

How to Survive a Layoff

11 Steps to get Back on Track

By [Kevin Hart](#)

Julie Fisk, a teacher in Pontiac, Michigan, has been laid off three times in her career - but when she got her latest pink slip this spring, it was the shock of a lifetime.



It's unusual for a teacher who has spent 29 years with the same school district to be laid off - but, then again, [what happened in Pontiac](#) was beyond unusual. The district laid off all its union teachers in a "reorganization" move to shore up a budget shortfall.

"I have seniority over most of my colleagues," Fisk says. "Unfortunately, that doesn't seem to mean much right now."

While Fisk is still holding out hope she'll be recalled in time for the 2009-2010 school year, there are thousands of teachers across the country who won't be so lucky. More than 25,000 teachers have been laid off in California. Six hundred teachers in Tucson, Arizona, received pink slips - as did hundreds of teachers and education support professionals in Charlotte, North Carolina, Seattle, and several other communities across the country.

If you're facing a layoff, the best outcome is to be recalled. But if you find yourself in the worst case scenario, use this 11-step plan to survive a layoff and improve your prospects of landing a job - either at your current school district or another.

Step 1: Relax and try to stay positive

As difficult as it may be to relax when you're uncertain where your next paycheck is coming from, a negative attitude is counter-productive and will cloud your judgment. "Decisions made out of fear and anxiety usually don't turn out well," says Hallie Crawford, a career coach based in Atlanta. "Process whatever feelings you're feeling, but move past them and try to remain calm. Surround yourself with supportive and optimistic people so you can remain positive and focused."

Step 2: Talk to your local Association

Find out whether your school district handled the layoff process correctly, and make sure you understand your rights. What are your chances of being recalled, and what priority do you have for applying for other openings in your district? Do you have rights to substitute assignments or temporary employment? Your local Association rep should be an information resource for you. Some state affiliates have also published layoff guides explaining the process and your rights. [The California Teachers Association](#) has an online version available, as does the [Arizona Education Association](#) and other state affiliates.

Step 3: Speak with creditors and research benefits you may be entitled to

Many people feel a sense of shame, and try to hide the news of a layoff from their creditors or just "tough it out." Big mistake. You may be able to renegotiate your payment plans or even defer some payments.

If you are eligible for unemployment, contact your state unemployment office right away. If you lose employer-provided health insurance, you may be able to continue coverage through the [Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act](#) (more commonly known as COBRA).

Student loans often can be deferred; you can get online information on deferring [Stafford and Perkins loans](#) and [SallieMae loans](#). If you're concerned about making mortgage payments, the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) offers a wealth of resources online.

Step 4: Get your portfolio and other key documents in order

Have you been neglecting your resume or teaching portfolio? It's time to get all important documents in order. Gather transcripts, ESP or teaching certifications, letters of recommendation, commendations, statement of teaching philosophy, unique lesson plans, and anything else that will help establish your qualifications.

If you decide to market yourself using a teaching portfolio, remember that it is a reflection on your professionalism as a teacher - and your attention to detail - so put some time into it and make sure it's perfect.

Step 5: Establish a job hunt schedule

You need to treat your job search like a job itself. Make a list of things you want to accomplish each day, whether it involves networking, phone calls, adding to your portfolio, or submitting applications. Crawford says her clients find a job hunt schedule helps them "get focused and stay productive."

Step 6: Engage your professional network

When it comes to job hunting, you don't need to go it alone. Often the best way to find another job is to network aggressively with friends and colleagues, who know what a good teacher or support professional you are. "Don't just say, 'I'm looking for a job,'" Crawford advises. "Give them specifics. Ask them about specific people they know."

Remember, a kind word from a colleague to a school principal or district recruiter may be just what you need to get your foot in the door. Crawford also advises laid-off education professionals to take advantage of the various social networking tools available online. Spread the word about your job search to your [Facebook](#) friends. Consider posting a profile on [LinkedIn](#), which is designed to keep you in touch with professional contacts.

Also, look for job feeds on [Twitter](#), the popular micro-blogging site. The Kansas Educational Employment Board, for example, [uses Twitter](#) to send job announcements to all of its "followers." [CareerBuilder](#) also has several regional Twitter feeds.

