

Louisiana Federation of Teachers

Weekly Legislative Digest

April 1, 2016

Steve Monaghan, President * Les Landon, Editor

2016 Regular Legislative Session

Now available on the Web at <http://la.aft.org>

All eyes on proposed 2016-17 budget cuts

The Edwards administration and the legislature are slowly coming to grips with how the state will handle a \$750 million expected shortfall in the fiscal year beginning July 1. Because revenue cannot be raised in this regular legislative session, all eyes are on possible cuts to state programs.

As the devastation of the expected cuts comes into focus, lawmakers are predicting that another special session will have to be called to ensure that vital services are funded. Capitol observers say that could come at any time between the end of the current session on June 6 and sometime in October.

In the meantime, cuts seem to be the only option. This week, health care and special schools and commissions were given a preview of the pain to come. On Tuesday, April 5, a subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee will see what HB1, the appropriations bill, contains for higher education.

\$750 million in cuts equals real pain for important programs

Cuts to education programs could be catastrophic

Educators sat in grim silence as the effects of proposed budget cuts were explained to a House Appropriations Subcommittee on Education. Early childhood programs, special schools and public television are all at risk as cuts totaling about \$85 million are imposed.

The Louisiana School for the Deaf and Visually Impaired might have to shut its doors because of the proposed cuts. The school's budget would be cut by 55.5%, or about \$13.7 million. A report given the subcommittee said the cuts "would require closing the campus. LSDVI would be unable to deliver core educational programs and required ancillary services..."

Ours could become the only state in the country without public broadcasting television stations. A 41% budget cut would cost the Louisiana Educational Television Authority over \$3 million and half of its employees. The report says that cuts "would jeopardize the six FCC television licenses held by LETA."

The Louisiana School for Math, Science and the Arts, which has a residential campus in Natchitoches, would lose 41% of its budget, or \$3.7 million. Student enrolment would drop from 330 students to about 200, requiring faculty layoffs. The cuts would trigger a reduction in MFP payments and self-generated revenues. The report says that LSMSA "would fail to meet state performance indicators."

The New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts would lose \$3.6 million, or 45% of its budget. The school, in which students from around the state can prepare for careers as creative artists, would lose its Academic Studio and Arts Instructions Programs, according to the report.

Proposed cuts would end funding for two pre-kindergarten programs that serve 3,796 students, and slice 10 percent from the popular LA4 preschool program, eliminating about 1,500 seats, according to reports.

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education would be relatively unscathed by the cuts, losing just 2.3% of its budget, or \$573,838. That's because the bulk of BESE's \$25.7 million budget comes from statutorily dedicated funds, primarily the 8(g) offshore oil settlement known as the Louisiana Quality Education Support Fund.

The Louisiana Special Education Center, which serves 69 students with extreme special needs, will lose no funding because none of its revenue comes from the state general fund. It is primarily supported by Medicaid dollars.

Cuts could force closure of hospitals around the state

The brunt of budget cuts will apparently fall on state hospitals, according to the Department of Health and Hospitals. There is a threat that hospitals in Houma, Monroe, Alexandria, Lake Charles and Bogalusa could shut their doors.

At issue are the contracts with privatized hospitals that were hallmarks of the Jindal administration health care plan. An undersecretary for the Department of Health and Hospitals told an Appropriations subcommittee that partners in the privatized health care scheme "can walk away from the deal" if the state cuts funding.

Hospitals in Shreveport and New Orleans have some protection from cuts because they house medical schools. Final decisions on cuts to health care are expected shortly.

Governor testifies for equal pay, fair pay

Governor John Bel Edwards personally appeared before the Senate Labor and Industrial relations Committee to testify on behalf of two issues that were fundamental to his successful campaign last fall: equal pay for women and a hike in the state minimum wage.

First up was SB 254 by Sen. J.P. Morrel (D-New Orleans), which provides a way for women to discover and litigate when their wages are not comparable to men's. Pay inequality, Sen. Morrell said, is "another awful category in which Louisiana leads the nation."

Gov. Edwards pointed out that women, on average, earn 83% of what men make. It's worse for African-American women, who earn 48% of their male counterparts, and Hispanic women, who average 53% of a man's wage.

