

Florida Education Association

Frontline Report

2022 Legislative Session

1st Committee Week

September 24, 2021

Week One

Here we go again. The first committee week of the 2022 legislative session has officially concluded. This week, as is usual in first committee weeks, was full of presentations, pomp and circumstance and just enough of a slight cool breeze in Tallahassee to make you think fall is around the corner.

Viewpoint Diversity Survey (HB 233)

Members of the House Post-Secondary Education and Lifelong Learning Committee heard from the Board of Governors (BOG) regarding the implementation of two bills that passed during the 2021 legislative session — tuition and fee waivers (House Bill 1261) and the “viewpoint diversity” assessment (House Bill 233).

As of this moment, the “viewpoint diversity” assessment is in development. HB 233 stipulated that the BOG could create the survey themselves or contract with a company. The BOG has decided to work with the Florida State University Policy Institute to craft the survey.

According to the chancellor, the BOG and the Policy Institute are still working on developing the survey questions and deciding how the results of the assessment will be analyzed and distributed. Neither the BOG nor the committee members mentioned the United Faculty of Florida (UFF) lawsuit regarding the survey and its implementation. Only one member appeared interested in the survey, and very few questions were asked about the implementation of this fairly contentious bill.

House Bill 1261 introduced three new tuition and fee waivers: Select STEM, Grandparent and Free Seat Waivers. Two of the three waivers (Select STEM and Free Seat Waivers) are now available for eligible students. The Grandparent Tuition Waiver will not be available until Fall 2022, and only 350 students per year will be able to claim the waiver.

Federal Covid Relief Funds

The House PreK-12 Education Appropriations Subcommittee meeting began with a brief presentation on the Florida Department of Education’s legislative budget request (LBR.) The FLDOE has developed a budget request that forecasts a 118,288-student increase over the 2021-22 budget but only increases the per-student funds by \$6.35. This increase in student enrollment represents both an optimistic view of students returning to public schools after shifting to other options for the past couple of years, and the shift of voucher students from funding through tax-credit diversion to direct public funding through the public-school funding formula.

Next came an inquisition on the use of federal ESSER funds with the FLDOE representatives answering questions about their efforts to collect and report the data that school districts reported on the infamous missing students from the 2021-22 school year. You may recall that the state's enrollment showed a drop of nearly 80,000 students in the fall count. Districts have been required to find the students using some of their federal ESSER funds. Thus far, most of the students have been tracked to another school or district, or re-enrolled in the district, but there are still 16,500 students who are unaccounted for and another 8,000 who have either dropped out (over age 16) or are truant.

The FLDOE data reported to the committee shows that very few districts have spent any of their ESSER funds looking for students, but as Rep. Matt Willhite (D-Wellington), Rep. Robin Bartleman (D-Weston) and others pointed out, expenditures take time to reach district and FLDOE accounting offices. Their point was that implying that school districts are not doing their part to use the funds to find missing students, or to spend the federal assistance, is disingenuous; payment on delivery is responsible financial management and many orders have been delayed by Covid-related issues.

The rest of the meeting was spent discussing federal ESSER funds and district expenditures as well as the similar pattern in the early childhood expenditures that come from a separate ESSER federal grant program. Again, Chair Randy Fine (R-Palm Bay) took great pains to criticize school districts for not spending their available funds while also pointing out that the districts did not actually have access to most of the funds the state is holding. Talk about mixed messages. The short meeting schedule left little time for further questions from the members of the committee.

Standards and Assessment

The Senate Education Committee's first meeting of the 2022 session included a presentation by Chancellor Jacob Oliva. The chancellor reviewed the history of Florida's curriculum and standards adoption process from the Sunshine State Standards in 1996 to the future implementation of the Benchmarks for Excellent Student Thinking (BEST) standards in ELA and math, as well as additional standards in civics and government, and other areas.

Oliva also reviewed data on 2021 testing and the statistics on school grades for the 20 percent of schools that decided to have their school grades calculated (remember this was optional for all schools and districts, so only 11 school districts opted to receive a grade this year). Not surprisingly, all schools and districts that opted into school grades either improved their grades or maintained an A.

Next on the agenda was a summary of the state accountability system, as the governor and FLDOE have proposed we transition from the Florida Standards Assessments (FSA) to the Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (FAST). The stated intent is to eliminate the previous standards, while maintaining accountability, and move to a system of progress monitoring that will use adaptive computer testing three times a year. Under this proposal, FSA testing continues in 2021-22, then the new tests will be piloted and accountability "paused" for 2022-23, with full implementation in 2023-24.

As many have said, the devil is in the details. Our members have been clear that the old test-and-punish system is not working, and policymakers have gotten this message. There are many unanswered questions including the who, what, where, when and how of the test design. Rest assured that FEA members will be in on the discussions about how to gather and use student learning information in a way that helps students. Who better than those in the classroom to guide what is working and what needs to change. Stay tuned for what we suspect will be a particularly lively discussion in the weeks leading up to session and beyond.

Early Learning and School Readiness

The Early Learning and Elementary Education Committee met Tuesday. The committee focused on implementation of HB 7011, sponsored by Rep. Vance Aloupis (R-Miami) and passed during the 2021 session, which addresses Florida's student literacy and school readiness rates. FLDOE Vice Chancellor for Literacy Cari Miller and State Regional Literacy Director Melissa Miller gave presentations on the statewide plan for providing students, educators, and parents support based on the mandates of HB 7011 and the difference between the current CARES program and the new RAISE programs.

The committee also heard a presentation by University of Florida's Dr. Elayne Colon, director of Assessment and Accreditation, and Dr. Tina Smith-Bonahue, associate dean of Student Affairs & Graduate Studies, regarding the teacher preparation program that would include a reading endorsement to meet the qualifications of HB 7011. There are still questions about current educators and the path to the reading endorsement. We will continue to keep you updated on what implementation will look like for our members.

Speaker Designation Ceremony

Finally, the House Republican Caucus gathered – joined by their Senate counterpart and many current and former Republican members, distinguished guests including members of the Florida Cabinet and fellow dignitaries – to nominate Rep. Paul Renner (R-Palm Coast) as the official speaker-designate to be speaker of the House for the 2023-2024 legislative sessions. Reps. Tom Leek (R-Daytona Beach) and Bobby Payne (R-Palatka) made the first and second nomination speeches.

In Speaker-designate Renner's acceptance speech, he touched on the importance of making sure that children have all they need to succeed. Renner focused on working together with his fellow colleagues. He stated, "We can either succeed together or fail alone. ... We can tackle big problems with bold, lasting solutions." He told lawmakers, "We believe in the nobility of work, and we honor those who show up to work every day."

Unlike previous speaker-designates, he spoke very little on education, but what he did say continued a message around supporting all so-called "choice" options stating, we "support parents to choose the education choice that is best for them," and then saying, "children deserve to grow up in a neighborhood where it's safe to walk at night, go to a school that isn't failing and get out of poverty."

One of his most memorable statements, which we hope is an indication of how Renner will preside over the chamber was, "Bullying people to conform to one set of ideals isn't progressive, and it's certainly not American."

Only time will tell ...

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Thanks to Cathy Boehme for the Senate Education and PreK budget content, Alexis Montalvo for the Higher Ed content, and Chad Leonard for the Early Learning content.



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