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Florida Education Association

Frontline Report

2021 Legislative Session

Week 4 - Day 25

Mar. 26, 2021

Slow and Steady

As parents and educators, we all know the story of the tortoise and the hare. Slow and steady wins the race. That's what this week felt like – as we continue to work towards passing proactive legislation, stopping legislation that stymies our freedoms and makes it harder for educators to do their jobs. We haven't even made it to the halfway point yet of session, even though it feels like we've been in session for half a year now.

Freedom Fighters

This week the Senate and the House of Representatives gave us a reprieve – neither [SB 78](#) or its companion, [HB 947](#), nor [SB 1014](#) or its companion, [HB 835](#) – were on a single committee agenda. If these numbers sound vaguely familiar then you might be a previous *Frontline* reader – as these are the bills that would take away your rights to determine when and how you join your union and direct your union dues be deducted through paycheck deduction.

Big thank you to the many educators who were on Spring Break and were ready and waiting to travel to Tallahassee at a moment's notice to testify against these bills in committee should they have been placed on agenda. Another big thank you is also owed to everyone who

continues to call their senators and representatives and email committee members urging them to oppose these terrible bills. As you can see from the lack of bills on agenda, your actions are working!

If you have already made calls and sent emails, make a call again, then ask your friends and family and your co-workers to take action as well. And if you haven't yet made your calls and emails then now is the time! But please don't delay, as these bills are likely to be on agenda next week and we need you to make your voice heard to legislators.

Budget Updates

The state budget negotiations involve at least three groups, more if you count all the lobbyists and advocates that will provide input into the process. First, the governor releases his budget recommendations just before session starts. This is based on state departmental requests and the governor's priorities. Next, it's the Legislature's turn. Our state constitution requires them to produce an annual appropriations bill that must pass both legislative chambers before they send it to the governor for his review and signature.

This week, the public part of the negotiations began in earnest with both the House and Senate appropriations subcommittees releasing their pieces of Florida's \$92 billion dollar state budget. This year is even more uncertain as the state recovers from the severe economic downturn that began nearly a year ago. Unpredictable state revenue and disappearing students have made projections for revenue and expenses difficult, but federal grants have helped the state avoid massive cuts to routine expenses.

PreK-12 Education Budget

The House [PreK-12 Appropriations Subcommittee](#) presented their version of the PreK-12 budget. This budget maintains the total funding compared to the 2020-21 General Appropriations Act but project a loss of about 48,000 students (a 1.67% reduction) compared to the pre-COVID enrollment projections. This number is subject to changes in the next few months as more and more students return to school across the state. The budget proposes:

- Placing about \$334 million in reserve. These funds will be added back into school funding if student enrollment increases.
- Appropriating \$500 million for the Teacher Salary Increase Allocation – same as the previous fiscal year.
- Increasing the Base Student Allocation by \$52.11, a 1.2% increase over last year.
- Total funding increase in the House budget of .55% over last year.

Much of the budget depends on funds that have been received through the federal CARES Act and the CRSSA Act. The latest American Rescue Plan funds are still to be added to the budget. These non-recurring dollars will help districts invest in short-term projects to ensure

students are learning what they need and to reimburse districts for Covid-related expenses.

The Senate [Appropriations Subcommittee on Education](#) budget proposes PreK-12 funding of approximately \$12 billion dollars. That is half a billion less than the House budget. The Senate projects a similar reduction in total student enrollment. The proposal also includes:

- Reserves to be determined, in case more students return to school than are currently attending.
- Zero dollar increase to the base student allocation.
- Appropriates \$500 million for the Teacher Salary Increase Allocation maintaining the 80/20 split (80% to raise the base teacher salary and 20% for veteran teacher salary increases).
- Other details in the FEFP were not outlined in the Senate budget spreadsheet that was released.

Higher Education Budget

The initial budget proposal from the Senate [Appropriations Subcommittee on Education](#) indicates an approximate \$1 million increase in state funds for colleges and a decrease of approximately \$225 million in state funds for universities (SUS) when compared to the 2020-21 General Appropriations Act. This is based on documents published by the [Senate Education Appropriations Subcommittee](#) Wednesday.

Below are highlights of the proposed \$4.6B appropriation for the SUS:

- \$560 million for Performance Funding (maintains the current budget)
- \$11.8 million for Integrated Library System (matches the BOG request)
- \$3.7 million for UF-IFAS Workload (matches the BOG request)
- \$2.2 million for 7 university projects
- \$37 million Administrative Efficiencies (recurring – no information on the allocation)
- \$217 million Program Reductions (non-recurring – no information on the allocation)
- \$3.3 million Reduction for 4 university initiatives

The [House Higher Education Appropriations Subcommittee](#) met on Thursday to discuss their [higher education budget proposal](#). Chair Plasencia (R-Titusville) explained his 2021-22 Budget proposal to the committee. The proposal is a decrease of 7% over the 2020-21 General Appropriations Act. Mostly, the cuts were to the State University System of \$556.4 million. However, he indicated that federal funds (from CARES and new stimulus from 2021 Congress) will replace those lost state funds and that the full 2020-21 appropriations will be distributed as the governor's [holdback](#) funding will be restored later this fiscal year.

