

Collier schools' salary offer stands, two state magistrates rule

By [KATHERINE LEWIS \(Contact\)](#)

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The Collier County School District's salary offer to its employees is all that is economically feasible this year.

That's how two state magistrates ruled and sent their decision Wednesday to the district, the Collier County Education Association and the Collier County Association of Educational Office & Classroom Assistant Personnel.

Now, the district and the unions must accept or reject the ruling. If either party decides to reject the ruling, the rejection must be sent in writing to the Florida Public Employees Relations Commission. If either side rejects the ruling, the Collier County School Board will act as a legislative body and will conduct a public hearing and determine the action to be taken.

The Collier County Education Association plans to hold a news conference at 4:30 p.m. Thursday to discuss the ruling.

The magistrate met with both sides in January after the district and the union reached an impasse over salary increases in November. Because public sector employees cannot strike in Florida, they must declare an impasse and have a magistrate issue a finding of fact on the dispute.

The Collier County School District offered teachers and other contract employees a 1 percent bonus on top of the 2 percent salary increase, which is based on years of experience, that was given in September by the Collier County School Board.

The bonus is part of a \$5.69 million compensation package for teachers. That package included \$3.6 million in step increases; \$1.8 million for the 1 percent bonus; \$175,000 in middle school athletic supplements; \$42,000 in increased compensation for class coverage; and \$35,000 in Webmaster supplement increases.

District officials told employees they wanted to give more, but cited several reasons for the offer, including that the district returned \$4.9 million to the state as a result of the state's general revenue shortfall. Of that, \$2.5 million was for the Merit Award Program, which the district would have forfeited regardless because the district and teachers could not agree on a plan. The remaining \$2.37 million was in budget cuts.

In addition, the district experienced declining enrollment this year and returned more than \$5 million for planned enrollment increases that never materialized in Collier County Public Schools.

Both magistrates cited those financial constraints as support for why the district did its due diligence in offering what it did.

"From the evidence presented to me, the odds of getting a better salary offer than the one now offered to the CCEA were much better 12 months ago," wrote Special Magistrate James Brady, who presided over the hearing between the district and the teachers.

"Failure of both witnesses to respond clearly to the District's queries lead me to believe that the District's budgetary procedure was proper, with the funds available for teacher salaries in FY 2007-08 to be as the District had calculated."

Brady wrote in his opinion that he was also impressed with Superintendent Dennis Thompson's initiative in getting Board approval of the 2 percent, which was the union's first priority on the salary issue.

"Additionally, the District's strenuous attempts to find reserves for available funds in the FY 2007-08 budget for salaries illustrated strong concern for the financial well-being of its teaching staff. The District postponed a number of positions to be added and made other efforts to free up enough funds for a 1 percent increment," he wrote.

Special Magistrate John McCollister wrote that he understood the concerns of the classroom assistants over the high cost of living in Collier County.

"When news reaches the Union members of the hiring of a new superintendent and two colleagues at salaries that dwarf those of everyone in the bargaining unit, agitation mounts and heads shake side to side in bewilderment," he wrote.

"That said, the Special Magistrate felt that the explanation offered by representatives of the Board that the District actually saved money through these hirings, was quite satisfactory."

McCollister said the district had to represent the interests of everyone while ultimately being fiscally responsible.

"A school board owes an obligation to its employees to treat them fairly and offer wages to recruit and maintain quality workers. A school board also has a duty to the citizens of Collier County to be good stewards of the taxpayer dollars entrusted to its care," wrote McCollister. "The Board dare not create a budget for items that it cannot, in good conscience, expect to be funded."

The Collier County School Board will host a special meeting Thursday morning to discuss returning more money to the state to help with the state's budget woes and Superintendent Dennis Thompson's request to use reserve funds to make up for that shortfall.

The cost to hire the two magistrates was \$6,063.88. Half will be paid by the district, the other half by the unions.