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MARTIN -- Halfway through the school year, Martin County teachers have yet to get their annual raises. District officials declared contract negotiations at an impasse in mid-November, making this the first time since the 2003-04 school year that negotiations have dragged beyond October. "I think things have been degrading in negotiations for a while," Dianne Falvo, the Florida Education Association liaison to the Martin County teachers union, said of district officials' role in the negotiations. "There's been no cooperation." After a federal mediator failed to bring the two sides to agreement, a special magistrate is set to hear the dispute Jan. 16 and 17. But even that might not settle the issue. The magistrate's ruling will be nonbinding, meaning that either side can appeal to the school board, which has the final say. Salary remains the main issue. The district proposed changing the pay schedule, so teachers would have to work an additional year before reaching their maximum salary. Adding the additional step would help even out the jump in pay each year a teacher works, according to district officials. Under the present contract, the difference in salary between most of the 19 steps is about 1.6 percent, but when teachers reach the 17th step, it ranges from about 3.9 percent to 7.4 percent. Adding another step, and limiting raises in steps 17 through 19, would slowly close the gap in salary jumps, Baxter said. Union officials counter that the district should offer smaller raises to teachers with the least experience, so those with more tenure can get more pay. The union's plan calls for the district to kick in about \$200,000 more overall, so the pay a teacher receives over the course of a career is not diminished, Falvo said. "To me, \$200,000 is not that much money, with a budget the size the school board is dealing with," union President Jeanette Phillips said. Phillips said the union hasn't decided whether to stage public demonstrations, as teachers did in 2004, when contract negotiations stretched beyond the last day of school. The teachers union will meet next week to talk about the impasse and discuss what actions, beyond the magistrate hearing, the union might pursue, Phillips said. "The purpose of public education is to teach students, and there's only one place that occurs: in a classroom," Falvo said. "You need to reward the people who are providing the education to make this system outstanding."

PASCO -- Sure, the new year is just the turn of a calendar page when it comes to school. It's not the start of a new semester. The budget cycle doesn't begin or end. Five-year plans remain in force. But January does offer educators, like everyone, the chance to set some new goals and refresh their perspective for the days and months to come. With that thought in mind, we turned to Pasco school leaders to see what resolutions they've set for the school district for 2008. Money proved a hot-button issue for many of Pasco's education leaders. Lynne Webb, president of the United School Employees of Pasco, said her big hope was for a resounding defeat of the constitutional amendment on property tax changes that voters will consider Jan. 29. Though a state initiative, Webb said the proposed changes could have a profound negative effect on local schools. "If that isn't stopped, I don't think we're going to have a very happy new year, or future years," she said. Webb said she has begun an education campaign among district employees to make sure they understand the potential impact of the amendment. Until the vote, she said, everything else pales in importance.