Chicago Strike Tests Unions' Sway in Reform Fight

By John Schuppe
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The week-long teachers’ strike in Chicago has drawn national attention because it affects 350,000 children and pits two Democratic forces against each other. But it also represents a broader struggle over education reform and union power, and the results could reverberate elsewhere.

If the Chicago Teachers Union wins enough concessions, then it’s a victory for the labor movement and a potential guide for similar battles underway in other parts of the country.

If Mayor Rahm Emanuel emerges with enough of his demands intact, then it’s another setback for labor and validates the push to impose stricter measures of teacher accountability.

“This is being looked at very carefully by school districts across the country,” said Kathleen Hirsman, who teaches education and labor law at the Loyola University School of Law. “There’s the issue of the diminishing strength of teachers unions and who is going to come out the winner. And how the Chicago Public Schools resolves this will be very instructive to other school districts now looking at implementation of state laws requiring teacher evaluation based on student performance.”

All over America, states and cities are trying to figure out how to respond to federal initiatives aimed at improving the public school system. They come down to a series of carrots and sticks. There’s money for districts that implement the Obama administration’s ideas on teacher evaluations and testing, and there’s the threat of closure or other sanctions for underperforming schools.

That challenge has resulted in elected officials trying to impose new standards for teachers, who resist having to give up control over their work.

“It comes down to who’s going to decide how kids are educated,” said James Wolfinger, an associate professor of history and education at DePaul University. “Who is the expert? Who should have the greatest voice?”

Chicago is just the latest of several big cities - including New York, Los Angeles, Boston and Cleveland - where that tension has come to a head.

Illinois lawmakers have set a schedule to implement new teacher evaluation methods, and Chicago must start making those changes this year. Illinois also happens to be a state that allows teachers to strike.
That makes the four-day-old walkout, which has captivated the country and could impact the presidential election, an ideal opportunity for labor to show that it’s no pushover.

“This is a very important strike for the teachers union,” said Richard Kearney, a political scientist at North Carolina State University. “If they can come out of this thinking they’ve made up some ground, that should give some encouragement to teacher’s unions elsewhere who are facing similar situations.”

Then again, Emanuel could end up on top.

Or: each side will concede, ending the strike in a draw.

What then?

“Then the fight just goes on elsewhere,” Kearney said. “And none of this meant a great deal.”