

Louisiana Federation of Teachers

Weekly Legislative Digest

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“Lunch shaming” bill progresses

Over the objection of school boards, the House Education Committee approved a bill aimed at making sure children whose lunch payments are in arrears are able to get nutritious meals.

Rep. Patricia Smith (D-Baton Rouge) cited examples of children who owe lunch money being handed peanut butter sandwiches instead of a full meal, saying that those children are shamed because of the negligence of their parents.

HB 284 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.

School boards opposed the bill, saying that forcing schools to pay for the meals could impact other educational services.

LFT Legislative and Political Director Cynthia Posey supported the bill, saying that “no child should be denied a meal or shamed.”

Responding to concerns about the cost to schools, Posey said we need to ask if our schools have enough money to both feed and educate children.

“The question is not which one to fund, but how do we fund everything” that our children need, she said. That is the issue hanging over the legislature as the fiscal cliff approaches on July 1.

Rep. Smith’s bill was approved on a 7-4 vote, and moves to the House floor for further action. The bill was endorsed by Gov. John Bel Edwards.

Budget woes shelve bill providing benefits for educators killed on duty

A bill that would provide a \$250,000 benefit for the estates of teachers and school employees killed in the line of duty was shelved by the Senate Finance Committee because any bill that could cost the state additional money is being held in abeyance until the state budget is resolved.

SB 423 by Sen. Neil Riser (R-Columbia) is part of the LFT’s legislative agenda. It was prompted by the heroic deaths of teachers who put themselves in the line of fire to protect students during school shootings.

Sen. Riser said his bill mirrors legislation that compensates first responders like police and firefighters who are killed in the line of duty. Any potential claim would be routed through the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education for cases involving K-12 teachers, and through the Board of Regents for college and university employees. A final judgment would be made by the state's Office of Risk management.

The bill has a potential fiscal impact, although an exact amount is unknown because no Louisiana educators have been killed in the line of duty in recent years. Even so, said committee Chair Sen. Eric LaFleur (D-Ville Platte), the fact that it includes a fiscal note means that it will be shelved at least until the budget picture becomes clearer.

Panel okays bulletproof backpacks for kids; nixes handgun bill

In response to recent school shootings, the Senate Judiciary C Committee approved a bill that would allow children to wear bulletproof backpacks.

SB 178 by Sen. Mike Walsworth (R-West Monroe) amends a law prohibiting body armor on school grounds. It would allow bulletproof backpacks, but not other forms of armor, to be worn on campus. Reports say the backpacks can be purchased for between \$50 and \$300. The bill will go to the full Senate for debate.

The same panel rejected SB 406 by Sen. Neil Riser (R-Columbia), which would have allowed military personnel, veterans or reservists to bring handguns onto school grounds with the permission of the school principal.

"I have three grandchildren in school," said Senator Yvonne Colomb (D-Baton Rouge), "and I don't want anybody on campus with a gun except for police officers."

Hybrid retirement plan passes committee

A so-called "hybrid" retirement plan for public employees was approved by the Senate Retirement Committee over objections that it could shortchange civil servants after their work years end.

SB 14 by Sen. Barrow Peacock (R-Shreveport) would penalize employees who choose to make career and employment changes late in their careers. Workers who come into the state in their 40s will receive an often substantially lower benefit under the proposed plan than under the current Louisiana State Employees Retirement System.

Louisiana AFL-CIO President Louis Reine said the bill would result in lower benefits, higher costs to state taxpayers, and an increase in the retirement age for state workers.

Despite those arguments, the committee voted 4-1 to send the bill to the full Senate for further action.

Senate shoots down minimum wage and equal pay bills

After winning approval in committee, bills aimed at raising the minimum wage and guaranteeing equal pay for women were torpedoed by the full Senate. SB 162 by Sen. Troy Carter (D-New Orleans) would have increased the state minimum wage from \$7.25 an hour to \$8.50 in steps over the next two years.

Since 2017, 37 states have raised their minimum wage. Louisiana remains one of just five states that adheres by default to the federal minimum. Sen. Carter has proposed a hike in the minimum wage without success for the past three years.

The bill, which had the support of Gov. John Bel Edwards and the LFT, went down on a 17-21 vote.

An 18-20 vote against SB 117 by Sen. J.P. Morrell (D-New Orleans) sent the equal pay for women guarantee to defeat. The bill would have required any company that does business with the state to comply with a law that prohibits pay disparities between men and women. That bill also had the backing of Gov. Edwards and the LFT.

House panel follows suit on minimum wage, equal pay bills

Two days after the full Senate rejected minimum wage and equal pay bills, the House Committee on Labor and Industrial Relations made sure the lower chamber's versions of the bills would not even be heard on the floor.

Passionate pleas from advocates of low-wage workers and women employees fell on deaf ears as the committee acquiesced to the demands of business lobbyists.

HB 251 by Rep. Joseph Bouie (D-New Orleans) would have required that any employer who enters into a contract with a public entity to comply with the Louisiana Equal Pay for Women Act.

One of the women on the committee, Rep. Julie Emerson (R-Carencro) moved to involuntarily defer the bill. Her motion was approved on a 9-4 vote.

Rep. Bouie also authored HB 192, which would have raised the state minimum wage to \$15 per hour by January 1, 2019.

A motion to approve the bill failed on a 3-9 vote.

The Week Ahead.....

Monday, April 2

Senate Finance Committee: SB 224 by Sen. Regina Barrow (D-Baton Rouge), requiring schools to provide instruction and display of the national motto "In God We Trust."

Wednesday, April 4

House Education Committee: HCR 12 by Rep. Larry Bagley (R-Stonewall) creates a task force to study teacher shortages in Louisiana.

HB 343 and HB by Rep. Steve Carter (R-Baton Rouge) provide relative to the statutory rights of teachers.

HB 499 by Rep. Patricia Smith (D-Baton Rouge) provides relative to sex education instruction in schools.

HB 554 by Rep. Patricia Smith (D-Baton Rouge) authorizes the State Health Department and Department of Education to survey students regarding certain risk behavior associated with chronic health conditions.

HB 625 by Rep. Rick Edmonds (R0-baton Rouge) provides for maternity leave for adoptive parents.

Thursday, April 5

House Education Committee: HB 337 by Rep. Franklin Foil (R-Baton Rouge) requires public school authorities to develop policies to notify certain school visitors of crisis management and response plans.

HB 498 by Rep. Edmond Jordan (D-Baton Rouge) requires school crisis plans to provide for parental notification in the event of a shooting or other violent action.

HB 511 by Rep. Tony Bacala (R-Prairieville) requires a mental health evaluation of persons who threaten public safety or physical harm to other persons.

HB 575 by Rep. Barbara Norton (D-Shreveport) provides for safety instruction in K-12 and higher education schools, provides for reporting online content to school and campus security offices and local law enforcement.