

COLLIER -- They previously had agreed to a school district request to suspend negotiations, but Collier County's teachers were anxious to get back to the bargaining table. Now, they will have to wait longer. Chief Operations Officer Michele LaBute informed the Collier County Education Association, the group that represents about 80 percent of the district's teachers, that the district wouldn't have an offer for the teachers until Superintendent Dennis Thompson had a chance to meet with the Collier County School Board in executive session. LaBute told the teachers' representatives that Thompson wanted to discuss how news from Vern Crawford, the board's legislative liaison, about the Legislature could affect how much the district is able to offer teachers. Representatives for the teachers said educators would be unhappy at the news, telling district officials that they needed to come back to the table with a good offer. "Anything less than last year is unacceptable," said Cal Boggess, chief negotiator for the union. "You have to realize the teachers' morale is dropping. There is a lot of anger over last year's contract. The message that the teachers sent us is that the contract had to be better than last year." Last year, both sides agreed that the teachers would receive a 6 percent increase across the salary schedule for the 2006-07 school year. The teachers didn't get their step increase, which is measured by years of experience. The Collier County School Board agreed last month to give the teachers their step increases while negotiations were suspended. Oakridge Middle School teacher April Mapes said the teachers are angry that the district seems not to value them. "You wait until you figure out everything else. You wait until your wish list is calculated and whatever is left over is for us. That is an awful feeling," she said. "It is difficult to support our families on the money we make. We need a decent raise. Salaries should be figured into the budget first and then everything else."

LEON -- A tentative agreement has been reached between the Leon County School District and the teachers association on raises, health benefits and differential pay. The agreement stated the average increase will be about \$1,650 or 3.9 percent, costing the School District \$4.7 million. The base pay for beginning teachers will go from \$33,000 to \$34,100. The most any teacher with a master's degree can earn yearly is \$63,100. "We're pretty pleased with it," said David Worrell, president of the Leon Classroom Teacher Association. "Teacher reactions have been very good." Negotiations have been in the works since the spring. Two things will need to happen before the deal is sealed: The School Board needs to vote on the agreement, and teachers will need to submit a secret ballot vote on whether they are for or against the terms. A motion will be presented during today's School Board meeting. Teachers will need to submit their votes by Nov. 8. "I'm asking to put these dollars toward the raises," said School Superintendent Jackie Pons. "I think the School Board will be supportive." The district and the union wanted to have more definite information on raises before teachers came back to work in August but that was pushed back because of the state budget picture. In addition to the potential raise, the district will also pitch in more than \$600,000 to help increase funding for insurance premiums. "The raises that teachers get will pretty much stay in their pockets instead of going to health-plan premiums," Worrell said. A plan is also in the works to create a differential-pay plan where teachers can get more money if they work in low-performing schools or work in areas with teacher shortages such as math, science and exceptional-special education.