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Board of Education Approves 3-Year Teachers Contract Increasing Cost \$1.5 Million Each Year

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Darien's 484 or so public school teachers would get an average pay increase of almost 12 percent over the course the next three fiscal years under a contract recently approved with no public discussion by the Board of Education.

The new contract will increase the town budget by roughly \$1.5 million in each of the next three fiscal years, very roughly 1% of the next three town budgets. The teacher's contract now costs the town roughly \$50 million.

The teachers have already ratified the contract, which is officially estimated to cost the town \$4.7 million more in its final, third year than the town now spends on its current contract, although the official estimate is artificially high.

A significant feature of the new contract is a concession by the union to have teachers at the secondary level (the middle school and high school) take on a larger number of classes: They currently teach 4.5 classes at a time. That would go up to 5 classes starting in the 2020-2021 school year, an 11 percent increase in work load.

The result of the extra workload could mean a gradual reduction in staff or smaller class sizes or a combination of both, unless the student population increases. Since some teachers already teach five classes and are paid extra money to do so, the district won't have to pay that out about \$200,000 a year, according to Board of Finance member James Palen.

Palen said that estimate is very rough: "The actual savings could be less, or they could be more."

The town would save that much starting the first year, he said, and it amounts to a cut of 0.2 to 0.3 in the percentage increase of the cost of the contract, he said.

According to a memo from district Finance Director Richard Rudl and Human Resources Director Marge Cion, the cost of the contract and the percentage increase in wage costs to the town are officially estimated at:

Year 1 (FY 2020-21): \$1,544,824 or 3.71%

Year 2 (FY 2021-22): \$1,568,271 or 3.63%

Year 3 (FY 2022-23): \$1,606,170 or 3.59%

The total increase in cost to the town would be \$4,719,265 over this year's budget by the third year of the contract, according to the memo.

Some of the Complexities

The percentages noted in the memo are all percentages of the current year's expected spending on teachers' wages. To get the total, actual estimate of wage increases year-to-year, the percentages need to compound, Palen said in a presentation to other members of the Board of Finance last week. Palen was a member of the

district's negotiating committee. Compounded, the three years of the contract amount to 11.34% more than current spending.

(None of these percentages takes into account the \$200,000 in savings from no longer paying extra money for teachers who now teach extra classes.)

Palen also said that the official cost estimates are higher than actual expectations: They are based on an artificial assumption — that the entire teaching staff won't have any resignations or retirements from now until the end of the contract.

When a teacher with more experience leaves and is replaced by one with less experience, the new teacher isn't paid as much. The cost estimates are a uniform, traditional way that school districts can compare their costs with other districts and past contracts, he said.

Health Insurance

Salaries make up 85 percent of the contract costs. Health insurance takes up much of the rest, Palen said.

Darien teachers already pay 21 percent of their health insurance costs, the highest amount paid in the "District Regional Group A" — districts similar to Darien that the state and school officials compare the town to, he said. That high percentage is also more than other school districts near Darien, and that wouldn't change with the new contract.

Active Negotiations, Quiet in Public

Palen's description of the contract is the only extended description of it yet made in public. The school district memo, included in the documents made public with the Nov. 12 Board of Education meeting, was 1 1/2 pages long.

When the school district put together its negotiating committee, it included Superintendent Alan Addley, not long after he was hired by the district, along with Cion and Rudl (the authors of the later memo mentioned above), Palen as a member of the Board of Finance, and four members of the Board of Education. Those eight members faced 10 members of the Darien Education Association, the union representing teachers, and both sides had legal counsel.

The negotiations went on for about three months, Palen said. Teachers ratified the contract, and the Board of Education then approved it unanimously on Nov. 12.

How Teachers Can Increase Their Salaries

"The minimum [starting wage] in Darien is \$54,125" a year, for a full-time teacher, Palen said. Teachers can expect to double that salary before they retire, he said.

The individual pay of a Darien teacher depends on a number of factors, including years of experience and level of education. They can get relatively small amounts of money in stipends for helping students with extracurricular activities like clubs or sports.

Teachers can increase their education level by taking college courses during their employment and increase their wages.

A total of 53% of Darien teachers have master's degrees and 24% have master's degrees as well as 30 credits of classes. A total of 94% have a master's degree and some credits, Palen said.

Each year a teacher is employed in the school district, the teacher gets a "step" increase in wages of 0.5%. Teachers generally start at Step 3 and continue to Step 19, when the steps end. Wage increases coming from new contracts further increase the wages paid in each step, making the salary increases greater.

