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\$8.1M school board request prioritizes teacher pay

Katie Jansen Apr 30, 2016

CHAPEL HILL — Both local school boards presented budget requests last week to the Orange County Commissioners for the 2016-17 school year, ultimately presenting numbers that would require tax increases of a little more than 2 cents.

Representatives from both Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools and Orange County Schools said that although the districts' needs were great, staff and the school boards had prioritized teacher pay above all else.

"The most important thing we can do is make sure we have the most highly qualified teachers — that's what's going to address the achievement gap and everything else," said James Barrett, chair of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Board of Education.

Pam Jones, deputy superintendent for Orange County Schools, had a similar message for the commissioners, adding that the district created its budget to advance its strategic plan created by community stakeholders.

“We asked ourselves, ‘Where do we need the money to take the strategic plan forward in the worst way?’” she said. “And it came back to, ‘We need it in the classroom.’ We can get away with having less than stellar buildings. We can’t get away with having less than stellar educators in the classroom taking care of our children.”

Tom Forcella, Chapel Hill-Carrboro’s superintendent, said the district is facing a recruitment and retention problem, with teacher turnover sitting at about 18 percent.

Much of Tuesday evening’s discussion focused on the recent increase in Wake County’s local teacher supplement, which is paid in addition to the statewide base salary.

Prior to the change in Wake County, Chapel Hill-Carrboro’s supplement was close to the top, said Todd LoFrese, assistant superintendent for support services.

Now, Wake’s supplement for beginning teachers is 17.25 percent, outstripping Chapel Hill-Carrboro’s 12 percent.

So on April 7, LoFrese said, the school board took action, approving a new 16 percent supplement for new teachers and existing teachers who opt into Project ADVANCE, a new program that proposes to pay teachers based on professional development and performance rather than years of experience.

But teachers have in the past expressed qualms with Project ADVANCE, with some saying they will leave the district if their questions about the program are not answered.

Several of the county commissioners questioned the board's move to increase the supplement, which would cost the county more than \$1.8 million.

"You've made a commitment, but you may have made a commitment we can't afford," Commissioner Barry Jacobs said.

He asked why the supplement couldn't be phased in over a longer period of time, giving the county time to "throw out the bums in Raleigh" so the county wouldn't have to foot the whole bill.

But representatives from the district stood by their decision.

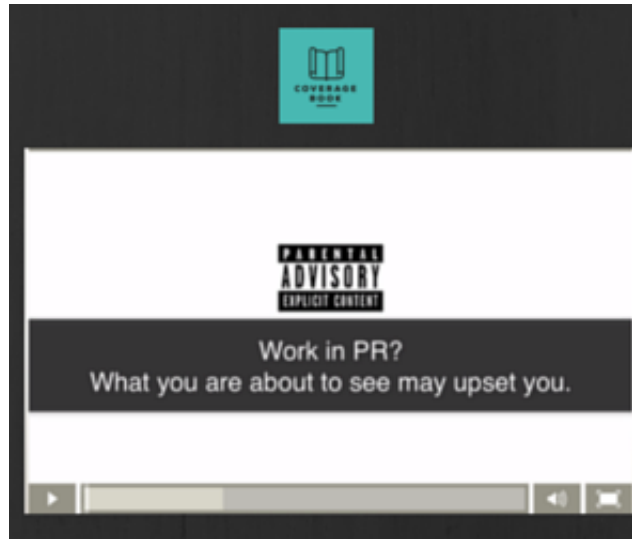
"Recruiting season is now, so there was no way we could stand at the table next to Wake and say, 'Hey, come to Chapel Hill-Carrboro. We'll give you 12 percent, and they'll give you 18,'" school board member Rani Dasi said.

On top of the \$1.8 million needed to fund the local supplement increase, Chapel Hill-Carrboro asked for funding for two items focused on recruitment and retention.

The district requested \$200,000 to fund the second phase of its raises for classified employees — including custodians, bus drivers, cafeteria workers and others. The district voted this year to pay all classified workers a living wage, but the additional funding would bring their salaries to market rate.

The district also asked for \$50,000 for a new program in partnership with North Carolina Central University, in which the district would pay students' tuition in return for the students' commitment to work at Chapel Hill-Carrboro as EC teacher assistants.

Combined with monies needed to continue providing existing services, Chapel Hill-Carrboro's total request came to over \$4.4 million, which would require a \$446.76 increase per pupil from last year.



Orange County Schools' budget also focused on raising teacher pay, classified worker pay and assistant principal pay. Superintendent Todd Wirt said the board's discussions focused less on what Wake County was doing and more on what was needed to hire and keep "world-class employees."

Orange County's proposal would increase the local supplement for beginning teachers from 10 percent to 14 percent, with an opportunity for growth with years of service.

To fund Orange County's increase, Jones said, the district needed \$1.9 million.

Combined with funds needed to continue services, the district requested a total of more than \$3.7 million, requiring a \$391 increase per pupil from last year.

But some commissioners balked at raising taxes in light of a bond referendum on the November ballot that, if approved, will provide \$120 million to schools and raise taxes over a longer time frame.

"It feels like we're throwing money in this bathtub. We keep throwing money at it, but we forgot to put in the stopper," said Commissioner Penny Rich, adding that some residents wouldn't be able to afford a tax increase and would have to leave the county.

Commissioner Mia Day Burroughs said that as a former school board member, she felt conflicted. She said Chapel Hill-Carrboro's move to increase the local supplement was a "gamble," but she also knew the commissioners could delay other projects to address this "crisis."

Commissioner Mark Dorosin said that although he appreciated the focus on teachers, he did not think the current situation was a crisis.

"I think it's a mistake for us to be thinking that this is a crisis or an emergency. I think this is the reality we will be dealing with — we've been dealing with it for two years, and I think we'll be dealing with it for at least another four," he said, referring to education cuts from the legislature.



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