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HIGH FIVES AND NEXT STEPS — Leaders with Together Baton Rouge, the EBR Association of Educators, the EBR Federation of Teachers and the School Bus Operators Association celebrate school board approval of employee pay raises.

EBR School Board OKs $473M budget

Employees to get raises under change

BY CHARLES LUSSIER
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As the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board on Thursday unanimously approved a $473 million spending plan for next year, two sets of interest groups showed up in force, one pressing for employee pay raises and another pushing for improvements to low-performing schools and graduation rates.

The former left hopeful, while the latter left angry.

As they have at several previous meetings, employee groups — the Louisiana Association of Educators, the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, Service Employees International Union and the East Baton Rouge Bus Drivers Association — pressed once again for raises for all district employees.

The groups have joined forces with the faith-based group Together Baton Rouge to press the issue as well as to push the school system to reject all future requests from manufacturers for property tax breaks via the state's 80-year-old Industrial Tax Exemption Program. They want the school system to use any exemption savings to increase employees' pay.

The budget approved Thursday gave them a first win: a new salary schedule that in-

➤ See **BOARD,** page **5A**

BOARD

Continued from page 1A

creases the pay of all school employees, above and beyond their annual step increase, by matching pay to years of experience.

Chief Financial Officer Kelly Lopez said the change will cost about $4.3 million, which the school system plans to pay for by redirecting $1.5 million set aside for little-used stipends for people to work at low-performing schools and by not filling jobs as they come open, 69 since early May and counting.

"Every category of employee will receive raises," said Millie Williams, chief of human resources.

The move was treated as a promising first step by representatives of the employee groups, who hope to build on the momentum and find money for an even bigger pay increase in the future.

Lauren Lirette, a teacher at LaSalle Elementary and a member of the Louisiana Association of Educators, thanked board members for the "real and tangible progress" made since May 17, when she and other school employees expressed concerns about low salaries.

"We want to rise to thank you and recognize you for that serious and respectful work," Lirette said.

Fred Skelton, a retired educator and a member of Together Baton Rouge, had similar things to say.

"I applaud you for making this move during a time when your financial situation is ... dire," Skelton said. "This is a noble and good first step."

Carnell Washington, the longtime president of the East Baton Rouge chapter of the Federation of Teachers, came Thursday wearing another hat; he's on the NAACP's education committee. He said restoring money that employees lost in salary freezes and because of a salary schedule that had divorced step increases from experience is long overdue.

The $473 million proposed general fund budget anticipates the school system will raise only $451 million during the 2018-19 fiscal year. That's a gap of $22 million, slightly better than it was when the budget was first presented a month ago. Overall revenue for the school system is expected to increase by 3 percent from the current fiscal year, while spending is proposed to increase by almost 5 percent.

To avoid red ink, the school system plans to once again tap its reserves, estimated at $50.4 million. The school system is projecting the reserves would end 2018-19 with only $28 million.

The general fund budget accounts for roughly three-quarters of all spending by the school system and for most day-to-day operating expenses. The proposed spending plan for 2018-19 calls for $15.2 million in budget reductions. The bulk of that, $12.4 million, shifts expenses to the school district's special funds.

The remainder, about $2.9 million, includes a 5 percent across-the-board cut in materials and supplies and travel, the elimination of scattered jobs, and holding off on purchases of transportation and information technology equipment.

The charter school-friendly parents group Stand For Children showed up Thursday night with a much different set of concerns. The group was joined by representatives from a newly formed group of local ministers and other faith-based leaders, United Faith Leaders for Academic Equality.

Carolyn Carter said she has five school-age grandchildren and she's concerned about the district's low 66 percent four-year graduation rate — at some high schools, it's much lower.

"If the graduation rate continues to move like it is, what will happen with them?" Carter asked.

They partially unrolled a huge laminated sheet with 1,200 petitions all decrying the high number of Baton Rouge schools with D and F grades; the petitions, which all say the same thing, were signed by local parents since the beginning of the year, said a spokeswoman for Stand for Children.

Board President David Tatman told them it was against board rules to bring it into the board meeting room, so they rolled it back up.

At the end of the meeting, Tony Jones, who said he trains other ministers, grew angry when Tatman would not let him speak on another item, the annual evaluation of Superintendent Warren Drake, saying it was an information-only item. Jones stood up and tried to speak but was told to leave the room.

After the meeting, Johnny Young, senior pastor with Heavenly Hope Ministries, said he also wanted to speak about what he views as Drake's negligence in allowing such poor performance in local schools. Young said he's tried repeatedly in recent weeks without success to get a meeting with Drake.

Afterward, Drake said he agreed with Young's concerns but said there are changes being made that will help. Drake also said he doesn't recall Young trying to meet with him but will get in touch.

"I'm going to meet with anyone who wants to meet with me," Drake said.