

Louisiana Federation of Teachers

Weekly Legislative Digest

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2013 Regular Legislative Session

Now available on the Web at <http://la.aft.org>

[Check out all things legislative on the LFT's Legislative Resource Page!](#)

LFT will host a TeleTown Hall on legislative issues at 5:30 PM Thursday, April 25. Anyone interested in learning more about bills affecting retirement, education, the state budget and more is welcome to join the conversation.

Just call 888-409-5381 at 5:30 PM Thursday to participate.

Income tax repeal plan collapses in committee

The fiscal session of the legislature was jolted on Monday when the House Appropriations Committee indefinitely deferred a slew of bills aimed at abolishing the state's corporate and personal income taxes.

It was a second blow to Gov. Bobby Jindal's ambitious plan to restructure the state's tax structure. Last week, in his opening address to the legislature, the governor laid aside his scheme to swap income taxes for increases in sales and tobacco taxes and the curbing of some tax incentives. Instead, the governor charged lawmakers to simply send him a bill aimed at abolishing income taxes, making that the centerpiece of his legislative agenda this session.

Eliminating income taxes would have blown a \$3 billion hole in the state budget, experts estimated.

The rebuke to the governor came when Appropriations Committee Chair Joel Robideaux (R-Lafayette) announced that, "Unless the committee members have a change of heart, I think (eliminating incomes taxes) is dead for this session."

That leaves lawmakers in the position of crafting a budget that can fill a projected revenue shortfall of \$1.3 billion in the coming fiscal year, with very little guidance expected from the chief executive.

Panel deals Jindal retirement plan a setback

The Senate Retirement Committee listened to complaints from higher education administrators on Monday, and approved a bill that partially undoes Gov. Bobby Jindal's 401(k)-type plan for new employees.

SB 16 by Sen. Gerald Long (R-Winnfield) retains current employer contribution rates, which will drop from the current 5.7% to 1.8% if the bill fails to pass.

LSU System President William Jenkins, University of Louisiana System President Sandra Wooley and Southern University Chancellor James Llorens testified that the lower contribution would make it more difficult for Louisiana's colleges and universities to hire qualified professors.

The committee approved the bill without objection even after Jindal spokesmen said the administration is concerned that institutions will not be able to afford the higher contribution. The administration has cut funding for higher education by about a half billion dollars over the past five years.

BESE drops rule changes for librarians and counselors

Faced with overwhelming criticism from school counselors, librarians and education organizations, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education abandoned a rule change that could have eliminated those positions from schools.

The rule change was first approved months ago, when backers claimed that services provided by counselors and librarians could be provided by volunteers, non-profit organizations or private providers.

Widely seen as an effort to save money by reducing services to students, the rule change was promoted by supporters like Superintendent of Education John White and BESE President Chas Roemer as promoting “flexibility” in school staffing.

In a most unusual move for a board dominated by White and supporters of Gov. Bobby Jindal, BESE reversed its former vote and approved a motion to leave existing requirements for counselors and librarians in place.

Data sharing concerns aired at BESE meeting

Plans to share Louisiana student data with private companies raised hackles at a Board of Elementary and Secondary Education this week.

The department of education has agreed to participate in a program financed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and reportedly associated with Rupert Murdoch’s NewsCorp. Data for just about every student in Louisiana will be entered into a database that tracks student progress.

Privacy advocates and a number of parents shared concern that the company, InBloom, might not offer sufficient protection of personal information. Superintendent of Education John White said the company is in compliance with the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act, but BESE members Lottie Beebe and Carolyn Hill said they have concerns about the cloud-based program.

White agreed to provide a full report to BESE on the company’s agreement with the state.

School breakaway bill advances

In a rehash of a divisive issue from last year’s legislative session, a plan to allow part of East Baton Rouge Parish to secede from the local school board was approved by the Senate Education Committee was approved by the Senate Education Committee.

