

Louisiana Federation of Teachers

Weekly Legislative Digest

and BESE Report

March 4, 2016

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2016 Special Legislative Session

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

BESE slams report on voucher schools

Vouchers don't save money, they actually cost Louisiana \$8.3 million more than public schools.

In a stunning rebuke to State Superintendent of Education John White, the board he oversees demanded that he strike [a controversial voucher report](#) from its agenda and rewrite it to more accurately depict the voucher program.

The annual report on the status of non-public schools that receive state aid contained glaring errors that public school supporters say conceals deficiencies in the voucher scheme championed by ex-Governor Bobby Jindal.

Louisiana School Boards Association Executive Director Scott Richard pointed out the report's biggest contradiction, a claim that voucher schools are saving the state money because tuition costs at voucher schools can be lower than the per-pupil amount sent to public schools through the Minimum Foundation Program.

Richard presented [a report from the Legislative Fiscal Office](#) noting that reductions to the voucher scheme would actually save the state money.

Trimming vouchers would "increase MFP costs, but at a lower per-pupil cost than what is currently being paid to voucher schools," the report says. "The state will pay \$8.3 million more to the voucher schools than it would have paid through the MFP in the current year."

White's voucher report also concluded that voucher students perform at increasing academic levels, even though a series of recent studies show that voucher students actually lag far behind their public school counterparts.

When the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education was asked to receive White's report, members rebelled.

At-large Member Doris Voitier said that if receiving the report means BESE endorses it, it would have to be revised to reflect the Legislative Fiscal Office's comments.

White responded that the report is the Department of Education's and not BESE's. "This does not have to go to BESE for approval," he said, adding that there "would be no consequences" for receiving an inaccurate report.

Voitier would have none of it. "Whether or not we accept the report, it is misleading," she said, and urged White to rewrite the document.

When White balked, District 5 Member Gary Jones moved that the item be stricken from the agenda, and Voitier amended the motion to require a rewrite.

The amended motion was approved by all 11 members without opposition.

Lawmakers meeting over weekend to resolve budget

Wednesday's deadline to complete the special legislative session is leaving lawmakers nervous about their prospects of resolving this year's \$900 million deficit and an expected \$2 billion deficit in next year's budget.

The legislature is meeting over the weekend to find solutions to the shortfall. On Saturday, the approved a new 22 cent tax on cigarettes expected to raise \$11 million, leaving this year's budget still about \$147 million short of balance.

As this issue of the Weekly Legislative Digest is written, both houses of the legislature are preparing to enter Sunday afternoon sessions.

Business groups are floating the idea of increasing sales taxes not by one cent but by two to two and a half cents, which would impose a greater burden on lower income families. They would phase out as the state economy improves and more revenue from other sources appears.

Some Democrats in the legislature are hopeful that business will surrender some of the tax credits and exclusions they enjoy under current law.

Spokesmen for Governor John Bel Edwards say the administration is hoping to find a balance between new revenues and reductions in tax expenditures before sine die at 6:00 P.M. Wednesday.

Gov. Edwards lashes out at "lackadaisical" legislature

With time to resolve the state's budget deficit growing short and the size of the shortfall growing, Governor John Bel Edwards on Friday convened a press conference to berate the "lackadaisical" House of Representatives for failing to present real solutions to the problem.

Gov. Edwards spoke after it was revealed that some of the revenue measures already approved by the legislature will not raise as much money as expected by the end of the current fiscal year. Leaders learned that the deficit stands at \$162 million instead of the \$42 million it had been believed to be.

The governor reiterated the consequences to higher education if lawmakers fail to balance the budget. Possibilities include cancelling classes, calling off summer school and laying off faculty.

He called on the legislature to approve HB27 by Rep. Kenny Cox (D-Natchitoches). The bill would impose the first increase in alcohol taxes since 1948, and raise the price of a beer by about three-fourths of a cent. It would raise an additional \$6.7 million this year. As of this writing, the bill had not received the two-thirds majority vote it needs to pass the House.

Edwards' aide says limiting vouchers is a top priority

The special counsel to Governor John Bel Edwards told public education supporters that trimming the state's voucher program will be one of the governor's top education priorities.

Erin Monroe Wesley told the Volunteers in Public Schools that Edwards will support legislation to remove students in "C" rated schools from eligibility for the voucher program.

Under current law, students in schools graded "C" "D" or "F" under the state's labeling system are eligible to apply for vouchers, provided they meet income requirements.

The law also allows kindergarten students to apply for vouchers even if the public school they would otherwise attend has a high grade. That provision will also be on the chopping block in the governor's education agenda.

