

## NY public workers retiring at faster rate

ALBANY — Public workers in New York are filing for [retirement](#) at a record pace, up more than 50 percent between the past two years for both teachers and government workers, records show.

Retirement incentives offered last year, the threat of potential layoffs and pay freezes, and an aging workforce contributed to a surge in people packing up and leaving the public payroll.

"You're not adding much to your [pension](#) by hanging around. So all the incentives were to just go," said E.J. McMahon of the conservative Empire Center for New York State Policy.

The number of new state and local government retirees hit a record 30,772 in 2010, according to the state Comptroller's Office. That's a 52 percent increase from 2009, when 20,228 workers retired.

For schools, the number of teacher and administrator retirements was among the highest on record. School retirees soared to 8,423 from 5,501 over the past two school years, an increase of 53 percent, according to the state Teachers' [RetirementSystem](#).

The increase in retirees means governments, in most cases, have had to

manage a smaller workforce because vacant positions were not filled. It also allowed some municipalities and schools to [savemoney](#) and avoid additional layoffs, officials said.

New York State United Teachers, the state's largest teachers union, estimated that schools lost 11,700 teaching positions this school year.

The reductions came amid a \$1.3 billion cut to schools to help close a \$10 billion state budget deficit.

"Many school districts have negotiated early retirement options with their local unions that provide an incentive for the most experienced, most highly paid teachers to [retire](#)," said NYSUT spokesman Carl Korn. "That in turn allows school districts to hire first-year teachers at the bottom of the pay scale, saving taxpayers money."

It's unclear, though, whether the retirements provide significant long-term savings to schools and governments, some

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fiscal analysts said.

Retirees are tapping into taxpayer-funded pensions that have suffered significant losses on Wall Street in recent years, meaning higher costs to governments and schools.

Also, [earlyretirement](#) incentives cost taxpayers in up-front costs, and retirees still receive health insurance along with new hires, said Tammy Gamerman, senior research associate for the business-backed Citizens Budget Commission.

Teachers who took the retirement package in 2010 receive about 60 percent of their final average salary, a calculation of the highest three consecutive years of pay.

The average annual pension in the 2010-11 school year, which ended June 30, was \$38,238, up slightly from \$37,005 the previous year.

Dodge Watkins, who retired in 2006 as superintendent in Haverstraw-Stony Point Central Schools in Rockland, had the 10th highest pension at \$205,286, a Journal News review shows.

Robert Lichtenfeld, who retired in 2007 as superintendent of the Katonah-Lewisboro Union Free Schools, received a pension of \$204,573, the highest in Westchester.

James Hunderfund, retired superintendent in Commack Union School in Suffolk County, received the highest pension: \$316,245 a year.

The state Teachers' Retirement System paid out benefits last school year to 141,633 retirees and had 280,435 active members.

About 1,200 educators received a pension in excess of \$100,000 last year. About half of those are on Long Island, with 160 listed as [retiring](#) from Westchester County schools, 24 from Rockland County.

The state instituted an early retirement deal in 2010 that allowed many government and school employees to receive full pension benefits if they reached age 55 and had 25 years of service.

They had previously needed 30 years of service.

Another retirement incentive allowed some state and local government workers to receive one month of additional service credit for each year of service, which upped their final pensions.

For state workers, the incentives led to a

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wave of retirements.

The Comptroller's Office report showed that retiree payouts by county rose nearly 8 percent in the last fiscal year.

Some counties had hundreds of workers retire, fueled in part by their own early retirement packages.

Westchester County had the fourth largest increase in recipients with 451 new ones, a rise of 9.5 percent.

Donna Greene, spokeswoman for Westchester, said the retirements help the county's finances, but it is still facing major costs in pensions next year.

"Everything is a squeeze on the pension system," she said.

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