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Senate increases UNC spending, but teacher pay hike stays same

By Gary D. Robertson
The Associated Press

RALEIGH — The North Carolina Senate’s proposed education budget would boost funding for the University of North Carolina system and give Gov. Mike Easley nearly all the money he sought for his signature preschool initiative.

But it limits pay raises for public school teachers to an average of 3 percent — the same boost included by the House when it passed its own proposed budget two weeks ago.

“We all wanted to do more for teachers, but we all don’t want to raise taxes,” said Sen. Linda Garrou, D-Forsyth, co-chairwoman of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Easley wants a nearly 7 percent raise for teachers, which would bring their salaries to the national average by the time he leaves office in January. He suggested raising the state’s cigarette taxes to help pay for it, an unpopular idea for lawmakers facing an election this fall.

Senators also agreed with House colleagues on pay for rank-and-file state employees, proposing a raise of either 2.75 percent or $1,100, whichever is greater. Easley asked for a 1.5 percent raise, plus a $1,000 one-time bonus.

The proposal would make adjustments to the second year of the two-year budget, approved by the General Assembly last year. The complete Senate budget will be released Tuesday by the Appropriations Committee, with final votes on the Senate floor expected Wednesday and Thursday.

Lawmakers want to complete the budgeting process before the new fiscal year begins July 1.

While the small raise for teachers is sure to disappoint Easley, the roughly $21.3 billion budget plan submitted by the Senate’s budget writers should please the governor on several fronts.

Senators gave Easley’s More at Four education pro-

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gram for 4-year-olds $41 million, compared with the $23 provided by the House budget. But it’s still short of the $45 million in Easley requested in his budget proposal.

The UNC system would receive $68.6 million more than the House offered in its budget, achieved in part by the Senate’s suggestion to delete a 1 percent spending reduction the House wants to make across most of the system’s campuses. The Senate also proposed investing $12 million into faculty and graduate student recruitment and retention efforts, and to improve research funding.

Overall public school spending is slightly smaller in the Senate’s proposal when compared with the House plan. A key difference: The Senate would allocate an extra $11 million to help schools pay for diesel fuel for school buses, instead of the $45 million boost provided by the House.
What's a teacher worth?

Legislature, Easley face off over raises for state workers

BY BENJAMIN NIOLET
STAFF WRITER

Dave Walsh is paid $39,500 a year to teach math and science to middle schoolers. Wendell Powell is paid $33,000 a year to keep an eye on rival gangs in prison.

Which service is more valuable? Do the men make enough money? Should one get a bigger pay raise than the other?

Such questions underpin a debate between the legislature and Gov. Mike Easley as they try to assemble a state budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1. The Senate joined the fray Monday when leaders said that they, like the members of the House, would give teachers smaller pay raises than those proposed by Easley. Other state employees, in the House and Senate plans, would get larger pay raises than Easley proposed.

Powell, 32, is sympathetic to the concerns of teachers. After all, he has two girls in elementary school and he wants them to have well-paid teachers. But Powell, a correction officer who works in the gang unit at Wake Correctional Center, says his job is valuable, too.

"If we had to trade shoes for a day, I don't know how many teachers would want to work on death row," Powell said. "We all serve the state and the counties in different capacities, and it's all vital."

Meanwhile Walsh, a six-year veteran who will teach math and science at Moore Square Middle School in Raleigh next year, may have to choose between his passion for teaching and a salary he can live on. He and his wife are thinking of having children in the next year or so.

"It's a job where if you don't like it, it's not really worth the pay," Walsh said. "I prefer right now to stay in the classroom, but family comes first."

Raises are one of the biggest issues facing the legislature. The state Senate began rollin...
That puts the House and the Senate, controlled by Democrats, at odds with Easley, the state's two-term Democratic governor. Easley has proposed larger raises for teachers and smaller increases or no raises for other state employees.

Easley has made pay raises a centerpiece of his final budget proposal, saying the state's future depends on well-educated workers. Easley also says that he and lawmakers promised three years ago to raise teachers' pay to the national average, and that his proposal to raise teachers' pay by an average of 7 percent would fulfill that promise.

Legislative leaders say they can do only so much in a struggling economy. "This is not a pass-all test," Rand said. "This is a lo-the-best-you-can test."

A 1 percent raise for non-teacher employees would cost the state $73 million a year, said Dan Gerlach, a senior budget advisor to Easley. A 1 percent increase in teachers would cost $57 million. The budget is about $21 billion.

