

Louisiana Federation of Teachers

# 2014 Legislative Agenda



## Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education

An Excellent public education for all children is an economic necessity, an anchor of democracy, a moral imperative and a fundamental civil right. The LFT's value-based vision of the promise of public education includes a commitment to **fairness, equal opportunity** to achieve, **accountability** at all levels, **and access** to resources for students, teachers, school employees and higher education faculty.

Along with that vision for public education, our solution-driven unionism has led us to craft a set of legislative and policy goals that **set out a path to reclaim the promise of public education** – not as it is today or was in the past, but as it should be: This means a commitment to great neighborhood schools; a full and fair accountability system based on accurate and valid measures; empowering teachers to teach, not just test; full funding of each child's unique educational needs; respect and dignity for all those who dedicate their lives to our children.

LFT's five policy making committees are: 1. Compensation Excellence, 2. Retirement, Healthcare and Benefits, 3. Employee Rights, 4. Education Funding, and 5. Education Policy. At our annual convention, these committees discuss and debate resolutions submitted by and to the LFT Executive Board. The resolutions adopted by delegates each year shape our legislative agenda and member advocacy.

### **Our policy agenda and strategic engagement plan center around the most important tenants of reclaiming the promise of public education:**

- Creating safe, welcoming places;
- Cultivating well-prepared and supported teachers and staff;
- Developing engaging curriculum; and
- Ensuring wraparound services that address students' social, health and emotional needs.

## 1. Compensation Excellence

The true path to educational excellence in Louisiana begins with excellent compensation that helps to recruit and retain the very best professional educators and staff. As LFT continues to push for nationally competitive salaries, it must also confront roadblocks to excellent compensation that exist at the state and local level. While continuing to oppose the new stator requirement that local salary schedules ignore or diminish the value of experience LFT will advocate for compensation models that leave no employee behind.

**Permanent Pay Raises for All School Personnel.** In 2013 the legislature authorized a one time payment to local districts that gave one time raises to certified classroom teachers. However, no mandatory pay raise for support personnel was included. LFT will advocate for investment in all school personnel including support staff through continued permanent increases to the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP). This is a simple matter of fairness.

**Equitable Salary Schedules.** Act 1 (2012) required all districts to develop new salary schedules that devalues valuable experience

that their employees bring to school in service to students and their communities. LFT will continue to advocate for salary schedules that allow local districts to base salaries on the values that matter most in their schools, including experience.

**Certified Personnel in All Schools.** The promise of public education can only be fulfilled when highly qualified, certified teachers lead every classroom. LFT will continue to work to undo recently enacted policies allowing charter schools to operate with 0% certified teachers.

## 2. Retirement, Healthcare, and Benefit Protection

In Louisiana, teachers, school employees and college faculty belong to the Teachers Retirement System of Louisiana or the Louisiana School Employees Retirement System. These systems provide Louisiana's public school employees a defined retirement benefit. LFT will work to prevent retirement benefits of teachers, school employees, and higher education faculty from being sold to wall street. Despite the fact that many of the most recent attempts to force public workers to work longer, pay more, and receive a lower benefit have failed, these privatization efforts persist. Through our partnership with the National Public Pension Coalition and its other partners in Louisiana, we will continue

to *provide solutions* to keep our public employee retirement system healthy and sustainable for years to come.

#### **Protection of Defined Benefit Plans.**

LFT will continue to support defined benefit options for all of Louisiana's public education employees. Because most educators will not enjoy social security, public employee retirement systems are the only option.

**Return to Work Laws.** After years of dedicated service compensated by a humble paycheck, most retirees must forfeit their retirement income if they return to work, even in a part time capacity, in their local school districts. Abuse of the retirement system through retire-rehire turnaround should be prevented; however, LFT believes we must craft better policy that prevents abuse while allowing seasoned educators to continue to contribute to their local schools without foregoing their retirement income altogether.

**Cost of Living Adjustments for Retirees (COLAs).** In 2013 LFT proudly helped to achieve a COLA for retired school support personnel, many of whom retired after 25 years or more of service in their schools only to collect a pension check that left them living below the federal poverty line. The **income of retirees makes up the number one source of income in many Louisiana parishes.** As the cost of living rises, the fixed incomes provided by the systems don't cover the necessities of life. LFT is committed to fighting for regular cost of living adjustments for Louisiana's retired public education

employees, and supporting the local economy, which ultimately must be strong to grow strong schools. LFT will also oppose efforts to limit the ability of systems to pay COLA's by prohibiting the systems from making contributions to the experience account, the account from which COLA's are to be paid.