Despite opposition from the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry and the national federation of Independent Business, the bill was approved by the committee on a 5-2 vote.

The minimum wage raise also won a favorable report from the committee, but by not as big a margin.

SB 269 by Sen. Karen Carter Peterson (D-New Orleans) would create a state minimum wage, instead of relying on the national norm, currently \$7.25 per hour. The bill would raise the minimum wage here to \$8 per hour starting in 2017 and \$8.50 per hour in 2018.

Speaking on behalf of low-wage workers who would benefit from the bill, Sen. Carter said, "They just want to be able to earn a living wage to take care of their families."

The increase, Gov. Edwards said, would help the problem of childhood poverty. "Most of the minimum wage workers are women," he said, "and when you help mothers, you help children."

SB 269 was approved on a 4-3 vote. Both bills proceed to the Senate floor. If they succeed there, they will face a tough challenge in the House Labor and Industrial relations Committee, which has a less favorable makeup than its senate counterpart.

High school athletic bill postponed in hope of compromise

Action on a bill that could result in the death of the Louisiana High school Athletic Association was postponed by the House of Representatives in hopes that a compromise could save the organization.

HB863 by Rep. Kirk Talbot (R-River Ridge) would require public schools to quit the Louisiana High School Athletic Association because of a controversial decision to split selective and non-selective schools into different divisions for athletic playoff competitions.

The bill was approved by the House Education Committee, and sent to the House floor for action. But Rep. Talbot, who said the aim of his bill is to preserve LHSAA, allowed it to remain on the calendar without a vote.

LHSAA will have its annual meeting on April 15, and Rep. Talbot is hopeful that the organization will reverse its rule and once again combine selective and non-selective school championships. If the desired change is made, Rep. Talbot's bill will not move further.

Residency rules for schools deferred

A bill that would have toughened residency requirements for school attendance was deferred after concerns arose about its effect on existing laws.

HB 675 by Rep. Barry Ivey (R-Central) was introduced by request of the Central school district, a highly regarded system that has complained of problems with people from outside the district enrolling children there.

Members of the House Education Committee said they were concerned that the bill included a definition of "domicile" that contradicts the way the word is used in existing law.

Rep. Ivey voluntarily deferred the bill.

Child abuse hotline numbers may be posted

A bill requiring schools to post the state child abuse hotline number was approved by the House Education Committee after it was clarified that the posting could be on the school's Web site.

HB 97 by Rep. Patricia Smith (D-Baton Rouge) moves to the House floor for further action.

Health and safety bills proceed

Bills requiring defibrillators and CPR training for athletic coaches were approved by the House Education Committee.

HB 147 by Rep. Vincent Pierre (D-Lafayette) requires schools in Lafayette Parish to keep automated external defibrillators on their premises. Rep. Pierre said he hopes the bill will be a model for other school systems.

HB 868 by Rep. Marcus Hunter (D-Monroe) requires schools to have at least one coach in each sports activity certified in CPR.

Both bills will now be heard by the full House.

Creationism repeal rejected by Senate panel

In what has become something of an annual exercise, the Senate Education Committee rejected a bill to repeal an unconstitutional law that allows biblical creationism to be taught alongside evolutionary science.

The 1981 Balanced Treatment for Creation Science Act was declared unconstitutional by the State Supreme Court in 1987. Creationism cannot be taught as science, but the law but remains on the books because lawmakers just can't bring themselves to repeal it.

Sen. Dan Claitor (R-Baton Rouge) has tried without success for several years to repeal the law. This year, his SB 156 was part of a package of bills intended to repeal laws that have been ruled unconstitutional. While others in the package may succeed, this one was shot down by the Senate Education Committee, which voted 4-2 against repealing the creationism act.

Panel rejects voluntary teen sex survey

A bill that would have allowed high school students to take an anonymous survey of their sexual behavior was rejected by the Senate Education Committee.

SB 218 by Sen. Wesley Bishop (D-New Orleans) would have required parental permission to complete the survey, and parents would have had access to the questions ahead of time. The anonymous answers would have been compiled into the annual youth risk survey developed by the Centers for Disease Control.

The vote by the Senate panel was 3-1 against allowing the bill to proceed.