

IS YOUR KID'S

BEING PAID?

Teachers

Public payroll

JOSEPH SPECTOR ALBANY BUREAU CHIEF

ALBANY - New York has nearly 13,000 fewer educators than it did five years ago, while the number of retirees continues to swell, state records show.

The average salary in the 2014-15 school year was about \$60,000 for the nearly 300,000 full- and part-time educators in New York. The average was up 1.2 percent from the 2013-14 school year and up 8.5 percent over the last five years.

The number of active educators in the state's Teacher Retirement System fell 4.5 percent between 2011 and 2015, the system's annual report shows. "Active educators" includes

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public school teaching assistants, guidance counselors, administrators and some community college and State University of New York employees.

At the same time, the number of retirees soared: up 8 percent or by 11,600 new retirees.

“The baby-boomer generation is retiring across every segment of our society, and teachers and educators are among those,” said Michael Borges, the executive director of the state Association of School Business Officials. “And that has led to shortages in teachers and other educational professionals.”

The drop in the teacher ranks in New York has been an ongoing concern since the recession in 2008 and 2009, when state aid to schools was cut and layoffs were plentiful.

Schools have yet to fully rebound from the downturn, even as state aid has jumped by 5 percent to 6 percent in recent years.

Districts outside New York City have benefited by student enrollment that has continued to drop. Districts last year had about 8,800 fewer kids than in 2014, to a total of 1.5 million.

But the pace of retirees leaving the teaching ranks has put a strain on a system trying to fill teaching slots, education officials said. It’s a problem across the country: Last year, California had 21,500 teaching slots, but only about 15,000 new teachers, the *New York Times* reported in August.

In New York, there were 280,435 active members in the Teachers Retirement System in 2011; as of June 30, it was down to 267,715. Conversely, the number of retirees jumped from 146,843 to 158,458.

The total number of active educators hit its height in 2010, when there were nearly 286,000 workers on the rolls.

The employees in the state’s largest district fell over the past nine years, the records showed. In Rochester, the city schools had 10 percent fewer staff members than in 2006 and down 18 percent in the Greece schools in the city’s suburbs.

There was a similar drop in Yonkers: the staffing fell from 2,329 in 2006 to 2,052 in 2015, a 12 percent decline.

The retirements are expected to continue to grow: The state’s largest teachers union has estimated that about 20 percent of teachers were aged 49 to 56. In New York, schools are also bracing for a difficult budget battle this year, which will also likely limit their hiring. The state’s property-tax cap for schools in the fiscal year that starts July 1 is 0.12 percent, and voters rarely approve an override at the budget vote each May. While districts can benefit from hiring new teachers at lower salaries than the senior staff who retire, the pace of retirements remains a challenge, school officials said. Gov. Andrew Cuomo has proposed a nearly \$1 billion increase, or 4.3 percent, in school aid for the fiscal year that starts April 1, to a total of \$24.2 billion. Schools want an additional \$2.4 billion.

“With the prospect of a near-zero tax cap and school aid that doesn’t fully make up the difference, I hear from superintendents: They are worried they may have to eliminate some of the positions they were finally able to restore,” said Robert Lowry, deputy director of the state Council of School Superintendents.

The increase in retirees has also contributed, in part, to higher pension costs for districts in recent years.

Coupled with weak returns on Wall Street, the Teachers Retirement System increased the amount districts have to pay into the \$108.9 billion system by 46 percent between 2011 and 2014. There has been some relief of late: Schools this year are required to put in 13.26 percent of payroll to fund the pension system, which is a 24.4 percent decline from last year. The pension system covers schools outside New York City. This month, the pension system said that the costs will decline by 11.6 percent next year, the second year in a row contribution rates have fallen.

The average pension was \$40,689 last year, with 80 percent going to New York residents and the rest who have moved out of state; 76 percent of the system members were women. The average salary is nowhere near the top pensions.

Forty-two retired educators earned pensions that exceeded \$200,000 last year. The highest was \$326,214 that went to James Feltman, the retired superintendent of Commack Union Free Schools on Long Island.

There also were about 200 educators who earned more than \$200,000 in salaries in the last school year, state records showed.

Joyce Bisso, who retired in June as superintendent in the Hewlett-Woodmere district on Long Island, earned \$625,214 last school year, in part through cashing in unused vacation and sick time.

The pension system's membership touches every part of the state.

In western New York, Erie County had 10,291 retirees and beneficiaries and Monroe County had 8,200.

The system included 4,664 active members from Buffalo schools, 3,878 from Rochester and 2,052 from Yonkers, the annual report said.

Overall, there were 2,284 retirees and beneficiaries in Broome County; 1,064 in Chemung County; and 955 in Tompkins County.

In the Hudson Valley, Westchester County had 6,285 retirees, with 3,032 in Dutchess County and 2,272 in Rockland County.

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DEPUTY DIRECTOR, STATE COUNCIL OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS