



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Teacher salary boosts at many ?districts outpace private sector

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Northwest Herald, The (Crystal Lake, IL)-November 13, 2009  
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Over the past three years, the average salaries paid to public school teachers have increased in every school district but one in the McHenry County area.

Four percent. Eight percent. Sixteen percent.

These are just a sampling of the increases, according to the State Board of Education.

To taxpayers weathering a tumultuous economy, these numbers could be hard to swallow.

Teachers unions maintain that salary schedules that award educators with raises based on advanced degrees and their years in the field help teachers stay focused on their students.

"To have a good learning community, you have to have people working together," said Charles McBarron, communications director for the Illinois Education Association. "If every teacher was negotiating his or her salary, it would certainly open the door to favoritism [and] discrimination."

However, few other industries, if any, offer annual step raises to employees. And amid the current recession, fewer employees in the private sector are seeing raises at all.

"We've had millions of people lose jobs, and those who still have jobs have seen their incomes not grow at all or actually decline," said Steve Stanek, a research fellow at the conservative, Chicago-based Heartland Institute think tank. "In government, they're still hiring, and they're still getting raises, and they still have lavish health benefits and retirement benefits."

The Bureau of Labor Statistics keeps data about average annual salaries paid to workers. According to this data, the overall average increase of all Illinois salaries tracked by the Bureau was 10 percent between 2006 and 2008, which is the latest data available. This data includes public school teachers, as well as professionals in the private sector.

The data shows that a number of professions in the state have had smaller increases than 10 percent.

The annual average salary of dental hygienists increased by 3.4 percent between 2006 and 2008, to \$62,810. The average annual salary of a human resources assistant increased by 5.9 percent to \$38,420 from \$36,260 in 2006.

The districtwide averages listed in the state data told a considerably different story at a handful of McHenry County area districts.

DUring the past three years, these salary schedules have caused the districtwide average salaries paid to McHenry County area teachers to increase by as much as 16.4 percent.

According to the State Board of Education, the average of salaries paid in 2006 to teachers in McHenry District 156 was \$56,476. That average swelled by 16.4 percent to \$65,752 this year.

Alden-Hebron had the second highest percent increase between 2006 and 2009: 14.7 percent. The average of salaries paid to teachers increased to \$47,660 in 2009, up from \$41,526 in 2006, according to the data.

The district with the notably highest average teacher salary was Crystal Lake District 155, in which the average increased to \$85,619 in 2009 from \$75,560 in 2006.

However, increases in other districts were more modest.

In Carpentersville District 300, the average teacher salary dropped by less than a percent between 2006 and 2009. It went from \$59,541 in 2006 to \$59,028 in 2009. The increase over three years in Harrison District 36 was less than 2 percent, to \$43,775 this year from \$42,934.

McBarron said the salary schedules and contracts are telling of a community's attitude toward schools, among other factors.

"They're based on what the local school board, what the residents are willing to pay," McBarron said. "The contracts reflect ... the value they place on education."

The contracts also reflect the work of collective bargaining organizations, which devise salary schedules for teachers.

Almost every public school teacher in the state is represented by a teachers' union that negotiates salaries and benefits. Most of these unions or collective bargaining organizations establish salary grids that determine teachers' pay.

Along one axis of the grid are numbers that represent years of teaching experience. On the other axis are levels of educational attainment. Teachers receive raises as they advance from one school year to the next, and as they take classes to advance their education.

It's a process, some say, that awards teachers who may not necessarily be improving their teaching skills.

"Neither of those two factors makes teachers better teachers, but both of those two lead to increases in pay," said Collin Hitt, director of education policy at the conservative Illinois Policy Institute.

The especially large increases represent how different the public school system is from the private sector, he said.

"Teachers do very well compared to other professions," Hitt said. "One of the problems facing human capital in teaching in Illinois and elsewhere is the myth that teachers are poorly paid ... [and] that they have good job stability."

Hitt recommends that perks of being a public school teacher be widely advertised, to convince more people to enter the field. That way there would be a bigger pool of qualified candidates for teaching jobs, in turn possibly improving the quality of teaching and student performance.

However, just as with education, some other industries experienced double-digit increases. Paramedics, for example, saw a 22 percent increase in statewide average annual salaries – to \$36,760 from \$29,930 in 2006. However, these average salaries are significantly less than the averages for teachers in McHenry County.

Beyond the finances of the matter, contract negotiations can polarize a community. Some taxpayers express

outrage over possible increases, whereas others think the increases are insufficient.

“Contracts are really hard to negotiate. A lot of thought, a lot of work goes in to planning for them,” McBarron said.

Negotiations that go awry can lead to strikes, such as the strike that occurred last year in Huntley District 158.

Other districts have had relatively calm relations with their collective bargaining units, such as Johnsbury District 12’s group.

The Johnsbury Teacher’s Organization doesn’t use strong arm tactics to force board members into approving hefty raises, President Paul Hanrahan said. During negotiations with District 12 school board members, JTO leaders instead use a method called “getting to yes.”

“We sit very informally together,” Hanrahan said. “We all have the same common goal, and that’s to provide the best possible education.”

Section: Local

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