

THE ADVOCATE

Baton Rouge public educators plan pay raise push at Thursday's school board meeting

BY CHARLES LUSSIER | CLUSSIER@THEADVOCATE.COM MAY 14, 2018

As a torrential rain poured down, more than 150 educators and school support personnel gathered Monday night inside Shiloh Baptist Church urging the end of Louisiana's tax break program for industrial manufacturers, at least when it comes to public schools, and use that revenue to increase compensation for school employees.

They pledged to gather again Thursday night, and bring along hundreds of other school employees to barnstorm the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board meeting.

For the past two weeks, the Louisiana Association of Educators, an ally of Together Baton Rouge, has been floating a petition urging the School Board to adopt a resolution that it reject all requests through Louisiana's Industrial Tax Exemption Program, or ITEP, and commit to using the extra tax money to fund employee pay raises. The last across-the-board pay raise was in 2008.

Debbie Meaux, LAE's president, said educators in Arizona, Kentucky, Oklahoma, West Virginia and soon, North Carolina, are saying "enough is enough" and winning higher pay. That movement is now coming to Louisiana, starting with East Baton Rouge Parish schools.

"My hope is you will spark a fire across the state," Meaux said.

LAE, however, won't say whether they are prepared to do what those other states did to compel lawmakers to pay them more, namely hold work strikes.

Ashley Davies, a spokeswoman for the union, said LAE has not settled on what it would do if the School Board does not pass the resolution Thursday. The current school year is racing to an end — the last day of school in East Baton Rouge is May 22 — so educators will have just three more days of school after Thursday if they want to strike this school year.



Members of The Louisiana Association of Educators and members of Together Baton Rouge cheer at a rally for a petition drive to persuade the EBR School Board to reject all future requests for industrial tax exemptions. The groups hope the taxes to fund a raise for all school employees.

PHOTO BY PATRICK DENNIS

School bus drivers with the East Baton Rouge Parish School Bus Drivers Association are particularly eager for change. About a quarter of the more than 400 people pledging to show up Thursday night are school bus drivers.

Kathy Keas, president of the association, said Monday the group has managed to win just one small raise in the past 16 years and its patience is near its end. She said she's sat in meetings with Superintendent Warren Drake, including one just two weeks ago, but those meetings haven't gone anywhere.

"We need some finality (on Thursday)," Keas said, "but we're willing to work with the school system."

School Board members Dawn Collins and Vereta Lee were present Monday night. They said their colleague, Kenyetta Nelson-Smith, who was not present, has already asked that LAE's resolution be added to the agenda for Thursday's meeting, which starts at 5 p.m.

They will need yes votes from two more of their colleagues to gain a five-vote majority on the nine-member School Board. And the board still needs to cement any changes in its annual budget, which it will debate over the next few weeks.

"If anyone thinks that all the work is done on Thursday if we pass this resolution ... it can be undone over time," said Brod Bagert, lead organizer with Together Baton Rouge, a coalition of religious and community-based organizations.

Bagert said school advocates need to stay organized for the long term and not be "summer soldiers."

For decades, ITEP operated with little oversight. But in 2016, newly elected Gov. John Bel Edwards ordered that companies seeking the property tax break had to get approval from various local taxing districts — school boards, municipalities, parishes and sheriff's offices — before the state Board of Commerce & Industry could grant the exemption.

On April 25, the Edwards administration unveiled its latest plan to reorganize the program. Approved businesses would receive a single 10-year exemption at 80 percent of the property taxes owed. But local governments would be limited to just up or down votes on the contracts put together by the state. Previously, the Edwards administration had given local officials broader latitude to come up with their own ITEP tax rates.



*East Baton Rouge School Board members Vereta Lee, standing right, and Dawn Chanet Collins, standing left, speak to The Louisiana Association of Educators and members of Together Baton Rouge at a rally for a petition drive to persuade the EBR School Board to reject all future requests for industrial tax exemptions. The groups hope the taxes to fund a raise for all school employees.
PHOTO BY PATRICK DENNIS*

Together Baton Rouge has calculated the East Baton Rouge Parish school system is not collecting about \$28 million in property taxes a year because of existing tax exemptions. That much money would fund a \$4,900 pay raise for teachers and other school employees, the organization has estimated.

Bagert, however, cautioned that money would accrue over a 10-year period, so any pay raises funded by it would be relatively small at first.

The push for an employee pay raise comes as the East Baton Rouge Parish school system is preparing \$10 million in budget cuts. Superintendent Drake told The Advocate he supports an employee pay raise, but the tight budget makes a pay raise unlikely at least until some time during the next fiscal year, which starts July 1.

East Baton Rouge teachers have seen their salaries decline 17 percent in real dollars since 2008. That's what Together Baton Rouge found when it plugged local salaries into an inflation calculator. To catch up with inflation, these teachers would need to be making another \$9,219 a year, the organization concluded.

A handful of educators spoke Thursday about their predicament.

Lashunday Antoine, who teaches at Scotlandville middle school, said since the August 2016 floods she's worked three jobs.

"I drive both Uber and Lyft to make ends meet," she said.

Laverne Simoneaux, a teacher at Westdale Middle School, said she became a schoolteacher in 2008 after previously working in higher education

"In 2018 I'm making less money than I was making in 2008," she said. "Food has gone up, utilities have gone up, but our salaries have not gone up."