

From: Brenda Ververis
Sent: Wednesday, October 27, 2021 11:41 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pensions

As a teacher who is getting close to retirement, this is a highly concerning topic. It is extremely important that the pension fund is funded responsibly and consistently in the years ahead. We were promised this pension when we began our teaching careers. We rely on this pension to help us after we retire by supporting our health care insurance along with our daily living expenses.

Teachers don't make a lot of money as compared to other professions that people attend college for. In order to attract more individuals to become teachers, the pension is a nice incentive. This helps young people make the informed decision about going into this very rewarding field.

Please look at supporting the one time addition to the pension fund from the surplus money that is available to the state along with responsible investments that would keep the State Employees pension at a reasonable rate. We should not be asked to retire later or put more money into the system that the state underfunded for so many years. This is a problem that the state created, it is up to you to fix it, not us!

Brenda Ververis
Learning Specialist
Brookside Primary School
47 Stowe St
Waterbury, VT 05676
802-583-8043

From: Hopper, Kay
Sent: Wednesday, October 27, 2021 7:14 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: FW: Pension Manipulation Testimony

Subject:
Pension Manipulation Testimony

Hello Folks,

Here my testimony on manipulating the pension in ways that cost the State work force.

Having listened to most of the Pension Manipulation meetings with the task force, I was shocked and saddened to see how readily some legislators feel that lowering benefits and raising costs for State employees, was an acceptable way to pay for this shortfall, which I feel is the States burden and error due to years of not resolving this problem.

This is illegal. Our pension benefits are defined at the time of hiring and are a contract with the State. Any change to this contract can only create a better situation for the employee. Otherwise this is a break in contract, which is against the law.

Frankly, the amount of confusion created with all of the different retirement types and scenarios is frustrating. I personally think a huge overhaul, with an extreme simplification is needed and would likely save taxpayers money. You could choose the best retirement package and change everyone over to that package and do away with the ridiculous, and extraordinarily complicated system that has been created.

The bottom line is that civil servants accept the VERY LOW RATE of PAY, because of the retirement option. When legislators think it's acceptable to ask the State employees to accept less for more, it creates a huge trust issue. Many people are leaving the State employment because of this situation, and will continue to, unless this can be remedied in a fair and equitable manner abiding at least to the agreement set forth in the hiring job description and benefit package contract.

Thank-you,

Kay Hopper, EIT | Civil Engineer
Highway Division | Asset Management Bureau
Bridge Deterioration Analysis and Bridge Management System
Suite 201 @ Barre City Place
219 North Main Street | Barre, VT 05641
716-885-3418 home cell: talk, text
802-371-9365 work cell: talk, text, voicemail, e-mail
Kay.Hopper@vermont.gov

From: Celeste Emler
Sent: Sunday, October 31, 2021 7:54 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pension

Dear Pension Task Force,

I have worked in schools in different capacities for the last 25 years or so. At the start of my career I was in positions that didn't offer any pension, sometimes I paid into the support staff pension and now I pay into the teacher's pension plan. I was never asked if I wanted to pay in, but the money was automatically deducted from my pay. No one from the state explained how this was going to work and why it was done. Colleagues assured me that this was the way it worked and that a pension was a good thing to have. They explained that it would be an important piece of my retirement and at the time I was led to believe that the pension was doing well or had always done well.

Part of the problem is that no one really explained the whole pension thing and no one explained that it wasn't doing well, not that it mattered because I had to participate anyway. I feel like I was kept in the dark about it all until last year when it was going to be taken away. Again, you would think that the first people to know would be the people that have been investing in this plan.

I was hoping that at the end of my career that my pension would provide much needed financial support. I don't know how I can make up the difference at such a late point in my life, especially since I am still trying to get my son through college.

My understanding is that the pension isn't financially viable and hasn't been for many years, I think? What it boils down to is that the state wants to get rid of the pension plan. Could the state phase it in by starting with new hires? If that went ahead, what could some options be for them instead of a pension? Are there other options?

I know all of you are in a difficult situation to fix something that isn't a result of your actions and I appreciate your thoughtful attention to our voices.

