

Rewriting the Book on Teacher Contracts

By Andrew Sawires '14



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Increasingly in recent years, tensions between school boards and teachers' unions across the country have been running high as conflicts arise over the difficulty of negotiating fair contracts and balancing issues of teacher evaluations, teacher salaries, student test scores, and expectations. On September 10, 2012, over 30,000 teachers walked out of Chicago schools - sacrificing student education - and started a strike when negotiations between the teacher unions and the city fell through. After an eight-day strike, a new deal was finally brokered, in which amendments to the previous contract dealing with teacher evaluations and teacher salaries were put into place. However, this strike could have been prevented if communication between both sides had been improved and more people were educated about teacher contracts and their various components.

Thankfully, junior Simon Boehme and senior Susanne Donovan are working in the ILR School's Scheinman Institute on Conflict Resolution, led by Professor Alexander Colvin and Sally Klingel, to understand labor-management relations in New York's public schools. More specifically, Boehme and Donovan are working to organize and better understand teacher contracts in New York in an effort to give the general public more information on collective bargaining and provide schools with ways to improve their education systems.

Since early 2012, Boehme and Donovan have been using what they learned from taking classes in the ILR school to contract code over 650 teacher contracts from New York public schools and compile the data into an excel spreadsheet. Contract coding consists of reading each contract in its entirety and looking for specific chosen variables, such as whether or not schools include a procedure for teacher evaluations or procedures and requirements for tenured and non-tenured teachers. The source of these New York teacher contracts comes from two databases, SeeThroughNY and the Digital Commons database in Cornell's ILR School. After Boehme and Donovan analyzed the contracts, they indicated whether the specific contract was positive or negative for that specific variable. From current preliminary data, 91% of New York Public School contracts have included language on how to conduct a teacher evaluation, such as who specifically is authorized to conduct it, and other such stipulations. The other 9% do not have any language in the contract for teacher evaluations.

This research is being conducted in ILR in the **Scheinman Institute on Conflict Resolution** under the supervision of **Professor Alexander Colvin** and **Sally Klingel**.

In an attempt to expand their research, Boehme and Donovan hope to use other databases in Cornell's Policy Analysis and Management Department in order to add social variables to their analysis, such as teacher turnover rate, location (urban or rural), and school district wealth. With this combination of variables, Boehme and Donovan hope to compare the microenvironments of separate schools and compile the data into one large database that will be available "Information is power...and that power is required to improve the existing school districts." to the public. Their goal is for schools to be able to use the data to compare their contracts and policies with other schools that are similar in size and location, but have been more successful. Hypothetically, these schools and their superintendents would then have the tools they need to improve educational opportunities for students.

This data may prove highly beneficial for evaluating the success of new education policies. For example, New York State recently passed an Annual Professional Performance Review law, which makes teacher appraisals mandatory. In order to determine the impact of these teacher appraisals, the future status of the 638 public schools can be compared to the data that Boehme and Donovan have compiled. There is also growing national interest in this area of research: MIT has recently started a similar research project that seeks to analyze collective bargaining agreements of Massachusetts public schools in order to improve school districts.

Donovan and Boehme have realized the potential importance of their research and the possibility it has to bring schools together to talk about new policies and contracts that benefit both students and teachers. "Information is power...and that power is required to improve the existing school districts," said Boehme. Boehme and Donovan both hope that their research will leave a lasting impact on the nation's education system.

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