

WATCHDOG REPORT

## \$59,451: NY'S AVERAGE SCHOOL SALARY

**Average for Monroe County teachers and administrators was about \$50,000**

**JOSEPH SPECTOR AND SEAN LAHMAN** @GANNETTALBANY AND @SEANLAHMAN Salaries for teachers and administrators increased 7.2 percent over the past four years as school districts across New York state have sought to trim costs amid declining enrollment and growing costs. The average salary for teachers and administrators hit \$59,451 in New York last year, up from \$55,480 in 2011, a review of state records showed. School officials said the increase is on par with the rate of inflation — at less than 2 percent a year. And the data don't reflect other concessions by educators, such as higher health-insurance premiums and less generous pension benefits. "Competitive salaries are at the heart of what makes a strong educational system," said Carl Korn, a spokesman for the New York State United Teachers union. "They are what help to attract and retain the best teachers for New York students."

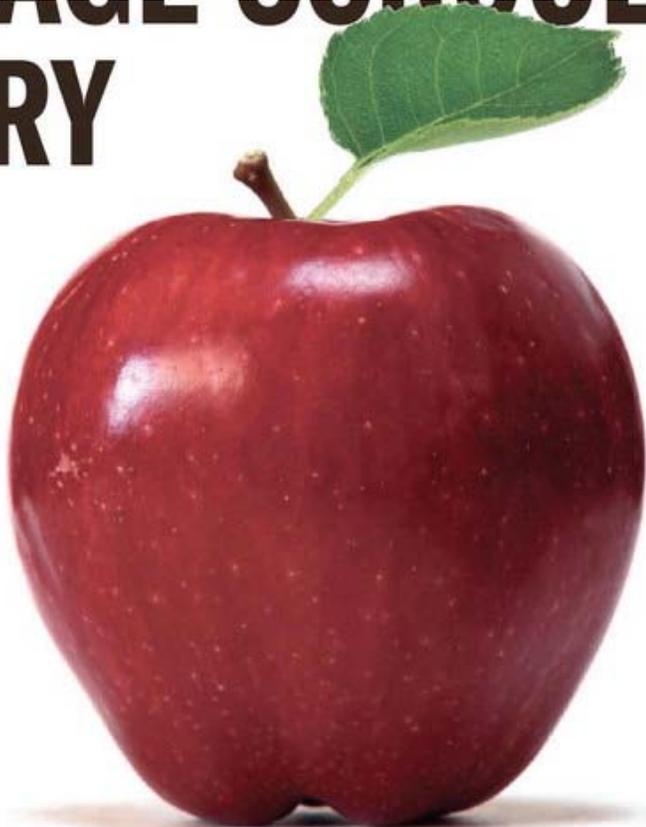
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### Salaries

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The overall figures showed a changing landscape at New York's nearly 700 school districts.

The number of active school employees in the Teacher Retirement System — which includes all teachers and administrators, both full and part time — fell 7 percent over the four years, from nearly 235,000 to about 219,000.

The higher average salary also reflects an aging teaching population in New York. Last school year, about 13 percent of teachers were aged 57 to 64, and 19 percent of teachers were aged 49 to 56, according to the retirement system.

Additionally, the number of retired school employees receiving pensions increased by 5.2 percent between 2011 and 2014, from 142,080 to 149,405. The average annual pension rose 4.6 percent, from \$40,446 to \$42,306, state records showed. Some pensions are substantial: Nearly 2,600 earned more than \$100,000 a year in retirement — up 47 percent over the four years. The top pensioner was James Feltman, a retired Long Island superintendent, who last year earned a nearly \$326,000-a-year pension. Schools have had to juggle more retirements, higher teaching standards and limited state aid. But state aid increased 6 percent this year, helping districts limit tax increases. On May 19, voters approved 99 percent of school budgets statewide.

Enrollment outside New York City also continues to drop. In the coming fiscal year, which starts July 1, districts predict about 8,800 fewer kids, for a total of 1.5 million.

"The economy has improved a little bit, and the state has been able to make larger contributions to school districts," said David Albert, a spokesman for the state School Boards Association. "That's allowed schools to maybe get back to a point where they can give incremental cost-of-living increases to employees and look to restore some programs they lost during the recession."

The salary and pension data used in this report was provided by the New York State Teachers' Retirement System, which administers the pension fund for public school teachers and administrators employed outside New York City. Its data does not distinguish between members who are teachers and those who are administrators, so it is not possible to calculate separate averages for each occupation.

Statewide, the top paid public school officials in the last school year, which ended June 30, 2014, were two administrators on Long Island: Joseph Ogeka at \$376,340 in the Riverhead district and Jeffrey Streitman at \$374,150 in the Syosset district.

The salaries of teachers and administrators fluctuated significantly across the regions of New York.

Westchester County had the highest average salary at \$89,000 for its public schools.

Lisa Davis, executive director of the Westchester- Putnam School Boards Association, said the New York City suburbs are an expensive place to live. Plus, she said, the schools benefit from a highly educated and veteran staff. New York is one of only seven states that require a master's degree for certification, schools officials said.

"I think there is something to be said for districts that have teachers who create an environment of professional development and the kind of environment where teachers want to stay there," Davis said. The salaries were lower farther upstate. The average salary was about \$50,000 in Monroe and Erie counties, while it was \$48,000 in Chemung and Broome counties and \$46,000 in Tompkins County. Jody Siegle, executive director of the Monroe County School Boards Association, said local schools have sought other ways to curb employee expenses, such as teachers paying more for their health insurance. "While districts have been negotiating with the teachers and looking to keep any salary increases in line with what they feel the communities can afford, at the same time they have been looking to make adjustments to benefits," she said. Still, critics said that school salaries are high compared with other states and the average workers' salaries in their regions. Data released in February by the state Education Department showed the median salaries for teachers on Long Island exceeded \$100,000, and teachers in the Hudson Valley were at about \$99,000, the Empire Center for State Policy found.

Comparatively, the average wage for all industries in the Hudson Valley was nearly \$56,000 in 2013, according to the state Labor Department. In the Finger Lakes, the average salary was \$44,000. New York's full-time teachers earned an average of \$77,628 in the current school year, the highest in the country, according to the National Education Association. The second highest was in

Massachusetts at nearly \$75,000. “If they’ve plateaued a bit, they’ve plateaued at a very high level,” E.J Mc-Mahon, president of the Empire Center for New York Policy, said about teacher salaries. “We have very high teacher salaries, and they are high relative to living costs in various regions.” The number of educators making more than \$100,000 a year increased nearly 20 percent over the last four years — to about 20 percent of the total education workforce in New York. Teachers also have been at the center of the fight in New York over education policies. Gov. Andrew Cuomo has vowed to toughen evaluations for teachers and principals, including a greater reliance on state testing to determine educators’ effectiveness.

The state Education Department by June 30 expects to have new evaluations approved; then schools would have until Nov. 15 to put them in place. Schools will likely be able to apply for a hardship waiver to delay the implementation by several months.

“We want the best teachers in our classroom. Every study says the quality of the teacher makes a difference in the school,” Cuomo said in his State of the State address Jan. 21. “We must start treating teaching like the profession that it actually is.” New state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia, who was appointed to the post on Tuesday, urged the sides to cool the rhetoric and work cooperatively to help students succeed.

“Teachers are successful when their students are successful,” Elia said. “And so I really believe that it’s important for us to put the emphasis on support for teachers and help to make sure that what’s happening in our classrooms are good for our kids.”

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