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L.A. Unified payroll a lesson in agony

Frustrated teachers, aides take out loans as district's troubled \$95-million system refuses to pay them.

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Since launching a \$95-million computer system six months ago, the Los Angeles Unified School District has been beset by programming glitches, hardware crashes and mistakes by hurriedly trained clerical staff. The result: tens of thousands of teachers, cafeteria workers, classroom aides and others have been underpaid, overpaid or not paid at all.

The hardest hit have been the roughly 48,000 certificated employees -- teachers and others who require a credential to perform their jobs. Their complicated, varied job assignments and pay scales have perplexed computer programmers and, this month, an additional 3,900 people received incorrect paychecks.

That total would have been higher had the district not caught "a number of . . . system defects" and "administrative errors," before paychecks were written, acknowledged David Holmquist, the district's director of risk management and insurance.

Anedra Harper knew she would never get rich working as a teacher in Los Angeles' public schools. The trade-off, the 32-year-old figured, was the satisfaction of doing a job that mattered.

But for three months this summer, Harper, who makes about \$40,000 teaching learning and emotionally disabled students at a city high school, was not paid. With mortgage payments, bills and grocery receipts piling up, she eventually took out \$15,000 in loans to stay afloat.

"I absolutely love teaching and working with kids," she said, "but this has been a nightmare."

The continued payroll problems have become a serious stumbling block for Supt. David L. Brewer, who inherited the Business Tools for Schools technology project when he was hired in November. His early, emphatic promises to fix the mess only exacerbated the situation as district hotlines and an emergency office set up in L.A. Unified's downtown headquarters were immediately overwhelmed.

Union leaders have pounced on the issue, lambasting the district for not doing more. United Teachers Los Angeles took the district to court, unsuccessfully seeking a ruling to force a remedy. No quick fix appears possible: District officials say that several more months are needed and have already set aside an additional \$37 million to pay for the repairs.

That does not bode well for employees. With only one payday each month -- as is the case for most district staff -- when something goes awry, carefully laid plans to pay bills and budget for such basics as groceries and gas quickly become complicated.

"All I want to know is whether I am getting a paycheck or not," a calm but weary Rosanna White, an English teacher, told a frazzled payroll staffer who was trying to help determine why she had received a check for less than half of what she was owed for July. White was into her fourth hour of what would turn out to be a seven-hour wild goose chase.

"Do you even see my [teaching] assignment in the computer?" she asked the man, the third person to whom she had repeated her story so far that day.

"No," he said, helplessly.

White, 30, who earns about \$43,000 a year as a full-time teacher at Manual Arts High School, said she was first beset by payroll problems in February, when she was working every day as a substitute at the school.

That month, she received no paycheck. With little savings in the bank, White saw her finances spiral out of control. She accepted an emergency advance from the district that estimated her net pay, but did not account for taxes, union fees or other deductions. As the district's system automatically recouped the advance in subsequent checks, White said, she was left scrambling anew and was forced to take more emergency advances. The cycle lasted for months. White said she has taken her credit cards to the limit and gotten about \$14,000 in loans to keep afloat.

Her story is a common one. Months of oscillating between underpayments and overpayments, and trying to decipher the system's pay stubs has led to widespread confusion and frustration. White and Harper, the special education teacher, eventually received paychecks for July, but both say they are uncertain whether the amounts are accurate.

"I don't even know what my base pay is anymore!" an exasperated Beverly Ann Ball said recently to a group of teachers who nodded in agreement as they waited for help at the district office. Over the last four months, Ball's paychecks have varied dramatically, fluctuating from \$1,033 to \$3,269.

Teachers continue to take the brunt of the abuse because they work 10 months out of the year, but are scheduled to be paid 12 times.

The payroll system's software was not designed to correctly spread out, or annualize, the salaries, Holmquist said. Programmers have begun the two-to three-month process of rewriting the software from scratch using more complex programs while district officials consider scrapping the 12-month pay calendar, Holmquist said.

Meanwhile, the district is in talks with Deloitte Consulting, the firm hired to plan and implement the three-phase technology project that began in 2005. District officials are negotiating a possible repayment of some of the more than \$55 million the firm has received, or an increase in the resources and staffing it provides to the district. If talks fail, district officials said, a lawsuit is possible.

"All of the potential remedies are on the table," said Holmquist, who oversees the district's efforts to fix the payroll problems. Holmquist took control after the district's chief financial officer, Charles Burbidge, left his post this summer amid increasing dissatisfaction with his performance.

A spokeswoman for Deloitte declined to respond to questions regarding the company's alleged role, saying in an e-mail: "We empathize with those district employees who have been affected by the transition to a new payroll system."

Los Angeles Unified is not alone in its troubles. The Los Angeles Community College District experienced similar problems, albeit on a smaller scale, after implementing the same system in 2005. The state government, meanwhile, has decided to phase in a similar project next year.

The confusion at L.A. Unified seems certain to continue. Next month, the district plans to begin the process of recouping nearly \$45 million it has overpaid to more than 28,700 employees -- most of it on the June 5 payday that district officials refer to as "black Tuesday."

Not accounting for new problems that arose from the last payday, Holmquist said, the district had repaid all of the employees who had been underpaid by "any material amount."

Small underpayments, he said, will be corrected in coming months.

In an effort to minimize the inevitable confusion, district and union officials have mailed payroll histories to each affected employee in an attempt to reconcile and explain each person's situation.

Such efforts may help, but they are unlikely to erase employees' built-up aggravation. Several said their experiences in bouncing between school clerks and overwhelmed staff downtown in search of help has been a harsh reminder of the impersonal reality of working in a school district with 90,000 employees.

"It makes you feel like a small person, very insignificant," White said. "This hasn't soured me on teaching. I want to teach, but I don't have to teach at this school district."

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