

Louisiana Federation of Teachers

Weekly Legislative Digest

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Schools, TOPS, health care facing budget axe

The long awaited announcement about how Louisiana can shave \$750 million from next year's budget came on Tuesday, and Gov. John Bel Edwards did not sugarcoat the bad news.

"There was one guy who could do the loaves and fishes trick and it ain't me," Gov. Edwards told the House Appropriations Committee.

The governor strongly hinted that he will call lawmakers back into a special session as soon as the regular session closes on June 6, saying "I believe we need more revenue."

Appropriations Chairman Rep. Cameron Henry (R-Metairie) pushed back. Focusing on a proposed \$183 million cut to the popular TOPS scholarship program, he suggested shifting other funds to preserve TOPS, then call a special session in the fall. By then, he said, the effects of cuts should be fully known, and perhaps new revenues could be avoided.

But by then, damage that could not be undone may be inflicted on programs that are necessary for the people of the state. Gov. Edwards said that students can't wait until fall to know whether or not TOPS will be fully funded, and that hospitals may face closure in the meantime.

Aside from the 66% cuts to TOPS, Gov. Edwards proposed cutting \$44 million from public school funding and \$75 million from hospitals in Houma, Lake Charles, Alexandria and Bogalusa that serve the poor and uninsured.

Education cuts would affect the continuation of a teacher pay raise, \$7 million in support for lunch programs at some private and religious schools, and \$6 million from the voucher program.

Higher education, which has suffered more than most areas of the budget during the Jindal years, will endure yet another \$46 million cut.

MFP rejection threatens teacher salaries

In a private meeting with leaders from LFT and LAE, Governor Edwards explained the dilemma he faces in asking the Senate Education Committee to reject public education's proposed \$3.7 billion Minimum Foundation Program formula.

As a state representative, Gov. Edwards convinced lawmakers to include nearly \$40 million in the current year's budget, primarily to continue a teacher pay raise. That money was appropriated outside the MFP, but legislators asked the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to memorialize the funding in the coming year's formula.

BESE did that, sending the legislature an MFP proposal with an increase amounting to just over 1.3%. But given the magnitude of cuts to other state programs, the governor said, he could not justify the increase in the MFP. If lawmakers can agree on new revenues in a special session, he said, the cuts could be restored.

When the Senate Education Committee considered the MFP in SCR 44 by Sen. Blade Morrish (R-Lake Charles), LFT Chief of Staff Marcus Fontenot urged members to approve the resolution and send it to the Senate for action.

“We have an obligation to our members and the children of the state to ask that you approve this resolution,” Fontenot said.

Fontenot also asked the senators to support the call for a special session in early June, so that full funding for education can be restored.

The committee unanimously approved rejecting the MFP, sending it back to BESE to be reconsidered. If BESE takes no action, the formula will automatically revert to the previous year’s funding level.

Retiree COLA bills on track to pass

If there is any good news coming out of this year’s legislative session, it is that a cost of living adjustment for retired public servants is increasingly likely.

COLAs are funded through increases in retirement systems’ investment earnings, and not the state’s general fund. Those experience accounts have grown enough to allow raises ranging from 1.5% to 2% for members of the state retirement systems.

Two nearly identical bills are making their way through the process with almost no opposition.

In the Senate, SB 2 by Sen. Barrow Peacock (R-Bossier City) passed through two committees and the full Senate without an opposing vote.

In the House of Representatives, HB 32 by Rep. Sam Jones (D-Franklin) was approved by the House Retirement Committee with only Rep. Barry Ivey (R-Central) voting against it. The bill awaits a hearing by the full House.

Bills reining in charter expansion are stymied

A series of bills aimed at taming the expansion of charter schools in the state all fell short in House and Senate Education Committees this week. Included were bills that were part of Gov. John Bel Edwards’ education package.

Supporters of the charter expansions championed by ex-Gov. Bobby Jindal poured into the committee meetings. The Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, the Council for a Better Louisiana, public charter organizations, BESE members and State Superintendent of Education John White all weighed against limiting charter expansions.

Meeting on Wednesday, House Ed disposed of several charter school-related bills:

HB 98 by Rep. Pat Smith (D-Baton Rouge), part of the Edwards agenda, would have prevented so – called “charter authorizers” from creating 600 or more charter schools in the future without approval of either BESE or local school boards. It was involuntarily deferred on a 9-6 vote.

HB 167 by Rep. Smith would have prevented BESE from authorizing new charter schools in years when the MFP is reduced. It was involuntarily deferred on a 9-6 vote.

