

Local school boards pay salary raises before tackling class size

By [Michael Alison Chandler](#) and [Ovetta Wiggins](#), Published: June 3

School boards across the Washington region have responded to plunging revenue in recent years by freezing wages, imposing furloughs or cutting summer school, pre-kindergarten or arts programs.

But as their budgets begin to improve, boards face choices about spending increases: Should they raise salaries, lower class sizes or restore programs that had been cut?

Several local boards have opted this year for pay increases, in response to demands from teachers and other employees whose salaries had stagnated.

Resetting priorities after a fiscal downturn is challenging, administrators say.

“We know what the priority is when making cuts: You safeguard the classroom as the last resort,” said Daniel A. Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators. “But do you go back the same way? Not necessarily. You are going to put those dollars in the areas that are crying out for need.”

In Montgomery County, where pay was frozen for two years, the [school board voted](#) to spend nearly all its extra dollars on a salary increase. The \$2.1 billion budget deal, a 2 percent increase over current spending, includes two raises in the coming year: a step increase July 1 and a retroactive step increase in May for those who went without one in fiscal 2011. The average increase by next summer will be about 5 percent, officials said.

The deal with the school system’s three employee unions prompted an outcry from some parents and the County Council, which approved smaller, one-time bonuses for other county employees.

Santiago Gasso, a Silver Spring father, said he’s [concerned that services “are being degraded”](#) while teachers get raises. His daughter is likely to have more than 25 students in her kindergarten class next year, he said, but his son had fewer than 20 in his kindergarten class a few years ago.

A letter from County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) [questioned whether the more generous raises](#) would take away from the district’s longer-term ability to lower class sizes or hire music teachers, media assistants and counselors.

In Prince William County, salary increases are coming with greater sacrifices.

The fast-growing district has [lower tax rates](#) and larger class sizes than many of its neighbors. The [School Board decided this spring to increase class sizes in middle and high schools](#), pushing against state limits, so it could afford a step increase for employees.

“This year the priority was keeping pace” with salaries around the region, said Philip Kavits, a spokesman for Prince William schools. “We don’t want to lose people.”

The decision came after [teachers packed School Board meetings](#) and protested an original proposal to hold salaries flat. Employees have forgone step increases for three years, but teachers received a [1.75 percent raise and 0.6 percent bonus last year](#).

Other Virginia districts also are prioritizing pay raises this year, although increases are being offset by adjustments to employee contributions to state and local retirement plans. In Arlington County, for example, the school board approved a 7.2 percent pay increase, but employees will take home only about 2.2 percent. In Fairfax County, [the net increase also is 2.2 percent](#).

Fairfax County School Board member Kathy L. Smith (Sully) said she voted against the budget because she wanted to dedicate more funding to salaries. “Our teachers are working harder and harder every year,” she said.

Instead, the Fairfax board chose to begin restoring services that had been cut or frozen during the recession. It approved as many as three weeks of summer school for struggling students and added money to expand a popular foreign language instruction program to new elementary schools. The board also eliminated an unpopular \$100-per-sport athletic fee.

It did not address staffing ratios, which increased class sizes by an average of one student in recent years. The board did add \$2.5 million to a staffing reserve meant to relieve some of the largest classes, however. And it set aside \$600,000 to expand the board’s support staff.

The District, which has not imposed pay freezes on teachers in the past five years, will spend an additional \$25 million in operating costs in its fiscal 2013 budget over this year, with most of the money going to salaries and benefits for teachers, instructional coaches and counselors. The student-to-teacher ratio, meanwhile, is expected to grow by about two students in D.C. middle and high schools.

In Prince George’s County, where property tax revenue was especially hard-hit by foreclosure rates, the school board is trying to find cost-effective ways to make up for some of the region’s most drastic cuts. Teachers have gone without raises for three years, and class sizes have gone up by about four students.

Briant Coleman, a spokesman for the school system, said officials are still in negotiations with the unions but have set aside \$18 million for raises. (The school board plans to vote on its \$1.65 billion budget at the end of June.)

Meanwhile, Prince George's officials have given principals some flexibility to address class sizes. They instituted a program that gives principals discretion over how money is spent in their schools, and the school system plans to disperse \$15 million among school leaders, who can decide whether to use the money for extra textbooks, extra teachers or to restore programs.

Theresa Saunders, president of the Prince George's County Council of Parent-Teachers Associations, said school officials have a difficult balancing act to manage. Saunders wants smaller classes, especially in elementary schools, but she also wants good teachers to be adequately compensated.

"We want to retain our good teachers, so we have to be competitive," Saunders said.

"And we want to retain a competitive school system, and to do that we have to have small classes. . . . It's a challenge to do both."