**Unfunded Accrued Liability (UAL).** In the 1970's our legislature took responsibility for its failure to make payments to our public retirements systems by creating a plan to pay down the unfunded accrued liability by 2029. Louisiana is on schedule to just that. While one of our state systems was recently ranked among the best in the nation, many policy makers attempt to balance state debts on the backs of public employees. LFT will oppose efforts to reduce benefits for any retirees based on assessments that our systems are not properly funded. This philosophy is based on a false premise, and blames workers for the state's failures. LFT will also continue to support **studying alternative methods of financing the state's repayment of its debt to the retirement systems** including methods that have been utilized in other states to address similar problems.

**Affordable Health Benefits.** As the cost of health insurance continues to increase, many public education employees face ever-decreasing earnings or complete loss of health care coverage. In addition, retirees face these same difficult decisions, without an employer option. LFT and its local affiliates will continue to assist educators as they explore **new options available under the**

**Affordable Care Act (ACA)**, making health insurance more affordable for all.

### 3. Employee Rights

Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education requires reinstating essential liberties in the school environment as we educate the citizens of tomorrow. Teachers, school employees, and higher education faculty are all public employees. As public employees, all policy regarding their employment is set by a public body—a local school board, the state legislature, the Board of Regents, BESE, or one of the university system boards of trustees. LFT and its local affiliates will continue to advocate for fairness for all public employees. In particular, we will fight any efforts to make teachers and school employees at-will workers.

**Public Employee Bargaining.** LFT believes that the right to organize and the right to collective bargaining are issues of social justice and carry with them distinct advantages for students, teachers, school employees, college faculty and the community as a whole. LFT will continue to seek the statutory right for public education employees to decide whether or not they want to enter into a bargaining relationship with their respective employers. **And, we will never forget how --- well before the attacks on bargaining rights in states**

**such as Wisconsin, Florida, and Ohio --- teachers in New Orleans were stripped of those rights after Hurricane Katrina.**

**Use of Payroll Deductions.** For three consecutive years big business interests attacked employee rights to pay their union dues from their hard-earned paycheck, attempting to prohibit payroll deductions for such a purpose. While the First Amendment protects political speech, some policy makers hope to end the existence of our organization, and to silence public employees by preventing the payment of dues by payroll deduction or by limiting the purposes for which those dues may be used. LFT will continue to oppose any effort to interfere with how its members choose to spend their hard-earned paychecks.

**Sick/Sabbatical Leave.** Recently, LFT helped to remove the financial exigencies excuse, under which school districts were able to deny sick and sabbatical leave. Additionally, the first mandatory sick leave bank policies, and paid maternity leave policies were instituted with support from LFT. Now, as we continue to protect extended sick leave, LFT will advocate for better local and state policies regarding donation to newly established sick leave banks, while keeping a careful eye on boards that have used new law incorrectly, as excuses to deny maternity leave.

**Tenure.** Tenure was created to ensure that highly qualified, experienced classroom educators would never fall victim to arbitrary termination. Tenure is intended to be

insurance against arbitrary or political attacks on our best teachers in order to ensure they stay where they belong, in the classroom. The constitutionality of the law that links an inaccurate evaluation system to the earning and removal of tenure is currently being examined by Louisiana Courts. In the meantime, LFT will advocate for the best local and state policies that insure fair process for tenure eligibility and tenure removal.

**Evaluation.** Effective school systems use data to inform instruction, not as a “scarlet number” that does nothing to improve teaching and learning. In 2013, the Louisiana House voted unanimously to delay the punitive impacts of our COMPASS Evaluation system, recognizing that it is flawed. Political posturing stalled the bill in the Louisiana Senate. LFT will oppose the further linking of our unfair system of evaluation and fixation on testing to teacher pay, tenure, and reductions in force. LFT will continue to put forth policy that improves the Value Added Model of evaluation, while working, ultimately, to replace it with a system that is fair and accurate. LFT will also advocate for the ability of teachers to invalidate their evaluation due extenuating circumstances and better access to the courts as they appeal the results of COMPASS. Moreover, LFT will continue to advocate for its members who are denied due process under the law first by helping to create a process to fix the method of evaluation, but also through the creation of a clear way to

challenge the final ratings assigned under COMPASS.

