School workers begin campaign for a living wage

By Alia Malik and Greta Kaul STAFF WRITERS

Vanita Rodriguez, the cafeteria manager at Graebner Elementary in the San Antonio Independent School District, has seven children and 24 grandchildren, all SAISD students. Rodriguez works extra hours into the evenings, weekends and summertime to help her grown children financially, dedicating her spare time to baby-sitting grandchildren.

The cooks who work under Rodriguez start at $10.30 per hour. To feed their families, they work second jobs as bus monitors and assistants. Many of them have children in SAISD.

“Everyone that I know has to supplement with additional work to be able to survive,” Rodriguez told SAISD’s board of trustees last week. “They do it because they love our kids, but more so because they need the money.”

The lowest-paid workers in school districts across San Antonio are launching living wage campaigns, with the help of outside organizations, including COPS/Metro and the Southwest Workers’ Union.

At a rally before SAISD’s board meeting, the San Antonio Alliance of Teachers & Support Personnel and community organizers asked the board to publicly commit to the campaign and research the cost of raising the wage floor to $13 per hour next fiscal year and $15 per hour within three years.

The alliance is asking for “decompressed” wage increases, meaning workers with more seniority would receive raises as well. By their calculations, their campaign would result in raises for about 2,000 workers.

SAISD employs about 3,500 full-time, nonexempt hourly workers, district spokeswoman Leslie Price said. Fewer than 1,000 of them make less than $13 per hour, she said. When the district begins its budget process next month, administrators and trustees will analyze the potential for raises, Price said.

District officials said Tuesday that they supported the goal of a phased minimum wage increase to $15 per hour.

“We are together on this,” said Patti Radle, board president. “This board is anxious to pay decent wages to its employees.”

COPS/Metro is working on replicating the campaign in Harlandale, Northside and North East ISDs, said Mike Phillips, a leader with the organization.

“We don’t have enough folks to go after them all at the same time,” Phillips said. “Once we’ve got one under our belt, we’ll try to do another two more next.”

At Edgewood and South San Independent School District meetings this month, the Southwest
Vanita Rodriguez, the cafeteria manager at a school, says everyone she knows works extra hours or second jobs “to be able to survive.” The cooks at her school start at $10.30 an hour.
“This board is anxious to pay decent wages to its employees,” said Patti Radle, SAISD board president. Seated next to her at the meeting is district Superintendent Pedro Martinez.

Workers’ Union organized workers to ask districts to plan for a wage increase in next year’s budgets. In San Antonio, $17.44 per hour is a living wage for a San Antonio family of three living in a two-bedroom apartment and spending a third of its income on rent, said Chavel Lopez, a labor coordinator with the Southwest Workers’ Union. Lopez estimates that the union has between 400 and 500 members in San Antonio.

Marcela Martinez, who has worked in the cafeteria at Wrenn Middle School for nine years, said during the public comment period at Edgewood’s board meeting this month that the district’s wages leave workers like her in poverty.

“The school workers of the district help kept schools clean and healthy. Bus drivers safely transport the students from school and home. The cafeteria workers provide nutritious meals for the students. The cafeteria workers deserve a just wage to provide for our families,” Martinez said in Spanish.

Lopez said Edgewood has failed to keep up with a living wage resolution it passed in 2003.

Edgewood spokeswoman Keyhla Calderon said custodians, bus aides and nutrition service workers earn between $9.37 per hour and $13.19 per hour. Bus drivers earn between $12.82 and $17.70. Such workers are eligible for benefits, she said.

Eddie Rodriguez, the Edgewood board president who has since resigned, said last week that if the district were to raise the wages of such workers, the changes would likely go through the board’s budget committee before they could be put on the agenda.

During public comment at South San’s meeting last week, Joaquin Abrego, a labor organizer with the Southwest Workers’ Union, said some workers were too afraid to voice their concerns over wages publicly.

“We’re asking that the district work its way up toward a living wage, and we’re asking that they do it in a process that’s just and that it’s phased in through time. We’re not asking them to (fork over) $17.44 an hour,” Abrego said.

For bus aides, cafeteria workers and custodians at South San, pay ranges from $9.25 to $13.75 per hour. Starting wage for South San bus drivers is $13.30 per hour, according to district spokesman Ryan Paredez. Cafeteria workers, bus drivers, bus assistants and custodians are eligible for district benefits.

As the budgeting process begins in the spring, South San board President Connie Prado said the
district’s employees work hard and deserve to be compensated as the district is able.

“We welcome their comments and their concerns. We need to know what’s going on in our district,” she said. “We value all our employees and we want to be competitive (with wages).” amalik@express-news.net, gkaul@express-news.net Twitter: @aliaatSAEN, @gretakaul