Thank you,

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Celeste Emler
Second Grade Teacher
Brookside Primary School

From: Ann Fisher
Sent: Sunday, October 31, 2021 6:41 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pensions

Hello,

I teach empathy to our Vermont youth, and have been doing so for over twenty years. Never has this skill been needed as in this pandemic! I love working with our youth, even as we face this rough patch of covid-infused learning. I am 7 years from retirement, and have a carefully crafted retirement plan based on the promised pensions.

I know your group faces some impossible challenges. I don't envy you as you face some very difficult decisions with a system that is very broken. I understand that some of you, politically, face losing your jobs no matter what decisions the group lands on. In that, I think you can understand how the pension decisions will change all of our lives- whether you are the workers who count on a promised amount of money for retirement, or civil servants who count on voters to keep you in your positions.

As a worker close, but not on the verge of retirement, I of course want to advocate for no changes as I do not have time to re-configure my retirement finances. I also know that you understand that as a school counselor, I have dealt with workplace changes such as more work for the same pay. Lack of appropriate offices to do my work; lack of supplies to carry out my teaching, and many system changes that leave me without support. My district faces cutting over 40 faculty in the next few years; the health care that makes up for my low salary scale is also threatened. But I'm also thinking about the other end of the spectrum- we want our Vermont schools to attract quality young teachers, making our schools vibrant places of learning for all of our Vermont youth. Here in lies the terrible problems that you all face.

One issue that I think would be easy to solve is the problem of "salary grabbing". This is where individuals make late-career changes to positions in administration and/or supervisory roles, bumping their salaries up to gain the bigger pensions under the three-year average rule. I also know individuals who have taken on coaching, or other work from the district/school in order to bump up their averages. This is a small thing money-wise in the scheme of this problem, but it should be stopped.

Pensions should be calculated on salary alone- not on added coaching, etc. Also, if one changes jobs in the last 7 years of service, pension should be calculated on a 7 year average for those individuals. This might stop our revolving principal door, where individuals stay for 2 or 3 years then move on, bigger pensions in hand and service short. I don't think those who have taught for many years should have the 7 year calculation.

I also believe changing the rule of 90, requiring teachers to stay longer, will only gut district coffers and bottom-line, will be bad for your youth. They do not need older people teaching, no matter how much professional learning they receive.

Small potatoes, I know. Please remember that school faculty do not have exorbitant salary schedules to start with- no teacher earns millions in this job. No teacher gets rich by staying, year after year, dedicating their careers to our youth.

Thank you for all your careful consideration of all the angles in this gnarly issue. As I've said, there will be no easy answer as I know you know. I appreciate your work in trying to solve the issue at hand. I wish I had the magic answer. Thank you for all you are doing to wrangle with this problem.

Ann Fisher,
School Counselor
Mt. Abraham Union Middle/High School

10/31/21

To whom it may concern,

I am writing this testimony because I am sure I can not be polite if I were to deliver this live to your faces. Hopefully you will receive the message with equal importance as those who can manage their emotions and testify live.

First, let me say that this year has been hard in so many ways, but we teachers continue to do our best for our students, because we are professionals. What makes this year unbearable, is knowing in the back of our heads that at the state level, the process of changing our pensions (that we have been promised, planning for and expecting) is going on. It is utterly humiliating and disgusting that you should be ashamed that you even considered for a moment that teachers and state troopers should pay in ANY way for state mismanagement. It is absolutely debilitating working everyday thinking this is going on, while we manage all the other challenges coming our way.

Having said this, I want to inform you that I, and many teachers that I have spoken to, who have years and years of teaching under their belts, who have positively affected hundreds of students in their years of teaching, and who are getting even more effective at teaching every day, will likely leave the profession if our pensions are changed (in a negative way) by this process. Hundreds of well educated and professional teachers will leave, all at once. Most teachers have no way of "moving up the ladder" in this profession and could have used a change long ago, but we stayed because of the pension. You will lose most of us if you change the pensions you promised us and that we have been planning for. I can not imagine how you will deal with this huge absence of experienced teachers. And worse, I can not imagine how our students will be affected negatively by the absence of teachers, and I guarantee, there will be a substantial absence of teachers.

