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OPEN FORUM | Changing the rules on teacher tenure

Is this education reform?

Work rules need to put kids first

By Margaret G. Fortune

California's children deserve the best education. Teachers are the key. Entitled "Put the Kids First," Proposition 74 focuses on a simple question: Should a school board be able to more easily replace a teacher with a track record of poor performance?

Republicans and Democrats say yes. Both John Kerry and Al Gore called for reform of tenure systems that protect teachers at the students' expense. Addressing the Michigan Teachers Association in 2000, Gore argued for higher standards for teacher tenure, saying that school districts should act quickly to remove ineffective teachers from the classroom within the context of due process protections.

Similarly, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger supports Proposition 74, which sets the same high standards for teachers that we expect of students. Today, teachers receive virtual lifetime employment after two years. Prop. 74 requires that teachers prove themselves for five years and gives districts the ability to remove teachers with two consecutive unsatisfactory evaluations based upon collectively bargained criteria.

California schools give teachers lifetime employment more quickly than 38 other states. Unions argue that such job protections without accountability for performance are necessary to address teacher shortages. Sadly, that presumes teachers enter the profession due to promises of easy job security.

That's simply not true. Great teachers enter the profession because they care about kids. Any suggestion otherwise degrades the profession and attacks every teacher's integrity.

The truth is, two school years (which actually turns out to be less than 18 months) is not enough time to evaluate a beginning teacher. It puts union interests before student achievement. Proposition 74 puts kids first, requiring new teachers to spend five successful years in the classroom before achieving tenure. That's an approach rooted in academic research and worthy of public support.

According to a new study by the National Bureau of Economic Research, first-year teachers do not perform as well as their colleagues. With experience, teacher performance improves dramatically, peaking in their fourth year. Prop. 74's five-year probationary period gives every teacher a fair chance to succeed.

Additionally, under Prop. 74, teachers would have input into their evaluation system and full due-process protections — local teachers would actually help create the system. Teachers receiving two consecutive unsatisfactory performance evaluations would be subject to removal at the school district's discretion.

Conversely, the current system is expensive and detrimental to students. School attorneys say it can take years and hundreds of thousands of dollars to document all the specific instances of poor behavior required to prove that a teacher should be replaced.

While Sacramento teachers' union leaders attack reform, their local counterparts know better. In 1998, former Glendale Teachers Association president Chuck Sambar wrote, "Good teachers do not need tenure. Poor or incompetent teachers use it to protect their jobs. Tenure also gives weak school administrators a ready excuse not to get rid of poor teachers."

Proposition 74 does not abolish tenure, but asserts that the entire profession is tarnished when bad teachers are protected at the expense of students. If due process is the union's concern, voters should know Prop. 74 wouldn't prevent a teacher's right to appeal their firing to an administrative hearing, Superior Court and ultimately the state Court of Appeal.

When the dust settles and political attacks stop,

who really pays if Prop. 74 fails? Students who do not receive their education.

Teachers deserve the honor that Prop. 74 delivers, but earning tenure should be based on excellence, dedication and consistent high performance. With Prop. 74, California's great teachers will earn the respect they so richly deserve. More important, students will receive the education they need to become productive adults.

Margaret G. Fortune is on leave from her job as the director of the Governor's Initiative to Turn Around Failing Schools to campaign for Prop. 74.



This plan will drive away teachers

By Sheila Jordan

Our state will need 100,000 new teachers over the next 10 years just to keep up with population growth and retirements. This is not the smartest moment to make a teaching career less attractive and to drive some of our best and brightest teachers out of the profession.

Yet that's exactly what the governor's ill-considered Proposition 74 would do. Before becoming a public official and county school superintendent, I spent more than 20 years as a teacher. I've also participated in research studies that demonstrate what makes a good teacher and how schools can become suc-

cessful learning communities. The governor's simpliminded proposal contradicts everything we know about making better schools.

Most teachers enter the profession because they want to make a difference in the lives of students, and because they have a passion for teaching. The idealism of these young teachers is a precious resource. It conquers the many obstacles that our overstressed and underfunded school system places in the way of learning. If Prop. 74 passes, those young teachers will have to tiptoe through the gauntlet of their school's bureaucracy, naked of all procedural rights, for five years instead of two. If you had to devise a formula to guarantee that the old guard will strangle at birth all renewal and innovation in the system, you couldn't do better than by instituting Prop. 74.

