

Hermosa's teachers march over pay

by Robb Fulcher

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A dispute over teachers' salaries bubbled over into a protest rally followed by a sometimes contentious debate at the school board's regular monthly meeting.

Hermosa's public school teachers complained that they have the lowest pay of Los Angeles County's 27 elementary school districts, while their students maintain the highest academic test scores. School board members agreed that the teachers deserve more money, but said they can't afford raises over 3 percent.

A report from the county Office of Education shows that Hermosa teachers are the lowest paid among the 27 elementary districts over the course of their careers. Meanwhile, Hermosa students' crucial Academic Performance Index scores are indeed the highest.

The disparity prompted more than 50 teachers and supporters to march to last Wednesday's school board meeting, carrying signs with messages such as "I can't afford to teach in Hermosa Beach."

Second grade teacher Karen Maguy asked the school board, "What, or may I ask who, are your priorities in the district? Where have you spent your money? Is it a new gym? Is it in administration?"

Maguy urged the school district to "get back to the bargaining table. Support your teachers."

Teachers and other employees opened negotiations by asking for a 5.6 percent increase in salaries and a \$1,000 per person increase in benefits. The district offered a 3 percent pay raise and no increase in benefits. The employees came down to 5 percent on the salary increase, and management did not change its initial offer.

"They haven't moved at all," said David Carver, president of the Hermosa Beach Educators Association, which represents the district's 85 teachers and workers in clerical, food service, maintenance and operations.

(On Tuesday, Carver said a further negotiation session was "somewhat positive" with some movement "on both sides.")

At the meeting, school board President Cathy McCurdy said there's no money for a larger pay raise. She said she has seen the district's reserve fund shrink from 27 percent to 4 percent, which is as low as it can go under state law. She also said 10 percent of the district's budget – \$900,000 this year – is being raised by parents and other community members to keep existing academic programs afloat.

School board member Greg Breen said the teachers previously negotiated to front-load their salaries, making them more comparable to other districts early in a teacher's career, although the teacher maxes out at lower pay than colleagues in other districts.

District officials also said the teachers get individual pay raises by accruing seniority and continuing their outside education. District Superintendent Sharon McClain said on a big year a teacher can get a 10 percent raise individually.

Beginning Hermosa teachers, with a bachelor's degree and a minimum of continuing education, are paid \$41,900 a year, according to school district figures. After 15 years, with the maximum continued education and training, they can make \$78,900.

The 1,086-student Hermosa district spends 80 to 85 percent of its general fund on personnel. Hermosa campuses – the K-2 View School and third-through-eighth grade Valley School – have earned California Distinguished School status and rank in the top 5 percent statewide in standardized academic testing. ER

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