

RTM to Vote Monday on Teachers Union Contract — the Biggest Part of the Town's Next Three Budgets

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Date : February 26, 2017



Two Representative Town Meeting committees have each voted to recommend that the full RTM, when it meets Monday night, approve the teachers union contract.

The proposed three-year Darien teachers union contract will be the single largest expenditure made by the town — not just for the coming fiscal year, but for the two that follow it, as well. Once the RTM vote is taken, that expenditure of tens of millions of dollars a year will be locked in, essentially, unavailable for either the Board of Education or RTM to change for three years.

Most of the town's education spending is on teacher's salaries, and town education spending is close to 70 percent of the entire town budget. The RTM's vote will be the final one, putting the contract into effect starting July 1 and ending June 30, 2020.

Top school administrators and several members of the Board of Education answered questions about the contract on Tuesday at a joint meeting of the RTM's Education Committee and Finance & Budget Committee.

They also briefly discussed the the four-year contract for the school district's administrators union, which would begin at the same time as the teachers union contract but end a year later. The part of the meeting

about the labor agreements lasted about 20 minutes and involved hardly any mention of actual costs, including the overall cost to the town.

School administrators and Board of Education members did say, however, that they looked at costs and at least in some cases compared various options — they just didn't say what those costs were and in all but a few instances, committee members didn't ask.

See also:

- **SIDEBAR:** [Memorandums Given to RTM on 2017-2020 Contracts for Teachers & Administrators Unions](#) (Feb. 26)
- [Board of Ed OKs Biggest Item in the Town Budgets for Each of the Next Three Years](#) (Nov. 23)
- [Stevenson to Lawmakers: 'Don't Balance the State Budget on the Backs of Local Property Taxpayers'](#) (Feb. 25)
- [Board of Ed OKs \\$98M Budget with 4.5% Increase \(2.34% from Loss of State Aid\)](#) (Feb. 15)
- [Selectmen Pass \\$46.8M Town Budget Proposal, Cut \\$450K from Town Administrator Spending Plan](#) (Feb. 13)

For Darien public school teachers, all of whom are in the Darien Education Association (the name of the teachers union), wages will rise an average of 3.4 percent a year. That average includes a general wage increase (GWI) and step increases (raises based both on the degree a teacher has and on the number of years worked in the school district — see the charts from the contract published with this article).

Wages for Darien public school teachers in the first year of the contract will range from \$46,467 for a teacher in the first step (called Step 4) with only a bachelor's degree to \$116,146 for a teacher in the 19th step and with a doctorate. (After the 19th step, there are no more steps, and the teacher will only get the general wage increase.) By the third year of the contract, those minimum and maximum numbers will be \$47,401 and \$119,244.

"I just wonder how we got 3.4 percent," RTM Member Jay Hardison said during the meeting. "There's been no uptick in inflation."

Jack Davis, chairman of the Finance and Budget Committee, said that when labor contracts are negotiated, district officials look to see how other school district labor contracts have increased wages. He said New Canaan, which pays its teachers more than Darien does, also negotiated a 3.4 percent increase in its most recent contract.

When he looked at what teachers in other school districts were getting, Davis said, "they were all in the 3.2, 3.4 [percent range]."

Michael Harman, chairman of the Board of Education, said district officials looked at contracts negotiated with similar school districts in the "DRG" (pronounced "dirg") — DRG stands for District Reference Groups that Darien belongs to.

[District Reference Group A](#), which the state Department of Education set up to group districts into comparable sets with similar student bodies and similar community tax resources, is made up of Darien, New Canaan, Wilton, Easton, Weston, Westport, Ridgefield, Redding and District 9 (for Joel Barlow High School, serving both Easton and Redding).

Without any general wage increase, Board of Education Member Elizabeth Hagerty-Ross said, teachers would still get step increases of about 2.6 to 2.8 percent a year.

"The actual step itself — the step grid — moves us pretty high," Hagerty-Ross said. "We were able to renegotiate that as well, so next negotiation we're going to start it at a little lower level."

