



## Springfield's costly and broken pension promise

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In viewing the challenge over public pensions in Illinois, it is easy to get pulled into a pro-teacher/anti-teacher debate over the issue that in the end serves only to polarize the community.

Certainly, some of the numbers are staggering. One former superintendent in the suburbs drawing a pension at age 59 of \$238,882 a year for the rest of her life. Another, also 59, right behind with an annual pension of \$237,195 while working as a superintendent in Arizona, where he makes another \$205,000.

All told, 131 former educators in Illinois draw annual pensions of \$150,000 or more.

Given early retirement and average life expectancy, those 131 can expect to receive seven-figure payouts in retirement - some, many millions of dollars.

It is helpful to keep in mind those are the top numbers, and they are reserved almost exclusively for administrators. And in most cases, they are from the suburbs. The pay downstate is not nearly so high.

Few retired teachers approach those pension figures. That's not to say retired teachers are suffering; clearly, the pension system is a generous one, especially for teachers who worked in the suburbs. It provides for a very comfortable retirement beyond the reach of many in the private sector. But for most, not quite the lavish one some retired superintendents enjoy.

But here's a central point that no one should miss: Teachers are not at fault for the crushing shortfall in the state's pension program.

Teachers, after all, did not promise the pensions. They merely worked in good faith and along the way, contributed a sizable part of their incomes to the retirement fund.

True certainly, their unions combined political clout with labor strength to lobby hard for the pension system we have today. But who, after all, said yes to this union muscle? Who, after all, acquiesced?

Are the pensions too generous to be sustained? That's a valid and important question, but let's not let it distract us from the central question of accountability.

Years ago, as described today by Senior State Government Editor John Patterson in the first installment of our On Guard series on the Public Pension Time Bomb, the state mandated the retirement system for public employees.

In other words, the state promised the pensions.

And then for years, the state robbed from the fund that was to fulfill that promise.

For years, the state put off its debt, borrowed more, ignored the growing problem - Democrats and Republicans alike.

Today, we're in an awful mess - a public employee pension system only 38.4 percent funded, \$78 billion in debt.

The solution will be painful all the way around. In all likelihood, it eventually will include some combination of reduced pension benefits, general state program cuts, tax increases and polarizing acrimony. Common sense forecasts all that.

And who's to blame?

Not teachers.

No, it's the people we send to Springfield and have sent to Springfield these past several years.

The governors and legislators who did not mind the store, who time after time were shortsighted, taking the easy way out on tough decisions.

In the process, they betrayed our state's teachers. But not just them. They also betrayed the taxpaying public. And worse, they betrayed our progeny too.