

Teacher union for retarded in state fight

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

A state move to reclassify teaching positions at state-run institutions for the mentally retarded has met with resistance from the teachers and their union, the Public Employees Federation (PEF).

Up to 700 teachers statewide — all of them civil service employees — stand to be affected by the change, including about 100 at the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook.

Covering six teaching levels, the state's package, effective May 15, would introduce new job titles accompanied by alterations in workload and pay scales, which union leaders consider detrimental to 40 to 45 percent of the teaching force.

"The union is not happy with this situation, because we believe it to be a coercive situation," Robert Bush, PEF regional coordinator, said yesterday.

Although the reclassification is optional, teachers who do not sign for it by

March 27 will not be offered another opportunity to do so. But future hiring, according to the package distributed in late February by the state Division of Classification and Compensation and the Division of the Budget, will be carried out under the new classification system.

PEF officials met Wednesday with officials from the Governor's Office of Employee Relations (OER) to discuss the new job titles. "Our basic difficulty was that we were not able to resolve anything," James W. Small, the union's research director, said yesterday.

According to Bush, union members have been advised to refrain from volunteering for the reclassification, which would replace "teacher" and "educational" titles with the newly invented "developmental assistant" and "developmental specialist" titles.

The teachers' contract does not expire until April 1982, but civil service law permits the state to reallocate jobs without engaging the pertinent union in collective bargaining.

"I would also point out," James Brown, assistant director of state employee relations, said yesterday, "that we are not imposing anything on any employee."

Small, however, said the union was "not certain the state is within its rights."

Small singled out two provisions of the new package which he deemed "especially onerous."

To begin with, he noted, current teacher classifications entail a 10-month working period, whereas the new job titles will extend over 12 months. In the past, Small said, about 35 percent of the teachers have opted to work the extra two summer months not covered by their titles.

Those extra months, Small contended, lifted salaries beyond the raises written into the new package.

Teachers who refused to sign over to the new titles would forego their present option to work two unscheduled months, at least in a teaching capacity. The package suggests that they could find summer employment with the state as "camp counselors, food service workers, etc."

In addition, Small noted, some teachers with great seniority are earning more than the rate they would qualify for under the new job titles.

He estimated that these "worst cases," total between 40 and 45 percent of the teachers.

Brown, however, said that in the state's estimation the number of teachers who stood to take a cut in pay would be minimal, if any.

Brown conceded that the package is aimed at "a review of supervisory patterns and perhaps elimination." "It is likely some professional duties," he added, "could be carried out by the (non-professional) mental hygiene therapy aides."

But he insisted that the reclassification was not motivated by efforts to economize on institutional services. "I don't see anything unusual about this," he said. "Nor do I see an attempt to reduce costs; rather, I see an attempt to increase cost effectiveness."

Small said his union would try through administrative channels to reach agreement with the state on the new titles.

Meanwhile, teachers at the Staten Island Developmental Center Thursday collected funds against the possibility that "as a last resort" they would hire their own legal counsel, rather than rely on the union, according to David Bienstock, a member of the developmental center teachers' steering committee.