

# Louisiana Federation of Teachers

# Weekly Legislative Digest

April 22, 2016

Steve Monaghan, President \* Les Landon, Editor

2016 Regular Legislative Session

---

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

## Consensus growing for June special session

Support is gaining ground in Baton Rouge to hold a special legislative session, according to ace reporter Jeremy Alford.

In his latest newsletter, Alford wrote that both Senate President John Alario (R-Westwego) and Speaker of the House Taylor Barras (R-New Iberia) say that it's possible that the regular session could end by Memorial Day, with a special session to begin in early June.

The special session could be the only way to avert a possible pay cut for teachers. The budget now under discussion would eliminate funding put into this year's budget to continue the teacher raise. Because that funding was not memorialized in the Minimum Foundation Program, it could be lost unless new revenue is raised.

Sources say that although there is little support for raising taxes in a special session, there could be room to work with changes to the corporate tax exemptions. So far this year, according to reports, the state has paid out some \$150 million more in various tax expenditures for business than has been collected.

## Move to abolish local charter authorizers proceeds

The Senate Education Committee approved a bill that would remove so-called Local Charter Authorizers from Act 2 of 2012.

The Act allowed the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to create as many as 40 authorizers in the state's 11 Regional Labor Markets. With little oversight, the LCAs would each authorize no fewer than five new charter schools, which if successful could each then create two more charter schools without any further approval. There could eventually be more than 600 of the Type 1B charter schools operating without authority from BESE or local school boards.

SB 260 by Sen. Blade Morrish (R-Jennings) is part of Gov. John Bel Edwards' legislative agenda. Supporters of the bill pointed out that charter authorizers are unnecessary because BESE and local school boards both now have the authority to approve charter schools.

The bill was approved by the committee on a 5-2 vote, and sent to the Senate floor for further action.

Sen. Morrish was less successful with another charter bill, SB 170, which would have reined in BESE's authority to approve new charter schools over the objection of local school boards.

Even though Sen. Morrish amended his bill to say that BESE could approve the Type 2 charters in school districts rated lower than “A”, and could still approve charters in those districts with a two-thirds majority vote, it was apparent that a majority of committee members opposed the bill, which was part of Gov. Edwards’ legislative agenda.

“I can count,” Sen. Morrish said after more than two hours of testimony against his bill, and voluntarily deferred it.

## **Attacks on retirement systems fail**

Thanks to strong lobbying by LFT, LAE, AFL-CIO and associations representing retired public employees, a series of attacks on the public retirement systems were stopped in their tracks this week.

As soon as Rep. Barry Ivey (R-Central) set up his bills to cut benefits, raise costs to employees and eliminate defined benefits plans, the House Retirement Committee batted them down.

Two of Rep. Ivey’s bills were proposed constitutional amendments. HB 45 would have asked voters to approve removing the guarantee of retirement benefits for state employees under some circumstances, and HB 46 would have required new enrollees in state retirement systems to share some retirement costs equally with the employer.

Also going down to defeat in the committee was Rep. Ivey’s HB 65, which would have created a new “hybrid retirement benefit structure” for new employees. It would have set up a defined contribution plan to be administered by approved “third-party providers” who make investments on behalf of system members.

Assisting in the protection of state retirement systems was the Louisiana chapter of the National Public Pension Coalition, which is supported by AFT, NEA and AFL-CIO.

For a constantly updated list of bills we are tracking related to pensions, please [click here](#).

## **Cursive writing bill okayed by committee**

The Senate Education Committee approved SB 275 by Sen. Beth Mizell (R-Franklinton), which would require the teaching of cursive writing at the appropriate grade levels in all public schools.

Sen. Mizell said that because students are no longer taught cursive writing, many do not know how to sign their signature.

"It's just an ongoing concern nationwide that cursive is a lost art among our students," she said. "This is about a signature which is an identity for each of our students. This is a signature that you take with you for the rest of your life."

She also cited a land surveyor who told her that young employees are unable to read the handwritten notes on old transfer documents.

## **Panel approves risky behavior survey bill**

After several years of rejection, Rep. Patricia Smith (D-Baton Rouge) convinced the House Education Committee to approve a bill allowing high school students to take an anonymous national survey about their personal sexual behavior.

HB 402 would allow the collection of information that Rep. Smith said is necessary to combat the state’s high rate of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

The questions would be included in an annual survey conducted by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A version of the survey is already taken by Louisiana students, with questions about sexuality omitted.

The survey is administered in 42 states. Of those, only Louisiana and Georgia do not include the sex questions.

## **TOPS bills moving**

Bills aimed at reining in the exploding cost of the TOPS scholarship program are making their way through the legislative process.

The program is expected to cost the state \$300 million next year unless changes are made. Gov. John Bel Edwards has proposed a budget that would trim the popular program by 66 percent unless new revenues are identified.

SB 174 by Sen. Jack Donahue (R-Mandeville) would cap TOPS budget at the current year's level. Instead of rising every time that tuition is raised, increases in TOPS would have to be approved by the legislature.

This bill was actually passed by the legislature last year, but was vetoed by ex-Gov. Bobby Jindal. So far this year, it has been approved by the Senate and the House Education Committee. Should it pass the House, Gov. John Bel Edwards has signaled that he will sign it into law.

SB 80 by Sen. Blade Morrish (R-Jennings) is another TOPS bill that is working its way through the process, having been approved by the Senate Education Committee. In conjunction with other legislation, it would sever tuition hikes from TOPS increases.

Another bill, HB 439 by Rep. Barry Ivey (R-Central), would allow higher education institutions to increase tuition, but would exempt TOPS recipients from paying the extra cost. It won approval by the House Education Committee.

## **Are you willing to rally for education?**

The 2016 Regular Legislative Session will close by June 6 without fixing a massive budget crisis that threatens K-12 schools, higher education, health care and the very quality of life we enjoy in Louisiana.

Governor John Bel Edwards will call a special session beginning as early as June 7 to raise the \$750 million that our state needs to avoid a calamity.

The LFT, LAE and our other partners are considering a rally on June 7 to show our support for fully funding the budget.

If we don't show lawmakers that we mean business, K-12 education could be cut by over \$50 million. Teachers and school employees could be laid off and salaries could be cut.

[Please click here and let us know if you can come to the capitol on June 7.](#)