

Teresa Piette - Pension Testimony

January 17, 2022

Dear Members of the Senate Committee on Government Operations:

My name is Teresa Piette. I am a middle school language arts teacher at NCUJHS in the North Country Supervisory Union. I'd like to thank the State Legislative Pensions Task Force for completing their task of studying the deficit in the state pension systems and with the help of Senator Jane Kitchel and Representative Janet Ancel, delivering a proposal to the legislature in a timely manner. I am especially grateful that the OPEB funding was also addressed in the recommendations and will not continue to burden the system further.

I support the task force's recommendations with the caveat that you add a clause to the legislation that will protect state pension benefits so that they can no longer be retroactively depleted, diminished, or underfunded by state government. I have been teaching in VT since 1989 and have witnessed the VSTRS pension system being grossly underfunded through my first decade of teaching despite the fact that I was contributing my fair share the entire time. To be asked this late in my career to take one more for the team by paying more and taking home less in benefits in hopes of fixing the system that neither I nor my colleagues broke was a gut punch I should have anticipated. Having served on the VT NEA's internal pensions task force supporting and advising our task force members, I have an appreciation for the hard work and ultimate compromise that my colleagues and task force representatives Molly, Kate, and Andrew reached with the legislature, but I, like many VT teachers, feel this could have been avoided had the system's coffers been protected from previous legislatures and governors "robbing Peter to pay Paul" to the tune of \$600M.

This can't happen again for the sake of Vermont's education system and our children's future. If we want to attract and hire quality educators, we have to be able to compete with higher salaries and better benefits that surround us throughout New England and New York. Moreover, if we want to retain this talent in VT, we need a sustainable pension system to draw young educators and their families to want to make a life in the Green Mountains. The pandemic and teacher shortage have put enough strain on education in our state. The pension system cannot be the straw that breaks its back. Thank you again for reaching an agreement, and I look forward to a quick adoption of the proposed legislation this session. Still, I ask you to please add language to the pension legislation to protect the system from being robbed again. The future of Vermont education depends on it.

Sincerely,

Teresa Piette
NCUJHS Literacy Interventionist
32-year teacher in VT schools

Janet Dunigan - Pension Testimony

January 18, 2022


Dear Senate Committee on Government Operations;

I am a Vermont state employee who has worked for the Department of Children & Families, Family Services Division for the past 30 years. Twenty-five of those years were as a Family Services social worker who primarily focused on supporting youth with developmental disabilities, extreme mental health needs and females with sexually maladaptive behaviors. It is safe to say that all of these youth had experienced trauma. I can also say that I absolutely loved that job. For the past five years, I have been in the Family Services central office supporting social workers who have youth in DCF custody who require a higher level of treatment.... And I am happy to report that love this job as well. I have reached a point where I would say that I am at the top of my game. I have experiential knowledge of the system and vast professional relationships within and outside of our agency that help me do my job effectively and efficiently.

While I appreciate that the Pension Task Force recommendations are not as extreme as Beth Pierce's original ones, I would ask that you not try and make up for these funds by increasing my contribution. That is just not right. I have seen such a change in our workforce over the past several years. There is a significant reduction in what I would call "lifers", those employees who love the job and who you know will stay until retirement. This job is so extremely hard and the acuity of the youth are so high now that I watch new worker after new worker leave. Those of us with longevity do our best to support and train them, but this revolving door continues. I can honestly say, with what I see, there will not be an abundance of DCF state employees in 20-30 years who will be around long enough to collect a pension. Those who do, should be given your full support. If on those really, really tough days it makes some good workers hang in there, then it is worth it in the long run.

I worry. I worry that there are fewer and fewer of us with the experience and knowledge of our work to do it efficiently and effectively. And I worry that as a result, the state will incur far more costs down the road. Making me and my fellow state employees pay more to do a very difficult job just does not make sense. I have kept my part of the contract that I signed 30 years ago, you should keep up your end as well.

Sincerely,


Janet K Dunigan
Department for Children & Families
Family Services Division
Client Placement Specialist.

Beatrice David - Pension Testimony

January, 16 2022

Beatrice David
166, Elm Street Apt 3
Montpelier VT 05602

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

Here is my testimony:

I am 60, 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 independant.

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 have been paying into and planning on this retirement plan my entire career, and 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 make my post-retirement financial security more difficult, but keeping the retirement age is very important for me.

I hope you can see how the Task Force's hard and serious work has come up with a plan respectful of 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

Paul Cherrier - Pension Testimony

Dear Senate Government Operations Committee,

My name is Paul Cherrier, and I have been teaching for 29 years, the last 24 years in Vermont at Middlebury Union Middle School in Addison County. I want to thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on the very important pension issue.

Prior to today, I have testified publicly three times over the past year—February, March, and November—regarding this issue. My first two testimonies were to protest the proposed changes in the pension system, which I believe would have irreparably damaged the public education system in Vermont. My last testimony was a plea to the Legislative Pension Task Force to make changes “the right way” by **maintaining current benefits for ALL, dedicating significant one time funds to pay down the unfunded liability, and creating a dedicated income source to consistently fund & maintain the pension system.**

The purpose of my testimony today is to thank the Legislative Task Force, praise and endorse their proposal, and encourage you to do the same. I believe this report provides a path forward that requires both parties—the State and the teachers—to contribute more to solve the problem. Although teachers have to contribute more, the benefit is pretty much maintained and this will still make Vermont competitive as it tries to attract talented teachers to address our teacher shortage. The one time payment of \$125 million to help address the unfunded liability and the commitment of \$15 million in recurring extra annual funding helps to make up for the years of underfunding in a way that is fair and reasonable.

In closing, I would just like to emphasize that the proposed solution outlined in the report must be implemented **IN WHOLE** in order to solve the problem. It is a package deal that will only work if **ALL PARTS** are implemented. Please send the plan forward **AS IS** so we can finally solve this problem in a way that minimizes the negative impact on everyone involved.

Thank you

Paul N. Cherrier

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