

YVONNE ABRAHAM

Old-school thinking



By [Yvonne Abraham](#) | GLOBE COLUMNIST DECEMBER 08, 2011

Talking to Boston Teachers Union chief Richard Stutman can feel like chatting with a United Auto Workers rep in the days before Toyota. He makes sense, as long as you ignore the fact that it's 2011, and a new crop of more efficient carmakers - that would be charter schools - are sucking away customers at an alarming clip.

After months of not talking, the Boston Public Schools and the teachers union will finally be back at the table negotiating a new contract next week. One big thing they'll wrangle over is the length of the school day. Charter schools, which now educate about 5,000 of the city's 61,000 public school children, offer more classroom time than the average public school - about eight hours, compared with the district's 6.5. That's a huge draw for parents, not just because the extra time often translates into higher achievement, but also because longer days mirror those of working parents.

Superintendent Carol Johnson is asking teachers to put in an extra hour each day - half in the classroom, and half in planning. Right now, Boston public school teachers are among the highest-paid in the Commonwealth, and their official workdays are among the shortest urban days in the nation.

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Johnson is also proposing to change the way newly-hired teachers are compensated, with raises tied to performance instead of the current automatic yearly increases for longevity or advanced degrees. It is an approach that makes a lot of sense: There are many great teachers in the public

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schools, men and women who transform kids' lives. They should be well-rewarded. But those who don't bring that same commitment - or talent - shouldn't be bumped up through the pay grades, without regard to how their students fare.

In addition, the schools are offering a pay increase to all teachers of 5 percent over four years, in part to compensate them for the extra hour.

The union wants 10 percent over three years, and additional compensation for the extra hour. That's right - not just a pay increase, which Stutman says they have coming anyway, but an extra bump, for moving toward a day that ought long since to have become standard.

Problem is, there are plenty of teachers routinely working longer hours in charters, and they're set to draw thousands more students away from the district in the next few years.

Stutman is unmoved by this market reality. "If other teachers are getting exploited, that doesn't tell me that our teachers should be similarly exploited," he says.

"Plumbers, lawyers, dentists, they all get paid more for the extra cases they take on."

That formulation is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, if a plumbing company or a law firm was doing as poor a job as some Boston public schools, they wouldn't have any clients. Second, Stutman seems to want to have it both ways: He wants his teachers to be treated as professionals, but he casts them as clock-punching assembly-line workers.

Charters see teaching as a professional enterprise, with success based on outcomes, not hours. That's a good thing not just for students, but for teachers, too: They deserve good salaries and more respect as professionals. But Stutman undercuts their case with his old-school ways.

If he chooses intransigence, a whole alternative system will continue to grow up around traditional public schools, which will keep losing students, money, and jobs. Still, it wouldn't be the first time the Boston Teachers Union has shot itself in the foot: Its chief's efforts to undercut pilot schools made Mayor Thomas M. Menino a charter school convert, speeding the exodus of district students.

For the BTU, accepting a longer day would be an act of self-preservation. Stutman seems unlikely to wake up to that reality before it's too late.

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