The raises would not be based on merit. For state employees, they would be across the board. For teachers, they would be based on experience and education.

In 2005, Easley and legislative leaders announced a four-year plan to raise teachers' salaries to a national average, as calculated by the N.C. Association of Educators, which lobbies for teachers. Easley says that the state's ability to compete depends on the quality of education available to the children who will make up the work force.

The plan was to raise salaries 5 percent a year. But other states have been more aggressive, and it would take an average raise of 7 percent this year to meet the average, Gerlach said. Easley's advisers say $49,520 is the average for a teacher with 15 years of experience and a bachelor's degree. The state now pays such a teacher $46,319.

The gap seemed wider when the legislature rejected a tax hike on cigarettes that Easley proposed to pay for teachers' raises.

Even if Easley got what he wanted on teachers' pay — which seems increasingly unlikely — the base salary for a just-graduated teacher with a bachelor's degree would rise from $29,750 to $32,610. That's a 10 percent raise, probably not enough to draw teachers to the state from across the country. But the money would help said Eddie Davis, president of the N.C. Association of Educators, the largest education group in the state.

"For a lot of people, $3,000 might not be that much money," he said, "but with the gas prices and in the lives of people who are getting their first jobs, $3,000 makes a whole lot of sense."

Easley has said the proposed teachers' raises would send a clear signal about the state's priorities. "Our kids aren't below average," he said. "Their ambitions aren't below average, and our teachers can't be compensated below average, either."

Dividing teachers from the rest of state employees has been a successful political tactic, said Dana Cope, executive director of the State Employees Association of North Carolina, which represents 55,000 employees and retirees. Cope said it has been difficult to get people to recognize other government workers' contributions as readily as those of teachers.

Powell, the correction officer in Wake County said he wants more state residents to realize how hard state employees work.

"For what you're getting for the money you're spending as a taxpayer, you're getting quality," Powell said.

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TEACHER SALARIES: COMPLEX NUMBERS

For his budget proposal, Gov. Mike Easley considered the national average to be $49,520 for a teacher with a bachelor's degree and 15 years of experience. That number came from the National Education Association. The state's salary for a teacher with the same qualifications is $46,319.

HOW MUCH DO TEACHERS MAKE?

Teachers are paid differently from other state employees. The state's schedule for base salary provides for higher pay with every additional year of experience a teacher has. Teachers also benefit from incentives and bonuses as well as supplements from some counties that can average $5,000 more. The starting salary for a teacher freshly graduated with a bachelor's degree is $29,750, not including incentives and supplemental pay. A teacher with a bachelor's degree and 30 years of experience makes a base salary of $52,000.

WILL ALL TEACHERS GET THE SAME RAISE?

No. The salary scale is designed to reward teachers for sticking with the profession for five years, so raises are higher as teachers approach that level of experience. Gov. Mike Easley has argued that new teachers need high starting salaries to help attract job applicants to the state. Others say the state should provide more incentives for high-performing teachers or those who teach math and science.
Senate, House differ on state budget details

BY DAN KANE
STAFF WRITER

The UNC system would get more money to cover growing enrollment and would be spared an across-the-board $18 million cut. Gov. Mike Easley's More at Four pre-kindergarten program would be expanded for another 6,345 kids, and $1 million intended to help sheriffs enforce federal immigration law would be cut in half.

Those are some of the differences Senate budget writers made from the House version in their state spending plan for the coming fiscal year. On Monday, Senate budget writers began releasing parts of their version.

The full budget bill is expected to be released today.

OTHER DIFFERENCES INCLUDE

- A $36 million cut from the mental health service called community support. The House cut $65 million.
- For some health programs the House funded, the Senate uses money from the Health and Wellness Trust fund, a pool of money that comes to the state from the national tobacco settlement with cigarette companies.
- Two additional toll road projects in future years: $15 million a year to help start the Mid-Currituck Bridge in Currituck County and $35 million a year for the Golden Parkway in Gaston and Mecklenburg counties.
- $11 million to cover rising diesel fuel costs for school buses, far less than the $45 million increase the House proposed.
- $8 million for dropout prevention grants, compared to the $15 million the House included.
- The Senate proposes to pay doctors and hospitals less than the House for treating Medicaid patients.
- The Senate reduces the money available for children enrolled in Health Choice, a health insurance program for children whose families make too much money to qualify for Medicaid. The House added $10.4 million to the program, enough to add more than 10,600 children. The Senate proposal would freeze enrollment until April 2009 and would provide $1.7 million to start adding children then, if the federal government renews the program. The Senate would take $7 million out of another children's health insurance program that has not yet started.

