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In Case You Missed It: Teachers Must Do Their Share

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Editorial: Teachers must do their share
Philadelphia Inquirer
Posted on Mon, Mar. 29, 2010

New Jersey public school teachers face a difficult test: accept salary freezes and contribute to their health-insurance costs or face layoffs.

Gov. Christie last week urged local public school employee unions to reopen their contracts and freeze salaries for a year. It is a difficult but reasonable request given the state's \$11 billion deficit on a roughly \$30 billion budget.

Christie says everyone has to share the pain. The governor is taking the difficult but necessary steps.

A handful of unions have agreed to renegotiate part of their contracts to save jobs. But many, led by the powerful New Jersey Education Association, oppose the effort. The state can't mandate changes in the union contract. But if the union leaders resist the wage freeze, many of their members may lose their jobs. That's shortsighted.

Educators have typically received annual raises of more than 4 percent. It's fine to reward teachers, but the steady pay hikes have translated into high property taxes that many can't afford.

Having school employees contribute to their health insurance is also a reasonable request. This is something most employees in the private sector have been doing for years.

School employees are going to have to contribute in the coming years anyway. Under legislation signed by Christie last week, state workers will be required to pay at least 1.5 percent of their salaries toward health coverage when their current contracts expire.

When the economy recovers, the unions can negotiate to lift the salary freeze. Even with union concessions, it will take more belt-tightening to avoid cutbacks. Districts need to carefully scrutinize spending and find more ways to save.

A report by the Cherry Hill Reform Committee found that the school district could see up to \$7.8 million in annual savings by switching to a state health insurance plan. Other recommendations may require legislation, but offer a starting point.

Christie and Sweeney, like many in New Jersey, seem to agree that the state is taxed out. The teachers' unions (and the wealthy) should share in the sacrifice.

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