

Florida Education Association

Frontline Report

2024 Legislative Session

January 26, 2024

A Brief Recap of the Week

When session starts next week, we'll already be one-third of the way through the scheduled end of 2024 legislative session. For session to end on time, the House and Senate have to agree to and pass the state's budget for the 2024-24 fiscal year. The first steps in that process got underway this week as the appropriations subcommittees began releasing their proposed budgets.

Read on to learn more about

- the budget,
- conversion charter schools,
- this year's union bill,
- the latest on "deregulation,"
- rolling back child labor protections.

Budget

From Pensacola to the Keys and everywhere in-between, educators are struggling to pay for rent, insurance and groceries. This is the result of decades of legislators giving more and more funding to charter and voucher schools at the expense of public schools.

We are reminded that budgets are values documents and that if the elected leaders don't value education, we must come together as educators to elect new leaders.

While budget proposals are just that, proposals to be considered before a final decision is made, the latest released by the House and Senate in its current form still leaves Florida's teachers at 48th in the nation in terms of pay.

By the way, that ranks Florida just slightly better than states like Mississippi, and significantly worse than every other state. Florida's students, meanwhile, continue to lose as they rank in the bottom ten in the nation in per-pupil spending. You can see the proposed budgets in their [entirety here](#) and the proposed FEFP from each chamber [here](#).

In just a few months, many of these same legislators will be campaigning on their support for children, teachers and public schools. Whether or not they are allowed to continue to get away with simultaneously passing starvation budgets while claiming to support education is ultimately up to each one of us.

Together, we can demand our lawmakers rewrite the rules so every public school has smaller classroom sizes, teachers who are certified to teach, counselors to help students make healthy choices and school nurses who can help students when they aren't well.

When we join together across our differences and elect leaders who have demonstrated their commitment to public education, then every child in Florida will attend a public school that provides them with everything they need to learn, grow and thrive.

Now is the time to [make a plan to vote](#) in November and make sure your friends and colleagues have a plan as well.

Minority Rule

One of the hallmarks of Gov. DeSantis' administration has been his fervent support for minority rule, seen played out across the state when a fringe minority of far-right activists restrict what books are available in school libraries and classrooms.

Rep. Alex Andrade (R-Pensacola) filed [HB 109](#) in yet another attempt to give a loud unrepresentative minority the ability to impose their will on the majority. Specifically, this bill would make it even easier for public schools to be converted to charter schools— over the objection of the community at large. The bill removes the requirement that teachers have a vote in the conversion process and allows a municipality to convert any public school in its jurisdiction to a charter school, even if they don't have the support of the majority of parents in the school.

In the House Choice and Innovation Committee, parents, clergy, teachers and community members vocally opposed the bill. Person after person made the point that public schools are the heartbeat of their community and it is just that it's plain wrong for a small minority of community members to have the power to give away a public school to a for-profit charter management company. Nancy Lawther speaking on behalf of the Florida PTA pointed out the harm that will occur to students if this bill becomes law when she told the committee, "the richer communities will be the ones that might take advantage of this creating a (further) division between haves and have nots."

We appreciate Rep. Angie Nixon (D-Jacksonville) and Rep. Katherine Waldron (D-Wellington) for their debate against the bill. They both criticized the bill's sponsor for suggesting that Florida's public schools are "failing." Instead, as the representatives pointed out, the schools have been failed by Florida's leaders who have underfunded them and passed law after law like this one whose sole purpose is to favor charter and voucher schools while disfavoring public schools. HB 109 passed along party lines. [You can click here to see the votes](#). The bill has two more committee stops in the House.

The Senate companion, SB 246, has not been heard in its first committee stop. The next opportunity for it to be heard is when the Senate PreK-12 Education Committee meets on Tuesday, Feb. 6. We'll be sure to let you know if it does get placed on that agenda.

Minority Rule, Part Two

Another example of the Florida Republican party's embrace of minority rule is their attempts to silence workers and their unions. Surely you know by now that in order for a public employee union to avoid the risk of decertification, they must demonstrate they have 60% membership. When Gov. DeSantis signed SB 256, a number of lawsuits were quickly filed and they are slowly making their way through the courts.

[SB 1746](#) filed by Sen. Blaise Ingoglia (R-Spring Hill) looks like an effort to appease police and firefighters unions in hopes they will drop their lawsuit against the DeSantis administration by making their carveout of the bill even more explicit. In its current form, though, the bill doesn't do enough to make them happy. Representatives from police and firefighters unions addressed the Senate Governmental Oversight and Accountability Committee this week to share the concerns they have with this new legislation.

Meanwhile, SB 1746 in its current form adds a new provision that would require public employees to sign a government created form full of anti-union propaganda. Stephanie Kunkel from FEA's Public Policy and Advocacy department testified in opposition to the bill and reiterated FEA's desire to work with the bill sponsor to improve the bill as it moves through its committee stops.

SB 1746 passed along a party-line vote [which you can see here](#). It has one committee stop left before it is ready for a vote by the full Senate. The House companion to the bill, HB 1471, has yet to be heard in its first committee.

The Latest on Deregulation

On just the second day of session, the Senate passed [SB 7000](#), [SB 7002](#) and [SB 7004](#). These bills, as you likely remember, were a mix of good and bad.

They contained provisions that would support children and educators such as

- removing some punitive consequences from high-stakes testing,
- removing certain salary restrictions that have caused compression for experienced teachers and
- allowing teachers to once again earn multi-year contracts.

Meanwhile, the House bills [HB 7025](#) and [HB 7039](#), contain none of those provisions—or really any provisions that would directly impact children and educators. Instead, the House bills focus mainly on removing administrative paperwork and reporting requirements at the district level. The House bills do, however, contain the negative aspects of the Senate bills that place further restrictions on collective bargaining.

The House bills have their final committee stop on Tuesday, Jan. 30. We'll be watching closely to see what amendments, if any, are filed to the House bills to bring them closer in line to what has already passed the Senate.

Looking Ahead

[HB 49](#), the bill that rolls back child labor protections in Florida is poised for final passage in the House this week. Multiple Democratic representatives have filed amendments which would enhance workplace protections for 16 and 17 years olds while also reaffirming parental rights.

These amendments would:

- require employers who employ minors to provide the minor's parents with an itemized list of the minor's duties, breaks and wages,
- require employers to provide shade, drinking water and regular breaks to employed minors who are working outdoors in high-heat conditions,
- require an employer who employs minors to maintain a record of all sexual harassment incidents in the workplace and provide a copy of those records to the minor's parent or legal guardian, and
- allow the parent or legal guardian of an employed minor to enter and inspect the minor's place of employment at any time the minor is working.

We have a good idea that these amendments will be voted down almost exclusively along party lines. That's not to say the amendments are useless though. They will again lay bare the hypocrisy of the politicians who have spent the last few years screaming about the need to protect children while honoring parents' rights.

Its Senate companion, [SB 1596](#), will have its first committee stop on Tuesday in the Commerce and Tourism Committee.

Thanks!

FEA members know that fighting for respect, better pay, and the freedom to teach means advocating for their profession in front of state leaders. We appreciate the members of the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association, Teachers Association of Lee County and United Faculty of Florida who were in Tallahassee this week to meet with lawmakers and to testify on important bills in committee.

How You Can Take Action Today

Visit the [FEA website](#) to learn more about session and sign up for FEA Action Alert texts by texting “**edactivist**” to 22394.

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