Find a way to pay for it that does not affect the teacher pensions that we signed up for when we began this profession and have been planning for. Don't make the students and teachers pay for your mistakes. The only acceptable solution to this problem should in no way change our pensions.

Sincerely,
Stephanie Bruning
Teacher since 1996

From: Kathy Olwell

Sent: Friday, October 29, 2021 4:32 PM

To: Testimony

Subject: Pupil Weight Public Comment 10.29.21

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you.

My name is Kathy Olwell. I am a Burlington School Commissioner and a retired social worker, who spent 25 years working with middle school youth. I was hopeful when the weighting study was initiated and hopeful that it would show what we knew was happening for the past 20 plus years. And it did!

The legislature commissioned UVM, Rutgers and the American Institute for Educational Research to conduct The Pupil Weighting Factors Report that has been praised by educational, scientific and mathematical institutions as one of the most equitable education weighting studies done to date in the United States. We, the taxpayers, paid for the study because AOE and JFO did not have the personnel to research and model the weighting formula. However, last week the task force stated to the Coalition that the reason the categorical aid modeling is taking so long to finish is because AOE and JFO have lost personnel and new staff need to be trained. This does not sound reassuring to me and I do not understand why a completed, scientifically credible study is being set aside for an unfinished and unvetted study? That's not how good science nor how good government works. You do not design a study for the answers you want, nor do you take out a portion of the population based on a class or race when you are trying to find an equitable solution. That is what I would call racism, not science nor government looking for equity.

It is imperative that you show the categorical aid proposal as well as the updated modeling of the reports recommendations. If you refute the Weighting Factors Report, the full Legislature must fully understand what it is you are refuting and why. Additionally, you should provide the Legislature with an updated data simulation of both Simulation B.1 of the Weighting Factors Report and Categorical Aid simulation so that comparisons are accurate and the work is transparent.

I hope that you find the civil courage to make the politically difficult choice before you. Please do not play politics with the education and future of Vermont's impoverished and ELL children. They are depending on each one of you to right this inequitable wrong that has burdened education for the past 20 years. Prove to the children of this state, that Vermont does what is equitable and right, even when it may be difficult.

Thank you!

Julie Rollo
State Employee 36 years

Vermont State Employees Retirement System. I started my career with the State of Vermont 36 years ago. The year I became vested, I received this in the mail as my yearly statement.

Dear Member,

“The board of Trustee is pleased to provide you with this personal statement. We thought you would like to know how the system protects you and your family. The statement estimates your actual benefits from the Vermont State Employees Retirement system.”

Thirty-six years later, I am standing here fighting for my protection, my pension that I earned and was promised to me. I have been paying a portion of my gross wages, now currently at 6.65% for the past 36 years. If that money was in the stock market, my portfolio would be worth more than a million dollars today. I would not be standing here today having this conversation.

I have dedicated 36 years of my life to state service and serving Vermonters, I put my faith into the hands of the system that said, “they would protect me and my family”.

I am so dishearten, words cannot describe how I feel. Yet I still come to work every day. I could leave, keep half of my pay and work for a company that respects the work that I do. However, it is serving Vermonters, trying to make this world a better place and contributing to the health and well-being of others that keeps me coming back every day.

The pension was a promise, something I signed up for, agreed to contribute a portion of my wages in exchange of coming to work every day, serving Vermonters to the best of my ability. I knew I could go elsewhere and make more money, but I put my trust into the retirement system, the yearly statements, and the goal of retiring someday. At my age, I can't go back and change the contributions. I can only move forward and there isn't enough time for me to create a different strategy.

So, I ask all of you to walk a day in the life of a State Employee and make your decisions based on the statement that was sent out year after year, 36 years ago.

Dear Member,

“We thought you would like to know how the system protects you and your family. The statement estimates your actual benefits from Vermont State Employees Retirement System”

Julie Rollo

Beatrice David
Montpelier VT 05602

To the Legislative Pension Benefit, Design and Funding Task Force's public hearing.

Here is my testimony: I am turning 60 in December, and I have been teaching for 23 years in Vermont, 22 of those at U-32 in Montpelier.

