

# Louisiana Federation of Teachers

# Weekly Legislative Digest

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2016 Second Special Legislative Session

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## Second special session begins

### Gov. Edwards sets three priorities in opening speech

In an opening address to a joint session of the Legislature on Tuesday morning, Gov. John Bel Edwards told lawmakers that he has three goals for the special session scheduled to wrap up on June 23.

The governor urged harmony to solve the state's budget crisis.

"Now is the time to govern," he said. "Not to engage in self-serving, hyper-partisan grandstanding that is largely responsible for the mess to begin with. Let's work together."

The most pressing need is passage of revenue bills that will raise between some \$600 million to make the budget for 2016-17 whole (some in Baton Rouge suggest that a \$450 million revenue enhancement would be adequate).

Missing from the budget adopted by legislators in the just-concluded regular session is \$75 million needed for K-12 education, \$54 million for higher education, \$155 million for the TOPS scholarship program and \$174 million cut from "critical, life-saving health care services," which Gov. Edwards identified and the state's public-private medical partnerships, waivers and essential Medicaid services.

The governor said it is urgent that the state "enact real, meaningful tax reform" to avoid the shortfalls that have plagued Louisiana's budget process for the past eight years. He asked lawmakers to listen to the advice of a bipartisan task force of economists and business leaders who are working on a more stable tax base.

The governor's second priority, he said, is to "clean up work from the first special session." The legislature passed some tax measures so quickly that mistakes led to unintended consequences, like charging sales taxes on Girl Scout cookies, school lunches and other items.

A third priority arose after the failure of the legislature to adopt HB2, the capital outlay budget, in the waning hours of the regular session.

State Rep. Neil Abramson (D-New Orleans), who chairs the House Ways and Means Committee, made himself scarce when it came time to approve the state's construction budget, and time ran out before the House could approve it.

That bill, Gov. Edwards said, "allows us to complete essential construction projects, tackle deferred maintenance, and invest in our highway priority program and other critical infrastructure needs."

The capital outlay bill will include an estimated \$330 million to \$500 million that could be spent on road improvement and maintenance of public buildings, included neglected college campuses.

[Read the complete text of Gov. Edwards' address here.](#)

[See the governor's legislative agenda for the special session here.](#)

## **Ask Gov. Edwards to Veto Creation of Questionable Charter School**

A bill to remove an existing charter school from local control and give it free rein status as an "independent public school" is headed to the governor's desk.

HB 887, sponsored by Representative Steve Carter (R-Baton Rouge), would allow a certain East Baton Rouge Parish Type 1 charter school to become its own independent public school district with all the powers of a local school public school district. The school would be governed an unelected board dominated by political appointees, including state legislators.

The per-pupil cost of the school would be an astronomical \$23,714 at a time when public school funding is at risk across the state.

This proposal sets a very dangerous precedent because it takes away accountability from local voters and places it into the hands of unelected appointees with very broad financial authority. The school would be exempt from laws that apply to traditional parish and city public schools, and would be able to buy, sell, or lease property without the oversight of elected board members.

As part of the East Baton Rouge school system, the school is currently required to accept only local students, but if HB 887 becomes law, it could accept students from across the state, draining MFP funds from other districts.

HB 887 is bad public policy. It initiates too many opportunities to bypass accountability and transparency, and promote corruption.

[Please click here to send Governor John Bel Edwards a message TODAY and ask him to VETO HB 887!](#)

## **House pushes back on Gov. Edwards' budget plan**

Following his rousing speech to open the second special session, the House of Representatives poured cold water on parts of Gov. John Bel Edwards' agenda.

Bills approved by the House amounted to just \$222 million to be raised next year, with most of the money coming from a new tax on health management organizations.

The governor's biggest disappointment came with the Ways and Means Committee's rejection of HB 11 by Rep. Rob Shadoin (R-Ruston). The bill would limit the deductions that can be claimed from itemized deductions on federal tax returns in excess of the federal standard deduction.

The bill would raise \$116 million, mainly to be paid by taxpayers who earn over \$100,000.

Supporters of the bill included higher education officials, K-12 representatives, health care spokesmen and sheriff's departments. They argued passionately about the need to raise revenues in the special session.

But committee members, especially freshmen on the committee, were bulldozed by big business lobbyists. Tycoon Lane Grigsby, who has spent millions to support pro-business and conservative causes, reportedly threatened newcomers with recall petitions if they voted for the bill.

An anti-tax group, American for Prosperity, blanketed several freshman representatives' districts with mailers during the week. The organization is headed by Grover Norquist, to whom ex-Gov. Bobby Jindal infamously pledged never to raise taxes.

The Ways and Means Committee, which comprises 12 Republicans and seven Democrats, initially tied nine to nine, leaving the decision up to Chairman Neil Abramson (D-New Orleans), who broke the tie with a shocking vote against the governor's bill.

The Ways and Means Committee will hear a few more bills on Monday, after which the effort to fully fund Louisiana's budget will move to the Senate. Lawmakers have until June 23 to come up with enough revenue to meet the needs of the state.