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Florida Education Association

Frontline Report

2021 Legislative Session

Last Interim Committee Week

Feb. 19, 2021

Week Five

Last week, best week! Okay, not really, but certainly a busy week again for your Public Policy and Communications teams. We began fighting bad legislation in both the Senate and House this week, while still working to advance our proactive legislative agenda. Check out the all-new [FEA website](#) for updates on session and priority legislation, including how you can take action to stop bad legislation and support bills that will actually help our students, educators and faculty.

Friends and Champions of Public Education

We honored some more of our Champions and Friends of Education award winners this week, including Champion of Education recipient Sen. Janet Cruz (D-Tampa) and Friends of Education recipients Sen. Lori Berman (D-Boynton Beach) and Rep. Rene Plasencia (R-Titusville).



FEA Vice President Carole Gauronskas, Sen. Janet Cruz, and Secretary-Treasurer Nandi Riley

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Surprise, Surprise... Senate Bill 78

This week, thanks to some procedural moves, [SB 78](#) – legislation putting your employer between you and your union – wasn't "received" by the Senate Rules Committee, so this bad legislation wasn't considered Thursday. This shows that your advocacy on the ground is working. As we've always said, we'll take every little victory we can get! Continue to contact legislators. Thanks to the many individuals who were prepared to testify or waive in opposition to the bill Thursday, including Karen Morian, president of the United Faculty of Florida (UFF); Matthew Lata, president of the UFF-FSU Chapter; Martin Balinsky, vice president of UFF at Tallahassee Community College; Vincenza Berardo and Jordan Scott, from FSU Graduate Assistants United; Krystal Williams and Eugene Matthews, from the Florida A&M University UFF chapter; and Scott Mazur, president of the Leon County Classroom Teachers Association. Our Leon unions were out in full force Thursday!

The House Came to Work

Well, look who woke up! This week the House may have realized that it is the final week of committee weeks, because they were on a roll, taking up legislation and having spirited debates as they prepared the state budget. This week in the House [PreK-12 Appropriations Subcommittee](#), a panel of superintendents from Bay, Bradford, Brevard, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties described their efforts to locate the students who seem to have not returned to school since the beginning of the pandemic. The statewide fall count was nearly 87,000 students below last year's projections, but Chair Randy Fine (R-Palm Bay) intimated that the schools had received far more state funding than the earned FTE (total count of students in seats). Each of the superintendents described the work they were doing to locate the students they thought would be attending. Chair Fine also implied that school districts are not spending their federal CARES Act funding. The superintendents pushed back and described how they are spending the funds, while also communicating that they are struggling with the reimbursement process.

All this talk is setting up a session-long budget battle, with the president of the senate stating that he thought the students would return, and, unless we see evidence that the students are no longer in the state, we should budget for them returning next year.

Vouchers, Vouchers Everywhere

What is made up of about 1,870 government-dependent private schools, plus an undisclosed number of home schools, and is the third largest school district in the state? If you guessed, "What are the results of SB 48 becoming law, Alex?" then you'd be right.

The Senate [Appropriations Subcommittee on Education](#) heard [SB 48](#) regarding vouchers this week (for more information on the bill, visit the FEA website). In public testimony, the reality of private schools receiving vouchers was on full display. A parent advocate testified to seeing 15 special needs children in a classroom with teachers who have no experience teaching special needs populations, and to observing situations where parents went into debt while supplementing the voucher, which is intended to cover the "full cost of education." These are just some of the many stories that are happening across Florida at state-funded private schools.

FEA lobbyist Cathy Boehme also provided testimony in opposition and highlighted the incongruence of having the third largest school district in the state being regulated by only 47 pages out of the 1,253 pages of school code. Sens. Janet Cruz (D-Tampa), Audrey Gibson (D-Jacksonville) and Tina Polsky (D-Boca Raton) all tried to point out the issues and disparities in

the voucher programs to deaf ears. The bill passed on a party line 6-3 vote. It now heads to the full Appropriations Committee.

Still Picking on our Higher Ed Faculty

The Senate [Government Oversight & Accountability Committee](#) met and passed four bills. Of concern was [SB 220](#) by Sen. Jeff Brandes (R-St. Petersburg), which would make college or university presidential searches secretive, versus the open process it is now. Pamela Marsh, executive director of the First Amendment Foundation; Matthew Lata, UFF GR chair and FSU Chapter president; Karen Morian, UFF president; and Rich Templin, Florida AFL-CIO all testified in opposition to the bill. Collectively, they described concerns regarding head-hunting firms, allowing for a single finalist and inside favorite to be presented to the trustees, protecting the least qualified applicants, and stripping Florida citizens of their rights to public records. FEA lobbyist Yale Olenick waived in opposition.

Committee Chair Ray Rodrigues (R-Fort Myers) said in debate that the bill offers more transparency than we have today. Sen. Joe Gruters (R-Sarasota), who has previously served on a search committee at FSU, seemed to debate against the bill but then said he was in support. The bill passed by a [party-line 4-2 vote](#). NOTE: SB 220 requires a two-thirds floor vote of both chambers of the Legislature for passage because the legislation would amend our state's sunshine laws.

In the House [Post-Secondary Education & Lifelong Learning Subcommittee](#), the committee considered [HB 233](#), regarding so-called "intellectual freedom." Our higher education units were well represented and held their own under a barrage of questions from members of the committee. Once again, Karen Morian and Krystal Williams, as well as Yale Olenick from the FEA, were at the podium defending UFF's and FEA's position in opposition to the bill.

Time to take action!

With legislators back home in-district next week, now is the perfect time to take action! Please take a few minutes, if you have not already, to contact your senator and your representative about the issues that are important to you and ask for their help in making Florida the place where we provide a world-class education to our students. Legislators need to hear from the people they represent! Visit the [FEA website legislative page](#) to get familiar with bills that are filed and let us know if you need help speaking about bills. [Follow the FEA on Twitter](#) to catch our live tweets during committee meetings. You can always email us at ppa@florideaea.org, and we'll help answer your questions.

How You Can Take Action Today

Visit the FEA website to learn more about session and sign up for FEA Action Alert texts.



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