

Florida Education Association

# Frontline Report

*2024 Legislative Session*

*January 12, 2024*

## A Brief Recap of the Week

The 2024 legislative session got off to a wild start. First, we want to extend our thoughts to anyone impacted by the winter storm that has caused significant damage in the Panhandle. As those in the impacted communities work to rebuild, it serves as a reminder of the incredible power we have when we join together in community.

Legislative leaders remained in Tallahassee through the storm to quickly move on some issues:

- A bill to restore cost of living adjustments to FRS flew through its first committee stop.
- The Senate has already passed three major education bills.
- The House is moving rapidly to rob children of their childhood by gutting Florida's child labor laws.

Keep reading to find out about all that and more.

## All People Deserve to Retire with Dignity

One of [FEA's priorities](#) entering the 2024 legislative session was to enhance the Florida Retirement System, and we are pleased to say we are already seeing movement on that front. This week, [HB 151](#) sponsored by Rep. Busatta-Cabrera (R-114) passed its first committee stop in the house with unanimous support. This is a short, simple bill (not even three pages long) but will have a tremendous impact on educators and all public employees in Florida.

Specifically, HB 151 restores the 3% cost-of-living adjustment for members of the FRS pension plan that was eliminated by Gov. Scott in 2011 when he balanced the state's budget on the back of public employees after the Great Recession.

After a lifetime of serving the public, educators deserve to live in dignity when they retire. This

small cost of living adjustment will help make sure retired educators are able to afford to live independently and enjoy their retirement without having to seek out employment in their golden years.

HB 151 has two committee stops left while its [Senate companion](#) has yet to be heard in its first committee. We will be sure to let you know how you can play a part in making sure these bills pass both chambers and ultimately be signed into law.

## **Jeb Bush, The Shadow Governor**

Though he hasn't been the elected governor of Florida since 2007, Bush still retains firm control of education policy. Gov. Rick Scott and Gov. Ron DeSantis have both dutifully carried Bush's water and implemented his agenda. If the Florida Senate has their way, that will finally change.

On only the second day of session, the Senate passed three bills ([SB 7000](#), [7002](#) and [7004](#)) which start to undo some of the havoc that Bush's agenda has wreaked on the state. This series of bills would remove punitive graduation requirements tied to high-stakes testing, allow instructional personnel to once again earn multi-year contracts, and undo some of the burdensome regulations on teacher pay that have caused compression and stagnant wages.

It's not all perfect, though. The bills narrow the scope of collective bargaining and would require student performance measures to be 50% of a teacher's evaluation— up from the current requirement of 33%. Even still, if the bills in their current form pass, it would be a massive rebuke to Florida's Shadow Governor.

In order for that to happen the Senate has a lot of work to do to convince their colleagues in the House to have the courage to stand up to Bush. The House has released two related bills ([HB 7025](#) & [HB 7039](#)) to the Senate measures, but the House bills stop short of providing relief to educators, students and school communities. Instead, they keep the Bush agenda alive by restricting collective bargaining and by making it easier for private, religious schools to have access to public funds.

One positive aspect of HB 7025 is that it allows for school districts to charge people who make frivolous book challenges up to \$100 per challenge after their fifth challenge. This could help to rein in some of the challenges and allow media specialists and school district staff to once again focus on their jobs, instead of dedicating their time to addressing challenges to books and instructional materials. It was this portion of the bill that kept it from getting a unanimous vote in its first committee hearing on Wednesday as Rep. Mike Beltran (R-70) (who prefers the chaos currently happening in our schools) and voiced his strenuous objection to anything that would help reduce said chaos.

So far, Gov. DeSantis has been silent on these bills as his focus has been on Iowa. The Florida Department of Education, however, has made it clear they are not supportive of the Senate bills.

Time will tell if Gov. DeSantis ever gets the courage to stand up the shadow governor or if he will continue being Jeb's puppet on education issues.

As we move through the next eight weeks of session, we'll keep you informed on how you can help to push the good ideas from the Senate bills across the finish line in the House as well as ways to advocate for the removal of the harmful provisions in these bills.

## Children Cannot be the Solution to Florida's Labor Shortage

Based in Orlando, Darden restaurants is the largest full-service restaurant company in the world whose brand includes Olive Garden, Longhorn Steakhouse, and Cheddar's Scratch Kitchen. In 2023, Darden Restaurants had a net profit in excess of \$2 billion. But for Darden and others, billions in profit just isn't enough.

Despite massive profits, Darden along with other Florida restaurants, hotels and service-related industries are not offering wages and benefits necessary to retain the number of employees they need. Rather than attracting employees by offering a living wage, they are lobbying hard to change Florida's child labor laws so they can exploit child workers in ways that aren't currently legal in our state.

Rep. Linda Chaney (R-61) has filed [HB 49](#) to do just that. HB 49 would allow children to work longer hours with fewer breaks and for more consecutive days than currently allowed. Under pressure from advocates like you, Chaney amended her bill and removed a provision that would have allowed children to work night shifts and be at work until the early hours in the morning before heading off to school. This serves as an important reminder of the importance of all of us using our voice and speaking up; ***it does make a difference***. During the committee meeting, there was a steady stream of speakers who voiced their opposition to the bill. We want to give a special shout out to [Jessica Maharrey](#) and [Ellen Baker](#) from the Palm Beach County Classroom Teachers Association who spoke passionately in committee about the negative impacts weakening child labor laws would have on the children they teach. For what it's worth, the only person to speak in favor of HB 49 was a [lobbyist for the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association](#) who could not have been more clear that the big businesses she represents see child labor as the solution to Florida's labor shortage.

We'll note that Rep. Chaney takes umbrage to those who say her bill is about child labor since the provisions apply to sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds. However, it is worth noting that this is the same Rep. Chaney who has supported efforts to limit the books children can access in school libraries as well as the history they can be taught about our nation's original sins of slavery and racism. She certainly is not interested in lowering the voting age to sixteen. It seems that she only considers school-age children not to be children when she is doing the bidding of her corporate donors.

HB 49 has one committee stop left before it is ready for a floor vote. Its Senate companion [SB 1596](#) has not yet been heard in any committees. As session continues, we'll be watching both these bills closely and letting you know how you can voice your opposition to weakening Florida's child labor laws.

## Thanks!

We want to give a big shout out to Kim Andrews from Union of Escambia Education Staff Professionals as well as Ellen Baker and Jessica Maharrey from the Palm Beach County Classroom Teachers Association for showing up in Tallahassee this week to meet with legislators and testify in committee.

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### *How You Can Take Action Today*

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