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THURSDAY  
JUNE 26, 2008

HOUSTON  CHRONICLE  
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## HISD budget boosts pay

■ Rising property values will cover increases without tax hike

By ERICKA MELLON  
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After some infighting this week, the Houston school board on Thursday unanimously approved a \$1.6 billion budget that includes pay raises of at least 3 percent, plus millions more for library books, computers, fine arts programs and principal training.

The Houston Independent School District's 2008-09 budget does not call for a tax-rate increase. But because of rising property values, the owner of an average-priced home — worth \$203,895 — would owe HISD about \$1,670 in taxes next year, according to the Harris County Tax Office. That's up about \$80 from last year.

HISD Superintendent Abelardo Saavedra described the budget as one that "serves students well and continues our fiscal responsibility to our taxpayers."

A last-minute compromise gives principals an extra \$5 million in discretionary money for things such as field trips or new technology.

The budget includes \$50 million for schools to im-

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## HISD: Millions to create institute

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prove substandard libraries; to enhance art, music and theater programs; to buy capital items such as furniture; or to cover other needs.

The extra money for schools equals about \$275 per student.

### Gasoline bonus

To help offset gasoline prices, the district's lowest-paid employees also will get a one-time \$250 bonus.

"The employees see that the administration reached out and provided \$250 for the gas voucher, which is good," said Wretha Thomas, president of the Houston Educational Support Personnel Union, which represents custodians, bus drivers and others.

"But we wish we could have gotten more," she added, "because when we get to October or November, if gas prices don't go down or groceries, we're still going to face a problem with employees being able to get to work."

Earlier this week, board President Harvin Moore threatened to vote against the budget, condemning what he considered a lack of funding for

schools and not enough input from trustees early in the budget-drafting process.

Saavedra said Thursday that he and Chief Financial Officer Melinda Garrett would work to improve the process next year.

Under the new budget, teachers will get an average raise of 4 percent, with some receiving a 3-percent boost and others with the most experience and a master's degree pocketing a 10-percent raise.

The new pay scale brings the salary of a first-year teacher with a bachelor's degree to \$44,027.

A teacher with at least 29 years of experience and a master's will earn \$68,590.

"It's an OK raise," said Gayle Fallon, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers, the district's largest employee group.

"Is it something we're going to do back flips over? No. But it's reasonable in that we have a commitment that (health) insurance rates will not increase," she said.

On average, principals will get an 8-percent raise, while assistant principals will get 7 percent. The bigger boost is needed

to make their salaries more competitive in the market, Garrett said.

A first-year elementary school principal will earn \$68,000, while a rookie high school principal will get \$86,000.

Saavedra's contract guarantees him the same percentage raise as teachers, so his base pay is expected to increase from \$302,000 to \$313,959. He also is eligible for a maximum performance bonus of \$80,000. Teachers can earn bonuses up to \$7,800 next year.

### Institute for principals

The budget also includes \$2.2 million to create an institute for aspiring principals, \$514,000 for a curriculum for gifted students, \$350,000 to expand testing of 4-year-olds to determine if they are gifted and \$100,000 to begin creating a curriculum for virtual schooling.

In addition, two new high-level positions will be created: an assistant superintendent for communications and a director of performance management.

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