

REDUCING PAY BAD IDEA, GROUP SAYS

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MOULTON -- An advocacy group for the poor said Lawrence County's plan to lower entry-level salaries for some educational employees is a step backward. The school board is likely to approve Monday a pay schedule that will include a \$15,697 salary for entry-level support staff, including teacher aides. The entry-level workers, like current employees, would have earned \$19,081 if it were not for the planned decrease.

Under the proposal, current employees will be at the top of the pay schedule, but employees entering the system after implementation of the schedule would start at the bottom. "Decreasing pay for education workers is not where we want to be headed," said Jim Carnes, communications director for Alabama Arise. "We would certainly not consider that a livable wage." The \$15,697 is less than Alabama Arise considered a livable wage for an adult in Lawrence County with an infant. Carnes said the standard for an adult with one infant child today, in Lawrence County, is \$21,500.

Unlike federal poverty guidelines that base adequate standards of living on food, shelter and transportation, the **self-sufficiency standard** also includes childcare, health care, taxes and miscellaneous items. The proposed decrease is intended to facilitate the implementation of step raises. Superintendent Dexter Rutherford said he compared the system's salaries with salaries in surrounding counties. He said Lawrence County pays its support staff more than systems with larger enrollments, a fact he said should rule out pay raises. Rutherford and the school board then proposed lowering entry-level salaries.

The plan includes a step raise system that places current employees at the top of the schedule, and allows support workers to earn the top salary after 12 years. Like teachers, instructional aides now have to become highly qualified as defined by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Roger Houston, Lawrence County's personnel director, said aides are considered highly qualified if they meet one of three criteria: at least 40 hours of college credit, an associate degree or a passing grade on a test. On the Net: **Self-sufficiency standard**, www.arisecitizens.org.