



EDUCATION

Miami-Dade voters say yes to property tax hike to pay teachers, hire school police

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Before any precincts reported — just early voting and mail-in ballots counted — Superintendent Alberto Carvalho declared victory for the Miami-Dade school referendum question.

“It’s won,” he said. The early tally was quite a divide: About 70 percent — the overwhelming majority of Miami-Dade County voters — approved a four-year property tax hike to pay teachers more and hire enough school police officers to staff every school.

Later, with 610 out of 783 precincts reporting as of 8:30 p.m. Tuesday, the ballot measure was a clear victory. Property owners will soon see a tax increase of \$75 for every \$100,000 in assessed taxable value. About \$232 million stands to be collected by July 2019 for the referendum’s first year.

The school district’s watch party, held at iPrep Academy, a magnet school across the street from district headquarters, buzzed. Websites and newscasts with election results were projected onto multiple screens. Party-goers chowed down on soda and sandwiches surrounding a yellow sheet cake with “#362 Secure Our Future” in blue icing.

Carvalho said the early results tracked with polling done through Secure Our Future, the political action committee created to promote the referendum. He also said the results mirrored those of the 2012 referendum for the general obligation bond to fix crumbling schools and upgrade technology, which passed with 68 percent of the vote.

Citing the district’s litany of accomplishments, including a historic A rating and a second year of no F ratings for traditional schools, “I think I would have to reassess everything if this referendum didn’t pass,” Carvalho said.

Miami-Dade Schools Police Chief Edwin Lopez milled around the party in plain clothes, all smiles.

“I feel that the margin of victory is going to be great because the safety and security of kids is the responsibility of every single resident in Miami-Dade County,” Lopez said. He said he hoped to raise a schools police officer’s starting salary beyond \$40,400.

Absent from the celebration was the United Teachers of Dade, which held its own watch party for the referendum and Democratic gubernatorial candidate Andrew Gillum. School Board members Lubby Navarro, Mari Tere Rojas and chairwoman Perla Tabares Hantman did attend the district's watch party.

School Board members have agreed to spend 88 percent of that funding, or around \$200 million, on pay increases for about 20,000 teachers and instructional staff. The remaining 12 percent will go toward hiring more officers to be placed in each school, now required by a new state law, and paying them adequately.

The referendum is a saving grace for the Miami-Dade County school district, which received the third lowest increase among all 67 counties for base student pay in this year's budget — funding that could be used for teacher raises. It now joins about 20 other counties that have turned to voters for additional funding.

Palm Beach County also passed its own school referendum on Tuesday. Voters in Broward County approved a similar referendum in the August primary election with 63 percent of the vote.

Mid- to late-career teachers who missed out on huge pay raises, some of whom barely make more than a brand new teacher, stand to benefit the most from the referendum. Although specifics, such as how much teachers would get and who would qualify for that money, would come through collective bargaining with the teacher's union, district and union officials said they hoped to increase teacher pay to above the national average, which is \$59,660 according to the National Education Association, rectify the disparate pay scale and pay veteran teachers what they're due.

The only teachers who would likely not see a raise are those who earned performance ratings of "needs improvement," "developing" or "unsatisfactory." According to state data from 2016-17, the latest year available, just 1.4 percent fell into those categories.

The union would also continue to negotiate annual raises on top of what is doled out from the referendum funding. Collective bargaining between the district and the teacher's union, United Teachers of Dade, has been on hiatus since early summer.

Charter schools may also benefit from the passage of the referendum. After some charter schools circulated critical fliers about the referendum, unhappy that it was not clear that they would benefit from the ballot measure, Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said he would recommend

“increased consideration” for sharing already earmarked safety and security funding with charter schools on the basis of passing the referendum. The item would be subject to school board approval.

The ballot language approved by voters also includes the formation of an oversight committee, which would go into effect at the next School Board meeting scheduled for Nov. 20.

The oversight committee follows the same template as the committee that oversees the 2012 general obligation bond; there are 19 voting and four non-voting members. Each member would serve four-year terms and could be reappointed.

In case the referendum is not renewed in the future, Carvalho said, rising property values could help stretch the pool of new money beyond four years. There are statewide efforts to extend the shelf life of a referendum from four to 10 years.

Secure Our Future, the political action committee formed to promote the referendum, raised \$368,247 as of Election Day. Prominent donors include UTD’s own PAC, insurance giant Cigna, Hard Rock Stadium, local billionaire Norman Braman and Teach for America Miami-Dade board chair Leslie Miller Saiontz, as well as several real estate, engineering, architecture and construction firms.

The PAC spent nearly all of that money, \$324,192, on political consultants including \$23,500 to activist Tangela Sears, TV ads, robocalls, mobile billboards, polling and nearly \$16,000 on “videos and airfare.”

Paying teachers more will help Miami-Dade County Public Schools attract and retain the best teachers for our children. Teacher of the Year, Rudy Diaz urges voters to fill in YES #362 at the bottom of the ballot for better teacher pay.

By Secure Our Future Miami

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