

The Perfidy of Illinois' Public Payrolls

Steve Cortes

November 26, 2018

I grew up in Park Forest, Ill., a working-class suburb of Chicago. In my youth, Park Forest was pleasantly middle-class -- a solid community of well-kept lawns, strong churches, and active sports. Unfortunately for my hometown, times have been tough over the years, reflected by a jobless rate about twice the national one and a poverty rate 43 percent higher than the state of Illinois average. As a consequence, Park Forest has lost almost a third of its peak population of 30,000 since the 1970s.

But like many such struggling communities, one class of people has found a way to prosper: public employees. Recently, Fox affiliate Channel 32 and Open the Books detailed the exorbitant pay package for part-time interim school Superintendent Joyce Carmine. She retired in 2017 making \$398,000 annually, the highest-paid superintendent in Illinois, in a community where the median household income is \$44,000. She will receive, courtesy of taxpayers, a pension of just under \$300,000 for the rest of her life. Adding insult to injury, the school district hired this retiree back as a consultant at the rate of \$1,200 per day for a total of 100 days, bringing her pay this year to \$419,000 total for part-time work. Given the modest \$75,000 median home price in Park Forest, her salary equates to 5.5 home purchases...per year.

Is Carmine somehow producing educational miracles to justify such munificence? The answer is no -- testing reveals that only 26 percent of her district's elementary school students meet state standards for their grade level, and a paltry 2 percent exceed those standards. By the time those students matriculate to the local Rich East public high school, only 16 percent meet expectations and a truly shocking 0 percent exceed them.

I wish that this Park Forest absurdity could be chalked up as exceptional profligacy. But here's the reality: While Carmine's pay package and benefits are particularly offensive, especially compared to the modest economic means of those she serves, similar stories abound. For example, in nearby impoverished Ford Heights, school Superintendent Gregory Jackson earned \$340,000 for leading a tiny district of only 437 total students, 97 percent of whom live in low-income households.

All told, over 94,000 total public employees and retirees in Illinois command \$100,000+ salaries from taxpayers, such as the "power couple" of Lewis and Clark Community College, Dale and Linda Chapman, who made a combined \$690,000 last year, or former Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, who earned a \$140,000 pension for his eight years of service in the Illinois legislature.

Such public-sector extravagance has fiscally transformed Illinois into America's Greece – only without all the sunshine, ouzo, and amazing ruins. But before the rest of America grows complacent, consider too that the average Washington, D.C.-area federal employee now has a six figure salary. Moreover, per a recent Cato Institute study, the total pay package (salary plus benefits) for the 2.1 million civilian federal employees now averages \$127,000 per annum vs. \$70,000 for the private sector, and that gap has widened demonstrably in this century. In large part, this taxpayer largesse to government workers explains why, per Forbes, the four richest counties in America all surround the nation's capital.

Both in America and abroad, voters revolt against such entitled political-class elites because working-class citizens know how badly they have been abused by a protected crony class. From overpaid local school administrators in Park Forest, Ill., to regulatory apparatchiks in Washington, our citizens must rein in the benefits and power of government employees in order to reclaim our private sector liberty and prosperity.