The subcommittee also passed the Proposed Committee Bill HEA 20-01 on an 11-2 vote. Opposition was to possible loss of funds for low-income students attending an ICUF institution

which would lose support due to low metrics. The bill does the following:

- Specifies that all funds appropriated for Preeminent State Research Universities must be distributed equally;
- Eliminates the State University Professional and Graduate Degree Excellence Program;
- Provides minimum performance standards for institutions to be eligible to participate in the Effective Access to Student Education tuition assistance program;
- Eliminates the Access to Better Learning and Education tuition assistance program;
- Expands the existing faculty salary cap from state university administrative employees to include all university faculty, excluding those in specified high-demand fields; and
- Creates the Florida Integrated Library System to provide funding for critical library services, a distance learning catalog, and transient student applications.

In Other News

SB 86, Activism Is Alive

A [strike-all](#) passed that would remove the provisions of the bill that would have tied scholarship and financial aid funding to a list of specified degrees that “lead to employment.” Sen. Dennis Baxley (R-Lady Lake) admitted he received over 2000 communications on the bill as did Sen. Cruz (D-Tampa). In the end, students, faculty, and parents were able to change the discourse on this bill. While not as good as current law, it should not change any funding received by scholarship students and is an important victory for activism. However with Baxley, beware!

Presidential Searches

Once again [HB 997](#), the higher education presidential search bill, was up in the [House Government Operations Subcommittee](#). If passed, this bill will take the open and important university and college presidential search process out of the sunshine, ultimately removing the public’s ability to participate and provide valuable input and buy-in into this process. Matthew Lata, president of the UFF-FSU Chapter and Rich Templin, Director of Policy of the AFL-CIO were present to speak against the bill. Fortunately, because it is a public records exemption the bill requires a 2/3 vote to pass out of both chambers. The bill passed 11-5, with Rep. Kelly Skidmore (D-Boca Raton) the only Democrat voting in favor the bill. The next and final stop before the floor is the House Education and Employment Committee.

Senate Education Committee

On the committee agenda was [SB 192](#) by Sen. Lauren Book (D-Fort. Lauderdale), legislation creating a standard for the use of seclusion and restraint for children in schools, which FEA supports. However, as we discussed in the March 5 Frontline, the [House companion](#) (HB 149) would also create a pilot project allowing parents to request cameras be placed in self-contained special education classrooms, which FEA opposes. Currently, Broward County is the only remaining district in the pilot project for cameras in classrooms. This issue is near and

dear to Vice President Gauronskas, so as our resident expert we will continue working with her to monitor and provide input with bill sponsors as it moves through the process. The next stop is the [Appropriations Subcommittee on Education](#).

House Vouchers

The House [Education and Employment Committee](#) finally unveiled their version of a school voucher bill. Like previous years, this big-ticket item proposes expansions in the number and scope of taxpayer supported private school vouchers. [HB 7045](#) is the House's counterpart to [SB 48](#) which is waiting to be heard on the Senate floor in a future session. The House bill moves the existing Gardiner program of Education Savings Accounts into the funding process for public schools and increases both the number of eligible students as well as the funding amount per student.

Most importantly for our members this bill paves the way to siphon more public money from our neighborhood public schools. It adds the Teacher Salary Increase Allocation categorical, which guarantees money for public school teacher salaries, into the General Appropriations Act. If the TSIA funds are included in the GAA, they will be used in part to calculate the amount of public dollars per student that will be provided to voucher schools. This will happen, even though these private schools are not required to use the funding to set minimum salaries, like neighborhood public schools. FEA successfully ensured that these funds were not used to justify an increase in funding to vouchers last year, and we will continue that fight this session.

Over the next two years this bill would also merge the Empowerment voucher, Gardiner Voucher and McKay Voucher into one fund. This expansion could add between 20,000 and 35,000 more students to the public school funding formula. What that means for our public schools is a loss of over \$200 million dollars to pay for vouchers for students to attend private school, or to purchase curriculum and attend home school, not to mention about \$50 million of the \$500 million allocation in the TSIA Categorical alone. These tax dollars are provided through a debit-style plan that has no public accountability for any learning standards.

FEA opposes voucher expansions and the use funds that should be supporting public school students for unaccountable voucher programs. Our students lose more every year these schemes continue to siphon off public school funding.

The bill passed the Education and Employment Committee 18-3 with Reps. Hunschofsky (D-Coconut Creek) McCurdy (D-Orlando) and Morales (D-Orlando) standing with FEA in opposition to the bill.

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