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Lafayette teachers' contract ratified with unprecedented solidarity

By Sharon K. Sobotta

Lafayette Teachers may not have gotten the full 14% raise they asked for, or additional health care coverage, but they did get 13, which was a percentage of a concession on the district's part and recognition of all of their years of service as educators, which many of them say, will be a game changer. Teachers and allies in other districts are crediting the unprecedented amount of coalition building and organizing with the strides they made.

California Teachers Association Staff Representative Rosemary Louissaint, who represents teachers in Pittsburgh, Antioch, Clayton Valley Charter, Contra Costa County and John Swett United, was among the supporters. "I've seen this kind of solidarity in other districts before but this was the first time I've seen something like this in Lafayette," Louissaint said during a solidarity action ahead of the contract being reached. "We know that the teacher shortage is real. We need to pay teachers the best we can so we can support our families and stay in the profession. We don't want our classrooms to be revolving doors. We want people to stay committed. And in order for that to happen, we need to prioritize our students, and to do that we need to prioritize our teachers."

In the end, 13 proved to be the lucky number for settling the one-year contract. On Nov. 8 after the Lafayette Education Association members voted, the year-old contract was ratified. And while no party got everything they asked for, there's a sentiment among teachers of being relieved that an agreement has been reached and happy to have been made "whole-ish" for now. The new agreed upon contract recognizes the teachers' collective years of service in the profession, which impacts the pay raise schedule for many of them. The teachers union conceded on their wish for more inclusive healthcare coverage and the district raised their offer from 12 to 13%.

Kristi Gingrich, a third- and fourth-grade teacher and the president of the Lafayette Teachers Association, believes strongly that the community support and educator solidarity had a direct impact on meeting the ultimate goal of reaching a contract.

When the contract was settled, Gingrich said she and many of her colleagues felt incredibly relieved. "We're excited to put the negotiation process behind us and move forward. We [teachers] conceded on our +1 healthcare ask, the district gave us an additional 1% in salary. We feel like our hard work hasn't gone unnoticed. We think having the community and fellow teacher support, and coordinated plans of action and being so organized as teachers for the first time in many years really helped us," Gingrich said. "Being united with teachers in other districts and with the community is what helped us move the needle a little bit towards a fair contract. We needed to work together to have a voice and be fair and be strong."

Lafayette School District Superintendent Brent Stephens says the district is just as excited as the teachers to move forward. "The 13% raise reflects the district's strong commitment to our teachers and staff. We value and recognize our outstanding Lafayette educators and the many contributions they make to our students' education," Stephens said. "Throughout the bargaining process the district has appreciated our ongoing engagement with the Lafayette Education Association, the voices of all our teachers, and the active participation of the Lafayette community in our public schools."

The negotiation process for next year's contract begins in March. Many may be watching to see if the needle towards a fair contract moves even a little further to add in the missing ingredient of more healthcare coverage. Till then, teachers from across the Bay have made their position clear. They are sticking together. "We all stick together. We're here to help our brothers and sisters," Bob Carson, the president of the Antioch Teachers Association, said while standing in solidarity with Lafayette teachers at a board meeting.

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