



## Districts using higher pay to compete

By CHARLES LUSSIER

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In the past year, West Baton Rouge Parish has gone from losing teachers to having multiple applicants for openings.

The reason? Superintendent David Corona points to the \$9,000 increase in teacher pay over that time.

“Are you kidding?” Corona asked. “We can keep up now. We’re competitive in what we can pay our people. And we’ve got a lot more to offer than money.”

Other districts in the Baton Rouge area are directing about \$5,000 more on average into their teachers’ pockets each year. Starting teacher pay has grown from about \$35,000 a year on average to more than \$40,000 annually.

East Baton Rouge Parish, which has long-standing problems recruiting teachers, is being forced to match its competitors with a proposed annual \$2,205 across-the-board teacher pay raise. The School Board is poised to approve the raise when it meets Thursday.

“This is a step in the right direction, but it’s not the solution,” said Elizabeth Duran Swinford, associate superintendent for human resources.

The Public Affairs Research Council estimates that average teacher pay in Louisiana this school year is about \$46,400 a year, a 75 percent increase since 1995. For the first time in recent memory, Louisiana teachers on average earn about the regional average for Southern states.

Still, average pay varies widely by school district. PAR estimates two-thirds of Louisiana school systems are still below the Southern average.

For instance, Louisiana raised teacher salaries this summer by an average of \$3,595, but the range among districts is wide.

Seventeen school districts, including East Baton Rouge Parish, received a minimum \$2,375 a year raise, while 51 districts collected more than the minimum. Union Parish teachers made out the best, receiving a \$6,385 a year state-funded raise. Locals are upping the ante.

West Baton Rouge Parish voters in May added \$5,000 a year to the mix by approving, by a wide margin, a 12-mill property tax. In June, Baker approved a \$2,000 a year teacher pay raise out of its coffers.

Likewise, East Baton Rouge Parish plans to pay for its proposed \$2,205-a-year increase out of its local tax revenue. Superintendent Charlotte Placide has said she is weighing following West Baton Rouge's lead and bringing her own tax proposition to fund a variety of initiatives, including raising salaries.

Corona said increasing teacher pay helps the whole profession.

"Not that money is everything, but young people today are looking to make a decent living, and can you blame them?" he said. "Now young people can think about becoming a schoolteacher because they can make a decent living, and in the past that wasn't true."

Louisiana could use more people in the teaching pipeline. The state's teacher preparation programs are not producing enough teachers to meet the demand, with local districts each year declaring shortages in areas such as special education, math and science. Even Ascension Parish, which usually has its pick of teachers, has been forced to offer some high school teachers more money to cover vacancies.

Some programs, particularly Southern University's, are producing far fewer new teachers than they used to. Alternative teacher certification programs have filled some, but far from all, the gaps.

And Louisiana teachers are routinely recruited by out-of-state school districts.

Swinford said Houston is a particularly tough competitor, offering annual starting salaries in the mid-40s, plus performance pay and other benefits Louisiana schools don't usually offer.

The state-run New Orleans Recovery District also has had some success luring teachers downriver with a \$39,270-a-year starting teacher salary, along with a \$5,000 signing bonus, and another \$5,000 bonus for teachers who stay for a second year.

East Baton Rouge Parish, which hired New Orleans educators after Hurricane Katrina, lost several of them as a result of those incentives, Swinford said.

“They stole a lot of my teachers and principals to work down there,” she said.

Supporters of higher teacher pay argue that enough of an investment should produce higher academic results. PAR’s Jennifer Pike said higher pay is probably important, but she knows of no magic number that will trigger better results.

“The connection between teacher pay and student performance is not clear,” Pike said. “At this point, I would say it’s all an experiment.”

PAR has long favored moving away from across-the-board pay raises and instead making targeted raises, including special raises for teachers in critical shortage areas and pay based on performance.

“Across-the-board pay raises can be wasteful or not the right way to spend the money,” Pike said. “Targeting pay raises makes a lot more sense.”

In his campaign, Gov.-elect Bobby Jindal expressed support for such approaches, but has yet to detail what he wants to do. Teacher unions generally oppose such moves, especially performance pay, saying it doesn’t reward good teachers and instead produces favoritism. Houston is a particularly tough competitor, offering annual starting salaries in the mid-40s, plus performance pay and other benefits Louisiana schools don’t usually offer.

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