

# Louisiana Federation of Teachers

# Weekly Legislative

# Digest

April 6, 2018

Larry Carter, President \* Les Landon, Editor

2016 Regular Legislative Session

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## LFT helps defeat bill to arm teachers

A bill that would have allowed teachers and school administrators to have concealed weapons on school property was rejected by the House Committee on Administration of Criminal Justice.

LFT President Larry Carter spoke forcefully against the proposal, saying, “Overwhelmingly, teachers believe it is a bad idea for them to be armed in school. In survey after survey, over 70% of teachers oppose being armed. More weapons create the illusion of safety, but really make things less safe.”

The author of the HB 271, Rep. Ray Garofalo (R-Chalmette) said that the state’s gun-free zone law is a “welcome mat” for “criminals and crazies” who “come to slaughter our children like sheep.”

In reality, the gun-free zones were established to give law enforcement another tool, with harsher penalties for carrying a weapon on or near school grounds.

Reacting to Rep. Garofalo’s hyperbole, Carter said that police work should be left to the experts.

“There is a good reason why we don’t arm ticket agents when airports are targeted in terror attacks, and we don’t arm bank tellers when banks are robbed,” he said. “That is a job best left to professionals.

“Most teachers would be conflicted about shooting at a student they know,” Carter said. “But imagine the horror, and the guilt, that a teacher would experience if their bullet hit an innocent child.”

Carter said that other measures could be taken to make schools less vulnerable to the type of mass killing that occurred in Florida on Valentine’s Day.

“Guidance counselors, who are currently overburdened with testing and record keeping, could be our first line of defense by identifying and getting help for troubled students,” Carter said.

Hiring more resource officers and ensuring that access to schools is restricted would also be effective, he said.

“All of those things would do more to protect students than arming teachers, but they would require extra funding at a time when money for our schools has been frozen for nine of the past 10 years,” Carter said.

Nine members of the committee voted against HB 271; seven voted for it.

## **Bill providing adoptive leave for teachers progresses**

Without opposition, a bill that would allow teachers to get maternity leave when adopting a child was approved by the House Education Committee.

LFT supported HB 625 by Rep. Rick Edmonds (R-Baton Rouge) changes existing law that allows teachers to get maternity leave after the birth of a child to include adoption. The bill requires all school boards to “grant leaves of absence not to exceed 30 days to regularly employed women teachers after the legal adoption of a child.”

LFT supported the bill.

## **Lunch shaming bill passes House**

A bill that would make sure students who can't afford lunch, or who owe lunch money, could not be denied a nutritious meal was approved by the full House of Representatives.

HB 284 by Rep. Patricia Smith (D-Baton Rouge) 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. Under some circumstances, the parents could be reported to child protective services.

Schools would not be allowed to stigmatize, scold or shame children in any fashion.

The bill was approved by a 71-28 majority, and moves to the Senate for further action.

## **Educators plead for funding**

Representatives of both K-12 and higher education told the House Appropriations Committee that education at all levels is at risk because of the looming budget cliff, now estimated to be in the neighborhood of \$700 million.

In a five-hour meeting, educators spoke of the challenges facing our schools after a decade of cuts to higher education and frozen spending for K-12 schools.

State Superintendent of Education John White noted that teacher salaries have stagnated, while other costs, like insurance and retirement, have risen. Citing the state's budget woes, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education proposed a public spending formula with no increase for the coming school year.

“We are at risk of being out-competed for talent,” White said.

Teachers in West Virginia recently went on a successful statewide strike for higher pay; teachers in Oklahoma and Kentucky are currently taking job actions to raise pay.

LSU President F. King Alexander told the panel that Louisiana's per-student funding in colleges and universities has fallen from 12<sup>th</sup> in the nation to 42<sup>nd</sup>.

In addition, Higher Education Commissioner Joseph Rallo said, tuition in state institutions has risen from \$721 million to \$1.4 billion in 10 years, shifting the burden onto students and their families.

## **Sex ed and risk survey bills fail in House committee**

In what has become an annual event in the House Education Committee, bills aimed at improving sex education in schools and surveying students on risky behaviors were rejected.

Faced with pressure from groups like the Family Forum, the committee dispatched HB 499 and HB 554, both by Rep. Patricia Smith (D-Baton Rouge). Rep. Smith has championed both bills for several years, and has always been rebuffed following opposition from cultural conservatives.

