

‘Me too’ raises questioned



At the February board meeting, Monterey Peninsula Unified School District’s superintendent PK Diffenbaugh said the 9% raise is the biggest single-year increase in district history.

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In return for the “historic” 9% across-the-board raise that Monterey Peninsula Unified School District announced earlier this year, the district said it would have to cut programming and layoff staff to account for that extra \$10 million in expenditures.

But district officials didn’t mention that some administrators and cabinet members would also receive the 9% raise — which in some cases could amount to three times the extra money the average teacher would receive.

And now, some district teachers are questioning the district's historic practice of "me too" raises and whether Monterey Peninsula Unified is putting its money where they say it's needed most — in educators' pockets.

Monterey Peninsula Unified isn't an outlier.

The "me too" clause included in several school districts' faculty and staff contracts specifies that when one bargaining unit receives a raise or increase in benefits, other bargaining units or employees will automatically receive the same. "For years in Monterey Peninsula Unified School District, we have focused on across-the-board percentage increases," Monterey Bay Teachers Association's President Nicky Long said at the February board meeting. "The same percentage given to a custodian as given to someone earning six figures at the top of our salary schedule. ... It's been practiced in our district since before I worked here. But practices should not necessarily continue just because they are easy or because they've been done before."

Who benefits from the practice?

The California Teachers Association explained that often the clauses are included for classified staff, such as custodians, bus drivers and office employees, who are usually paid less and have less bargaining power. But in many districts, administrators at school and district offices also benefit from the practice.

And an analysis by the nonprofit education news site EdSource found that almost a fifth of 53 California superintendent contracts it evaluated contained "me too" clauses (although Monterey Peninsula Unified's does not).

Troy Flint, the chief communications officer for the California School Boards Association, pointed out that "me too" clauses can be used by school districts to regulate and predict superintendent or administrator salaries.

"By regulate, I mean to provide some structure to the process for which those raises are given, as opposed to a more open-ended negotiation," Flint explained.

But unionized teachers have expressed outrage over the clauses, which they say overpay administrators as districts are cutting programs and laying off staff to conserve financial resources.

Monterey Peninsula Unified School District is facing a tough financial situation as decreasing enrollment, reduced funding and a dire state budget deficit has left the district scrambling to ensure it will be fiscally solvent in the coming years, District Superintendent PK Diffenbaugh said.

At the February board meeting, Diffenbaugh said the 9% raise is the biggest single-year increase in district history.

“We heard from union members, we heard from students and the community to invest in our people and we took that to heart,” he said. “That adds around \$10 million per year to the district’s expenditures. That’s a shift in resources that we have to find other ways to reduce expenditures so we can (remain) fiscally solvent for years to come.”

That shift in resources comes in the form of reduced programming and layoffs. In February, the board approved a reduction in over 73 certificated positions and 41 classified positions. Diffenbaugh clarified in February that many of those positions are vacant or will be vacant at the end of the school year.

But other notable cuts include all elementary school physical education teachers, many full-time health assistants and additional learning specialists hired during the pandemic.

Salaries

The California Department of Education placed the average salary of a public school teacher for the 2021-22 school year at \$88,508.

Before the 9% raise, a mid-career teacher at Monterey Peninsula Unified made \$74,000 a year, according to a San Francisco Chronicle analysis of 2022 state Department of Education data on certificated salaries and benefits for unionized educators.

The Chronicle analysis ranked Monterey Peninsula Unified mid-career educator salaries at 258 out of 268 California schools.

“This area — this is not a bottom 10 community,” said a teacher at Marina Vista Elementary Arts Academy who requested to remain anonymous out of fear of retaliation. “So the question is, where is all the money going?”

With the 9% salary increase, a mid-career teacher would see an increase of about \$6,600 a year. But many district administrators’ salary increases are more than twice that.

According to Transparent California data, Diffenbaugh’s salary for 2022 was \$249,947 and over \$300,000 with benefits. If he was to also receive the 9% salary increase, he would receive a raise of over \$20,000. Diffenbaugh pointed out his contract is negotiated separately, which means he may not get the 9 percent raise.

A district principal’s salary for 2022 hovered around \$160,000. With a 9% raise, that number increases by nearly \$15,000.