A total of 28 percent of Darien teachers are at the highest step, which gets a 1.5% increase. After that, there are no further step increases in wages. For teachers who have already reached the highest step, further salary increases depend largely on wage increases in new labor contracts.

"Generally speaking, all of these steps are between 4 and 5 percent," when all is said and done, Palen said.

Comparison With Other School Districts

"We have teachers that are paid fairly equivalent — if you look at years of experience — compared with other towns," Palen said.

Darien's costs for teacher's wages are somewhat lower because it has a smaller proportion of teachers at or above the top step, he said.

Palen referred to a document put together by the school district's contract negotiation lawyers that, he said, shows Darien's wages at the highest step are a bit above what Ridgefield and Wilton are paying "and consistent with others in our area," he said.

He said that according to the document, wages in selected Massachusetts school districts were also consistent with Darien's, although wages in selected Westchester County districts were higher.

Palen's presentation runs from about 14:36 to 45:28 on this Darien TV79 video of the Nov. 19 Board of Finance meeting:

Wider Perspective:

Where the Contract Fits in Darien's Upcoming Budgets and Taxes

First Selectman Jayme Stevenson [said recently](#) that with various town contractual costs like the labor agreement, taxpayers should expect to pay higher tax bills:

- “The biggest message that I heard during this last election cycle is ‘Please don’t raise my taxes’ and [...] I will go out on a limb and say it’s impossible to do with the contractual obligations that we have, both on the town side and the Board of Education side,” Stevenson said.
- “Certainly the Board of Education is the primary driver of mill rate increases in town,” she continued.
- At another point, Stevenson said: “From a big-picture perspective, we have to remember that folks are probably really just digesting the full impact of not being able to deduct their state and local taxes —and for many, property values are down. [...] So it’s our job to remember all that when we’re looking at our spending plan. People’s ability to pay certainly isn’t what it used to be in my opinion.”

Board of Finance Chairman Jon Zagrodzky said last week that with assessed values of high-end homes going down, taxpayers in many less expensive homes in town could face higher taxes even if town spending stayed the same.

Labor contracts with the Darien Education Association, the biggest union in town government or in the town itself, are the biggest single spending item in the town budget (making up about a third of it each year, very roughly \$50 million).

Roughly another third of town spending consists of the rest of the school district budget, and the last third includes all other town spending, which is overseen by the Board of Selectmen and Board of Finance.

But teachers union contracts only get voted on twice in public: once by the Board of Education, which unanimously approved it at its Nov. 12 meeting, and then by the Darien Representative Town Meeting. Other town spending also goes to the Board of Finance, and the non-education part of the budget goes through the Board of Selectmen as well.

The Representative Town Meeting is expected to vote on the contract in January, RTM Finance and Budget Chairman Jack Davis said last week. If the RTM rejects the contract, it goes to a state arbitration panel. If the RTM doesn't vote on the contract, it gets automatically approved, under state law.

Your Tax Dollars in the Dark:

In Darien, the Biggest Spending Item Traditionally Gets the Least Public Discussion

- The teachers contract, the biggest spending item in Darien's budget, is typically given the least amount of public deliberation by elected town officials, although there is some public discussion. A few members of the public at a recent Board of Education meeting spoke in favor of the contract.
- This year, the Board of Education approved the contract without public discussion. "It was a great process and a great discussion," board Chairperson Tara Ochman said before asking for a vote on Nov. 12. The board spent less than 45 seconds on the matter, just enough for a unanimous vote. (At a Nov. 19 Board of Finance meeting, board member James Palen gave a detailed description of the contract's provisions.)
- Like the Board of Education's Nov. 12 meeting, the full Representative Town Meeting has in the past often approved teachers contracts with little public discussion, although RTM committees have always discussed the contract, and committee chairs have presented brief oral reports. Deliberation does take place in private: The Board of Education frequently has meetings in (nonpublic) executive session in which it can discuss subjects like the labor contract. But this year it didn't follow up with any public discussion of the contract at a board meeting.
- The board's chair will typically speak before the RTM and the chair and sometimes superintendent will discuss the contract with RTM education and budget committees.

Here's the Nov. 12 Board of Education meeting in which the board spent less than 45 seconds (from about 1:43:32 to about 1:44:15) voting to approve the budget. Toward both the beginning and the end of the meeting, there was some public comment from people in the audience who spoke favorably about the contract:

[Board of Education 11-12-19](#) from [Darien TV79](#) on [Vimeo](#).