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Budget cuts must be kept away from classroom

By Laura Hainey

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We went into a recent City Council session with 20 existing vacancies for certified teachers. We came out knowing those vacancies will not be filled and that half a million dollars had been stripped from the budget. According to Superintendent Michael Hopkins, this means 10 more positions might be eliminated.

Ideally, in June, schools should be able to focus on looking at teacher candidates and considering who to hire for next school year. Instead, our budget standoff in Rochester creates an image of instability which leaves prospective teachers thinking, "I'd better look elsewhere for a position." That's the wrong message to be sending young professionals.

Rochester joins the rest of New Hampshire in facing an uphill battle as we work to recruit and retain quality teachers and other school staff. Consider this:

As the baby-boom generation rapidly moves toward retirement, public schools in New Hampshire will need to replace thousands of teachers. Filling these vacancies is complicated by the fact that 27 percent of our state's teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching.

There is intense competition in New England for new teachers, and there are signs that higher salaries in neighboring states may be drawing new teachers from New Hampshire to other states. Even after adjusting for cost-of-living differences, the average teacher salary in Massachusetts is \$3,665 higher than New Hampshire's.

Superior private-sector earnings in New Hampshire are also a factor. When we compare the average teacher's salary with private-sector earnings, our state ranks 47th in the nation, below every state that borders us (based on 2003-04 data).

Shortchanging the school budget can often translate into higher class sizes and other negative impacts on working conditions. Classroom conditions, for teachers who see their work as a higher calling, can be just as important as a good salary. One teacher told me, "I am in the classroom to make a difference in children's lives. If the system throws too many obstacles in my way, I have no reason to stay."

Of course, it's instinctive to look for cuts when we face a budget crunch. But a healthy community will try to keep those cuts as far away from the classroom as possible. Superintendent Hopkins clearly said that cutting teachers means eliminating programs. Pressure is growing from President Bush's education reform law, No Child Left Behind. Is this the time to lose teachers and programs?

Children grow up fast. Developmentally they have only one chance to accumulate the building blocks of learning. If they fall behind in the elementary years, they may lag throughout their entire school careers. By the time the school system recovers its eliminated programs, that child will be out-of-step and struggling in a later grade.

Playing catch-up is not good for young learners or for competitive school systems.

My union, AFT-New Hampshire, is grappling with the coming crisis in teacher recruitment and retention. We have written a report called "Who will teach New Hampshire's Children?" The report urges state and local officials to work with educators to improve teachers' rewards and reinforce professional respect.

AFT-New Hampshire's report, "Who Will Teach New Hampshire's Children?" is available at: www.aft-nh.org/whowillteach.

(AFT-New Hampshire is affiliated nationally with the American Federation of Teachers.)