

# Louisiana Federation of Teachers

# Weekly Legislative Digest

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## Deceptive voucher schemers slam Gov. Edwards

A group demanding that the state spend more public education funds on private and religious schools has unleashed a dishonest advertising campaign against Gov. John Bel Edwards.

The Louisiana Federation for Children's deceptive ad, which has reportedly cost over \$200,000 to air thus far, claims that Gov. Edwards broke a promise by proposing a reduction in funds for Louisiana's voucher program in the 2016-17 budget.

With the state facing a \$600 million deficit for the coming year, Gov. Edwards has proposed cutting some \$6 million from ex-Gov. Bobby Jindal's scheme to funnel state funds to private and religious schools.

The voucher fund has run multi-million dollar surpluses in past years, and Gov. Edwards says that the anticipated cut should not affect students currently enrolled in voucher schools. His plan does not eliminate funding for existing vouchers at all, according to the governor's office.

Meanwhile, Louisiana's public schools face a \$44 million budget cut that threatens teacher salaries, TOPS is struggling to deal with a 66% reduction, and hospitals in Alexandria, Houma, Lake Charles and Bogalusa could be forced to close because of a looming \$75 million cut.

The Louisiana Federation for Children is apparently taking advantage of a fiscal crisis for political purposes. The organization is closely allied with the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, which opposed Gov. Edwards' election and is struggling to maintain its influence in the legislature.

Little more than a shell for big business, the Louisiana Federation for Children is a subsidiary of the American Federation for Children, which is funded by right-wing billionaires like the Koch brothers and Betsy DeVos, wife of Amway pyramid manipulator Richard DeVos.

The national organization has spent millions of dollars promoting voucher schemes and school privatization across the country. AFC is closely aligned with the American Legislative Exchange Council, which promotes laws in the states aimed at privatizing public services.

The Louisiana Federation for Children is in no way an honest broker or true advocate for Louisiana's young. As Gov. Edwards said, "People who purposefully mislead the public about issues as important as our kids' education have absolutely no place at the table."

## **Panel okays bill returning RSD schools to Orleans School Board**

Only one of two bills aimed at returning recovery School District schools to the Orleans Parish School Board was approved by the House Education Committee this week.

SB 432 by Sen. Karen Carter Peterson (D-New Orleans) was approved by an 11-2 margin. The bill, which was harshly criticized by some New Orleans community groups, would transfer all RSD schools back to the local board by 2018. If snags come up, the transfer could be extended until 2019.

The schools would return as independent charter schools run by independent boards, which caused opponents to charge that community members could be left out of decision-making at the schools. Unlike public school boards, charter school boards are not elected by the public.

A second reunification bill, HB 1108 by Rep. Joseph Bouie (D-New Orleans), was involuntarily deferred by the committee. His bill would have returned RSD schools to Orleans Parish without charters.

## **COLA bills easily proceed**

Two bills that would grant cost of living adjustments to retirees are having an easy time passing through the legislature.

SB2 by Sen. Barrow Peacock (R-Bossier City) passed both the Senate without opposition. It would grant retired teachers and state employees over 60 years old a 1.5% raise. Sen. Peacock's bill is linked to two other instruments: SB 18 deals with how retirement systems are funded, and SB 5 would require administrative costs to be paid annually, and not made part of the systems' unfunded accrued liability. Both bills are by Sen. Peacock.

The other COLA bill, HB 32 by Rep. Sam Jones (D-Franklin) was unanimously passed by the full House. It would raise retirement benefits without condition.

If both bills are passed by both houses, an agreement must be reached on reconciling their differences.

In other retirement-related news, a bill that would have allowed school boards to opt out of the state teacher retirement system was rejected by the Senate Retirement Committee.

SB 452 by Sen. Bodi White (R-Central) would have allowed school boards to terminate their participation in the Teachers' Retirement System of Louisiana, making future hires ineligible for state pensions. It was one of a series of bills attacking public retirement systems that LFT and LAE both oppose.

## **Bill increasing retiree pay for substituting proceeds**

A bill increasing the amount that retired teachers can earn for substituting was approved by the House Retirement Committee.

Under current law, retirees can earn no more than 25% of their retirement pay while working as substitute teachers. HB 907 by Rep. Bernard LeBas (D-Ville Platte) would increase the amount to 50% when they wait for a full year after retiring before accepting substitute positions.

The bill moves to the House floor for action.

## **Budget shortfall estimate reduced to \$600 million**

Thanks to the planned expansion of Medicaid services, Louisiana's projected \$750 million deficit has been reduced to \$600 million for the coming fiscal year.

Commissioner of Administration Jay Dardenne told senators this week that the expansion of Medicaid services through the federal Affordable Care Act will save the state \$150 million.

The administration is still convinced that a special session in early June will still be needed to identify enough revenue to avoid a constitutionally prohibited unbalanced budget.

