

Louisiana Federation of Teachers

Weekly Legislative

Digest

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2018 Regular Legislative Session

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Health care, med schools, TOPS take budget hit

The \$27 billion state budget approved by the House of Representatives on Thursday would devastate safety net hospitals, shut down medical schools, and reduce the popular TOPS scholarship program if it passes the Senate and is signed by the governor.

But that does not seem likely, according to capitol watchers.

The budget passed the House by a narrow 55-47 margin, but faces a hostile audience in the Senate and the promise of a veto by Governor John Bel Edwards.

"The budget you saw today was a complete failure," said Gov. Edwards. "The sooner we get into a special session the better."

Insiders expect the legislature to exit the regular session by mid-May and enter a special session to deal with the budget.

The good news for lawmakers is that the official estimate of the state's shortfall has been whittled down from \$1.5 billion to \$648 million, mainly because of changes in federal tax law. The bad news is that making up that shortfall and providing the services expected by the people of Louisiana will require some new revenues.

Until now, the budget has been propped up by temporary taxes approved two years ago. Those will expire on July 1. Our constitution prohibits raising revenues during regular sessions in even-numbered years, making a special session necessary. A short special session last February failed to solve the budget mess.

JBE: Trained officers, not armed teachers, should protect schools

At the first meeting of a school safety task force, Governor John Bel Edwards made it clear that law enforcement professionals, not armed school employees, are the answer to concerns about violence.

LFT President Larry Carter is a member of the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Safety, which was formed after a tragic mass murder in Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High school in Florida. The commission comprises representatives from law enforcement and education.

Several bills aimed at arming teachers and other school employees have been rejected by legislative committees this year. LFT agrees with Governor Edwards that security should be provided by trained professionals.

House okays bogus “teacher rights” bill

A problematic bill that purports to protect teacher rights, but could actually chill information that teachers want, was approved by the House of Representatives and sent to the Senate for further action.

Language in HB 343 by Rep. Steve Carter (R-Baton Rouge) appears to protect teachers from being harassed by vendors during school hours.

But as education watchdog Ganey Arsement explained it, “Asking someone to attend a union meeting, or telling someone which candidate you support in an election and inviting them to learn more about a candidate, could be construed as harassment, or coercion.”

Not surprisingly, the bill was supported by such anti-teacher organizations as the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, Stand for Children and others with a bias against teacher unions.

When it was first heard by the House of Representatives, it was rejected. That led its supporters to oppose bills that would really help teachers, Rep. Frank Hoffman’s (R-West Monroe) efforts to ease restrictions on earning tenure and to reduce the Value Added portion of teacher evaluations from 35% to 15% - both bills were killed by the House Education Committee.

Rep. Carter was able to have HB 343 heard again by the full House, and it passed on a 53-36 vote. The bill has been assigned to the Senate Committee on Labor and Industrial Relations for its first foray into the upper chamber.

Senators gut discipline bill, add members to study group

A bill aimed at changing school discipline laws to reduce out-of-school suspensions and expulsions was so amended by the Senate Education Committee that it now simply adds members to a state commission studying student behavior and discipline.

As originally written, LFT and others expressed concerns that the bill might impinge on a teacher’s right to remove a disruptive student from class. LFT’s Legislative and Political Director Cynthia Posey worked with Sen. Wesley Bishop (D-New Orleans) on language that make it clear that teachers retain that right.

But when the Senate Education Committee finished its deliberations on SB 465, all of the language affecting the Teacher Bill of Rights was removed. Instead, the bill now adds members of the following organizations to the Advisory Council on Student Behavior and Discipline: Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children, the Urban League of Louisiana, MetroMorphosis, and the Louisiana Psychological Association.

The amended version also calls for a written report be delivered to the Senate Education Committee by February 15, 2019.

Bill allowing guns on campus deferred for a week

While several bills aimed at restricting gun rights were shot down by lawmakers in the House Criminal Justice Committee this week, a hearing on one that would loosen restrictions on guns in schools was postponed by its author.

HB 602 by Rep. Blake Miguez (R-Erath) would negate the state's gun-free zones, and allow anyone with a concealed carry permit to bring firearms onto a school campus.

LFT opposes the bill, saying that it would cause confusion if a person is seen with a gun on campus. Without knowing that the person has a permit, law enforcement would be called and the school put in lockdown, disrupting education for the day.

Rep. Miguez deferred a hearing on his bill until next week.

At the committee meeting, four bills that would have banned "bump stocks" and call for stricter background checks were all rejected.

Senate panel rejects "lunch shaming" bill

Facing pressure from local school boards, the Senate Education Committee voted down a bill that would ensure that children whose lunch payments are in arrears are able to get a nutritious meal.

HB 284 by Rep. Patricia Smith (D-Baton Rouge) had been approved by the House of Representatives. It would have required would require schools to provide a "USDA reimbursable meal" to students regardless of whether they have money to pay or owe money for meals, and provides that parents of those children must be notified.

Rep. Smith agreed to an amendment deleting high schools from the requirement. That was not enough to satisfy opponents, who labeled the bill an unfunded mandate that would put school systems in debt.

The bill was rejected on a 5-2 vote by the committee.

School district consolidation study proceeds

Without discussion or objection, a bill to study the consolidation of school districts in Washington Parish and the City of Bogalusa was approved by the Senate Education Committee.

HB 663 by Rep. Malinda White (D-Bogalusa) would create a 24-member Bogalusa/Washington Parish School System Consolidation Commission to study the feasibility of merging the two school districts in the parish. The bill has already been approved by the full House of Representatives.

Municipalities in two other parishes – East Baton Rouge and Ouachita – have split from the parish system to create city school districts. Rep. White's bill marks a rare effort to reunite city and parish school systems.

BESE updates policy on opioid abuse instruction

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education updated its policy manual to integrate evidence-based, age-appropriate instruction on opioid substance abuse into public school prevention education programs and curricula, starting in the coming school year.

State policy already requires a minimum of 16 hours of substance abuse prevention education each year in elementary schools. Secondary schools must provide eight hours of substance abuse prevention education in grades 10 through 12, and 16 hours in grade nine.

BESE's update adds language to the policy explicitly requiring schools to include an opioid-specific component in this instruction starting next school year.

The week ahead...

Sunday, April 22

Senate Finance Committee: The committee will begin deliberations on HB1, the state budget.

Monday, April 23

Senate Finance Committee: Deliberations will continue on HB1

Wednesday, April 25

House Education Committee: HB 842 by Rep. Beryl Amedee (R-Houma) would require daily recess for public school students in grades K-8.

SB 401 by Sen. Beth Mizell (R-Franklinton) would create a commission to study the feasibility of consolidating the Washington Parish and Bogalusa City school systems. Its companion bill, HB 633 by Rep. Malinda White (D-Bogalusa) was approved by the Senate Education Committee this week.

House Committee on Criminal Justice: HB 602 by Rep. Blake Miguez (R-Erath) would allow anyone with a concealed carry permit to carry a weapon into a gun-free zone in and around schools.

Thursday, April 26

House Education Committee: SCR 45 by Rep. Ken Brass (D-Vacherie) would create the Louisiana Commission on Safe Schools to study and review current laws, policies, procedures, and programs in place relative to preparing for and responding to threats and occurrences of school violence and to identify best practices, programs and initiatives to ensure stable and safe learning environments for all students and school employees.