

Chalkboard

By

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About this time thirteen years ago I interviewed at Gentry Public Schools regarding the then vacant superintendent's position. A question that any good interview would include was posed to me in the general form of "Name your greatest professional weakness". I do not remember my exact answer but it had something to do with divulging that I had no actual experience as a superintendent dealing with school finance. I went on to explain that I did have some budgetary experience as an assistant superintendent working with federal programs in another school district.

I wish I could boast that the ensuing 13 years have made me an expert in that area. It would be braggadocio for me to suggest that. However, I can affirm that many of the same basic principles that govern your and my family budgetary processes apply to school finance.

As I have noted in times past, one of my goals is to have our teachers and other staff members making a salary comparable to our neighboring districts, of similar size, in Northwest Arkansas. This year I have proposed to the school board a \$1700 "across-the-board raise" for the certified staff. Excluding me, there are 112 certified staff members. Some simple multiplication makes the cost of that raise \$190,400. Those same staff members have an experience "step" incorporated into the present salary schedule of \$500. That's another \$56,000. Totaling those yields \$246,400. One also has to consider that about 22% also has to be planned for teacher retirement, Social Security, unemployment, Workman's Compensation, and such. That turns into \$54,208 more. That takes the grand total up to \$300,608. That amount seems reasonable, as it is only about 3.8% of the total school budget.

What type of raise would \$1700 be for the average certified employee? Let's see. A 190 day contract times an 8 hour day would be 1,520 hours making \$1700 for a contract increase translate into a raise of about \$1.19 an hour. I think most people would consider that a decent raise.

Another way of looking at it is to look at the "mid" position on our salary schedule, which is what a teacher with 15 years of experience and a Masters degree is paid- \$41,332. For such a person, \$1700 translates into a 4% increase in salary. At the beginning step of no experience and a Bachelors degree, \$29,300, that percentage is 5.8 %. At the very top step of

Gentry's current schedule for an employee with a Specialist degree and 30 years of experience, which pays \$50,068, the increase would be 3.4%, which is in the neighborhood of a Cost Of Living Adjustment.

Now back to the family budget for a moment. All of us understand that if monthly expenses increase, say because of the rising cost of gasoline, then either we must find a way to make more money, cut some other expense out, or dip into our savings.

School finance is no different in that aspect. My plans for the above raise for staff was and is partially predicated on the state legislature giving school districts an additional \$100 per student for the 2005-06 school term. If that does not happen, and it is beginning to look doubtful, then the amount of the raise will have to be decreased to a lesser amount.

Without going onto a long spiel about why the Gentry Public School District does not have a large reserve to "dip into" for raises, let me just say that it does not. Nor do I see areas where large amounts of money can be cut from expenses other than staff reduction. I do not anticipate that happening, to the contrary we may have to add staff because our student enrollment is growing.

By now you are probably saying, "Want some cheese with that whine?" Maybe I am whining. Or maybe I am not. Perhaps this is only intended to remind you, our parents and patrons, that our school has to live within its budget also.