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Florida Education Association

Frontline Report

2021 Legislative Session

1st Interim Committee Week

Jan. 14, 2021

The FEA Frontline Report is a publication of the Florida Education Association (FEA) during the legislative session. If you are not already on our mailing list and would like to continue getting the Frontline, please sign up here: <https://feaweb.org/news/2020-legislative-session/frontline-email-archive/>

Back Again

It feels like only yesterday we were in the halls of the Florida Capitol. This session, or at the very least the interim committee weeks, are going to look very different for your FEA lobbying team and those of you who like to travel to Tallahassee to meet with legislators during session.

We must Continue a Decade of Progress for Our Public Schools & Be Prepared to Push Back

This legislative session, your local union and FEA are pushing forward with our Decade of Progress for our public schools as we fight to fund our future. We will fight:

- for increased funding for our public schools.
- to address Covid-19 issues in our schools, including the continued administration and abuse of high-stakes testing.
- for fair wages for all FEA members, free of interference from lawmakers and the

Department of Education.

- for job security for all educators.
- to bring back the Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) in the Florida Retirement System (FRS).
- to eliminate the use of Value-Added Model (VAM) scores on employment and evaluation decisions.

But as we fight forward, we must also be prepared to push back! While lawmakers should be focused on supporting and funding our public schools and educators during a pandemic, it appears some have other plans. Everyone remember HB 1 – the big government, anti-union legislation from last year that passed the Florida House of Representatives but was held up in Florida Senate committee thanks to Sen. Ed Hooper (R-Palm Harbor)? We thought if this bill were refiled, the House would be first out the gate. Alas, the Senate has beaten the House to the punch. This week, newly elected Sen. Ray Rodrigues (R-Fort Meyers) filed [SB 78](#), legislation that picks up where the House left off last year.

If SB 78 were to become law, it would dictate the wording included on the membership form that basically says, ‘I understand Florida is a right-to-work state and that I don’t have to join a union.’ As if anyone doesn’t already know that it’s your right in Florida to join or not to join a union, but I digress. The legislation would require that the employer confirm with the employee who signed a dues deduction form that they did, in fact, willingly sign and agree to have their dues taken from their paycheck. There is no timeframe by which the employer must complete this verification, so it could take weeks or even months before the employer has confirmed with the employee. So, in the middle of waiting for your union membership to be verified, what happens if an incident occurs when you need the union most and are not technically a member? And lastly, the employee must sign a new membership form re-certifying that they do, in fact, want their dues taken from their paycheck every time a new contract is signed, or every three years, whichever is sooner – starting the process over of the employer verifying that you do want to be a member of the union. This bill is nothing more than big government interfering with your personal decision and right to have a voice in your workplace.

So in the midst of a pandemic, when educators are struggling to keep kids from falling behind, when legislators have already indicated there will be budget cuts coming and the education budget might not be spared, when educators are dealing with family and friends, or many themselves being exposed to or contracting Covid-19, Sen. Rodrigues feels it’s best to make it harder to join a union. Got it. What we have here is the age old “solution looking for a problem.”

Know that we are on it. FEA President Andrew Spar has requested a meeting with the bill’s sponsor and the Senate President to understand more about the Senate’s intentions of passing this bill. We will keep you posted as to the outcomes of those meetings. In the interim, make sure [you are signed up to receive the FEA Frontline Report](#) every week that committees

are meeting or during the legislative session, and make sure to sign up for text alerts by texting **edactivist** to **31996** so we can contact you when we need your help alerting legislators as to your positions on issues or bills such as SB 78, and other issues of actual importance to our members like wages and working conditions.

Capitol Protocols

Many people have asked us what session will look like. We can answer honestly – we’re just not sure yet. Even the Speaker of the House and the Senate President haven’t publicly stated what we will and won’t be allowed to do inside the Capitol, in large part because we just don’t know what Florida’s Covid-19 cases will look like by then. What we do know now is the following: Senate President Wilton Simpson (R-Spring Hill) has limited any public appearances in the Senate. Only those individuals invited to present on a panel before a committee will be allowed in the Senate building. All public testimony to a bill or an issue by the general public will be done via live feed from the Leon County Civic Center. All senators and staff are required to wear masks, and all meetings with senators or staff must take place outside the Senate.

Speaker Chris Sprowls (R-Clearwater) has taken a more lax approach – given that he has a maskless caucus can you really be surprised? While the Speaker is limiting individuals in the building, any meetings with legislators must be by appointment only, and you must be escorted to and from the Capitol rotunda by the staff or legislator you are meeting. Masks are recommended but not required, and seating is limited in committee rooms to only those who are testifying and have registered in advance to testify.

Again, these are the interim Committee week rules, but we expect similar rules as we enter session. It’s why building relationships with legislators at home, in-district has been, and especially now, crucial to our success.

Senate Education Committee 1/12/2021

The Senate Education Committee met for the first time on Tuesday and received an update on voucher programs for K-12 schools and financial aid programs for college and university students. The Florida Department of Education (DOE) brought up their favorite Senior Chancellor, Eric Hall, to do the usual song and dance about the merits of voucher programs – cherry-picking only the most plumb data to exhibit its effectiveness. Most of the state’s voucher programs have seen a decline in applications, however the newest voucher, the Family Empowerment Scholarship, which is funded out of General Revenue, more than doubled in size from 17,923 participants in 2019-20 to 36,384 to date which is driving the 7 percent increase in growth across all voucher programs.

Following the DOE’s presentation, Doug Tuthill, the Director of Step

Up for Students presented to the committee. Unfortunately, it was hard to tell where the DOE's presentation ended and where the Step Up presentation began. Perhaps next time they will do a duet and save everyone a little time.

The committee wasn't all about vouchers – Sen. Perry Thurston (D-Fort Lauderdale) asked the DOE about accountability for special skills exceptions to private school teacher certification, questioning whether they monitor anyone with these “special skills.” Chancellor Hall responded that after the initial affidavit is sent in to the department, they do not follow up on these individuals. So let me get this straight: you can teach in a private school without any certification, relying solely on “special skills” and no one actually checks to see if you have these skills or how they are being used? Oh Florida...

Looking Ahead

There will be no committee meetings next week. Interim Committee meetings will resume Jan. 25 and continue weekly through the week of Feb. 15. The regular session will be here before we know it – starting March 2. We'll keep our fingers crossed that the 60-day session is only 60 days this year (you might remember the last few sessions have had to be extended to reach an agreement on the budget). If all goes according to plan, session will end on April 30.

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Questions? Call PPA at 850-224-2078.

Thanks to Yale Olenick for content this week, and our faithful comms team for making us all sound better!

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