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In New York's Suburbs, Teachers Feel Budget Ax

By WINNIE HU

Teachers are giving up raises in at least five Long Island districts, including Brentwood, where the 1,400 teachers will also take individual pay cuts of \$900 that will be repaid to them without interest when they leave or retire.

Teachers are facing a wage freeze in 44 of the 69 Connecticut districts that reached new teacher contracts this year, something virtually unheard of in a state where the average raise has been about 2.5 percent.

And in Pelham and Scarsdale, two places in Westchester County that have long been synonymous with well-paid teachers, they voted to reopen their contracts and shave off a portion of their scheduled raises.

Such concessions come amid threats of widespread layoffs, state and local government budget cuts and insistent public calls that teachers make sacrifices in a tough economy.

"Nobody wants to give up money," said Joe Hogan, president of the Brentwood teachers' union, whose members unanimously agreed to give up their raises to prevent hundreds of layoffs and save music, art and sports programs. "Did everybody do this happily? I don't think so. But did they do this because of the times we're in? Yes."

In the past year, cost-saving measures like wage freezes, pay cuts, furlough days and higher insurance premiums have spread from cash-poor metropolises like Detroit and Los Angeles to upscale suburban communities that pride themselves on their schools.

In the New York region, at least 121 school districts — 67 in New York, 34 in New Jersey and 20 in Connecticut — have reported concessions from teachers, according to state education departments, school board associations and advocacy groups.

Nowhere has the call for teacher givebacks been louder than in New Jersey, where Gov. [Christopher J. Christie](#), a Republican, has demanded that every teacher accept a [wage freeze](#) and urged voters last month to reject budgets in districts where they refused. A record 58 percent were defeated.

In New York State, where school budget elections will be held next week, [Long Islanders for Educational Reform](#), a citizens' group, has started Operation Rollback to oppose budgets in districts that did not freeze either teachers' wages or school taxes.

"We deserve a tax break and the kids deserve to keep their programs more than the teachers need a raise," said Fred Gorman, one of the group's founders.

School superintendents and board members say they have been caught in the middle, left with no choice but to reduce teacher payrolls — either through salary concessions or layoffs — to offset sharp revenue drops from state aid cuts, declining property values and resistance to higher taxes. "At a certain point, there's nowhere else to go" to achieve savings, said Michael V. McGill, the superintendent in Scarsdale, whose 460 teachers are among the best paid in the nation, earning \$54,442 to \$135,000. Faced with the prospect of 20 layoffs, a majority of Scarsdale's teachers voted to reopen their contract to shave one percentage point off an expected raise of 3.25 percent in each of the next two years. That would save \$1.9 million.

Agreeing to such concessions is not the same as being happy about them.

John Yrchik, executive director of the [Connecticut Education Association](#), which represents 37,000 teachers and has spent \$300,000 since January on statewide television advertisements and billboards in Hartford, said: "Whenever there have been shortfalls in revenue, teachers have been asked to make up the difference. The climate has not been one of collaboration or respect for teachers."

Schools across New York State could lay off more than 15,000 teachers this summer, according to projections by union leaders and education officials; that includes 6,400 in New York City, where teachers have not agreed to salary concessions (but they also have not received any raises this year, because their contract expired in October). New Jersey is facing more than 9,000 layoffs, and Connecticut, more than 1,000.

Kate Walsh, president of the [National Council on Teacher Quality](#), a nonpartisan advocacy group in Washington, said "it seems like a no-brainer" that teachers' unions were better off accepting salary concessions than risking widespread layoffs. The council tracks teacher contracts in the nation's 100 largest school systems, and it found that 38 had wage freezes in place for this year and 10 others had pay cuts.

But Robert J. Rader, executive director of the [Connecticut Association of Boards of Education](#), noted "a lot of concern, and a lot of anger" over teachers' unions that have steadfastly refused to make concessions even as practically every other school group has.

In Waterford, Conn., the teachers' union rejected a proposal to replace two professional-development days with unpaid

furloughs next year but reversed itself after the district agreed to provide some training at other times, said Randy Collins, the superintendent. In Pelham, N.Y., where schools are the center of town life, some residents began speaking up at school board meetings last year to ask why teachers were not doing more to help.

“I have never heard such accusations against teachers,” said Frank Orfei, a social studies teacher for 32 years. “Many teachers feel like we’ve been made scapegoats of an economic crisis that we didn’t have anything to do with.”

In response, Pelham teachers voted 205 to 26 in favor of taking smaller raises of 2.9 percent and 2.7 percent over the next two years, instead of the 3.5 percent and 3.8 percent in their contract — a savings to the district of more than \$850,000. Mr. Orfei, president of the Pelham teachers’ union, said he was gratified when Pelham’s PTA leaders recently wrote a letter to a local newspaper commending the teachers for their sacrifice.

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