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Chicago's Mayor Challenges Teachers Union

By [MONICA DAVEY](#)

CHICAGO — One by one, teachers at public elementary schools here have been voting to buck their own union and take Mayor [Rahm Emanuel](#) up on an unusual offer: to accept bonus pay in exchange for waiving union contract provisions and keeping children at some schools longer each day.

By Friday, nine schools were on board, and City Hall said more might be on the way, even as union leaders objected to the tactic and furiously pledged to take Mr. Emanuel and his school system before a labor relations board.

For Mr. Emanuel, who has portrayed himself as a calmer, more reserved leader in his year of transformation from White House chief of staff to mayor, the uncompromising and blunt approach is both a keeping of a campaign promise and a reminder, as one political analyst here put it, that “Rahm is still Rahm.”

Mr. Emanuel and his top aides say that when it comes to hours of class instruction, Chicago's 482 public elementary schools compare unfavorably with schools in other cities, including Houston, Los Angeles and New York. They say they merely want children to spend more time learning at school — a notion supported by plenty of parents.

Union leaders suggest a broader motive, saying that the sidelining of labor unions and a mood against

public workers seen this year in Republican-led states like Ohio and Wisconsin are now coming through in subtler ways in Democratic-leaning cities like this one, the nation's third largest.

"It's a nightmare," said Karen Lewis, president of the Chicago Teachers Union, who added that Mr. Emanuel lived up to his reputation for foul language in a recent meeting in his stately office at City Hall. "You expect this stuff out of Republicans."

Even before Mr. Emanuel took office here in May, he had called for a longer school day as part of his plan to remake education for Chicago's more than 400,000 public school students. [Figures provided](#) by the school system show that elementary school students in the public schools here are well behind those in other cities in time spent in class each year: 52,360 minutes (about 873 hours) in Chicago compared, for instance, with 60,060 minutes (1,001 hours) in New York (an estimate New York school officials say sounds about right).

"Everybody knows it's not working," Mr. Emanuel said in an interview. "The system is stacked against teachers and against kids."

Last month, after teachers' union officials turned down a proposal to pay teachers 2 percent more to teach 90 minutes longer each day, Mr. Emanuel and Jean-Claude Brizard, Mr. Emanuel's schools chief, took the offer straight to the schools. Any elementary school that went along with the idea, which school officials began calling the [Longer School Day Pioneer Program](#), would get extra money (\$150,000 for those that started right away), and its teachers would get what amounts to a 2 percent bonus.

By agreeing to the deal, the teachers waive [specific provisions](#) of their contracts involving the length of the school day and after-school pay requirements. Schools get to decide how to use the extra 90 minutes, but it must be spent in instruction (not, say, longer lunches) in areas like math, science, literacy, art and music.

As a trickle of schools, through votes by their employees, have begun taking Mr. Emanuel's offer, union

leaders have angrily denounced it as an end run around the union, as a public relations ploy and as some combination of bribing, threatening and coercing unwitting schools and teachers.

This month, the union filed a [complaint](#) with the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board, and union officials said they hoped for a hearing in the coming days, even as more and more schools are expected to take votes.

By Friday, school officials said that only two schools had voted no, though union leaders said the number was higher.

Ms. Lewis, herself a product of the city's schools, said the union was actually not opposed to longer school days. Union officials, in fact, said they were looking at how to extend students' daily instruction time by 75 minutes next year, mimicking, the union says, the schedule at the private school that Mr. Emanuel's children attend.

But Ms. Lewis said that research about the effects of lengthening the school day had been mixed, and that any such change required a more thorough look at what schools would do with any extra time.

"This is something that sounds good," she said. "But to present it as a panacea is kind of a problem."

Some union leaders here had other worries about Mr. Emanuel's true goals to begin with; even before he took office, he supported a bill in the Legislature that would make it easier to get rid of poor teachers and harder for teachers to strike. It would also give him more leeway in extending the school day.

Why, union leaders asked, was Mr. Emanuel so insistent on pushing this through immediately when school officials have the power to impose a longer day next year when the current contract runs out? (Why wait, Mr. Emanuel's aides counter.)

And how, union leaders demanded, was Mr. Emanuel and his education team able to afford to offer these bonuses to "Pioneer" schools when the school board has rescinded some pay raises expected by

teachers, citing a \$712 million budget gap? (The cost of the pay raises would have been \$80 million, Mr. Emanuel's aides say, while the price of teacher bonuses, even if every elementary school in the city were to agree to lengthen the school day immediately, would total only \$30 million.)

On the city's North Side, outside the Disney II Magnet Elementary School, which announced on Tuesday that it was the seventh school to choose a longer school day, parents said they were pleased with what this would mean for their children, even if they were not thrilled with the growing war between City Hall and the teachers' union.

In recent days, Mr. Emanuel has shown his trademark impatience with all the public discussion over whether or not he cursed during his last meeting with Ms. Lewis (the meeting ended with a hug, he has noted), whether his move is an attack on unions and what to make of the daily announcements by schools, one by one, that they have agreed to a longer day even as the union seethes.

"This is all an attempt to distract from the core subject," Mr. Emanuel said of issues that he deemed questions of process, not substance. "This is not about tactics. This is about kids going from last place on education time."

He added: "This is what I said I was going to do, and I'm doing it. I'm actually executing exactly what I said I was going to do on the campaign, which is what people voted for. I didn't do a bait-and-switch."

Steven Yaccino contributed reporting.



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