Step 7: Check education and association job boards

There are many [public and private Web sites](#) that post school district jobs.

NEA state affiliates often link to job boards directly from their Web sites. Visit your state affiliate Web site for the job openings and resources in your state.

Step 8: Consider adding to your skill set

Perhaps you've thought for years about pursuing dual certification or adding new skills, but kept putting it off. Dual certification takes time and may not help with your current situation -- but it may leave you better prepared for the future.

"Dual certification doesn't necessarily help you avoid a layoff, because a lot of that is done by seniority," says Michael Moffre, a middle school math teacher in North Colonie, New York, who is dual-certified in math and social studies. "But it definitely helps you find a job."

There might not be a lot of demand for your current area of certification, which is why a second area can be critical. Math and science are the well-publicized shortage areas, but not the only ones.

"There's a lot of demand for math, but I'd look at special education as well," says Robert Piche, a veteran high school math teacher in Howard County, Maryland. "Everyone is looking for special ed." Piche says he feels fortunate he pursued a math certification -- he had little trouble finding work and even received a signing bonus.

[The NEA Academy](#) offers free or discount courses for professional development or, in some cases, graduate credit.

Some NEA state affiliates can also help you add to your skill set. New York State United Teachers operates the [Education & Learning Trust](#), which offers discount undergraduate and graduate courses for dual certification or for ESP and teacher skill development. [WEA Academy](#), run by the Wisconsin Education Association Council, and the [ESP Career Academy](#), run by the New Jersey Education Association, also offer courses for teachers and support professionals that lead to professional development or college credits.

Many community colleges are offering free courses for people who have been laid off, and some of the courses are very career-oriented. If you're an ESP who has performed building maintenance and always wanted to learn HVAC repair, this may be an opportunity. *Community College Review* did an excellent article on [some of the community colleges offering free courses](#).

Step #9: Look at regions of your state -- or the nation -- that are hiring

If relocation is an option, look for parts of your state - or even other states -- that have a real need for teachers and ESPs in your area of specialty. While budget shortfalls have forced many states to cut teaching and ESP jobs this year, others are dealing with a shortage of qualified candidates. And, although some educators may now be deferring their retirement, there are still

baby boomer educators in many states who will retire in the next few years, leaving positions that will need to be filled.

For example, during the 2007-2008 school year, Mississippi had 2,400 teaching vacancies statewide and Florida is actively recruiting teachers to move to the state, particularly if they teach in critical shortage areas. There is even a [recruitment Web site](#).

The U.S. Department of Education issued [a report](#) that allows you to see geographic and/or subject area shortages for every state, and how those needs have changed over the past 20 years.

If you're considering moving to another state, check to make sure it has reciprocal certification or that training you have earned as an ESP will translate.

Step 10: Prepare aggressively for your interview

Your portfolio or resume is strong and includes great recommendations. You've job hunted and networked, and you've landed an interview. Now, you need to do everything you can to make sure it goes well.

Crawford, who has prepared countless clients for interviews, says the key is to relax, which will allow you to come across as more authentic and confident. When you're overly nervous in an interview, a principal or hiring committee may begin to wonder how you'll handle yourself in front of a crowded, noisy classroom, lunchroom, bus, or office.

Make sure you're well educated on the school you're interviewing to work in - information like standardized test scores, special needs programs, and percentage of students on free or discount lunch is reported by each state. If you know anyone working at the school, chat them up and get the lay of the land.

Finally, never go in cold. Go to the interview, Crawford advises, with a list of five strengths you want to cover in the interview. Maybe it's your experience with differentiated instruction or your ability to contribute to extracurricular activities; for support professionals, it might be the diverse skill sets you've developed that would allow you to help out in multiple areas of the school's operations.

You know what your strengths are - go in with a plan to communicate them.

Step 11: Keep your Association membership

You need to cut back on expenses where you can, but don't rush to cancel your membership to NEA or your state affiliate. NEA and many of its state affiliates manage member benefits programs that give you access to competitive rates on various types of insurance and discounts on commonly purchased items.

Take advantage of these benefits. You'll soon find your Association membership pays for itself and could save you money. For more information, check out [NEA Member Benefits](#) or the member benefits Web site for your state affiliate.