

LAKE -- Teachers voted overwhelmingly to ratify their union contract for 2007-08, agreeing to a deal that provides a 4.75 percent increase in salary money for Lake County's nearly 2,800 instructors. The vote was 1,775 for the contract, and 217 against, said B Grassel, Lake County Education Association president. Teachers will not get 4.75-percent pay raises, but the pot of money for salary hikes is 4.75 percent more than last year, Grassel said. "I just want teachers to feel appreciated," Grassel said as votes were being counted at union headquarters. Under the salary schedule, veteran teachers will get \$1,350 annual increases while beginning teachers would receive \$1,300. "That was an important statement -- we appreciate the veterans," Grassel said, while the union values all teachers. Negotiators for the union and the school board tentatively agreed last month to the pay increase. The contract next goes to the school board Monday, where if it's approved as expected, it will be retroactive to July 1. The school board is going to try to get checks to teachers by Nov. 30, Grassel said. Initially, district administrators told the school board there would only be enough money for a 4-percent teacher raise. Board members disagreed and told negotiators to bring a 4.5-percent offer to the union. The LCEA countered with a 5-percent request, then eventually came down to 4.75 percent, which is where the two sides met. While the overall pay hike is good news, the union does not like a decision last month by the school board to apply for \$2.1 million from the state for teacher bonuses -- a merit pay system that teachers consider unfair. But whether the district actually gives out teacher bonuses through the MAP plan depends on a favorable teachers union vote. Teacher union officials said MAP is based too much on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test and that many teachers felt guilty they received a bonus when their colleagues did not. Grassel said she had hoped the union wouldn't have to vote on MAP, adding that her own straw poll shows 91.5 percent of teachers oppose the plan. The union will vote on the MAP plan after it learns more about it.

HOUSE TAX PLAN COULD HURT EDUCATION -- What helps local seniors could cripple local schools. A new plan proposed by Florida lawmakers to approve an \$11 million property tax cut package could backfire for the Hernando County School District because of the county's large number of low-income senior citizens. In a worst-case scenario, the local school district could lose nearly \$21.4 million in its operating fund and just over \$7.1 million in its capital fund over four years. This could translate to a loss of 500 district employees -- or nearly 14.3 percent of the district's workforce. Funds could also be slashed used for buying and repairing equipment, such as school buses, new facilities and roofs. "This scenario could be a reality for school districts such as Hernando," said Deborah Bruggink, the district's finance director. The Republican House proposal -- one of several currently being juggled by lawmakers -- includes plans to double the homestead exemption to \$50,000, making the current Save Our Homes cap portable and up to a 25 percent property tax exemption for first-time homebuyers.

While that would not apply to property taxes collected for schools, plans to limit property taxes for the state's low-income seniors and a \$25,000 break on "tangible personal property" for business owners would. According to a fiscal analysis, the plan would cut funding for Hernando County schools by 28.5 percent over the next four years. Schools would lose \$2 billion statewide. "In the next year alone, we could lose 114 employees," Bruggink said. "Anytime we're looking at severe cuts from the state like this, we'll have to reevaluate all our personnel -- and programs such as magnets and transportation -- as to whether we can still afford them or not," said Joe Vitalo, president of the Hernando Classroom Teachers Association. "This could make our students the lowest-funded in the state."

SANTA ROSA -- Faced with more than \$2.3 million in budget cuts, Santa Rosa County School Board officials are studying class-time changes at the high schools and developing a three-tiered bus system as cost-saving measures. Superintendent John Rogers said the options could save several million dollars. One idea is to have the six high schools on a "four-by-four, teaching four schedule," where teachers teach four 80-minute periods with a planning period. "We all have to work together because of the budget crunch and loss of sales-tax revenue," said Rhonda Chavers, president of the Santa Rosa Professional Educators, the teachers union.