

Louisiana Federation of Teachers

Weekly Legislative

Digest

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2018 Regular Legislative Session

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Special Session to start Tuesday, May 22

The House of Representatives agreed on Thursday to a Senate version of the state budget, HB1 by Rep. Cameron Henry (R-Metairie), but everyone knows that won't be the end of the budget battle this year.

The Senate version of the \$27 billion budget fully funds health care priorities, eliminating for now the threat that nursing home residents may be evicted when the new fiscal year begins on July 1.

But the budget calls for 25 percent cuts to most state agencies unless lawmakers can agree to raise about \$648 million in new revenues in a special session that will begin on Tuesday.

The final version of the budget funds the popular TOPS scholarship program at 70 percent, and cuts higher education by about 10 percent. It would end the SNAP food assistance program, close state parks and museums, lead to major layoffs of state employees, and threaten child welfare programs. Governor John Bel Edwards has not said whether or not he will veto the proposed budget, but it is clear that he expects the special session to come up with enough revenues to fund vital services.

Lawmakers will *sine die* the regular session on Friday, and return to Baton Rouge Tuesday to look for revenues.

Panel guts school gun bill, preserves constitutional rights

The Senate Judiciary Committee B defanged a bill that would have allowed anyone with a concealed carry permit to enter school grounds while armed, but amended it to satisfy concerns of gun owners about the constitutionality of the state's gun free zone law.

There were no comments from the audience when HB 602 by Rep. Blake Miguez (R-Erath) was amended by the committee, although lobbyists from the powerful National Rifle Association were in the crowd, hoping that the bill would pass as written.

The amendment removed all mention of allowing those with permits to carry weapons on school grounds. It simply said that those with permits may carry guns within the 1,000 foot gun-free zone, but may not enter school grounds while armed.

The amendment satisfied concerns that people legally allowed to carry guns could run afoul of the law merely by walking past a school while armed.

School grade comparisons approved

Without any nay votes, the House approved a bill that allows the public to compare school and district performance scores from year to year. Gov. John Bel Edwards is expected to sign the bill into law.

SB 152 by Sen. Blade Morrish (R-Jennings) makes year-to-year comparisons possible, even when the Department of Education changes criteria for determining scores.

The bill says that when BESE makes a change in the criteria used to determine the scores, the release will also show the performance score the school or district would have received had the change not been implemented. The information will be displayed side by side for an easy comparison.

Due to a change in the way performance scores are calculated, educators are expected to see a reduction in the number of “A” rated schools, and an increase in the number of “F” rated schools.

That does not mean the schools are performing worse than they did before, only that the formula for rating schools changed. When parents see the new scores, they have a right to know what that change really means.

School bullying bill deferred by committee

A bill aimed at curbing school bullying, but was criticized as being overly aggressive, was rejected by the House Education Committee.

At its last meeting of the regular session, the panel sided with school boards and superintendents, who said that SB 303 by Sen. John Milkovich could lead to lawsuits against teachers and schools.

The bill would have required teachers to report any bullying incident to law enforcement authorities within 24 hours. It would have given teachers the ability to have students removed from campus and to use “reasonable force, physical restraint” when they witness bullying.

Opponents said those elements of the bill sidestepped school board policies, and could result in lawsuits against teachers and schools.

TOPS program remains unchanged for the coming year

Despite soaring costs, the legislature resisted efforts to rein in the popular TOPS scholarship program that provides college tuition for students who meet certain academic standards.

Around 52,000 students currently get funding from the program, which cost the state \$292 million this year.

Various reforms were proposed, ranging from increasing academic requirements to setting a means test for the awards, but none were able to gain traction.

The budget approved by the House and Senate caps TOPS funding at 70 percent. Capitol watchers say that will play a key role in budget negotiations set to begin on Tuesday, when the legislature convenes a special session.

House okays bullet proof backpacks for students

With little debate, the House of Representatives approved a bill allowing parents to purchase bulletproof backpacks for children.

SB 178 by Sen. Mike Walsworth (R-West Monroe) passed the House on an 82-6 vote. Current law prohibits body armor in schools, but recent school shootings prompted Sen. Walsworth to offer the exception for bullet proof backpacks.

Supporters said the cost of the backpacks can range between \$50 and \$400, depending on the type of protection offered.

The week ahead...

Tuesday, May 22: The legislature will convene at 4:00 P.M. in a special session to come to grips with the state's looming budget crisis.