Darien has recently had the lowest overall wage increases in comparison with other school districts, Hardison said, but this time school district officials are saying the town has negotiated a contract in about the middle of the pack. "How hard do we fight on it?" he added. "That's what I want to know."

Dan Brenner, the superintendent of schools, who was standing in the back of the very crowded Room 108 in Town Hall, replied that the district had negotiated various favorable aspects of the contract that saved quite a bit of money, countering a lot of the costs of wage gains. As other officials did, he didn't give figures to back up his statements.

Significant Savings Outside of Paychecks

"There's more than just salaries" in the contracts, Brenner said. "There are other places to gain significant savings." He said there were two provisions that result in significant savings for the town: Raising the minimum number of classes teachers teach from 4 to 4.5 a day (on average through the school year) at Middlesex Middle School and in what the district spends on health insurance.

As teachers leave their jobs in the school district, some won't be replaced, Brenner said.

"We have achieved some significant gains in insurance," Brenner said. "Our insurance plan benefits the town better than any other town in the DRG. [...] We [...] achieved significant savings, which far outweigh the 3.4 [percent], which in essence was the benchmark number that most of the districts were getting."

There were also some smaller savings, he said, including reducing the number of personal days teachers can take with full pay from five to three.

Hardison asked what the average number of classes teachers will teach in the DRG. Brenner said he doesn't know exactly, but 4.5 to 5 is typical. Hardison replied that while the salary increase was average for the DRG, Darien teachers still will be at the low end for amount of classes teachers will teach.

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"I would agree with you," Brenner said. "I would like to get there." But getting concessions from a union that has an established past practice is a difficult thing to reverse in one contract. It often takes at least one more contract negotiation to get a big concession like that, he said.

Michael Feeney, director of finance and operations for the school district, said that to save on health insurance costs, the district will save money by increasing the premium that teachers pay. The proposed contract, as posted on the town website, says the premium will increase from 20 percent to 21 percent in the last year of the contract.

The current health plan for teachers costs \$6.8 million a year, with teachers themselves picking up 20 percent of the premium costs, Feeney said. He said the monthly bill for a union member is \$817 for an unmarried teacher, \$1,724 for a two-person household and \$2,158 for a family.

In two separate votes the Finance & Budget Committee voted the same way — 12-0, with one abstention (from Bert von Stuelpnagel) — to recommend to the RTM that it approve each contract. The Education Committee also voted the same recommendation with large majorities in favor.

Bottom Line Not Public, RTM Options Limited

No committee members asked the total cost of the two union contracts or the total of the increased costs of either contract, and no one in the school district management or Board of Education gave the committee those amounts, nor were any documents about the contract that might have been sent to committee members mentioned at the meeting, nor were any such documents posted on the town government website with the meeting agenda.

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A check of the Darien Public Schools website on Sunday could find no posted documents on either contract and no documents showing the cost of either contract. The superintendent's proposed 2017-18 budget is on the website, but apparently not the budget as approved by the Board of Education.

(Two memorandums regarding the contracts were posted with the RTM Warning [that is, agenda] on the town government website, and they've been republished on Darienite.com — but those memorandums, which had also been given to the Board of Education late last year, mentioned no costs to the town.)

So there appears to be no information published by town officials on the cost of the proposed contracts — the biggest single town expense for the next three fiscal years — as of the day before the RTM votes on them.

When the RTM votes on the budgets for the next three years and sets the tax rates, these and other town union contracts will essentially be off the table for consideration, since Monday night's RTM meeting will be where the decision will be made on what to spend for the contracts.

School district administrators and RTM members have said in previous years that while the RTM could later cut the overall education budget, breaking the contract involves state regulated arbitration that the town is likely to lose. Unions also have advantages in state arbitration proceedings if the town rejects the contract and proposes renegotiating it.

Video of the Meeting

The two contracts are discussed in the first 21 minutes:

[RTM Finance & Budget and Education Comm's 2-22-17](#) from [Darien TV79](#) on [Vimeo](#).