#### 4. Education Funding

Reclaiming the promise of public education requires investments in the future of our students, our communities, and our profession. In 2013 LFT proudly beat back an MFP proposal that would have frozen K-12 funding to public schools for the fifth consecutive year, and instead brokered a \$69 million increase to public school funding through the state’s general budget, and endorsed a legislative instrument that expressed the intent of the legislature to make this increase a permanent part of our annual K-12 budget.

By starving public schools, proponents of privatization have manufactured a crisis regarding the quality of public schools. They have used this crisis to support their case for vouchers and charters, leading to further defunding of public schools. Meanwhile, cuts to our Higher Education Community have been devastating. But some decision-makers preferred these cuts to desirable alternatives like undoing some of the billions of corporate tax exemptions on the books in Louisiana. Essentially, the public policy of public education funding in Louisiana has become a policy of turning students into commodities for sale in a high stakes transaction. Such profiteering will create deficiencies in public education for decades to come.

### **State Funding for Higher Education.**

State funding for higher education has been cut by 80% since 2008, passing the cost on to Louisiana families and placing what is effectively a tax on the future of Louisiana's college students. LFT will continue to advocate for funding that does not make college impossibly expensive, and for policies that make our state a true financial partner with parents and students as we invest in our people.

**Funding the True Cost of Education.** In 2013 LFT successfully fought for a seat on a reconstituted MFP Task Force. Louisiana's current funding mechanism for elementary and secondary education is historically based on student enrollment, and is inevitably determined based upon the amount of revenue the state has, and not the amount of money actually needed to education students. Costs of personnel benefits, new technology, and implementing myriad of so-called reforms are piling up, but our state hasn't provided additional funds to help local districts meet these demands. LFT will advocate for full funding of state mandated programs and costs, and continue to educate policy makers regarding the true cost of providing high quality public education.

**Components of an Equitable MFP.** The MFP is a constitutionally protected source of funding for K-12 funding which originates in the form of a recommendation made by BESE regarding a per pupil funding amount. LFT will continue to advocate for the **rejection of an MFP that:**

- does not represent a true calculation of costs associated with education
- incentivizes misdiagnosis of special needs
- funds gifted and talented education based on students' test performance
- inequitably funds technical education as yet another way to cut the state's commitment to our career and technical colleges, or to replace proven, successful technical education programs with unproven ones proposed by private interests
- fails to acknowledge the portion of the MFP being allocated for retirement costs and other state unfunded mandates including stipends for certified personnel.

**Infrastructure.** While the law currently requires the inspection and evaluation of public school campuses by the state on an annual basis, this inspection has not been completed in a truly systematic way in decades. In light of growing needs for infrastructure and technology improvements to properly administer new standardized tests, LFT will continue to fight to make infrastructure a part of a comprehensive school evaluation system, and will support efforts to develop the best learning environments for our students.

**Vouchers and "Course Choice."** School Choice has existed in Louisiana for decades. But now, Louisiana is sending precious resources to "voucher" schools:

- with questionable curriculum
- lacking of the proper resources

- without certified personnel or proper facilities.

This is no choice at all for parents seeking high quality education for their students.

In 2013 LFT won a historic court battle to stop funding vouchers through monies the Constitution requires the state pay to public schools. Now, LFT will continue the fight to protect Louisiana students and parents from the knowingly false promises of voucher proponents.

**Tuition Tax Credits/Deductions.** Tuition tax credits for private schools serve as yet another challenge to an already impossible budgetary situation. With no cap and no sunset in sight, the tax credit passed in 2012 has drained the general budget of our state. LFT will continue to oppose measures that prioritize private schools over the public good.

**School District Fragmentation.** Across the nation, financially-strapped school systems are consolidating with adjoining districts in order to achieve an economy of scale. However, Louisiana is witnessing a reversal of this trend, with some areas seeking separation from their parish school districts in order to establish school systems with municipal boundaries. LFT believes that this “balkanization” of districts diverts much needed resources from educating the children of Louisiana, and LFT will press for a stop to further splintering of districts.

