

Louisiana Federation of Teachers

Weekly Legislative Digest

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Budget woes hang like a cloud over legislature

Anxious lawmakers returned to Baton Rouge this week, just days after shutting down a special session that failed to address a looming budget crisis. The first full day of the session featured a House Appropriations Committee meeting in which Commissioner of Administration Jay Dardenne predicted massive cuts to health care and higher education.

Failure to resolve the crisis will have a devastating impact on the economy, Dardenne told lawmakers. "It's not a threat and it's not scare tactics," he said. "It's the reality of what's going to happen."

With temporary sales taxes slated to expire on July 1, the state faces a shortfall approaching \$1 billion, although that number will be reduced somewhat because the new federal tax law will increase state taxes for some taxpayers.

Because regular legislative sessions cannot raise revenues in even-numbered years, capitol insiders expect lawmakers to end the regular session before the June 4 deadline, and reconvene in yet another special session to address the budget. The hope is that a clearer picture of the state's predicament will emerge by then, allowing legislators to agree on a plan.

Governor announces his education agenda

Governor John Bel Edwards announced that his education agenda for the legislative session comprises four bills, two of which are aimed at restoring teacher rights that were hobbled by the Jindal-era education "reforms." Those include reasonable, fair changes to the teacher tenure process and teacher evaluation.

House Bill 587 by Rep. Frank Hoffmann (R-West Monroe) allows teachers to acquire tenure if they have ratings for five (out of six) years of "effective: proficient" or "highly effective". Currently a teacher needs a rating of "highly effective" for five (out of six) years.

House Bill 651 by Rep. Frank Hoffmann (R-West Monroe) reduces the percentage of a teacher's evaluation that is based on growth in student achievement from 35 percent to 15 percent.

Two other bills would increase accountability and transparency for the Department of Education and Type 2 charter schools.

Senate Bill 152 by Sen. Blade Morrish (R-Jennings) requires the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to report two sets of school- and district-performance scores in years when the calculation formula for these scores have changed.

Senate Bill 205 by Sen. Gerald Boudreaux (D-Lafayette) provides requirements in the areas of transparency and accountability for for-profit organizations that manage Type 2 Charter Schools.

LFT urges caution on bullying bill

The LFT joined Governor John Bel Edwards' education advisor and other stakeholders in urging caution on a bill intended to curb bullying in schools.

SB 303 by Sen. John Milkovich (R-Shreveport) would empower teachers and school employees to use force, including physical restraint, to stop incidents of bullying.

Testifying before the Senate Education Committee, LFT Legislative and Political Director Cynthia Posey said the union is concerned about the legal liability of educators who intervene. She joined others in asking Sen. Milkovich to work with the Louisiana Bullying Awareness and Treatment Task Force to address the bill's legal issues.

The committee approved the bill after Sen. Milkovich agreed to meet with the task force before it is heard on the Senate floor.

Guns and armor: school shootings prompt several bills

Responding to the recent mass murder in a Florida school, lawmakers have introduced several bills that they believe may increase campus security, including some that would arm teachers and other school employees.

At least three bills, SB 298 by Sen. John Milkovich (R-Shreveport), HB 332 by Rep. Rodgers Pope (R-Denham Springs) and HB 271 by Rep. Ray Garofalo (R-Mereaux), would allow armed educators under some circumstances.

LFT Legislative and Political Director Cynthia Posey said that while the bills start a necessary conversation about school safety, a proliferation of guns could be problematic.

"But when you look at giving teachers guns, or requiring them to have guns, it opens up a lot of questions about safety," Posey told reporters.

Another bill, SB 178 by Sen. Mike Walsworth (R-West Monroe) would allow students to wear bullet-proof backpacks.

Current law prohibits wearing body armor in schools. Sen. Walsworth said he has discovered that armored backpacks are available, and that children should be allowed to wear the protective devices.

BESE Report, March 2018

BESE rejects increase in request for funding K-12 education

Ignoring pleas from education leaders and a recommendation from its own funding task force, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted to reject a request for an additional \$40 million in public education funding for the coming school year.

Public education's Minimum Foundation Program, which funnels state funds to local school districts, has maintained a frozen per-pupil allocation for nine of the past 10 years, while expenses like insurance costs, retirement benefits and others have increased.

Since the MFP is also the main source of teacher and school employee salaries, it means that pay for educators has not kept up with other states.

Up until the past decade, it had been a practice to increase the MFP per-pupil allocation by 2.75% a year, with half of the increase devoted to teacher salaries.

This year, BESE's MFP Task Force and the Superintendents' Advisory Council both recommended asking the legislature for a one percent raise, or about \$40 million.

The board rejected that suggestion. BESE President Gary Jones said that it would send the wrong message to ask for more money when the state is in the midst of a budget crisis.

The MFP resolution adopted by BESE asks to reconsider the increase if Louisiana's budget picture brightens.

State seeks new SSD superintendent

Following release of a report critical of the Louisiana School for the Deaf, BESE is launching a nationwide search for a new superintendent of the special district that oversees LSD and two other schools.

Superintendent of Education John White said the search should be complete and a new superintendent of SSD in place by June.

The shakeup is coming after the Department of Education ordered a study that revealed "insufficient communication and effective problem-solving between and among administrators, students, families, staff and community stakeholders" at Baton Rouge's LSD.

Beyond problems reported by parents of LSD students, the study said, the Special School District "has significant issues that, if not addressed, present potentially insurmountable barriers to the improvement of each individual school."

Other schools in the district include the Louisiana School for the Visually Impaired in Baton Rouge and the Louisiana Special education Center in Alexandria. The three schools have a total of 233 students, with 128 at the School for the Deaf.