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## Lafayette teachers ask district to make them whole

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Lafayette Elementary School teachers at the Sept. 13 informational picket. Photo Sharon K. Sobotta

work at LES when the position opened up four years ago. "I stumbled upon the job posting while supporting my credential students in their job search and knew that it was a rare find: a full-time Reading Specialist at one site in a highly supported school district," McCormick recalls.

Mccormick says she and her colleagues are ready to be made whole. "Every teacher I speak with here loves their students, loves the community, and wants to stay here more than anything. But when you see that you can get paid \$30,000 more just by going to a neighboring district, it starts really causing us to prioritize our family's needs over our professional needs."

Kristi Gingrich, a third-grade teacher at LES and the Lafayette Education Association President, was among the more than two dozen teachers, accompanied by just as many aides, parents and students, standing in front of the school during morning drop that week. "We're asking the district to prioritize teachers over other things because teachers drive the classroom," Gingrich said. "Parents support us and passed a tax parcel with the intent to help hire and retain teachers and unfortunately that money hasn't surfaced on our salary schedule yet."

Lafayette has a reputation for being one of the top school districts in the state and in the county. It's also thought of as an affluent place - even as nearly a third of its residents are renters. Gingrich says the assumption that Lafayette teachers are doing fine because the school district is good and the median income of the city appears high compared to others is just plain wrong. "We are part of a coalition of teachers in the county and we are currently the lowest paid district with that. It's misinformation to think that we're well paid because we're in Lafayette," Gingrich says. "We had to hire 50 teachers this year."

While the 12% increase teachers have been offered may sound significant at face value, Gingrich says it's not enough to make up for what she says amounts to a not-so-good deal that teachers agreed to as they were transitioning back to the classroom after the pandemic.

"In February 2021 we were tired and were grateful to have our kids back in the classroom. We'd worked so well with the district, we were proud to bring our kids back. We were talked into signing a two-year contract with a 2% COLA [cost of living increase]," Gingrich says.

This meant that in 2022-23, as the state offered a 6.55% cost of living increase, the teachers in Lafayette were already locked in to a 2% increase. "Those around us negotiated for a 7.5% and an 8% increase and we'd already accepted the two. We had made a mistake," Gingrich says. "We can see that there are huge surpluses in our budget every year. And now we're asking our district to prioritize the budget and prioritize teachers who've invested years and years of their time in students so that we can continue having successful students and great teachers."

Another point of contention is the years of transferable service. Gingrich says that while surrounding districts have lifted the cap for numbers of transferable years, Lafayette is still at five. This means that if someone from San Francisco moved to the Lafayette school district with 20 years of experience, only five of those years of service would be reflected in their salary.

"There is a shortage of teachers - especially seasoned teachers with experience," Gingrich says. And, she doesn't want teachers to be penalized for opting into the Lafayette School District.

Reading Specialist Lindsay McCormick is usually one of the first people parents and caregivers see when dropping their kids off at Lafayette Elementary School, as she directs traffic before and after clocking into the reading lab each morning. On Sept. 13, however, McCormick carried a sign saying "Lafayette Teachers have the lowest career earnings in the county" as she stood alongside more than a dozen of her colleagues and another dozen parents, students and community members staging an informational picket.

The Lafayette credentialed teachers are seeking a 14% raise for their new contract and have rejected the district's offer of 12%.

With over a decade of combined experience in the Mt. Diablo Unified School District, Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District, and at Saint Mary's College, where she taught literacy courses for credentialed candidates, McCormick says she couldn't pass up the opportunity to

Superintendent Brent Stephens says the district remains committed to ensuring that teachers are paid competitively and that a sound budget is maintained in the future. "We see the same issue about competitiveness that our teachers do. Two years ago, in the pandemic, we entered into a two-year contract with our teachers," Stephens said in a written response. "Since then, the District received more money than we could have predicted, and now that the contract is open again, both sides want to make meaningful strides on teachers' salaries. Our 12% offer is reflective of that commitment."

Stephens called the district's current 12% offer "very strong" and says it will amount to "meaningful pay increases for teachers."

Teachers say that although the district's offer may seem strong, even the 14% that they are asking for is a concession they're willing to make - when the cumulative discrepancy in pay between Lafayette teachers who prematurely settled for a 2% cost of living wage a few years ago and their peers, who were able to factor in the state-rate of over 6%. "We'll still be behind, but this will be a step in the right direction," Gingrich says.

When asked about the possibility of a strike, Gingrich and her colleagues remain hopeful that a win-win solution can be found. "None of us want it to come to that," Gingrich says when asked about the strike. "We love the district, we love the kids, we just want a fair, competitive contract."

Parents like Jeanine Smith, the mother of a Lafayette elementary school student and a Stanley middle school student, who joined the teacher's informational picket line before school, say they're on the side of the teachers.

"I support the teachers and advocate for them having higher salaries because they do such a great job teaching our students," Smith says. "I would like to see all teachers make a great living no matter where they live or where they teach."

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