SB 73, a proposed constitutional amendment, and SB 199, the enabling act that accompanies it, are both by Sen. Bodi White (R-Central), who sponsored last year’s plan to split the Baton Rouge school system.

The plan would allow a pie-shaped section in a more affluent southeastern part of the parish to become the Southeast Baton Rouge Community School District, comprising 10 schools.

Although the committee vote was unanimous, the plan has many obstacles to overcome. The proposed constitutional amendment must pass both legislative houses by a two-thirds majority, and must then be approved by voters statewide.

School safety bill approved by committee

A no-cost measure to make schools safer was approved by the House Education Committee Wednesday and sent to the floor for a vote.

HB 79 by Reps. Kenny Cox (D-Natchitoches) and Bob Hensgens (R-Abbeville) requires school principals to partner with local law enforcement agencies when creating school crisis management plans, hold annual drills to practice the plan, and keep doors that are lockable locked.

An amendment to the bill exempts school crisis management plans from public records. At the suggestion of LFT Legislative Director Mary-Patricia Wray, authors said they will consider an amendment requiring private schools that seek state certification to also create crisis management plans.

Higher education funding bill returned to calendar

After winning approval from the Senate Education Committee, a plan to link state funding for higher education more closely to student performance was delayed on the Senate floor Wednesday.

SB 117 by Sen. Conrad Appel (R-Metairie) would create study panel to recommend changes to the higher education funding formula. The plan would build upon the LaGRAD act of 2010, which bases 15% of an institution's funding on student performance.

The bill was returned to the Senate calendar without a vote, meaning that it may be called up for action at any time.

House okays continuation of stipend for national certification

The House of Representatives approved a bill that will continue a program that pays a stipend to teachers, counselors and school psychologists who earn national certification.

HB 540 by Rep. Sam Jones (D-Franklin) voids a sunset clause in existing law that would stop educators from receiving the \$5,000 stipend after July 1 of this year. The bill, a part of LFT's legislative agenda, now moves to the Senate Education Committee.

Breastfeeding bill approved by House

The House of Representatives approved HB 635 by Rep. Patrick Williams (D-Shreveport), a bill allowing nursing mothers to pump breast milk at school in private and under sanitary conditions. The bill, a part of LFT's legislative agenda, now moves to the Senate Education Committee.

Concerns force restructure bill back onto calendar

After winning approval from the House Education Committee, a bill aimed at restructuring the Department of Education stalled on the House floor.

HB 650 by Rep. Steve Carter (R-Baton Rouge) would consolidate offices in the department into teams that could, in the words of supporters, provide "customized support" to school systems.

When the bill was slated to be heard on the House floor, Rep Carter asked that it be placed back onto the calendar. Several members expressed concerns that the bill would encourage further lack of transparency at the department. LFT opposed the bill in committee for that very reason.

In the week ahead...

Monday, April 22

Four bills that would raise taxes on tobacco products will be heard in the House Ways and Means Committee Monday, April 27. Bills on [the agenda](#) would raise the tax to varying degrees. The current tax of 36 cents for a pack of cigarettes would go up to anywhere from 60 cents to \$1.41. Gov. Jindal has vowed to veto any of the bills that pass unless corresponding cuts are made to the state budget, keeping the plan revenue neutral.

The Senate Retirement Committee will consider SB 7 by Sen. Barrow Peacock (R-Bossier City), which would increase the final compensation average for members of state retirement systems from 36 months to 60 months, resulting in a 15% reduction in benefits for future retirees.

Wednesday, April 24

The House Education Committee will consider HB 160 by Rep. Gene Reynolds (D-Minden) which would suspend implementation of the VAM until it can be tested and approved by the House and Senate Education Committees.

Also on Wednesday, the House Education Committee will consider a package of bills aimed at re-enacting sections of Act 1 of 2012. LFT will launch an Action Center campaign urging committee members to reject these efforts to resurrect failed Jindal policies.