### **Panel rejects higher education board merger**

The House Education Committee rejected HB 152 by Rep. Rick Edmonds (R-Baton Rouge), a proposed constitutional amendment aimed at merging Louisiana's five higher education boards into a single entity.

The plan would have created the Louisiana Postsecondary Education Board of Trustees to replace the Board of Regents and the governing boards of LSU, Southern, University of Louisiana and the Community and Technical Colleges.

A similar bill, SB 67 by Sen. Conrad Appel (R-Metairie) was approved by the Senate Education Committee. If passed by the full Senate, it will go before the House Education Committee, where it may meet the same fate as HB 152.

### **Compromise coming on teacher evaluation bills?**

There are no secrets in the state capitol, as participants in a complex negotiation to avoid bloodshed over teacher evaluation bills learned this week.

Representatives of teacher unions, schoolboards, parish superintendents, the business community and the governor's office have been meeting to find common ground on a series of bills intended to reform some of the most controversial aspects of ex-Gov. Bobby Jindal's education agenda.

The agreement has not been committed to writing yet, but a [New Orleans newspaper](#) broke a story on Thursday revealing a few details of the negotiations. LFT spokesmen confirmed to the reporter that the information in the story is accurate.

In legislation that has yet to be heard, participants agreed that there will be a year's delay in implementing consequences to teachers, schools and districts as a new set of state standards is implemented. In addition, the emphasis on Value Added scores in teacher evaluations will be reduced.

### **Cursive writing bill moves to House**

A bill requiring schools to teach children how to write in script, or cursive, writing was unanimously approved by the Senate and moves to the House of Representatives for action.

SB 275 by Sen. Beth Mizell (R-Franklinton) will be heard by the House Education Committee. Sen. Mizell says that cursive writing is necessary for children to be able to sign their signatures and read important historical documents. Cursive writing would be introduced by third grade and be incorporated into the curriculum in fourth through twelfth grades.

### **House kills high school athletics bill**

A bill that would have banned schools from membership in the High School Athletic Association as long as LHSAA has separate categories for public and private schools was killed on the floor of the House of Representatives.

HB 863 by Rep. Kirk Talbot (R-River Ridge) was intended to force LHSAA to reconsider its policy of splitting public and private athletic championships into two categories. Football playoffs have been divided for two years, and earlier this year LHSAA voted to similarly split playoffs for baseball, basketball and softball.

LHSAA is expected to revisit its policies at a meeting this coming June.

## **Teachers at fourth New Orleans charter form a union**

Teachers and professional staff at the International High School of New Orleans became the fourth charter school staff in the city to form a union, with 71 percent of the staff asking the school's governing board to voluntarily recognize the union and negotiate a contract with their representative, the United Teachers of New Orleans.

Two other unionized schools in the city, Benjamin Franklin High School and Morris Jeff Community School, received voluntary recognition of their unions. This week, Lusher Charter School's governing board refused Lusher teachers' request for recognition. The union has filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board to hold an election to determine their representation.

At the International High School of New Orleans, teachers and staff are asking to be recognized by the board at its next meeting on May 18.

"Charter school educators want a voice in their schools' decisions that affect teaching and learning," said UTNO President Larry Carter. "They want fairness in the workplace and job security. By coming together and forming a union, the teachers and staff can make this happen and improve their schools for student, parents and staff."

## **The week ahead...**

**Monday, May 2:** The Senate Finance Committee will consider SB 269 by Sen. Karen Carter Peterson, which provides for an increase in the state minimum wage.

**Tuesday, May 3 and Wednesday, May 4:** The House Education Committee will tackle a grueling schedule as members try to resolve a backlog of bills. Among the 21 bills on the agenda are:

HB 165 by Rep. Kevin Pearson (R-Slidell) would limit the amount of extended sick leave granted to teachers, bus drivers and other school employees who are injured while assisting students to prevent danger or injury to the student. LFT and LAE oppose the bill.

HB 392 by Rep. Nancy Landry (R-Lafayette) would allow reductions in teacher salaries under certain conditions. LFT and LAE oppose the bill as introduced.

HB 462 by Rep. James Armes (D-Leesville) would provide school employees the same rights to extended sick leave as teachers. LFT and LAE support the bill.

HB 653 by Rep. Larry Bagley (R-Stonewall) would guarantee that teachers and administrators have a post-observation conference after each classroom visit to provide the teacher or administrator with feedback. LFT and LAE support the bill.

HB 892 by Rep. Ted James (D-Baton Rouge) would strengthen teachers' due process rights. LFT and LAE support the bill.

HB 281 by Rep. Steve Carter (R-Baton Rouge) would transfer the ability to ask for waivers of laws and regulations from local school boards to principals and superintendents. It also removes a requirement that teachers agree to waivers of such rules. LFT and LAE oppose the bill.

HB 833 by Rep. Walt Leger (D-New Orleans) deals with student discipline, including out-of-school suspensions. LFT and LAE oppose the bill because of the pressure it could exert on teachers to keep unruly students in their classrooms.