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Editorial: Teachers union rises above own rhetoric

The surprise agreement between state negotiators and the Vermont-NEA on reducing the cost of teacher pensions is a significant accomplishment that speaks well of all parties in the deal – and speaks to the seriousness of Vermont's fiscal challenges.

As recently as November, the Vermont-NEA was against any change under consideration by a commission led by state Treasurer Jeb Spaulding, which was charged with looking at the cost of state pensions and retiree health benefits. In the November Vermont-NEA newsletter, union president Martha Allen wrote of teacher retirement benefits: "Just maintaining the status quo is a step back."

The union leadership deserves credit for cutting through its own rhetoric and working with Spaulding toward a real-world compromise. Spaulding, too, deserves credit for leading the commission charged with the unenviable task of bringing public pension costs under control. The treasurer endured attacks that verged on the personal, yet stuck to the task.

Spaulding and legislative leaders, who encouraged the union to find a pension solution, say they can book \$15.2 million in savings for the coming fiscal year by raising the retirement age, raising employee contributions and increasing the number of years a teacher must work to qualify for full health benefits.

In return, teachers receive an increase in maximum benefits and an option to include their spouses in their retirement health care coverage. Those within five years of retirement would be unaffected by the changes.

The pension changes are part of the \$150 million cuts necessary to balance the budget in the face of revenues reduced by the recession. Other cuts on the table include significant reductions in funding for social services -- on top of those imposed in the past year.

At a time when the state is forced to cut ever deeper into the budget to help those with the greatest need, the pension system for public employees is a logical place to look for savings. With education taking up the greatest share of the public budget, there is no reason to expect teachers, or anyone else in the public sector, will escape the impact of the state's fiscal problems.

Senate President Pro Tempore Peter Shumlin and House Speaker Shap Smith say they've found close to \$70 million in cuts and savings four weeks into the session, but that still leaves plenty – more than \$80 million -- that must be shaved to balance the budget. With deep cuts in their second year, every dollar in savings is likely to call for more sacrifice from Vermonters.

With the agreement on retirement benefits, Vermont's teachers are beginning to step up.