

## **Teacher compensation still under fire after West Chicago schools avoid strike**

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Although last-minute wranglings with the school board have averted a strike for some 140 teachers represented by the West Chicago High School Teachers Association, the scrutiny surrounding the talks has raised serious questions about how teachers' pay and benefits are calculated.

As the *Daily Herald* reported on Feb. 15, the new contract comes after the union and school board spent two years at the bargaining table in what has been termed "increasingly acrimonious talks."

At issue was a proposed annual pay hike averaging 4.25 percent – 17 percent over four years – that markedly elevated the previous contract's annual base salary increases, which assigned raises of 2.75 percent to 5.5 percent based on length of service, according to the *DuPage Policy Journal*.

Union members defended the salary bump, sounding the familiar "attract and retain" rhetoric often invoked when public employees' pay is scrutinized.

"It is time for the board to put forth a fair contract that will attract quality teachers to WeGo, retain quality teachers at WeGo and reward quality teachers for their loyalty to WeGo," Brian Wheeler, a special education teacher, was quoted as saying in the *Daily Herald*.

But some observers say union meddling in negotiations of public-sector employee contracts hurts taxpayers.

Chris Edwards, an economist with the Cato Institute, said in an email to the *Chicago City Wire* that in his opinion, labor unions ought to be banned in the public sector.

"Collective bargaining is a misguided labor policy because it violates civil liberties and gives unions excessive power to block needed reforms," Edwards wrote in a Cato Institute official position paper.

The position paper documents the rise of unions in public-sector employment since 1955, arguing that law enforcement, crisis responders and other government services have virtual monopolies, making it impossible for consumers to select non-union shops for those services.

"As for collective bargaining in general, it gives unions the exclusive right to speak for covered workers, many of whom may disagree with the views of the monopoly union," Edwards said. "Furthermore, collective bargaining is inconsistent with the right to freedom of association.

Individuals are prevented from dealing directly with their employer and bargaining for their own raises.”

A comparison between the existing contract’s terms and private-sector salaries and benefits has raised questions about how much bang taxpayers are getting for their buck.

According to the *DuPage Policy Journal*, teachers work 175 days per year, compared to 255 for the average private-sector employee, earning base salaries of between \$48,433 and \$99,638. Adjusted for a full year of work, that translates into \$70,753 for a freshly minted instructor to \$145,186 for a teacher who earned a master’s degree and has at least 23 years of experience.

The report also noted the raise request came after a poor showing on test scores among the students. As published in the *Journal*, a whopping 64 percent of the West Chicago High School sophomores failed a 2017 statewide dry-run of the SAT exam. The SAT is used by some colleges to help gauge a student’s readiness for higher education, according to a USA Today.com report.

“If Chicago public school teachers received pay-for-performance, they probably would not be getting 17 percent raises,” Edwards told the *Wire*. “That’s an aggressive demand, even for an entrenched labor union.

“Teachers using pressure tactics should not be able to hold hostage the education of Chicago children.”