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Florida Education Association

# *Frontline Report*

## *2021 Legislative Session*

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### *3rd Interim Committee Week*

*Feb. 5, 2021*

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#### *Third Committee Week Comes to an End*

Much like last week, the Senate moved legislation through committee at warp speed, while the House's focus was on listening to presentations with very few bills being taken up in House committees.

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#### *Voucher Expansion*

On Wednesday, the Senate [Education Committee](#) met and considered, among other bills, [SB 48](#) by Sen. Manny Diaz (R-Hialeah Gardens).

SB 48 would:

- Combine current voucher programs – Florida Tax Credit, Hope (the bully voucher), McKay, Gardiner, and the Family Empowerment vouchers – into two vouchers, the McKay-Gardiner voucher and the Family Empowerment voucher
- Set the stage for complete privatization of public education by turning these vouchers into an educational savings account
- Expand the use of a vouchers for those who are home schooled or attending a private school

- Expand the cap of total number of vouchers permitted each year to be funded with public dollars by over 100,000
- Expand the eligibility for participation to 300% of the federal poverty level – or just shy of \$80,000 for a family of four.

Perhaps most importantly, SB 48 moves all the vouchers into the Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP), which is the primary funding mechanism for public schools. This would further drain funds available for public schools and divert those taxpayer dollars to unaccountable private and religious schools.

Florida already diverts in excess of \$1 billion in taxpayer funds annually to private schools; should SB 48 become law, private schools would receive an ever-greater share of public funds — which, of course, means the underfunding of public schools will be exacerbated.

In spite of strong questions from Sens. Lori Berman (D-Boynton Beach), Shevrin Jones (D-Miami Gardens), Tina Polsky (D-Boca Raton) and Perry Thurston (D-Fort Lauderdale), and testimony in opposition from parents and organizations like the Fund Education Now, League of Women Voters of Florida, NAACP Florida State Conference, Florida PTA, Florida Retired Teachers Association, The Florida Council of Churches and FEA, the bill [passed on a party line vote](#).

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## *Legislators Keep Targeting Our Unions*

With no past documented concerns, protests or problems, the Senate [Judiciary Committee](#) met Monday night to consider [SB 78](#) – legislation that would put the employer between the employee and their union by mandating that the employer verify with the employee you actually want to be a union member before your membership can begin.

With just 15 minutes remaining in the committee, Chair Jeff Brandes (R-St. Petersburg) took up the bill. Brandes tried to rush through the measure, limiting public testimony and limiting debate by committee members to try to get a vote on the bill. Thankfully, our friends on the committee wanted to ask the sponsor questions and debate the bill. So combined with public testimony, and no one offering a motion to extend committee time or move a time certain vote, we were successful in running out the clock in committee. But this bill is back on the committee agenda Wednesday, Feb. 10.

We thank Matthew Lata, president, UFF-FSU Chapter; Martin Balinsky, vice president, UFF at Tallahassee Community College Chapter; Vincenza Berardo, FSU Graduate Assistants United, who testified alongside the AFL-CIO and the FEA. [Please continue to send emails or call committee members to urge them to vote no on SB 78](#). The House still has not filed a

companion measure to SB 78, but we'll alert you if and when they do.

Another anti-union attack, [SB 1014](#) by Sen. Dennis Baxley (R-Lady Lake), does the following:

- Includes the provisions of SB 78
- Goes a step further by targeting education staff professional unions (ESPs).

If this bill becomes law, then it would make the 50% membership threshold would apply to unions representing education staff professionals in addition to instructional personnel unions.

So far neither SB 78 nor SB 1014 have House companions. As of the morning of Friday, Feb. 5, SB 1014 has not been referred to any committees. As soon as it referred to a committee, we'll let you know so you can contact those committee members.

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### *How about that retirement?*

Despite the fact that Florida's pension is one of the best in the country and is a model that other states to strive to meet, your retirement security is once again under attack. [SB 84](#) would do the following:

- Close the pension plan to all incoming employees to the Florida Retirement System (FRS) starting in 2022—forcing all new public employees into the investment plan
- Close the pension to new members would be a huge self-inflicted financial burden to the state, employers, and employees
- Put the currently well-funded FRS at risk of financial insolvency.

More money going out than into the retirement plan is a recipe for disaster. Besides the economic ramifications of SB 84 by eliminating retirement security, this bill would make it more difficult to attract and retain high quality teachers and other public employees.

When Amy Baker, the Director of Economic and Demographic Research, was asked to present on the FRS in [the Senate Government Oversight and Accountability](#) committee, she made it clear that introducing a policy as drastic as the one in SB 84 would shock and undermine the current system.

Despite testimony from FEA, AFL-CIO, firefighters and police unions, the bill passed the committee on a [party line 4-2 vote](#). The next stop for this legislation is the full Appropriations Committee, but it is not year clear when the committee will take up SB 84.

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*Thanks to Cathy Boehme for Education Committee content and Yale Olenick for pension content. And thanks for our Comms team keeping us spellcheck worthy!*

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