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Oklahoma Legislature passes tax hikes for teacher pay



The Associated Press

Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin, left, high-fives Sen. Mike Schulz, right, R-Altus, during a news conference following a vote on a package of tax hikes to fund teacher pay raises in Oklahoma City, Wednesday, March 28, 2018. Sen. Kim David, R-Porter, is at center. (AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki)

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A package of Oklahoma tax hikes aimed at generating hundreds of millions of new dollars for teacher pay and averting statewide school closures received final legislative approval Wednesday night.

The Senate voted 36-10 to increase taxes on oil and gas production, cigarettes, fuel and lodging — narrowly receiving the three-fourth's majority needed to pass — and the chamber broke into applause afterward. The House passed the plan Monday. It is designed to generate about \$450 million for lawmakers to spend, and Gov. Mary Fallin said she "absolutely" plans to sign the package.

"We finally got the job done, and I applaud the bipartisanship of the House and Senate," Fallin said just moments after the Senate approved the bill.

It includes a \$1-per-pack tax on cigarettes, a 3-cent increase on gasoline, 6-cent hike on diesel and an increase on the oil and gas production tax from 2 percent to 5 percent. Amid a furious, last-minute lobbying effort by the hospitality industry, House and Senate leaders agreed to pass a separate measure to repeal the \$5-per-night hotel and motel tax that was projected to raise about \$45 million.

A separate bill to increase teacher pay by an average of about \$6,100 also cleared the Senate on Wednesday, along with another measure to cap itemized income tax deductions that was projected to generate another \$94 million.

The tax hike passage came despite fierce opposition from the tobacco and oil and gas lobby, along with anti-tax groups who vowed to launch a signature drive to overturn the hikes. Among the most vocal opponents was former U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn, who urged citizens to challenge incumbents who support the plan.

Oklahoma teachers, who have not had a raise since 2007, have set a statewide walkout for Monday to pressure lawmakers. Oklahoma would be the second state this year where teachers walked out. West Virginia educators won a 5 percent pay hike after going on strike.

A starting teacher in Oklahoma makes \$31,600, and the average teacher salary ranks 49th among the states and District of Columbia, according to the most recent statistics from the National Education Association. Only South Dakota and Mississippi are lower.

The head of Oklahoma's largest teacher union said many districts across Oklahoma already have plans for

teachers to walk out of class on Monday, but she described the legislative vote in a statement as a "truly historic moment."

"There is still work to do to get this Legislature to invest more in our classrooms," said Alicia Priest, the president of the Oklahoma Education Association. "That work will continue Monday when educators descend on the Capitol."

The union had been demanding \$10,000 pay raises for teachers and \$5,000 for support personnel over three years, along with additional funding for public schools and state agencies.

While the plan's passage is expected to successfully end the prospect of a long-term work stoppage, not all teachers are happy with the Legislature.

"This is pretty much half of what we were asking for," said Denara Manning, a high school science teacher in the Oklahoma City suburb of Edmond. "They threw us a bone."

Oklahoma State Superintendent Joy Hofmeister said she expected Monday's walkout to end up being more of a "rally for public schools."

"I think when our teachers get more of the details ... they will definitely feel a sense of accomplishment," Hofmeister said.

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