to make headway on the seniority front. But that does not seem to dissuade City Hall from continuing to pursue changes in the law.

Speaking at City Hall on Friday, the schools chancellor, [Dennis M. Walcott](#), said he would continue to push the state to allow layoffs based on merit, not years of service.

"This," Mr. Walcott said, "is not about demonizing teachers."

The City Council still has to approve the budget, and while the number of layoffs will probably go down, it is unlikely all layoffs will be averted, officials said.

For Mr. Bloomberg, the layoffs risk derailing a key element of his legacy: the progress of New York City schools. Because teachers must be laid off based on seniority, new schools, a cornerstone of his

education reform strategy, and schools in poor neighborhoods stand to lose the most because they tend to employ the most-junior teachers. Most, but not all, of those teachers would be replaced by more-senior teachers from elsewhere in the system, negating one of the victories the mayor eked out during negotiations over the last contract, giving principals the right to choose their own staff.

“We are not going to walk away from our education system,” the mayor said on Friday.

But the task of improving the schools will definitely be more complicated if mass layoffs occur.

Class sizes will increase by an average of two students, city officials said, exacerbating overcrowding in many schools.

The uncertainty of who might be laid off and who might be transferred to other schools has been unsettling to teachers and principals, who were not notified in advance of what Mr. Bloomberg's layoff numbers would be or given any directions on what they should do before the school year ends.

There could also be cuts among teachers in the Teach for America program, which recruits young people from top colleges for short stints teaching in poor schools. Those teachers are not considered different than regular teachers, so there would probably be fewer of them next year, though some work in hard-to-fill areas like special education that are protected from job cuts.

Columbia Secondary School in Harlem, where close to half of the students come from Spanish-speaking homes, could lose 70 percent of its current teachers. Its principal, Gary Biester, wondered, “What kind of message is being delivered to the community that this school is intended to serve?”

At the Brooklyn School of Inquiry, a new citywide gifted school in Bensonhurst that could lose one-third of its teachers, the principal, Donna Taylor, said she continued to believe money would be found somehow, so she told her teachers to “take a deep breath.”

“We have spent millions of dollars on making these new small schools,” Ms. Taylor said. “I don't think we are going to throw it all away in a tight budget year.”

*Noah Rosenberg contributed reporting.*



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