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FEATURED

Gainesville ISD, others looking for more money for teachers after legislature fails to come through

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Gainesville school administrators are combing through the budget to find more money for teachers after state lawmakers failed to approve the \$4,000 raise earmarked for additional teacher pay in last year's legislative session.

Gainesville teachers, who start out with an annual salary of \$48,000, haven't had a raise in two years, but the district is providing teachers with instructional coaching. District officials also believe the move this year to a four-day week has helped teachers, said LaCreasha Stille, GISD assistant superintendent for human resources.

"I think that helps try to keep them here, because many have even stated that they sought out Gainesville because of the support that we provide – not just our first-year teachers, but even our veteran teachers," Stille said.

These changes are intended to boost teacher retention and morale while also increasing recruitment rates for new teachers, according to Stille. While Stille said teacher morale in Gainesville has not suffered, statewide teacher groups said they are hearing outcries from struggling teachers.

A recent survey showed that 71% of teachers in Texas have considered leaving the profession, said Clay Robison, a spokesman for the Texas State Teachers Association. The same survey reported 41% of teachers having to pick up second jobs during the school year to make ends meet, and 55% having jobs during the summer, Robison said.

"The result is, that teachers are very disappointed, many of them have left; that was the final straw for many teachers," Robison said.

That final straw was when the Texas Legislature ended four special sessions without passing provisions for teacher raises. While almost all legislators said they wanted salary hikes for teachers, the protracted fight over creating a school voucher program left teachers as the primary victims of a divided Legislature.

With the failure to approve school vouchers at the behest of Gov. Greg Abbott, the entire \$7 billion package of school improvements – including a pay raise and added security for schools – died.

The average teacher pay in Texas is already about \$7,500 below the national average, said Bob Popinski, the senior director of policy at Raise Your Hand Texas, an advocacy group for public education.

“First and foremost, Texas needs to reinvest in public education,” Popinski said. “If there isn’t a special session called and we’re waiting until the next regular session, school districts are going to be in a bind really for the next two school years.”

School districts are preparing their budgets for the summer and the 2024-25 school year with many finding themselves facing budget shortfalls, he said.

“It’s really impacting what school districts can do, not only with teacher pay raises but with other programs that they’re going to have to start curtailing in order to meet their budgets,” Popinski said.

Gainesville ISD is not facing a budget shortfall; it is, however, putting together its 2024-25 budget without promises for teacher pay raises.

“We are looking at our budget and trying to get our pay raises to where they are comparable for our staff, so I’m not really sure yet,” Stille said.

Gainesville ISD is just one of many Texas school districts facing difficult decisions while planning for the next school year without extra assistance from the state.

“Local tax dollars only go so far,” Robison said.

The money meant for teacher raises and other benefits for public schools is sitting in the state budget until it is approved by legislators.

Advocates for public education hoping that funds are allocated before the next regular session in January 2025 are likely out of luck, said Rep. David Spiller, R-Jacksboro, who represents the Gainesville area.

“I think you’re going to have to wait until the next legislative session, as much as I hate to say that,” Spiller said.

Abbott has vowed to veto any public education spending bill that did not include money for school vouchers. Many Democrats and rural Republicans in the House have opposed vouchers because it would cost billions of state dollars for years to come and they fear it would harm their local school districts.

Meanwhile, teachers are left without financial help, said teacher specialist JoLisa Hoover with Raise Your Hand Texas.

“They’re talking about very difficult decisions, about leaving a job that’s not just their job, but it’s part of their identity,” Hoover said.

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