

Louisiana Federation of Teachers

Weekly Legislative Digest

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Caucus of NO threatens budget debacle

After February's special legislative session collapsed in failure, lawmakers offered a glimmer of hope, a path to avoid the fiscal cliff and set a budget before the fiscal year begins on July 1.

Once revenue estimates are clear, they reasoned, and we know the effect that federal tax law will have on our revenues, a second special session could be convened to eradicate the looming budget cliff, now estimated at between \$700 million and \$900 million.

But that was before the House of Representatives' Caucus of NO on March 19 [released a video](#) demanding a state budget that depends on steep cuts to services without any new revenues.

While the Caucus of NO is not a majority in the House, it comprises enough Republican members to almost guarantee that no revenue raising measures can get a 70-vote majority.

We will soon know where drastic budget cuts will fall. Because this regular session cannot raise revenues, the budget in House Bill 1 will show us what will happen without a successful special session before July 1.

Department heads are testifying this week about the impact that cuts of the proposed magnitude will have on their responsibilities. Health care and higher education once again are expected to bear the brunt, a reversion into the darkest predations of the Jindal era.

Clearly, there will be no new education resources, no raises for educators and other public servants, no light at the end of the tunnel.

The Caucus of NO is threatening the worst fiscal disaster of this generation.

What will it take to pluck the scales from the eyes of those who refuse to see the disaster that is our state fisc? Lawmakers in West Virginia learned a hard lesson from fed up teachers in that state, and educators in others are lined up to take action.

In little more than a year, every senator and representative in Louisiana will have to face the voters. A lot can happen in the meantime that may impact the outcome of that election.

LFT bill offers compensation for educators killed in line of duty

Families of educators killed in the line of duty would be eligible for a \$250,000 payment from the state if SB 423 by Sen. Neil Riser (R-Columbia) becomes law.

The bill was prompted by the February mass murder of students and teachers at a high school in Parkland, Florida, as well as other cases in which teachers and school employees sacrificed their lives to save students.

After agreeing to sponsor the bill, which is part of the Louisiana Federation of Teachers legislative agenda, Sen. Riser said, "Let's hope we never have to use it, but I think it's appropriate that these teachers know we recognize that they have become first responders and our kids' first line of defense in some cases."

The bill will be heard by the Senate Finance Committee on Monday, March 26.

Fireworks erupt as senate debates charter school accountability

Decorum broke down in the Senate Education Committee when a Metairie senator angrily cursed about a suggestion that New Orleans charter schools are failing African-American students.

The eruption came as Rep. Joseph Bouie (D-New Orleans) testified on behalf of a bill would prohibit approving or renewing school charters until a performance audit is conducted on existing charter schools.

For years, Rep. Bouie has steadfastly maintained that charter schools are intended by law to design creative new educational programs that can be replicated in other public schools. In New Orleans, he said, charter schools have failed in that mission, citing a Tulane University saying that 24,000 young people in the city are out of work.

"They were youngsters who came through the experiment of charter schools," he said.

Committee member Sen. Conrad Appel (R-Metairie) exploded in anger at the suggestion. "If there is a bunch of kids out of work that are 24 years old, it is because the goddamned city does not produce jobs for those kids," he shouted.

Lost in the kerfluffle was the intent of SB 292 by Sen. Regina Barrow (D-Baton Rouge). She said that since most charter schools in the state are rated C, D, or F by the state, the legislative auditor should conduct a survey of their performance before any charters are renewed or new ones issued.

As civility returned to the meeting, senators heard from opponents of the bill. They objected to the bill's proposed moratorium on new charter schools until audits are completed on existing ones.

Charter advocate Caroline Roemer said her organization would not object to performance audits of existing charters, but added that they should be performed for all public schools.

In the end, mounting opposition prompted Sen. Barrow to shelve her bill, which had the support of LFT.

Bill to aid deaf kindergartners passes committee

Making sure that deaf and hard-of-hearing students are prepared for kindergarten was the intent of a bill approved by the House Education Committee this week.

HB 199 by Rep. Patricia Smith (D-Baton Rouge) would create a 22-member task force to make recommendations on the best ways to assess children with hearing problems prior to entering kindergarten. That panel would report to the House and Senate Education Committees by February 1 of next year.

The committee unanimously approved creating the Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Kids – Lead K – task force, and sent the bill to the full House for debate. LFT supports the bill.

In other business, the committee gave unanimous approval to HB 509 by Rep. Gary Carter (D-New Orleans), which requires school boards to make presentations at public meetings about plans for schools in need of academic improvement.

The panel also approved HB 663 by Rep. Malinda White (R-Bogalusa), which would create a commission to study the feasibility of consolidating the Washington Parish and Bogalusa city school districts. LFT opposes the bill.

Budget crunch may shortchange voucher schemes

Louisiana is running short on funds to pay for state vouchers, according to Superintendent of Education John White.

Last week, White told local superintendents that funds to pay tuition in private and religious schools are about \$2 million short of what is needed for the state's 6,000 voucher students. For next year, voucher funds come up \$5 million to \$7 million short.

In a letter to the superintendents, White said that unless the state increases voucher funding, schools or dioceses will have to make up the difference.

This year's voucher funding was supposed to be \$39 million, and the state department expects that next year's vouchers will cost between \$42 million and \$46 million.

The Week Ahead

Monday, March 26

Senate Finance Committee: SB 423 by Sen. Neil Riser (R-Columbia) is an LFT sponsored bill that would provide a survivor benefit for teachers and school employees killed in the line of duty.

SB 373 by Sen. Regina Barrow (D-Baton Rouge) would require the state to report all revenues, exemptions, credits and rebates on the LaTrac reporting system. LFT supports the bill.

Senate Judiciary C Committee: SB 178 by Sen. Mike Walsworth (R-West Monroe) would allow students to wear bullet-proof backpacks.

Senate Retirement Committee: LFT opposes SB 14 by Sen. Barrow Peacock (R-Shreveport), which would convert the Louisiana State Employees Retirement System into a "hybrid" retirement system that puts public employee retirement benefits at risk and costs the state more money.

Wednesday, March 28

House and Governmental Affairs Committee: HB 609 by Rep. Barbara Norton (D-Shreveport) would create a legislative advisory task force on conducting school board meetings.

Thursday, March 29

House Labor and Industrial Relations Committee: HB 605 by Rep. Barbara Norton (D-Shreveport) provides equal pay for women. LFT supports the bill.

House Retirement Committee: HB 21 by Rep. Barry Ivey (R-Baton Rouge) unnecessarily adds members of the Senate and House of representatives to the Public Retirement systems' Actuarial Committee. LFT opposes the bill.

HB 23 by Rep. Barry Ivey (R-Baton Rouge) provides for a limitation on investment portfolio allocation to alternative investments. LFT opposes the bill.

