

This is Serious Business – Election Time Again

By Tom Moscovic- Legislative Chair

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Faction should stop undue criticism of State Teachers Retirement System of Ohio - William Siegferth (second vice president and legislative chair of the Summit County Retired Teachers Association.)

This is in regard to recent reports concerning the payment of annual bonuses to investment personnel of the State Teachers Retirement System of Ohio (STRS).

Ohio Retired Teachers Association (ORTA) Executive Director Robin Rayfield urged the STRS Board to vote “no” on bonuses for the system’s investment staff. On Aug. 18, board members approved the bonuses 9-2, ignoring Rayfield’s plea. They did so, in my opinion, with very good reason.

STRS’s most recently ended fiscal year ran from July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022. During that time span, the four most closely watched stock market indexes fell steeply; the Dow Jones Industrial Average, the S&P 500, the NASDAQ and the Russell 2000 dropped 15.3%, 20.6%, 29.5% and 23.9%, respectively. The retirement system’s portfolio dropped only 3.6%, a testament to the system’s investment advisers’ expertise, particularly in the area of alternative and real estate investments.

Rayfield has been a leading critic of STRS for the last several years. He fueled a certain level of anger among retired teachers by claiming STRS first reduced, then cut the annual cost of living adjustment (COLA) which he claims retirees were “promised.” In fact, no such promises exist. Ohio law clearly permits the STRS Board to adjust the COLA upward if the increase “does not materially impair the fiscal integrity of the retirement system” or downward if “necessary to preserve the fiscal integrity of the system.” (The STRS Board approved a one-time 3% COLA in March for the period July 2022 through June 2023.)

Rayfield and ORTA solicited member contributions to pay for a \$75,000 “forensic audit” of STRS which predictably was highly critical of the system. Rayfield falsely announced a year ago during a presentation to the Warren County Teachers Association that the gentleman who conducted the “audit” filed a whistleblower complaint with the Securities and Exchange Commission and reported his findings to the FBI. No such filing or reporting took place. In fact, the author of the audit report stated, “... many subjects addressed in the report are inherently judgmental and not susceptible to absolute or definitive conclusions; we were not hired to detect or investigate fraud, concealment or misrepresentations and did not attempt to do so ...” He cautioned readers that, “our analysis, findings and recommendations are not intended to provide legal interpretations, legal conclusions or legal advice; action upon such matters should not be taken without obtaining legal advice addressing the appropriate statutory or regulatory interpretation and legal findings regarding such matters.”

Rayfield’s most outrageous accusations against STRS were made in his YouTube announcement of ORTA’s endorsed candidates in last spring’s STRS Board elections. He claimed, among other things, that STRS was “broken beyond repair,” and that active (Ohio) teachers have the “worst deal in America,” that they “pay in more than their pensions are worth” and that “retirees are getting far less than what they were promised.”

It is difficult to imagine that one who holds such a high leadership position as Rayfield would dare to make so many entirely unsubstantiated claims. There are numerous impartial sources with expertise far greater than that of Rayfield who have repeatedly praised STRS and placed it near the top of the list of the nation’s public pension systems. The Ohio Retirement Study

Council, the state agency responsible for overseeing the five public retirement systems in Ohio, is one such source.

Given the plethora of information ranking STRS so highly among its peers, it is disturbing that not one of the three candidates ORTA endorsed disavowed or refuted the claims Rayfield made to justify his endorsement of them. It is alarming that the three were elected to replace incumbents — individuals who have helped STRS earn the reputation it has among the experts — based on voting in which only 33% of active teachers and 30% of retired teachers cast ballots. It is time for all teachers, active and retired, to start paying much closer attention to the business of their retirement system and to make every effort to separate fact from fiction, particularly when it comes to criticisms leveled on social media. A very small percentage of retired teachers — approximately 12% — belong to the Ohio Retired Teachers Association. Their small numbers aside, they can ill afford to allow their leadership to make derogatory and inaccurate statements about their pension system without any accountability whatsoever.

I would love to see Rayfield organize his thoughts and criticisms of STRS and present them, along with his supporting evidence, to the Ohio Retirement Study Council. I'm not placing any bets on that ever happening.

This October is first ever Ohio School Safety Month

This month is the first ever School Safety Month in Ohio after being established earlier this year when Governor Mike DeWine signed House Bill 583.

Perrysburg superintendent Tom Hosler said this is a positive thing but he also explained it's about more than just signing these bills.

The goal of this month is for schools to increase public awareness of school safety programs and policies. It's no secret safety has been at the forefront of a lot of parents and teachers minds this year, so doing this is an added layer of protection for the students.

Hosler said they focus on looking in the mirror to see what they can be better at in Perrysburg. The district recently hired a firm to come out and do a safety audit; checking on things like making sure all guests are wearing name tags or seeing how long someone can just wander the halls until they were noticed.

He explained they've also added a parent component to the district's safety committee, joining the sheriff, as well as the police and fire chief. Hosler said it's all these important leaders in the community coming together.

"And we began to realize the parent component is really important to this because they wanna know what's happening, they have concerns," he said. "It's great we're listening to parents and we're hearing what is it that keeps them up at night about what we do and how can we better respond to that or share with families what we can do."

Hosler explained while there's always that possibility of an active shooter situation, it's more likely they will experience other school safety situations. Things like a tornado, a power outage or a custody battle happening in the office.

He said every month, they practice safety drills with the students making sure everyone knows the procedures. But he also explained you can pass all kinds of legislations and laws about how to make schools safer but what it comes down to is how the entire community is able to make a difference.

"It's really all of our responsibilities. It's not the principal, it's not the school resource officer, it really is everybody's responsibility," explained Hosler. "So, if you're a neighbor to a school or you hear something at home and you don't have any kids in the school, this gives us an opportunity to say, 'This is all of our responsibility.'"

State lawmakers are considering a bill that would allow military veterans to become teachers without any teacher license requirements.

State Senator Jerry Cirino, of Kirtland, is co-sponsor of Senate Bill 361.

“It deals with the shortage of teachers but it also recognizes that there are vets out there who have tremendous training and background,” said Cirino.

According to Cirino, the bill would essentially drop most of the requirements for veterans to become teachers, including a degree, license or background in education.

“What it takes to be an officer in the military, even to teach in the military, is completely different than what it takes to teach children,” said Ohio Federation of Teachers President Melissa Cropper.

Cropper said the bill is a shortcut to getting more bodies in the classroom.

“But it’s a shortcut that doesn’t take into account the art and science of teaching. It says any adult can come into the classroom and do it,” said Cropper.

Ohio Education Association President Scott DiMauro offered potential solutions instead.

“Provide competitive pay and benefits, attract more people into the profession and address working conditions and support systems,” said DiMauro.

Ohio’s bill is very similar to legislation in Florida that gives qualifying veterans a five-year teaching certificate and allows them to work as teachers while they earn their bachelor’s degrees.

This comes just months after state lawmakers passed a bill that cuts the college degree requirement for substitute teachers.

“We are not requiring school systems to do this. We are simply modifying revised code on the licensing question for K through 12,” said Cirino.

Cropper added that Ohio already has a ‘Troops to Teachers’ program, which helps servicemen and women in the process of obtaining their teaching certificate and finding employment as an Ohio teacher.