I am a single woman, divorced, mother of a 25 years old son, now independent.

I am also an immigrant, who moved to Vermont in 1995, and became a US Citizen 2006.

I am a renter, as my financial situation did not allow me to buy a home.

I love teaching French to my middle and high school students, being a TA, and being part of the U-32 community. My work has been rewarding, but challenging, especially with the health issues that come with aging, and with the pandemic.

I look forward to being able to retire at 65. With the current Teachers Pension I will be able to take care of myself financially with a less demanding job, and have more time to volunteer in my community. The proposed changes would require me to work longer, and put my post-retirement financial security at risk.

I have been paying into and planning on this retirement plan my entire career. Making these changes now, when I'm so close to retirement, makes it impossible to adjust.

I hope the task force will bear in mind the teachers and other public employees who are counting on this pension, and remember the state's promise to these workers that, if they gave years of service and paid into the plan, they would have a secure retirement.

Sincerely,
Beatrice David

Memo to the Pension Reform Task Force
11/1/21
Cynthia Browning
Arlington, VT 05250

It is my hope that this task force can formulate reforms to our pension systems that will achieve a sustainable balance of rights and responsibilities between the Vermonters who are state taxpayers and the Vermonters who are beneficiaries. Such a balance must be based on a realistic analysis of the nature of the system and the resources available, which this task force has worked hard to pull together. (Note that I have commented on aspects of the draft report in a previous memo to the Task Force dated 10/13/21). I believe that one important aspect of the reforms put in place must include a provision for risk sharing to adjust to uncertain unfolding conditions in the future.

The reforms must include increased contributions by beneficiaries and reductions in the rate of growth of system costs to the state. The most promising way to reduce system costs seems to me to be to control the rate of growth of the Cost of Living Adjustments in a way that leaves the COLA in place below a certain pension level, but restricts it if pension payments are higher. The same principle could be used in determining increases in beneficiary contributions. There could be insurance provisions that would restore the COLA and reduce the contributions should the systems achieve higher funding levels, and provisions that would put in place further restrictions and higher contribution levels should estimated funding levels decrease again.

Any substantial immediate one time state contributions to these systems should be conditioned on reforms that will control the rate of growth of the ADEC (Actuarially Determined Employer Contribution) like this. It is not financially or politically feasible that the ADEC can continue to grow faster than the state's resources overall. Such a path will result in lower growth in the compensation of active workers and reduced resources to all the operations that state employees and teachers have spent their working lives to support.

The intensity of the call for supporting these systems from the beneficiaries is the very reason why such difficult reforms must be put in place. Vermonters are relying on these pension systems, and we must ensure that they are sustainable in reality. The continual repetition of the call for upholding the state's promises is misguided. These are contracts, albeit special contracts, and contracts are re-negotiated all of the time as conditions change for the parties involved. The primary causes of the unfunded liabilities – low rates of return and demographic changes – were NOT caused by state policy makers. The effects of these changes must be dealt with by the state and the beneficiaries together. The consequences of not reliably addressing the problems of these systems now could mean much more significant hardship for beneficiaries in the future, which should be avoided.

From: Julie Hinman

Sent: Monday, November 1, 2021 1:04 PM

To: Testimony **Subject:** Monday night pension hearing

I'm an elementary teacher mid-way through my career so this decision is very important to me. Madeliene Kunin, Howard Dean, and Jim Douglas all contributed to this deficit, and Dean has publicly said that he does not regret taking money from the pension of teachers. Our pension funds have been mismanaged for years and years. And, how have our local representatives through the years not stepped in to correct this mishandling of our money? The lack of support from our local representatives is very disappointing.

Cutting pensions for the frontline workers of the state is abhorrent when the workers have been contributing money directly from their paychecks, not having a choice to put their money elsewhere.

Our elected officials need to protect the retirement of state workers and educators.

