

Louisiana Federation of Teachers

Weekly Legislative Digest

March 20, 2016

Steve Monaghan, President * Les Landon, Editor

2016 Regular Legislative Session

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

Governor and BESE chief bump heads as session opens

Governor John Bel Edwards and Board of Elementary and Secondary Education President Jim Garvey appear to be on a collision course, according to statements made by both men in the opening week of the regular legislative session.

Governor Edwards threw down the gantlet in his 29-minute opening speech to the legislature on Monday, saying that he intends to slow down the expansion of charter schools and put some limits on the voucher scheme begun by Gov. Bobby Jindal.

Access to vouchers should be limited to children whose public school option is graded “D” or “F” under the state scoring system, the governor said.

Under current law, children who meet eligibility requirements may apply for private or religious school vouchers if their public option is graded “C”, “D” or “F”.

Also under scrutiny is a Jindal-era law allowing kindergarten children to apply for vouchers regardless of the stats of the public school they would attend.

A law allowing the state education board to grant charters over the objection of local school boards is also on Gov. Edwards’ hit list.

Currently, the State Board of elementary and Secondary Education can override local school boards that reject charter applications, creating what is known as Type 2 charters. The governor said that school districts rated “A” or “B” should be allowed to make the final decision on granting charters.

But Jim Garvey, the Jefferson Parish attorney serving as BESE president, said he would rather leave existing voucher and charter laws untouched.

The state’s grading system for schools is lenient, Garvey said, arguing that his board should retain control over the authorization of charter schools.

The BESE president also said he will fight to retain voucher eligibility for students in “C” rated districts. The state’s standards for setting a “C” grade are so low, he said, “that the standards are, in sense, nonsensical.”

The fight will be interesting this session. BESE is dominated by a faction swept into office with millions of dollars on campaign donations from big business and out-of-state critics of public education. Governor Edwards won a landslide election with support from opponents of vouchers, for-profit charters and other questionable education reforms.

[Read the governor's entire opening address to the legislature here.](#)

LFT and LAE announce joint legislative agenda

With all the problems facing our state, we can't let small differences divide educators. That's why the LFT and LAE are working together with other public education partners in the legislature this year.

Caring for children. Respecting the rights of teachers and school employees. Restoring the joy to teaching and learning. That's the essence of our agenda in a challenging legislative environment.

Strengthen schools and communities

Community schools are a cornerstone of real education reform. We support a pilot program creating schools that are hubs of the community, providing on-site health and social services, and building strong family-school partnerships.

Legislative goals include:

- Local control is fundamental. Return control of schools to local school boards.
- Ensure a strong start for our youngest children. Support better funding for early childhood education.
- Memorialize annual growth factors in the Minimum Foundation Program.
- Require charter schools to be held to the same standards as public schools.
- Ease burdensome standardized testing. Recognize the value of art, music, literature, phys. ed. and playtime for children.

Respect professional educators

Teachers have been blamed and shamed for the past eight years. It's time to recognize their professionalism and pay them accordingly.

- Annualize recent teacher pay raises into the MFP.

Ensure fair and accurate teacher evaluations:

- Restore the three-year probationary period for new teachers.
- Remove the "highly effective" rating as the threshold for tenure.
- Replace arbitrary and capricious standards with evidence-based reviews for hearing officers and courts.
- Require BESE to align its rules with state law requiring the pre- and post-observation conferences.
- Support legislation specifying that any and all scored observations meet the requirements already mandated by state law.

Ensure dignity for all members of the education family.

Our unions want to make sure that paraprofessionals and school related personnel are treated with the respect they deserve.

- Provide extended sick leave for support employees identical to that enjoyed by teachers.
- Allow PSRPs the same leave rights as teachers to seek medical treatment for injuries received on the job.
- Cafeteria workers should not be required to provide the uniforms mandated by districts.

- Modify the rate paid to school bus owner-operators for the first time since 1984.

It will take hard work and perseverance to repair the damage done to public education during the Jindal years. These goals should be considered the starting point for laws and policies that reclaim the promise of a great public education for all children. The time to begin is now!

[Download the LFT/LAE legislative agenda flier. Click here.](#)

State will have to find \$12 million for K-12 schools

One of the areas that cannot be cut is public education's Minimum Foundation Program, but the current budget for the MFP is underfunded by about \$12 million.

That's because the number of students in public schools was higher than expected when the required February count was reported. The shortfall was one of the items included in the \$950 million deficit projected when the special session opened on March 14.

Thus far, lawmakers have not appropriated any money to fill that \$12 million budget hole.

It's just one of the legacies of the Jindal administration's disastrous budget policies that continue to haunt Louisiana as Gov. John Bel Edwards and the legislature struggle to make ends meet.

Regular session opens with \$70 million budget gap

More bad economic news followed the close of last week's special legislative session. The estimated \$30 million to \$50 million budget gap for this year ballooned to over \$70 million after the state's Revenue Estimating Conference refined its fiscal outlook. The state must cut that much by the end of the fiscal year on June 30.

Those cuts will have to fall primarily on higher education and health care. Most other areas of the budget are protected from cuts.

Commissioner of Administration Jay Dardenne told reporters that "the cuts will be extreme."

The budget situation in Baton Rouge is so desperate that here is what counts as good news: the \$2 billion budget gap for the upcoming 2016-17 fiscal year was trimmed a bit more than expected during the special session. Instead of coming up the \$800 million short that was reported at the end of the special session, the shortfall will "only" be \$750 million.

House Education Committee shakes up

With just one meeting completed in the regular session, the House Education Committee is seeing a big change in its composition.

Four of the committee members appointed by Speaker of the House Taylor Barras (R-New Iberia) have been shifted to other assignments. They are Reps. Rodgers Pope (R-Livingston), Julie Stokes (R-Kenner), Dodie Horton (R-Haughton) and Barry Ivey (R-Central).

In their place, Rep. Barras named Reps. Scott Simon (R-Abita Springs), and Reid Falconer (R-Mandeville). It's not known whether more members will be added.

Higher Ed leaders list budget issues

Spokesmen for the state's higher education institutions told the House Education Committee about the toll that budget cuts have taken on their schools over the past eight years.

Higher Education Commissioner Joe Rallo told the panel that tuition increases at state institutions have not made up for budget cuts imposed by the Jindal administration. Over the past eight years, he said, mandated state costs to colleges and universities have risen from \$443 million to \$560 million.

Board of Regents Chairman Richard Lipsey told the panel that more than 500 programs have been eliminated due to the budget cuts, while only 100 new programs have been instituted.

University of Louisiana System President Dan Reneau added, "I know what it's like to look a student in the face and say you can't graduate because we can't afford a program that you need."

LSU president fears enrollment drop

LSU President F. King Alexander told the House Education Committee that he expects a drop in enrolment at the state's flagship university next fall.

Alexander said that this spring's freshman orientation saw a decline of between 22 and 25 percent. That signifies a decline in interest, probably because of proposed cuts to the popular TOPS scholarship program, King said. TOPS is expected to lose \$28 million this year and then be cut by as much as 80 percent next year.

King said he suspects that many students are opting to go out-of-state rather than commit to LSU.