

Louisiana Federation of Teachers

Weekly Legislative Digest

May 20, 2016

Steve Monaghan, President * Les Landon, Editor

2016 Regular Legislative Session

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

Outrageous: House oks bill limiting assault pay

In a very disappointing move, the House of Representatives voted 67-20 to pass a bill limiting compensation for educators who are injured or disabled by students.

HB 165 by Rep. Kevin Pearson (R-Slidell) would limit assault leave at full pay to just one year in most cases. After that, educators disabled in student attacks would have to rely on workers' compensation, which pays about two-thirds of their salary.

LFT and LAE opposed the bill in the House Education Committee and on the floor, and we are committed to defeating it when it moves to the Senate side.

The bill has been assigned to the Senate Labor and Industrial Relations Committee. Be ready to send messages to members of the committee expressing our strong opposition to HB 165.

New evaluation bills moving to House floor

With little debate, two bills intended to improve the teacher evaluation process were approved by the House Education Committee and sent to the House floor, where they will be up for a vote next week.

SB 477 by Sen. Gerald Boudreaux (D-Lafayette) reduces the emphasis on the Value Added Model in teacher evaluations from 50% to 35%. The bill, which was formerly labeled SB 342, won unanimous approval by the committee.

A second bill, SB 262 by Sen. Blade Morrish (R-Jennings), ensures that there will be another year's moratorium on linking test results based on state standards to consequences for teachers, school letter grades and the promotion of fourth grade students.

Both of the bills are the result of a compromise engineered by Gov. John Bel Edwards. The governor asked stakeholders including LFT, LAE, the Louisiana School Boards Association, Association of School Superintendents, Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, Council for a Better Louisiana and Stand for Children to hammer out an agreement that all could live with.

Gov. Edwards signs COLA bills

In a ceremony witnessed by dozens of supporters, Gov. John Bel Edwards signed three bills into law that grant retired state employees their first cost of living adjustment in two years.

About 125,000 pensioners will benefit from passage of SB 2 by Sen. Barrow Peacock (R-Shreveport), which grants a COLA ranging from 1.5% to 2%, depending on which system the retiree belongs to. The increase will average about \$30 per month for retirees.

Money to pay for the COLAs comes from investment growth in the retirement systems' experience accounts.

At the same ceremony, the governor signed SB 5 by Sen. Peacock, which prohibits retirement systems from including their administrative costs in a multi-year paydown plan for system debt. The final bill in the three-bill package, SB 18 by Sen. Peacock, reduces the time limit for systems to pay off their debt from 30 years to 20.

Bill limiting charter authorizers moves to House floor

A bill that would prevent an explosive expansion of charter schools in the state was approved by the House Education Committee and sent to the floor for a vote on final passage.

SB 2260 by Sen. Blade Morrish would remove local charter authorizers from Act 2 of 2012. The act allowed the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to approve as many as 40 local charter authorizers in the state's 11 Regional Labor Markets. With minimal oversight, the LSAs would each be required to authorize at least five charter schools, which if successful could then each create two more charter schools without further approval. There could eventually be more than 600 of the Type 1B charter schools operating without authority from either BESE or local school boards.

Opponents cited a report from the respected Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) which said that looser restrictions on charter school authorizers threaten the success of schools. Local charter authorizers are unnecessary, opponents said, because BESE and local school boards both have the ability to authorize charter schools that are properly supervised.

Bill allowing teacher pay cuts amended and renumbered

A bill that opponents feared could lead to teacher pay cuts has been amended to ensure that it would not lead to across-the-board reductions.

HB 1165 by Rep. Nancy Landry (R-Lafayette) stipulates that teachers who are moved to positions that require fewer working hours at lower salaries cannot have their pay reduced during that school year, but may be cut the following year.

The bill began its life as HB 392, which could have allowed school boards to reduce pay for whole groups of teachers by calling the pay cut a reorganization. Rep. Landry agreed to the substitute bill, which has won passage in both the House and the Senate.

Public school choice bill killed on House floor

Striking a blow for public education, the House of Representatives voted down a bill that would have allowed parents to send their children to any school in their public school district.

HB 1101 by Rep. Stuart Bishop (R-Lafayette) was described as "unnecessary and chaotic" by LFT and LAE. The unions agreed with school administrators that the bill would create a logistical nightmare in trying to staff and operate schools.

Under current law, only students who attend schools graded "D" or "F" have a choice to move to another school. Rep. Bishop's bill would have extended that right to all students in all schools.

Bill ending FAFSA requirement fails in committee

A bill that would have overturned a Board of Elementary and Secondary Education rule that all students must complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid was rejected by the House Education Committee.

Rep. John Schroder's HB 985 was opposed by the Department of Education. Spokesmen said that filling out the FAFSA ensures that students are eligible for numerous grants and scholarships. Before completing the form was required, they said, Louisiana students missed out on millions of dollars in scholarships and grants.

Rep. Schroder had no more luck with his HB 771, which was intended to allow special needs students to earn a diploma without passing exit exams.

As written, the bill would have excused all students from passing exit or end-of-course exams to graduate or be promoted to the next grade.

But because recent changes in law allow IEPs to circumvent testing requirements for special needs students, the bill was amended by the committee to apply retroactively only to special needs students who were denied diplomas in the past because of the testing requirements.

Even with the amendment, committee members expressed concerns that the bill could be changed later in the process, and involuntarily deferred the bill.

Cursive writing bill proceeds, with jokes

A bill requiring all public school students to learn cursive writing was approved by the House Education Committee, but not before a few laughs were had at the author's expense.

Sen. Beth Mizell's (R-Franklinton) SB 275 requires cursive writing to be taught in all public schools, including charter schools. Instruction would have to be introduced by third grade, and incorporated into the curriculum in grades 4 through 12.

While speaking on behalf of her bill, Sen. Mizell said, "The New York Times recently ran an article on the benefits of cursing in school... Ah, cursive. I mean cursive!"

Rep. Walt Leger (D-New Orleans) noted that he prefers to print, saying "I've always had a problem with the capital Q." For some unknown reason, that letter resembles the number 2.

Bill would require recitation of Declaration

A bill requiring students to recite a portion of the Declaration of Independence every morning was approved by the House Education Committee.

HB 1035 by Rep. Valarie Hodges (R-Denham Springs) says that students in grades four through six would have to repeat the part of the Declaration that says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

Some members criticized the bill, saying that students are already required to study the Declaration of Independence. Even so, it was approved by a 6-2 vote and sent to the House floor for further action.

Federation president honored by House of Representatives

The House of Representatives commended Red River United President Jackie Lansdale on her 20th anniversary as president of the Northwest Louisiana local Federation chapter.

HR 167 by Rep. Barbara Norton (D-Shreveport) notes that in 1992 Lansdale joined the American Federation of Teachers as a member of the organizing committee that became the Caddo Federation of Teachers in 1996. She was elected the first president of the chapter.

In 2011, CFT expanded to include the Bossier Federation of Teachers and was renamed Red River United. In 2013, the union expanded again to include teachers and school employees in red River Parish.

The commendation notes that she has “worked tirelessly in her 20 years as president to ensure fair and lawful practices within school districts; she has a palpable passion for public education and is active in the annual recognition of most improved students in the districts...”