“The highest paid teacher in our district is \$119,000. And their (salary increase) would be \$10,000,” explained Marina Vista Elementary School teacher, Aaron Beecher. “And that is (with over) 10 years of experience, plus your doctorate.”

“This is my second year in the district, I have five years of experience ... I got paid less than \$60,000 this year,” said another Marina Vista teacher who also requested to remain

anonymous to protect her children who attend school in the district.

Positions eliminated

Diffenbaugh said impacted individuals may still be able to find placement within the district for another position where they qualify and there is an opening.

“I get that (those vacant positions) were a great choice because you’re not really hurting anyone,” said an unnamed teacher at Marina Vista Elementary School. “But you are inadvertently because now there are ... teachers that are in the district that have to pick up the load ... someone has to take up the slack.”

“I’m saddened by the loss of a lot of these positions because they help out so much with kids who are several grades behind,” said Franky Morazan, a teacher at Marina Vista Elementary School and a union leadership member. “But what really hurts children is when they don’t have consistent teachers who can impact them not just for one year, but for the seven to eight years they’re in (elementary) school.”

Teachers represented by the Monterey Bay Teachers Association said the union had originally pushed for a 15% raise in negotiations, which they said the district claimed it could not afford as they were “already calculating their raise.” After some back-and-forth negotiations, the district came back with a “last and final offer” for 9%.

But Diffenbaugh said the teachers association was “very clear” that they wanted across-the-board raises, which is how the district landed on a 9% raise for all employees.

“In order to stay competitive with surrounding districts and honor all the hard work that’s been done throughout the district, we felt like it was advantageous and important for us to honor all our employees, not just our teachers,” Diffenbaugh said. “So we offered the same proposal to our classified staff and the same proposal to our management staff.”

Diffenbaugh said that while there isn’t any formal “me too” raise agreement in the district’s contracts with administrators, it’s been a historic practice in Monterey Peninsula Unified.

“Since before my time, it’s been a practice that we first negotiate with classified and certificated (employees) and then management would get something similar,” he explained.

But now, some Monterey Peninsula Unified teachers have pointed to the contradiction between administrators receiving bigger bonuses and the district’s need to layoff staff and cut positions in order to account for the extra expenditures.

Unable to save positions

Diffenbaugh disagreed and said that the district would not have been able to save positions if it had excluded administrators and cabinet positions from the 9% raise.

“There are six cabinet members. When you look at the level of raise they got, if we had given a 0% raise to our cabinet, that would have freed up money to save about three quarters of a teacher,” he said.

Diffenbaugh explained that with salary and benefits, one teacher costs the district about \$100,000. He added that with over 650 union members in the district, even a 1% raise would have cost the district far more than the amount that all of the district’s cabinet members combined are receiving through the 9% raise.

“As a practical matter, the level of reductions we needed in order to give the level of raises to our teachers and our classified staff would not have been saved in a significant way if we had chosen not to give any raises to our management,” he said.

He also pointed out that the district did not consider a different level of compensation for management as other employees because “we wanted to ensure that we stay competitive.”

“I’m very supportive and happy that we were able to give the level of raise that we did to our principals,” Diffenbaugh said. “When you look across our district, most of our principals have been at their site for six or more years. That’s a level of stability at the site that is not common in most districts.... The raise that we’ve been able to give will continue to support that level of stability, which I think has a direct impact on teachers and staff work environment and satisfaction.”

But many of the district’s teachers disagreed.

“The district is not allocating money to the people and places that do most of the work,” Beecher said. “The people that do most of the work are the teachers and the people that are on the ground with the students. ... It’s the people at the schools, in the classroom.”

Where should money go?

Beecher said that the more than \$100,000 that will go to the district’s cabinet members from the recent 9% raise could be better allocated.

“I’m not necessarily saying give that to us,” he said, explaining there are other areas, such as classroom maintenance that need to be addressed.

“If they were to allocate this money to even dropping a portable (classroom) on our campus, not even building a classroom, the students would see the benefit of that.”

Morazan added that the real question is about who decides where the district’s money is allocated and how to include more of the community in making that decision.

“What do the families think?” Morazan asked. “I think we can all agree that we need to come up with creative solutions to make sure that teachers stop leaving because it’s less about where should the money go and more ‘what’s the problem?’”