HB 502 by Rep. Smith would have required BESE to conduct a fiscal impact study prior to approving a Type 2 charter school over local school board objection. It was voluntarily deferred by Rep. Smith after seeing what happened to other charter-related bills.

HB 879 by Rep. Joseph Bouie (D-New Orleans), part of the Edwards agenda, would have prevented charter schools from entering contracts with for-profit operators. It was voluntarily deferred by the author.

HB 1004 by Rep. Kenneth Havard (R-Jackson) would have required the property of failed charter schools to be returned to the local school board or chartering authority. It was rejected by the committee.

Charter-related bills fared no better in the Senate Education Committee on Thursday.

SB 147 by Sen. Ryan Gatti (R-Bossier City) would have required charter schools that do not participate in the Teachers' Retirement System to pay a share of TRSL's unfunded accrued liability because the MFP includes funding for the retirement system. It was involuntarily deferred.

Sen. Gatti voluntarily deferred his SB 149, which would have restricted the amount of MFP funds that could be spent on virtual charter schools.

SB 198 by Rep. Gatti would have prevented BESE from authorizing charter schools over the objection of school boards in districts rated "A", "B" or "C". It was involuntarily deferred.

SB 260 by Sen. Blade Morrish (R-Lake Charles) was a mirror of HB 98, regarding "charter authorizers." It was deferred by the committee.

Another bill by Sen. Morrish, SB 170, was similar to SB 198, but limited the effects to "A" and "B" school districts. Time ran out before the bill could be heard.

Voucher restriction dies in committee

The Senate Education Committee killed SB 361 by Sen. Blade Morrish (R-Lake Charles) which would have restricted the number of students eligible for vouchers. It would have dropped students who would attend Recovery District schools from eligibility, changing it to public schools with a "D" or "F" rating. The bill is similar to HB 550 by Rep. Patrick Jefferson (D-Homer), which has not yet been heard by the House Education Committee.

Bills would return control to New Orleans schools

The first of two bills aimed at returning control of State Recovery District schools to the control of the Orleans Parish school Board was approved by the Senate Education Committee this week.

SB 432 by Sen. Karen Carter Peterson (D-New Orleans) says that every school that was transferred from OPSB to the recovery district must be returned to local control by July of 2018, with at least 10 schools transferred by July of 2017. Details about which schools will return first are not specified in the bill.

Another bill, HB 466 by Rep. Joseph Bouie (D-New Orleans) is slated to be heard by the House Education Committee. It requires a more straightforward transfer of schools out of the RSD as soon as it is determined that they are no longer considered "failing" schools.

Both bills rely on language in the act establishing the Recovery School District which states that schools no longer considered failing shall return to local control. Critics say that the Jindal administration and

Superintendent John White dragged their feet on returning control of schools to the local school system.

Third Orleans Parish school organizes a union

Teachers at New Orleans' Lusher Charter School have organized a union and are petitioning their board to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement.

The United Teachers of Lusher are affiliated with the United Teachers of New Orleans, the Louisiana Federation of Teachers and the American Federation of Teachers. They are the third Orleans Parish charter school to unionize, joining Ben Franklin High School and Morris Jeff Community School in affiliating with UTNO.

"We stand with the teachers of Lusher and with teachers in charters across New Orleans as they organize for a voice in their schools," said UTNO President Larry Carter. "We know we share many common challenges and a common vision of professionalism and high-quality, student-centered education."

Gov. Edwards to Launch Monthly Radio Show

On Tuesday, April 19, Governor John Bel Edwards will launch a monthly call-in radio show, "Ask the Governor," to air on the Louisiana Radio Network (LRN). The show will be broadcast statewide and made available to all radio stations. Listeners will have the opportunity to talk one-on-one with the governor and ask him questions about the issues that are important to them.

"I look forward to talking with folks from all walks of life who care about our great state, and I want to better understand how the challenges we're facing impact them," said Gov. Edwards. "I'm convinced that there is more that unites us than divides us, and by talking with one another, we can learn from one another."

The show will air the third week of each month, beginning with the first show on Tuesday, April 19 at 2 p.m. The program will be devoted to the governor taking questions from the public.

"The best part about this job is traveling the state. I see this program as another way of connecting with citizens throughout Louisiana," said Gov. Edwards.

"Ask the Governor" will also be available online at www.gov.louisiana.gov and www.la.radionetwork.com. The toll free number to call is 877-217-5757.