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School districts review tuition deals for out-of-district staff

Hundreds of Lower Hudson Valley teachers who don't live in the districts where they work are allowed to send their children to those schools for free. It's a benefit that has been on the books in certain school districts for decades, but falling tax revenues and reduced state aid have some school officials re-examining those policies to trim costs.

Mount Vernon officials suspended their tuition-free policy for this school year, while in White Plains, North Salem and Ardsley the policy is either under review or the subject of contract negotiations.

Several other districts, including Harrison, South Orangetown and Brewster, have eliminated the policy, though some students still attend their schools under a grandfather clause. In Katonah-Lewisboro, the policy is in the process of being phased out.

"We recognized that per-pupil spending was increasing, and we wanted to be fiscally conservative with attention to taxpayers," Brewster Superintendent Jane Sandbank said of her district's decision.

The Journal News surveyed the 54 public-school districts in Westchester, Rockland and Putnam about their policies for employees' out-of-district children. In some cases, the newspaper filed Freedom of Information requests.

Of the 53 districts that responded, 18 said they either never had such a policy or have eliminated the benefit, including seven districts in Rockland and four in Putnam, along with Mount Pleasant, Ossining and Yonkers in Westchester.

The Peekskill School District did not respond to repeated requests for the information.

The survey revealed that at least 681 students of school employees throughout the region attend districts where their parents work but don't live. Some districts, including Rye, said they didn't know exactly how many students attended their schools under the policy.

In most cases, the policies or contract provisions are given only to teachers and not the rest of the district staff.

Tim Hoefer, operations director at the Empire Center for New York State Policy, a fiscally conservative advocacy organization, said the free tuition should be considered part of a **teacher's** compensation.

"When we're looking at data like this, it's the taxpayer that has to look at this and ask, 'Am I OK with this?'" Hoefer said. "The more that these kinds of issues are brought to light, I think you're going to see the rates of school board election participation go up."

Some school officials maintain that the free or reduced tuition for employees' children does not cost their districts extra money because children are accepted only if there is no need to hire a new **teacher** or open a new classroom.

That's the policy at the Scarsdale school district. It has the region's highest number of **nonresident** staffers' children attending for free — 80 students — though the district doesn't allow other out-of-district students in, even if they are willing to pay the full tuition rate of \$25,656 a year.

That figure comes from the state Department of Education, which sets the tuition rates each year for every public-school district in the state even if they don't accept any out-of-district students.

The rates in the Lower Hudson Valley range from \$4,301 a year for an elementary student in Yonkers to more than \$100,000 for a special-education high school student in Bronxville.

Several local school officials said those figures do not mean that eliminating the policy would result in millions of dollars in savings. The expense isn't high because there are few students who take advantage of it and they are spread throughout the district, said Victoria Presser, Scarsdale's school spokeswoman.

"Much of a district's investment in education is a function of its overall scale, not of each individual student," Presser said. "For example, heat, light, gasoline, building upkeep, the number of vehicles needed to maintain grounds and so on, all are pretty much what they are regardless of whether a district serves 4,600 or 4,700 students."

North Salem Superintendent Kenneth Freeston said that even if the 17 children of staffers were to withdraw from his district, there would be no reduction in staffing. Freeston also said that teachers with **nonresident** children in the schools are an asset.

"They will stay involved and be coaches or after-school activity advisers rather than return to their hometowns and participate in their hometowns' musical or after-school activities," Freeston said.

Eastchester High School physics **teacher** Ed Gruber said he took a job in the district because of the **nonresident** tuition benefit. Gruber, 41, lives in the Bronx. He said that neither he nor his wife worked in the Bronx when their children were very young, so dropping them off and picking them up from school would have been problematic.

"What it does is keep me around for extra help instead of running out," Gruber said. "There are some teachers that, literally, as soon as the contract time is up, have to run to pick up their kids."

Gruber has three of his children in Eastchester schools, and he's involved himself in activities that they like in order to spend more time with them. He's the adviser of the high school's ski club because his oldest daughter likes the sport, and he's also the scoutmaster of the Scarsdale Boy Scouts Troop 2 because his middle-school son is in the troop.

"If I didn't work here, I'd probably be the master for a troop in the Bronx," Gruber said.

Eastchester High School junior Nick Perrone, 17, the troop's senior patrol leader, said that having Gruber volunteer outside the classroom creates a different relationship with students that enhances learning.

"I think that's really positive for the community," said Perrone.

Some districts, including Ardsley, Mamaroneck and New Rochelle, offer various reduced-tuition fees. Briarcliff Manor places a 10-student limit on its policy while Katonah-Lewisboro employees who were hired after 2000 do not receive the benefit.

Pat Puleo, president of the Yonkers Federation of Teachers, the region's largest teachers union, argued teachers aren't necessarily getting a free ride for their kids. Puleo said that teachers unions likely gave up something of equal or greater cost to taxpayers to get free **nonresident** tuition.

"It doesn't add a substantial cost to the budget, yet it's a benefit to the teachers," Puleo said.

Statewide, the New York State School Boards Association does not keep figures on how many districts offer free or reduced tuition to employees.

Barbara Bradley, deputy director of communications and research for the school boards association, agreed that tuition-free policies might not cost some districts extra money since they already have teachers in place and open classrooms.

"A lot of this would depend on the size of the school," Bradley said.

Mount Vernon resident Derickson Lawrence is a member of the Westchester County Homeowners Coalition, a group pushing for reform in how school districts craft their budget and assess property taxes. Lawrence said he appreciated that Mount Vernon school officials are trying to save money by suspending the **teacher** benefit, but he

questioned how much money will be saved.

"Any cuts help the taxpayer. However, you want to prioritize those cuts and have the cuts be real savings," Lawrence said. "My concern is that you're cutting around the edges. You're cutting a perk that will bring competitive folks to the district without gaining the savings for it."

Nonresident pupils of employees

At least 681 students in the Lower Hudson Valley attend school districts where their parents work instead of where they live. This chart shows the districts with the highest numbers of such **nonresident** students.

Number of District students

Scarsdale 80

White Plains 65

Mamaroneck 56

Pelham 46

Mount Vernon 45

Chappaqua 40

Bronxville 25

Source: Journal News out-of-district survey.

Data analysis by Cathey O'Donnell, The Journal News.

Caption: Ed Gruber of The Bronx, center, a scout master of Boy Scouts Troop 2 in Scarsdale, talks with Cub Scouts den leaders Diana Kiel, left, and Seth Ross of Scarsdale during an event for Troop 2 at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Scarsdale on Jan. 6, 2011. Gruber is a physics **teacher** at Eastchester High School, and his children attend school in the district.

Xavier Mascareñas / The Journal News

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