## 5. Education Policy

The promise of public education is one grounded firmly in policies that recognize schools as more than brick and mortar, but instead focus on their development as a tool for community-wide prosperity. From curriculum to discipline, the Louisiana Legislature, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Board of Regents and the various university systems of trustees all enact statute and policy affecting the delivery of public education from pre-kindergarten to graduate school, along with the professions of teachers, school employees, and higher education faculty. Reclaiming the promise of public education means redeveloping a focus on community schools to ensure that they are at the core of all policy decisions.

“In 2010, our state signed on to ‘Common Core.’ Between 2010 and 2013 state leadership embarked on a series of misadventures. Common Core became an afterthought.” – Steve Monaghan, LFT President

**Common Core Standards and Implementation.** Sound policy making requires setting out methods of implementation that will support our public institutions, not merely setting a demanding standard of excellence with no regard for the means required to attain that standard. LFT will continue to advocate for the resources,



training and education needed to meet the goals set for educators and students, while also working to ensure that the standards set by our policy makers represent healthy, valid goals. Additionally, LFT will oppose policy decisions that are driven primarily by test obsession, which lead to heartbreaking consequences for our students and deprive us of our professionalism leaving us without the freedom to truly teach.

**Rulemaking Oversight.** BESE promulgates rules to carry out the policy mandates of the Legislature. Over the past year, LFT has brought to the attention of BESE, and the Department of Education various ways in which it has exceeded or misapplied its rulemaking authority under the Administrative Procedures Act. LFT will seek remedies to restore transparency in the process of policy making at the administrative rule-making level.

**School Letter Grades.** The method for calculating School Letter Grades has changed frequently without any legislative oversight. In 2013, LFT garnered unanimous support in the House of Representatives for a requirement that the legislature review changes to the calculation method prior to implementation. Political showmanship prevented passage in the Senate. LFT will continue to advocate for measures of school performance that truly empower parents with information that provides an accurate assessment of our schools and which respectfully acknowledges and accounts for the unique challenges to student success in

each community. Such a system should apply to any school receiving state funds.

**Accountability for Public Funding.** LFT will support proper accountability for all local and state revenues appropriated for education in Louisiana. That means more than just a statement about rigorous standards. Traditional public schools, new charter authorizers, public charter schools, non-public schools receiving public dollars through vouchers, and course providers should all be subject to across the board standards for certification of personnel, curriculum, and facilities. Accreditation of non-public schools should not replace the need for state approval, nor should it supplant any part of the approval process.

Furthermore, every child deserves a school that is fairly and accurately assessed. Therefore, schools that enroll fewer children, that do not grant diplomas, or don't teach key tested grades must not be excused from any accountability standards or state approval processes. As the money "follows the child" so should the oversight of public dollars. This will require efforts to enhance policy in the legislature, BESE, and at the local level.

**Poverty as an Obstacle to Student Growth.** LFT will support measures that attempt to recognize and measure the ways that poverty impacts student achievement. Only an accurate picture of student health and welfare will produce the best strategies for improving student achievement. Integrating these finding and strategies into school letter grades, and teacher evaluations

is another important step towards serving all children regardless of their socioeconomic background. LFT will advocate for holistic approaches to student welfare that address the whole student, and therefore, all the obstacles to learning.

**Wraparound Services as a Key to Success.** In recognition that healthy children gain the most from the promise of public education, LFT will continue to explore and support methods to bring better primary healthcare to Louisiana students at their schools, provide for proper nutrition, as well as access to proper diagnostic services so that

the needs of all of Louisiana's children can be properly assessed and met.

Specifically, LFT will support a community action school model that improves health outcomes and academic achievement for students by developing community investments in student health services. For example, by working to maintain and increase reimbursements for services to Louisiana children enrolled in Medicaid, and by advocating for continued funding for nationally board certified diagnosticians, LFT can play an active role in ensuring that high quality healthcare is a staple of every public school..

## In Closing . . .

A legislative agenda is not a wish list. Rather, it is a strategy to address short and long-term issues within the context of the LFT's overarching mission and core beliefs. In 2014, LFT will work to reclaim the promise of public education for our students and communities, for our members and our profession.