



Testimony

to the

**Senate Civil Service and Pensions Committee
to Discuss Retention and Recruitment for Civil Service
Jobs in New York State, the New York State Pension
Fund, Pensions and Civil Service Benefits**

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Representing more than 675,000 professionals in education and health care
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*Testimony of
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to the
Senate Civil Service and Pensions Committee
Robert Jackson,
Chair
To Discuss Retention and Recruitment for
Civil Service Jobs in New York State,
the New York State Pension Fund,
Pensions and Civil Service Benefits*

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Chairperson Jackson, honorable members of the Senate and distinguished staff, I am Peter Savage, Deputy Legislative Director at New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). NYSUT represents nearly 700,000 teachers, school-related professionals, academic and professional faculty and staff in higher education, professionals in education, in health care and retirees statewide.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about retention and recruitment for all levels of public employment in New York state and the New York state pension systems that our members count on to assist them in their retirement.

EDUCATOR SHORTAGE

Let me begin by saying that public schools, colleges and universities are the center of our communities. The primary objective of our members is to provide their students with the highest quality public education in the nation, but to do that, we will need to take bold steps in the coming years to make sure our schools, pre-k through 12 and public higher education, are fully staffed by well-trained professionals.

It is estimated that New York state will need more than 180,000 new teachers in the next decade, and we have already begun to see the impact of the educator shortage that NYSUT has been warning of for years. We are experiencing a 50.4 percent decline in enrollment in New York state teacher education programs since 2009, increased retirements and shortages in difficult-to-staff subject areas. These grim statistics clearly illustrate that the teacher shortage is no longer looming; it is here.

While COVID-19 dramatically changed all our lives, its impact was particularly telling in the education sector. The health and fiscal crises that followed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the burdens and stressors borne by our public educators. Consequently, we are now witnessing unprecedented levels of educator and employee burnout. People are leaving the profession, and career changers and new entrants into the workforce are choosing other occupations.

We are also experiencing a need for more school-related professionals, including bus drivers. The shortage of teaching assistants and bus drivers directly impacts students and their learning experience. Teaching assistants play an invaluable role in the classroom by providing one-on-one support to students with special needs and helping to manage classroom behavior. The absence of teaching assistants hinders students' ability to learn and their teachers' ability to educate and prepare their students. The school bus driver shortage, which began to emerge during the COVID pandemic, continues to impact students' schedules. School districts have had to reconfigure bus routes in the absence of drivers and substitute drivers, altering the time students are picked up and dropped off. In some cases, students are picked up earlier than in previous years and dropped off later.

We must address this loss in education and public service jobs by promoting the fulfilling work our members perform every day. We must take steps now to ensure that education careers are attractive and sustainable from now on. This means securing safe, welcoming school environments, strengthening labor rights and job protections for teachers and other public employees, fully funding our schools and ensuring every public employee, regardless of their pension tier, can retire with a secure, well-earned retirement.

FIX TIER 6

One of the most significant issues impacting schools and other public employers' ability to retain current workforce members and recruit new public employees stems from the creation of Tiers 5 and 6. It has been over ten years since Tier 6 was added to the state public pension system. In that time, over 100,000 of our members have entered public service with a pension benefit significantly lower than their colleagues in Tier 4.

If you were to look at a side-by-side comparison between the benefits offered for public employees who are members of Tier 4 of the retirement system versus members who are Tier 6 in the same system, you would see a stark difference in the level of retirement security these individuals are working toward.

Under Tier 4, members can retire at age 55 with 30 years of service or retire at age 62, regardless of their years of service, without incurring a pension penalty. However, under Tier 6, members are required to work until age 63 to retire without a penalty, regardless of how many years they worked.

Additionally, Tier 6 members must contribute to their retirement on a sliding scale of between 3 and 6 percent of their salary. This equates to a system of "the more you make, the more you pay," which has the potential to erase raises obtained at the bargaining table. Tier 4 and Tier 5 members pay a static rate to the retirement system, either 3 percent or 3.5 percent, respectively. This provides greater financial stability for Tier 4 and Tier 5 members, allowing them to plan better and prepare for increased expenses over their Tier 6 counterparts.

Other changes under Tier 6 will significantly impact the calculation used to arrive at the final benefit these members will receive in retirement. In fact, members of Tier 6 will see a benefit cut nearly in half because of the pension changes put in place in 2010.

Last year, working with our partners in the Legislature and with Governor Hochul, we made the first substantive changes to the pension system in over 20 years. Consequently, the vesting period for Tier 6 was dropped from 10 to five years. This was a good first step to changing Tier 6, but much more is needed going forward.

Building upon our momentum from last year, NYSUT has begun a campaign to “Fix Tier 6” and rollback the benefit losses that were imposed on our members and other public employees. This is a top priority for our members and will remain so for the foreseeable future. We will continue to look for champions in the Legislature to partner with during the upcoming session to address this retirement inequity and incentivize new applicants to join the teaching profession and the public workforce in general.

TAKE A LOOK AT TEACHING

In addition to implementing provisions to Fix Tier 6, NYSUT seeks to address the teacher shortage through our union led “Take a Look at Teaching” initiative. Through this plan, we are working to develop a robust educator pipeline in New York state to encourage young people and career changers to pursue careers in teaching and to increase diversity in the educator workforce.

At the core of the initiative is the development and expansion of grow-your-own initiatives that cultivate relationships between pre-k-12 school districts, higher education and community partners. These grow-your-own programs provide valuable early experiences for students considering a career in education and help strengthen ties to community groups supporting students and families outside of school.

Grow-your-own programs address the need for more diversity in the teaching workforce by recruiting and supporting students of color — particularly males of color. These initiatives can be especially beneficial in rural communities facing significant recruitment and retention issues.

As we look to address the current educator shortage, New York must support and strengthen pathways for aspiring educators — including new students, career changers and teaching assistants — and remove impediments to teacher preparation and certification.

These are just a few of the issues that must be addressed to prevent the further loss of staff at every level of public employment, including in our public schools, and entice the next generation of educators to enter the teaching profession.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I look forward to continuing this dialogue with you as we move forward to address this important issue.