Becoming a teacher is difficult enough. In the last few years, the state has raised the bar considerably. You need a college degree, an advanced degree, plus additional tests and certifications, all expensive. The pay is relatively low, the workday is long, there are endless regulations and restrictions, and budget cuts are eating away at the benefits. Now is not the time to make entry into the career even more burdensome.

The governor is basing his campaign on stories about isolated examples of teachers who delayed their discharge despite gross incompetence and misconduct. The reality is that existing state law already allows administrators to fire bad teachers for unsatisfactory performance or unprofessional conduct, no matter how long they've been teaching. Teacher "tenure" is really nothing more than the right to due process. Show me a truly bad teacher who successfully resists firing, and I'll show you a school administration that bungled the process.

Prop. 74 was written without the input of informed educators or administrators. It not only disregards proven reforms, such as teacher training, mentoring, peer assistance, peer review and basic management training for school administrators, but it adds new complications and costs. Implementing Prop. 74 would cost tens of millions in administrative overhead, according to the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office. That's money not spent on reducing class size or buying textbooks and supplies.

The California School Boards Association believes that Prop. 74 is so poorly drafted that it would actually make it more difficult to get rid of the bad apples.

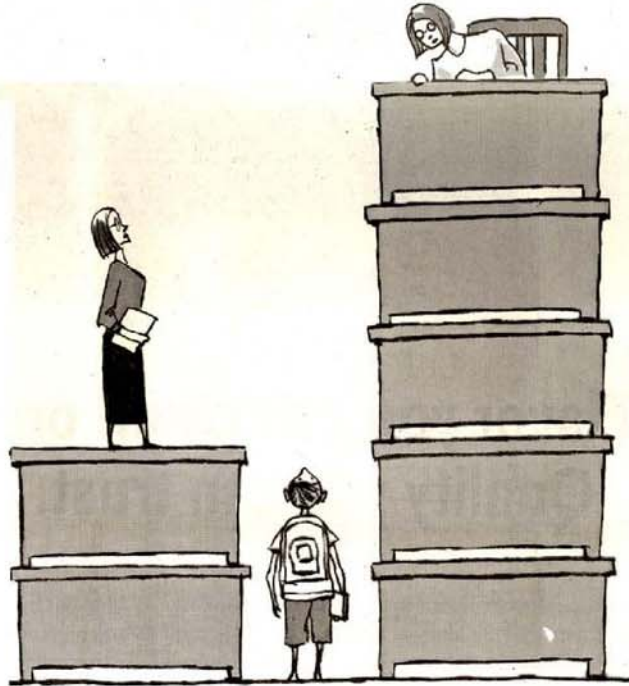
Prop. 74 is not only a deterrent to recruitment, it's a direct attack on thousands of young California teachers who are already in the system. It would apply retroactively, stripping due process rights from teachers in their third, fourth and fifth years of teaching. The League of Women Voters urges "no" on 74 for this reason alone.

Prop. 74 is an exercise in political finger-pointing, designed to scapegoat teachers for the state's scandalous cutbacks in education budgets. Doesn't the governor understand that good education is a necessary investment for economic development? Only one state, Missouri, has a teacher probation period as long as five years. Do we want to emulate one of the poorest and most struggling state school systems in the nation?

Let's stop playing politics with the schools. Yes, reform is needed, but Prop. 74 is a step in the wrong direction. Teachers, school boards as well as our state superintendent of public instruction, along with many others in the education community, are joining together to oppose Prop. 74. Why? Because it is bad for our schools, our teachers and our students.

Please vote "no" on Prop. 74.

Sheila Jordan is the Alameda County superintendent of public schools.



To learn more

"Put the Kids First" is designed to reform teacher-tenure rules to ensure every classroom has a competent teacher.

To read more about the campaign, go to www.janarnold.com.

To read more about the issue of teacher training and tenure, go to <http://www.nber.org/digest> and www.ctc.ca.gov.

To learn more

This initiative would change the period it takes for teachers to become a permanent employee to five years from two years.

To read more about the campaign, go to www.betterca.com.

To read more about the election, go to www.ss.ca.gov/elections or www.smartvoter.org.