HB 499 would have required public schools to provide age-appropriate instruction about human sexuality, including the health benefits and side effects of contraceptives. The instruction would stress that abstinence is the most reliable way to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Current law only allows sex education in grades seven and above, and only when integrated into an existing course of study. The major emphasis of the instruction “shall be to encourage sexual abstinence between unmarried persons.”

Even after Rep. Smith told the panel that Louisiana has the second highest incidence of syphilis among adolescents in the nation, the second-highest rates of chlamydia and gonorrhea, and the seventh highest rate of teenage pregnancies, the committee voted 5-8 against the bill.

HB 554 would have allowed the Louisiana Department of Education and the Health Department to survey students about risk behavior that can lead to sexually transmitted diseases and other issues. Other parts of the survey, asking about issues such as wearing helmets when riding bikes, are allowed in Louisiana, but those about sexual behavior are not.

Rep. Smith said it is important for researchers to have that data, which is voluntarily submitted and not personally identifiable. The annual survey is created by the Centers for Disease Control, and most states participate in all parts of the survey.

The bill was rejected on a 3-9 vote.

An identical bill in the Senate, SB 297 by Sen. Dan Claitor (R-Baton Rouge), was approved by the Senate Health and Welfare Committee and sent to the full Senate for a vote. If the bill passes the Senate, however, it will still have to pass through the House of Representatives.

## **Senate panel squashes bill to reconfirm John White**

A bill that would have required the Senate to reconfirm State Superintendent of Education John White was rejected by the Senate Education Committee.

Se. John Milkovich (D-Shreveport) authored SB 302 in an effort to resolve the issue of White’s superintendency. The law states that the superintendent must be reappointed, or a successor chosen, by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education following the election of a new board, which occurred in 2015.

But BESE is split, and there are neither the two-thirds majorities required to terminate Superintendent White or to reappoint him. He has been working on a month-to-month contract since the last election.

State law (RS 24:14) states that if any appointment is not submitted to the Senate for confirmation by the end of the second regular session after the appointment expires, the position is considered vacant.

Since BESE has taken no action on Superintendent White’s contract, and the Senate has not acted to confirm him since the last election, Sen. Milkovich’s bill would have required the superintendency to become vacant unless he is reappointed by BESE and confirmed by the Senate.

## **Committee approves standstill MFP formula**

There will be no increase in per-pupil funding if Senate Concurrent Resolution 48 by Sen. Blade Morrish (R-Jennings) continues its path through the legislature.

The Senate Education Committee approved the formula, which was given the nod by the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in March. It would provide \$3.7 billion to fund public education for the state's 700,000-plus students.

The legislature has the option of accepting or rejecting BESE's formula, but may not change it.

For much of the last decade, there have been no increases in the per-pupil funding. Prior to that, it was customary for an additional 2.75% to be added to the funding to account for rising costs.

Pay raises for teachers depend largely on the MFP. A portion of any increase must be dedicated to salaries. If the formula is adopted as approved by the committee, there will, once again, be no state raise for teachers.

## **The week ahead...**

### **Wednesday, April 11**

**House Education Committee:** HB 707, an LFT-sponsored bill by Rep. Samuel Jenkins (D-Shreveport), would strengthen teachers' due process rights in disciplinary actions. It would guarantee teachers' right to view all documents included in a disciplinary action, enhance notification requirements, and provide more time for teachers to respond to allegations.

HB 587 by Rep. Frank Hoffman (R-West Monroe) would ease the requirement for teachers to earn tenure. Currently, teachers must be rated "highly effective" for five out of six years to earn tenure and its due process rights; Rep. Hoffman's bill would change the requirement so that teachers would have to be rated either "effective: proficient" or "highly effective" for five out of six years to earn tenure. LFT supports the bill.

HB 651 by Rep. Frank Hoffman (R-West Monroe) would reduce the percentage of a teacher's Value Added Model score in evaluations from 35% to 15%. VAM is a measure that only applies to teachers in core subjects; it is widely regarded by experts as an inaccurate measure of a teacher's effectiveness. LFT supports the bill.

**House and Affairs Committee:** HB 693 by Rep. Barbara Norton (D-Shreveport) would create a legislative advisory task force on conducting school board meetings.

### **Thursday, April 12**

**House Education Committee:** HB 511 by Rep. Tony Bacala (R-Prairieville) would require a mental health evaluation of anyone who threatens public safety or physical harm to other persons. LFT supports the bill.