

# The REPORTER

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**CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER left, Rutland Northeast teachers Allison Dwinell, Kenny Cifone, Amanda Stockwell, Laura King and Kevin Duggan at the Red for Ed event in Brandon Friday.**

Photo provided

## Teachers protest pension reform

### Legislature punts issue to summer study committee

By LEE J. KAHRs

**BRANDON** — Roughly 30 public school teachers and community members lined Brandon's Central Park late afternoon Friday, holding signs and wearing red.

The "Red for Ed" demonstration was planned to protest a proposal to revamp the state's pension system before Vermont House Speaker Jill Krowinski (D-Burlington) postponed the plan Friday morning for further study.

Organizers weren't sure how many educators would show up to the protest given the news Friday morning that Krowinski would instead establish a task force to study Vermont's ever-growing pension debt. The retirement system is projected to add another \$600 million if left unchecked, according to State Treasurer Beth Pearce.

Despite unseasonably cold weather and the pending holiday weekend, teachers representing

all of Otter Valley Unified Union District schools came out Friday to participate in one of the "visibility events" that took place statewide to raise awareness about what the VT-NEA teacher's union considered a threat to public teachers' pensions.

**"We have to stay vigilant, demand transparency, and keep the conversation going."**

*Rachel Valcour, teacher*

"There would definitely have been lots more people out here today, if it weren't for the good news," observed Laura King, a Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union teacher and one of the organizers of the event.

It was Pearce, a Democrat, who recommended a series of changes that would require active employees of state government, including teachers but also all other state employees, to contribute more toward the pension fund and receive a slightly lower payout. Her suggestions would not affect retirees currently receiving benefits.

The proposal reduced cost-of-living adjustments for state employees and eliminated them altogether for teachers. Under the plan, employees would have contributed more while working and waited longer to access benefits. Also, the salary amount used to calculate a retiree's benefit would have been lower.

King and others said they believe the groundswell of protest against the proposal — including thousands of emails, letters, and phone calls to state representatives, plus two public hearings with testimonials from both

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# Pensions



**EDUCATORS LINED CENTRAL PARK, top photos, with signs supporting teacher's pensions and celebrating the House Speaker's tabling of a pension reform proposal Friday. Above, this group was enthusiastically supporting the Red for Ed movement where educators and their loved ones turned out to support pension funding reform at the state level, but not at the expense of their quality of life.**

**MIDDLE SCHOOL ART teacher Dasha Kalisz, middle right, displays her Red for Ed sign during Friday's event in Brandon. She was one of many, like the bottom photo, holding signs in support teachers.**



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teachers and state employees — helped convince the Legislature more study of the issue was needed.

High school science teacher Rachel Valcour appreciated the news that the proposal had been abandoned.

"It shows that they listened to us, and that's good," she said. "But now we can't step back—it's time to step up. It's good they acknowledged it is complex enough and needs to be more thoroughly understood, but the problem is still there. We have to stay vigilant, demand transparency, and keep the conversation going."

Donna Peduto, Rutland Northeast Association co-president, noted how difficult it's been for teachers to deal with the stress of the pension issue in addition to navigating the pandemic.

"We've worked so hard through this health crisis," she said. "Having our pensions challenged due to fiscal problems we didn't create — and this, on top of pending health care

teaching and absolutely love what I do, but I have to admit, this pension issue has me wondering what else could I pursue," she said.

Comments like that worry Laura King, a teacher for the past 33 years.

"All Vermonters should be concerned about the pension issue," she said. "The quality of our public schools is an important attribute of this state, one that attracts young families to settle here. We need to attract quality teachers to work in our public schools, and a solid pension benefit adds incentive to be a career public educator in Vermont."

"Don't forget it's a women's rights issue as well," added another participant, echoing Lt. Gov. Molly Gray's recent letter in opposition of the House proposal and her point that 75% of Vermont's teachers are women.

The "Red for Ed" campaign will continue across the state with teachers encouraged to wear Red on Fridays through the remainder of the school year.

*"We've worked so hard through this health crisis. Having our pensions challenged due to fiscal problems we didn't create — and this, on top of pending health care negotiations — well, it's just been shocking and very hard on teacher morale."*

*Donna Peduto, teacher*

Teachers of all ages were present at the Central park event. One young teacher admitted that the pension issue left her considering her options.

"I'm in my sixth year of