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## When a school year fizzles

### Students deserve the exciting start that a strike would thwart

August 19, 2012

Across Chicago and its suburbs, the first day of school looms as a Big Event. New clothes, fresh supplies, a new set of teachers, classmates, academic hurdles and social opportunities. Whether a child anticipates that day with enthusiasm or, sadly, dreads it, the first day, the first weeks, set the tone for a year of achievement ... or failure.

In some places, students are already in class. For 239,000 Chicago Public Schools students, classes start Sept. 4.

If there isn't a strike. If, that is, teachers don't walk because of pay or other demands that the CPS board can't meet.

Let's stop right there.

This editorial is not about CPS negotiations with the Chicago Teachers Union or what needs to be in the next teachers contract. We've written plenty about that and will again.

Today, though, we'd like to remind everyone that the school year is a marvel of rhythms. One middle school math teacher tells us: "The first days are important because they are the days in which a student will decide that this will be a good year, that this teacher likes him or her, and that no matter what challenges come this year, this teacher will not leave this student hanging. ... There is nothing to worry about. ... To not have that first day, that new day ... it's like a firecracker that doesn't go off. The momentum of the buildup is lost. Even if it happens later, that possibility of the freshest of starts is lost. And everyone starts from behind."

In other words, the stakes for Chicago schoolchildren couldn't be higher.

**Every time a student's passion** is ignited for algebra or Aristotle, or a clarinet player hits the high note, or a French verb is correctly conjugated, or a coach tutors his team on the exquisite choreography of football's power sweep — those are moments when teacher and student connect.

A classroom isn't an assembly line — insert Fact A in Head B — but a laboratory of trial and error. Teachers may teach the same facts, but to different kids. And that's where a teacher's skill — and gift for teaching — counts.

A school year that fizzles is an academic disaster for students prepping for college entrance exams and applying for scholarships. It dashes dreams of glory for footballers, volleyballers, rowers, field hockey

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players, tennis players and cross-country runners, not to mention cheerleaders, dance squads and Friday Night Lights fans.

If there's no school, eighth-graders at Chicago's Pershing West Middle School can't perform poems in the schoolwide fall "poetry cafe" recital.

Every fall for years, sixth-graders at Sunset Ridge school in Northfield have traipsed through neighborhoods on the same science assignment: Gather different tree leaves, catalog them, to better understand trees. It is a profound lesson in nature that can't be put on hold.

Every day counts. Every class counts.

Long before the first day arrives, teachers are in classrooms. They're planning lessons and tailoring curriculum for students from gifted to challenged. They spend hours decorating the room to motivate students. Cue the all-important bulletin board displays.

**It's not all academics.** Teachers and administrators nail down that field trip to the Museum of Science and Industry. They prepare for the teen poetry slam called Louder Than a Bomb. And for History Fair. And Science Olympiad. And mock trial.

One CPS elementary teacher told us some of her colleagues took Spanish classes over the summer, so they could better communicate with students' parents.

From the first day, smart teachers know they need to establish a classroom "culture," to help kids learn, Cheryl Watkins, principal of Pershing West, tells us. That means "establishing a climate that is collegial and collaborative, letting kids know that you're not on your own, that we're working together, this is going to be a tough year, we've got to help each other."

That launch is critical to what happens the rest of the year. "You need to get students in a position to raise their hands, to make mistakes, and feel like they'll be supported by their peers and teachers," says Tim Dohrer, principal at New Trier High School in Winnetka.

That needs to happen fast, he tells us, "because the clock starts ticking. We need to get moving on the material as quickly as possible.. We want to use every single minute we can."

### **Every single minute.**

At Pershing, kids come to school expected to turn in a homework assignment — made the previous spring — on the very first day. The seventh-graders, for instance, had to read "To Kill a Mockingbird." There are math problems, science questions and everyone has an assignment in Mandarin, a mandatory language class at Pershing.

"We start the very first day with instruction," Watkins tells us. "If you haven't prepared, you will be behind. If students miss that first month, then it's like starting from scratch from the year prior. So I hope we don't. I hope we don't." She doesn't finish the sentence, but it is understood: I hope we don't ... have a strike.

We're with Watkins. So are thousands of students — and their parents. Remember those kids. The first day of school is *theirs*.