

LOS ANGELES HERALD

EXAMINER

EQUAL PAY

L.A.'s school board ducks a tough choice

By Phyllis W. Cheng

The Los Angeles school board has shown a half-hearted political commitment to school employees by watering down Roberta Weintraub's proposal to study the idea of paying men and women comparable wages for comparable work.

The guardedly revised motion approved by the board late last month promises only to study bids for comparable-worth studies, and to put the lowest-paid female-dominated jobs on the bargaining table. The \$30,000 preliminary study, due next March, will be internally controlled by the superintendent, not by a committee of management, labor and community groups, as originally proposed. Nothing commits the school board

to actually conduct a comparable-worth study, nor to remedy pay inequities in a system that pays starting teachers and education aides less than painters and typewriter technicians.

The Los Angeles school administration repeatedly has resisted a comparable-worth study for fear of opening up a Pandora's box of legal, labor and financial ramifications. In line with national findings, even the most conservative study in the Los Angeles school system would reveal that sex-based wage discrimination is rampant.

This very finding could make the school system vulnerable to future suits under federal and state anti-discrimination laws. It could also give labor unions leverage in pressing for large wage increases through collective bargaining. Since measurements of job worth are subjective, a comparable-worth study would be sure to draw close scrutiny by women's advocacy groups and potential public criticism. Finally, the costs of rectifying historic wage discrimination would be enormous at a time when education budgets are

Phyllis W. Cheng is a member of the National Committee on Pay Equity and the Southern California Comparable Worth Coalition and former executive director of the Los Angeles school district's Commission for Sex Equity. She lives in Los Angeles.



tight and uncertain.

If the Los Angeles school district, after studying the issue, actually decided to implement pay equity, its action would have significant implications far beyond the system. The city of San Jose, which pioneered comparable-worth practices, has only 67 job classifications and 4,000 employees. The Los Angeles school district, by contrast, is the second largest employer in the county, with 2,700 job classifications and more than 50,000 employees.

Comparable pay in the school district would strongly affect the local job market. The private sector and other public sectors might be pressured to compete for skilled workers by raising depressed wages for female-dominated jobs. At the very least, a school-district action would shift the prevailing wage for clerical and service workers throughout the county.

Should the district proceed to make a thorough analysis of all

school-district jobs, the Los Angeles school system would be the first to compare the worth of teachers to that of other professions. Since women fill 70 percent of other school jobs, a number of female-dominated occupations would come under scrutiny. As the second largest school district in the country, any comparable-worth action in Los Angeles could trigger similar responses in other large, urban school systems. In addition, the Los Angeles school district would be among the first to attempt to apply comparable worth to collective bargaining with multiple unions representing diverse constituencies, setting a model for other complex agencies to follow.

Clearly, then, much is at stake, locally and nationally, on this issue, and the Los Angeles school board's response should be responsible and thorough. Instead, the comparable-worth motion adopted by the board is designed for failure. Structurally flawed, the search for study

bids will be controlled entirely by management, whose incentive is to delay and ultimately prevent the next step of carrying out a comparability study. It has been rumored that the \$30,000 budgeted for the task will be used to employ a retired administrator whose loyalties will be to management.

The motion's only real effect thus may be to negotiate changes in the district's lowest-paid female-dominated jobs. The selection of some low-paying jobs and not others for negotiations doubtless will create resentment among workers. Relying on the bargaining process also allows the possibility of trading away long-term comparable-worth remedies for short-term wage adjustments or employee benefits. In bargaining with four labor unions on different calendars, management has and will likely continue to use a divide-and-conquer strategy in setting labor groups against one another for a share of the pie. Since some of

the unions represent a mix of female- and male-dominated jobs, ambivalence about comparable worth solutions probably will arise unless there is aggressive, coordinated union leadership. In short, the motion ensures delay, biased findings, worker resentment, inequities and union animosity.

Instead, the school board should carry out a comparable-worth study that presents the district and the public — with an honest assessment of the costs and benefits of pay equity. Even though the search for comparable-worth study bids is controlled by the superintendent, an advisory panel of management, labor and community representatives should oversee the task to ensure objectivity. To head the search, it would be wiser to employ an independent and experienced analyst with no self-interest in conducting the actual study. Union leaders should work together for long-term pay-equity gains for all female-dominated job classifications, not just those immediately on the bargaining table. Aggressive organizing and education of employees on the comparable-worth issue is necessary for sustaining its momentum.

On this issue as on so many others, advocates of pay equity will need to come back to the school board again and again to press for meaningful action. ■