Thank you,
Julie Hinman

The Honorable Marcia L. Gardner, M.S.A.
Richmond, VT 05477

November 1, 2021

Task Force on the Implementation of the Pension Benefits, Design, and Funding
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Dear Committee Members,

I am writing today with some thoughts on the proposed changes and cuts to the Vermont State employees' and teachers' pension plans. I served the State of Vermont for twenty-three years, first as an exempt employee for nineteen years, and then as a State legislator on this committee for four.

As you look to fill the gap in the state's retirement funds, please keep in mind that this is not a new discussion. The debate over whether the retirements should follow the defined benefit plan or defined contribution plan has been going on since I was a new employee. As an exempt employee, I was offered the choice between the two, and because I already had a personal IRA, I chose the defined benefit plan. I wanted a strategy that I could count on – a fixed income on which I could base my retirement budget. In hindsight, I am so thankful I made this decision, as those who felt they could invest more wisely than the State suffered the nearly catastrophic market downturns of 2001 and 2008. The retirements of these people will probably not last them through their lifetimes.

Retirement, as explained by Treasurer Pearce many times, is a three-legged stool. To have a secure retirement requires Social Security, a retirement plan, and personal savings. Those who do not have these often find themselves falling into poverty and relying on food stamps, heating assistance, and rental support. So, we can fund the retirements now and allow these people who have worked so hard for us to live with dignity, or we can force them to beg for assistance. We can pay them now, or we can pay them later, but we are going to pay for them.

The majority of teachers and state employees are women. As we cut their benefits, we discriminate, once again, against women in the workforce. And as we cut retirement benefits, we discriminate against our older Vermonters and future older Vermonters.

I was not a classified employee, but I watched as the VSEA negotiated the Pay Act every two years. It seemed that with every negotiation, the employees gave up something – they lost a health benefit, or the price of insurance went up, or they gave up a vacation day. The Administration has rarely, if ever, said it had the money to fully fund the Pay Act. State jobs are not known for their high pay, but they are attractive because of their benefits package. As these benefits are slowly whittled away, these jobs will become less and less attractive, and the State will have an increasingly hard time filling jobs with qualified people. The entire state is already having a difficult time finding the workforce it needs to fill the jobs that are available.

And just this week, the news announced that wages for American workers jumped the most on records dating back 20 years, as companies are forced to pay higher pay to fill a near-record number of available jobs. Benefits also increased substantially, as companies try to lure employees with additional perks.

Finally, the State made a commitment to its employees and teachers. Unfortunately, due to underfunding and less-than-anticipated returns, the State now finds itself with a large hole in the retirement funds, similar to what happens when one frequently uses a credit card and only pays the minimum due. Eventually, the debt balloons. Does that mean that the user gets to negotiate the debt with the credit card companies? Probably not.

The State has an unexpected opportunity to fill a large portion of these retirement fund gaps. This, coupled with some reasonable adjustments to the system, should get us to our goal of a reliable retirement benefit that is sustainable.

Your former colleague,

M. L. Gardner

The Honorable Marcia L. Gardner, M.S.A.

From: Madeline Cobb
Sent: Monday, November 1, 2021 3:00 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: testimony

Dear representatives,

Before deciding to become a teacher, I worked risking my life as a wildland fire fighter throughout the American West. I worked next to some of, what I thought, were the toughest people one can meet. Then I started teaching in public schools.

Maybe my colleagues can't run a sub 5 minute mile or hike for 24 hours straight, but what they do is herculean in its own right. I was shocked by the sheer grittiness it takes to be a long haul educator in the public school system. This job is humbling and exhausting each and every day.

As teachers we are often asked to be social workers and therapists first, since a child in distress cannot learn. As teachers we are required to be in classrooms with students whose families do not believe in vaccines, risking our health and the health of our families. As teachers we had to reinvent our career and make kids want to come to online school with barely any more prep time than a regular year. As teachers **we stepped up**.

This pension situation is destroying morale. The state trying to pull more from us who have already been pulled thin is insulting. What's more is that the state misused the money that they are asking for from us right now! I'm just curious when the wealthiest Vermonters, or those who own second houses in Vermont will pay their fair share rather than taking it from some of the most dedicated public employees that you all have?