The state is currently spending about \$42 million a year on religious and private school tuition for some 7,100 students.

The governor's voucher proposals will be taken up in the regular legislative session that opens on March 14 and ends on June 6.

Department of Education funding restored

A bill that could have almost obliterated State Superintendent of Education John White's operating budget was amended by a Senate committee to protect the Department of Education. Testimony from the superintendent raised questions about how federal education funds are used

As passed by the House, HB 122 by Rep. Cameron Henry (R-Metairie) cut some \$51 million from the education department. It included over \$42 million from the department's operation budget, with the most of the rest to fall on private school support.

When White testified that the cut would effectively shut the doors of his department, the Senate Finance Committee restored most of the funding. The bill amended was approved by the full Senate and is now awaiting reconciliation in a conference committee.

BESE approves \$3.7 billion MFP

A standstill \$3.7 billion funding formula for the state's public schools was approved by the Board of elementary and Secondary Education and forwarded to the legislature for debate in the regular session that begins on March 14.

BESE members took the advice of an MFP study committee and included in the formula some \$32 million that last year's legislature appropriated for K-12 schools outside the formula. If the formula is ultimately approved, that means the money will always be there.

The increase amounted to a 1.375% bump in funding, about half of the 2.75% annual growth factor that was almost automatic before the Jindal years. Because the increase annualizes money that was already being spent on schools, there is no real increase in school funding in the formula.

That prompted LFT President Steve Monaghan to comment, "There's no joy contained in this formula. There's less pain, but there's no joy."

The base per-pupil amount in the proposed formula is \$4,015, with weights for a number of variables including special education, gifted and talented education, local funding efforts and more.

Revisions to state standards okayed by BESE

Following a marathon 12-hour session of committee meetings, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved a set of revisions to math and English language standards.

The changes are intended to end a long running controversy over Louisiana's participation in Common Core state Standards, replacing some of the national goals with state-specific standards. They were written by groups of teachers overseen by a 26-member panel called the Standards Review Committee.

Ten of BESE's 11 members voted to approve the new standards, with District 6 Member Kathy Edmonston the only holdout.

Critics of the new standards called them a sham that simply rebrands the controversial Common Core. Teachers who took part in the discussions, however, said they took their charge seriously and made substantive revisions.

According to a law adopted last year, BESE was required to approve the changes at this meeting. They must now be approved by Gov. John Bel Edwards and the House and Senate Education Committees.

Superintendent of Education John White said that final adoption of the new standards will probably come in July. With school slated to begin shortly after that, many educators say that implementation of the new standards should be delayed until the 2017-18 school year. Otherwise, they say, the new standards could bring the same confusion that implementation of Common Core caused last year.

New Orleans school funding dilemma moves to parish school board

A raging controversy over how Orleans Parish distributes \$390 million to public schools in the city was handed off to the local school board after BESE voted to approve categories of students to receive special education services.

Because the vote only identified the categories, but not the percentages of funding that will go to each, it will be up to the Orleans Parish School Board to finally resolve the issue.

Four of the city's selective admission charter schools are reportedly considering legal action if the school board ultimately reduces their funding in order to send more special education funds to other schools in the city.

Citizens who were expecting resolution to the longstanding conflict over the funding were disappointed when Superintendent John White explained that BESE only has authority to determine the categories of special services, but not how much money should be spent on each. The categories include students who require special education services, gifted and talented, two or more years behind and English language learners.

Critics have alleged that the selective admission schools – Ben Franklin Charter High School, Audubon Charter, Lake Forest Charter and Lusher Charter – receive more than they are entitled to from the Minimum Foundation Program. Schools with large populations of students who need other services feel that they are shortchanged.

Virtually all of the city's public schools are now charters.

The BESE vote raised larger issues about how local school districts allocate their MFP funds for special services. State law says that BESE must monitor local systems to ensure that funds are allocated according to the MFP formula.

In reality, said former school superintendent and District 5 BESE Member Gary Jones, school systems vary widely in the ways they allocate special education funds.

BESE finally denies Lafayette carter school

After months of dithering, BESE finally and officially denied an application for the Kingdom of Excellence Charter Academy in Lafayette.

State Superintendent of Education John White initially recommended denial of the charter application because of "a mismatch between the proposed school location and the target student population."

But that recommendation only came after video surfaced of school leader Aleashia Clarkston spanking her children on a TV reality show.

Clarkson claimed that the denial was based on her appearance on "America's Supernanny." White admitted that he was shocked by the video.