

School Salaries Priority In City

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Lexington school employees could be seeing a salary increase of as much as 5% next year if the Lexington School Board's proposed budget is adopted by City Council.

The proposed budget was discussed at a joint work session of Lexington City Council and the School Board Thursday night. The school system's business manager, Erin Gregg, laid out the priorities of the School Board, with employee recruitment and retention at the top of the list.

"Sometimes we have no applications," Gregg said. "We need to keep up with pay. We need to keep up with strong benefits."

Gregg explained that in order to compete with other area school divisions and jobs, keep up with the rising cost of living, and attract and retain the best possible staff, an increase in wages is needed.

"Lexington ranks 101 out of 130 school divisions in the state in starting teacher pay," Gregg said.

Councilman Charles Aligood agreed that pay was too low.

"Walmart is advertising a truck driver salary of \$110,000 and currently their [truck drivers] starting salary is \$87,500," Aligood said. "They are even having trouble finding truck drivers."

The joint work session between City Council and the School Board takes place every October and April so that the City Council can get a status update and overview of the School Board's work.

"We have this meeting to stay connected, to understand the priorities and projects that are going on in the school division, and to see how the state is helping or hindering your [the School Board's] efforts to educate our children," Mayor Frank Friedman said.

Last October, the School Board worked to address the substitute teacher shortage that was not only an issue in Lexington but across the nation. Substitute pay was raised by 25% from \$75 to \$100 a day.

The proposed raise included in next year's budget plan would increase wages by an average of 5% for all school employees, and teachers would see a 3.5% increase plus an additional raise based on the number of years of experience they have.

Also, "the School Board met their priority of increasing food supplies to grapple with the rising cost and amount of meals being serviced," Gregg said. The proposed increase in wages in the 2023 School Board budget comes after Governor Youngkin's proposed budget increases wages for school employees by 10% by 2024.

The School Board estimated that a 5% raise for all employees would cost about \$225,000 more than the current budget for salaries and the total would require about \$87,000 in local contributions.

Additional increases to the budget are also expected to come from the creation of a new special education teaching position for the elementary school to "support the increased caseloads and student needs in PreK through fifth grade," and by making two part-time positions into fulltime positions.

Those positions would be an English teacher at Lylburn Downing Middle School and a part-time art teacher into a part art and part student intervention position. The proposed budget would increase hourly pay for bus drivers and the starting pay for administrators to be more competitive with surrounding divisions.

It would also increase pay for food service workers due to the minimum wage increase passed in Virginia two years ago.

“We’re not close to what bus drivers make in Rockbridge [County] or Buena Vista by the hour,” Gregg said. “We are trying to get it to a better place... to support the kids.”

Lowering the cost of health insurance for employees is also a priority in the proposed budget.

“Lexington City School employees pay anywhere from \$120 to \$545 more a month than other school district employees on similar [insurance] plans,” Gregg said.

The proposed budget includes an increase in the school division’s contribution to employee monthly health insurance costs for those on the Employee +1 or family plans.

Increasing that contribution and increasing the pay for all employees are the driving forces behind the School Board’s request for an additional \$244,989 in local funding for next year.

In total, the proposed school budget will increase by 25% from the current year to about \$9.7 million. That total includes a \$1.2 million one-time state payment to Lexington City Schools for school construction that was included in former Governor Northam’s proposed budget, but which is now up in the air until the General Assembly concludes work on the budget.

Northam’s budget plan would have provided a onetime \$1 million minimum payment for each school division in the state for school construction. If Lexington were to get the money, it would go for pay for the School Board’s portion of the capital improvements proposed at Rockbridge County High School.

“There is a good possibility that this allocation may not be part of the state’s approved budget,” Superintendent Rebecca Walters told The News- Gazette this week.