At the end of the day, I do not have to be a teacher. I can easily take my motivation, charisma and work ethic to a different sector in a different state and make two to three times my current wage. **But I want to be a teacher because I know it is a deeply important job that needs to be done by passionate people.** However, with legislators constantly trying to pin my job and retirement security against my community's needs, you will successfully drive me out of the profession. You will successfully drive an entire group of young, motivated educators because we know we can get more respect and more money elsewhere.

So if you actually care about democracy, which cannot function without a well educated citizenry, put your weight in supporting teachers' pensions. Teaching is already one of the top careers for burn out, if you want to keep that up, cut our pensions, watch the quality of public schools fail and have a blast.

I'll be watching,

Maddie Cobb

From: Allison Williams
Sent: Monday, November 1, 2021 10:14 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: POSSIBLE SPAM: Teacher Pension

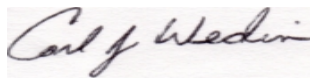
I am writing to express my concern about proposed changes to the State Teacher Retirement Plan. I have been teaching in Rutland City for 28 years and plan to retire in two years. It causes me great anxiety to hear about proposed changes as I approach my retirement. It is so sad that this state/country is still treating teachers with disrespect; that this wonderful profession, which is the backbone of the entire economy, remains at the bottom. I have contributed to the plan with every paycheck for 28 years with the expectation that I would be able to retire with the dignity and respect that I deserve after serving the students of this state for this long. I have accepted pay freezes and step freezes, while still contributing faithfully to the plan. My expectation was that the state was contributing faithfully as well. Was I given the opportunity, over the last 28 years, to invest the money that I contributed in my own way. No I was not. I teach my 3rd grade students daily about integrity, yet here I am writing this email. A pension is a promise. I have lived in this state, own a home in this state, pay taxes and support the economy in so many ways in this state, and raised my daughter in this state because I assumed my pension would be there for me. I would like to stay in this state when I retire. Do what is right!

Allison Williams
Grade 3 Teacher
Rutland Intermediate School
Rutland, VT 05701

My name is Carl Wedin and I have been employed by the State of Vermont for over twenty years as a State Game Warden with the Fish and Wildlife Department. The reason for my message is in regard to the current proposal to change the retirement/pension of state employees. The pension topic has me quite concerned as I am eligible for retirement. However, I do not want to retire yet. I have worked as a state employee for most of my adult life and enjoy what I do. I took the job as a game warden for two reasons. One, because of my interest in the outdoors and law enforcement. Two, the retirement plan. I have been a devoted employee since my hire date. During my career I have been nominated for numerous awards, including Game Warden of The Year four times, and the Lifesaving Award when I pulled an elderly man from a vehicle that had partially went through the ice of Lake Champlain. These are examples of my devoted service to the State of Vermont. As part of my job duties, I deal with people who carry guns and knives on a regular basis and with the current atmosphere toward law enforcement, the outcome of situations is unpredictable. I have been in many dangerous and stressful situations throughout my career. These are just my experiences, but each and every Game Warden is as dedicated and shares these experiences. As many other state employees, I have provided my contributions toward my pension faithfully every pay period and have not weathered from holding my commitment. After all these years of service, in sometimes a thankless role, I now face the possibility of the state not holding up their end of the commitment and possibly penalizing me, and others, because of a large deficit. I realize that this deficit needs to be rectified, but I don't believe it should fall on the shoulders of state employees. I have met and continue to meet the expectations of my employer, and I expect the same in return. I find it irresponsible and disrespectful of the state to think that taking a promise away from their employees is the right answer to fix the large deficit.

I am certain that the process of a new pension proposal has led many state employees to consider retiring early or to inquire with the retirement personnel about their pensions. I feel that there will be many people retiring as a result of this issue, which will cause a huge impact on many state operations and agencies. This will cause the state to lose tons of knowledge, experience and the dedication from loyal employees who have been with the state for 20, 25, 30 years and more. Not to mention those employees who have been on for 15 years or less. They have upheld the same commitment and do not have the option to retire and will be forced to endure undo financial hardship. Each one of them will need to make the hard choice to put their financial survival ahead of their love for their job.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Carl J. Wedin". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.

Lt. Carl J. Wedin