"It's cruel to children," said Soren K. Schmidt, senior vice president for Action for Children N.C.

"It's also politically shocking. It's a full reversal of the strong stance they've taken historically to provide health insurance to children and disabled people."

TAX CUTS

Both chambers have agreed to a package of tax cuts worth $50 million, but they differ in where to offer that relief.

The House included tax breaks for lower-income working families and for businesses that provide health insurance for their employees. The Senate package may include a repeal of the gift tax and a reduction on taxes paid for home heating fuels.

WHAT'S NEXT

Senate leaders expect to vote out a budget proposal this week. House and Senate budget writers, with input from Easley, will then negotiate a compromise.

Staff writers Lynn Bonner and Bruce Siceloff, and Charlotte Observer reporter David Ingram contributed to this report.
Stem cells may help heal broken bones

BY ZOE ELIZABETH BUCK
STAFF WRITER

CHAPEL HILL - When Harry Potter breaks his arm in a Quidditch match, the Hogwarts nurse gives him a magic potion called "Skelegro." In the morning, his arm is as good as new.

The possibility of using a potion like Skelegro to treat severe bone fractures may soon be more than the stuff of wizard tales. Medical researchers at UNC-Chapel Hill announced Monday that they have made strides in the technology to rebuild damaged bone tissue using stem cells.

The research team, led by Dr. Anna Spagnoli, an associate professor of pediatrics at UNC-Ch, derived the stem cells from bone marrow samples to locate and repair broken bones in mice. Now the work is poised to move to humans. "What we have done here is shown a reason to move to a real clinical trial," Spagnoli said.

Twenty percent of broken bones cannot heal on their own, affecting 600,000 people in the United States each year. A significant portion of them are women who suffer from osteoporosis, but the problem is not restricted to older patients. Children diagnosed with a condition known as brittle bone disease can suffer from multiple, painful fractures over their lifetimes.

Stem cell technology could significantly reduce healing time, Spagnoli said, noting that the development also could help trauma patients.

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It's a field that is generating interest and possibilities. A recent case in Germany, in which a man lost his jaw to an aggressive tumor, was reported in the journal Lancet in 2004. In that instance, German scientists used a titanium jaw prosthesis as a scaffold in which they planted stem cells extracted from the patient's bone marrow. The scaffold served as a mold for a new jawbone to grow from the cells.

"These cases are very promising, but one case does not make science," Spagnoli said.

The UNC study coaxed the stem cells to become cartilage using a compound called growth factor.

"The first step in bone healing is to create cartilage as a glue," Spagnoli said. "Without that glue, the bone will not be able to heal."

But just creating cartilage is not enough to fix a broken bone. The cartilage glue needs to form at the fracture for it to heal.

Glow-in-the-dark mice

"Nobody knew if the stem cells would even go to the place where they were needed — the fracture," Spagnoli said. To address this, Spagnoli's team injected a group of healthy mice with the same substance that makes fireflies glow. When they extracted bone marrow from these glow-in-the-dark mice, they got glow-in-the-dark stem cells, which the researchers then injected into ordinary mice with bone fractures.

"We put the mice in a dark box, and we saw the light, and we could see it was going to the right place," Spagnoli said. "When we saw this, we were so excited, we celebrated with a bottle of good Spanish wine."

But how do the stem cells know where to go when they are injected into the body? Spagnoli's team noticed that a certain molecule in the stem cells was the key to homing in on the fracture. The molecule, called CXR4, was responding to a chemical signal sent out by the damaged bone.

"It's like the fracture is sending out a message that says 'please come here, there is help needed here,'" Spagnoli said.

Elizabeth Lobo, an assistant professor of biomedical engineering at N.C. State University who studies the effect of mechanical stress on stem cell tissue generation, said she was intrigued by the UNC-CH results.

"You always have the challenge of going from the animal to the human model, depending on the research," said Lobo, who was not involved in Spagnoli's research. "But this sounds very promising. There's a lot of exciting research going on in North Carolina on tissue engineering right now, especially in the Triangle area."

Spagnoli hopes that this technology will be approved by the FDA for clinical trial as soon as possible.

"We have another bottle of good Spanish wine all ready for when the study is published," she said.