

FEA Frontline Report

April 24, 2009

“ Bizarre” Quote of the week:

“We must be able to get rid of killer teachers,” said Rep. Kelli Stargel (R-Lakeland) on the House floor. Stargel was answering questions about her anti-tenure bill and claimed that killer teachers could zap the desire for learning out of children.

In this issue:

[“Anti-Tenure” bill turns into study bill](#)

[Budget in limbo](#)

[Corporate Tax Voucher bill passes House](#)

[Public Records bills passes House](#)

[High school graduation bill passes House](#)

[“Double dipping” bill passes House](#)

[Senate Resolution honoring Jade Thomas Moore](#)

[Darts and Laurels](#)

[Member Lobbyists in Tallahassee](#)

[Visit FEA FrontlineTV for video of session highlights](#)

[Senate Glossary](#)

Week eight of the 2009 legislative session

We may be looking at the last five days of the 2009 legislative session ... or not. At the time this report was written everything about the budget was up in the air. Little of what we think we know can be called definitely factual. By the end of the day this may all change and the morning news will tell us everything has been worked out and that the budget negotiations will be on track to end this legislative session next Friday, May 1. Or it might say legislative leaders have decided to extend this session... or something else. Right now all we can do is wait and see and keep the calls to legislators going to get the best budget possible for Floridians — and especially our public schools, colleges and universities.

“Anti-tenure” bill turns into a study bill

HB 1411 “Quality Teachers for All Students Act” by Kelli Stargel (R-Lakeland) was heard and amended on the floor of the House Friday. Stargel offered a “strike-all” amendment to the bill to create a study commission to examine the teaching profession and tenure issues. But the bill gave no indication that teachers or other education stakeholders would be involved in the study. FEA pointed to numerous existing studies that clearly state that “tenure” is not the problem it’s been made it out to be and that a new study was not necessary... if the conversation is truly about teacher quality.

Stargel’s original bill would have done away with due process, lengthened the annual contract period from three years to five (or six) years, created a 5-year contract which would have allowed for teachers to be fired at the end of that contract —for any reason or no reason at all — and if a teacher moved to a new district, the process would start all over again. The bill had nothing to do with improving teacher quality. Stargel admitted that the bill “went too far.” No kidding.

The senate version —SB 2458 *School Personnel* by Sen. Thad Altman (R-Melbourne) — ran into problems once again in the Senate Government Oversight committee and was left pending in that committee. Pending bills cannot be heard or turned into amendments so it is doubtful that this bill will be passed by the Senate. This doesn't mean supporters of this bill won't try some shenanigans to amend it on to another bill. So we'll have to keep a keen eye on all the amendments over the next few days. Nothing is sure until the closing gavel falls or as we say in Tallahassee "nobody's safe while the legislature's in town."

Budget in limbo

We really have no change that can be reported to the stalled budget negotiations. The conference committees have yet to meet. What we do know is that if they are to end by next Friday (May 1) as scheduled they have to have the final budget completed by Tuesday so the mandated 72 hours cooling off period can begin before it goes to the floor of both chambers. We've heard that some type of negotiation is going on but it isn't in the sunshine. As it stands, the House budget is slightly better for K-12 education but terrible for higher education. We're asking that the House move towards the Senate budget and look for more revenue changes to avoid further cuts to struggling schools. We do know FEA members and lobbyists are pressing on to make sure legislators know that we need more revenue to keep our schools and higher education institutions running and meeting the needs of our students. Whatever we do, now is not the time to throw in the towel. Continue to contact your legislators!

Corporate tax voucher bill passes the House

HB 453 Tax Credits/Nonprofit Scholarship-funding Organizations by Rep Will Weatherford passed the full House by a bi-partisan vote of 94 to 23. Twenty Democrats voted with the Republicans for the bill. To see how your Representative voted go to:

<http://www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Bills/floorvote.aspx?VoteId=9732&BillId=40353&SessionId=61>

The Senate version —SB 1310 by Sen. Andy Gardiner (R-Orlando) — passed the Senate Policy and Steering Committee on Way and Means by a vote of 15 to five. Two Democrats, Senators Siplin (Orlando) and Lawson (Tallahassee) voted with the Republican members in favor of the bill. SB 1310 is now in position to go to the floor of the Senate.

As you may recall, the current Corporate Tax Credit (CTC) program allows corporations to donate up to 75% of the taxes they owe to the state to organizations that fund scholarships to private and religious schools. The proposed change would expand that option to insurance companies who would rather contribute their tax money to vouchers for private and religious schools rather than pay it to the state.

Proponents of the program contend that it saves the state money – the difference between the per pupil state expenditure of about \$6,800 versus the voucher of \$3,950. It is currently estimated that 23,000 students participate in the CTC voucher program.

FEA opposes any expansion of the program and demands that private schools accepting these vouchers be held to the same accountability standards and transparency required of public schools.

Public records bill passes the House

HB 135 Public Records/Insured Dependents/Agency by Rep Seth McKeel (R-Lakeland) was heard on the floor of the Florida House passed unanimously. The bill creates a public record exemption for personal identifying information of dependent children of agency officers and employees when such dependent children (children under the age of 21 and still in school, and certain incapacitated children 18 years of age and older) are

insured under an agency group insurance plan. The bill specifies that personal identifying information of agency employees remains subject to public disclosure.

The public's right of access to government records is established by the Constitution of the State of Florida. The Legislature, however, is authorized to create exemptions to preclude the disclosure of specified records when the exemption is found to be a public necessity and is not broader than necessary to meet that public necessity. The Senate version SB 270 by Sen. Dockery (R-Lakeland) is ready to be heard on the floor of the Senate but had not been placed on the agenda at the time this report was written. The House bill is now in Senate Messages (*communication by one house to the other house concerning action taken on a bill. Each bill, and any amendments to it, is transmitted from one house to the other accompanied by a document (Message) that states the action taken on the bill*).

High school graduation bill passes the House

HB 1293 High School Graduation by Rep. Erik Fresen (R-Miami) was heard on the floor of the House passing by a vote of 75 to 42 with only two Democrats voting for the bill. They were Rep Bill Heller (D-St. Petersburg) and Rep. Janet Long (D-St. Petersburg).

This is the bill that is purported to “raise high school graduation standards to ensure Florida’s students are prepared to enter the increasingly competitive global economic community.” The bill would:

- Establish new graduation requirements beginning with students entering high school in 2010-2011, including geometry and Biology, and additional requirements beginning with students entering high school in 2012-13, including Algebra II and chemistry or physics.
- Raise the minimum passing scores for the grade 10 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) beginning with the 2011-2012 school year.

The supporters of House version first claimed there would be no additional costs incurred by school districts. But the Senate analysis estimated the staffing cost to run up to \$250 million.

The Senate version — SB 2654 by Sen. Thad Altman (R-Melbourne) — ran aground in the Senate Education PreK-12 Appropriations Committee due to the bill's price tag. The committee temporarily postponed the bill placing it in pending status, so it is unlikely to be passed by the Senate.

“Double-dipping” bill sees life

SB 1182 State Retirement System aka the “double-dipping” by Sen. Mike Fasano (R-New Port Richey) was amended and passed after contentious debate in the Senate Government Oversight committee by a vote of 5 to 3. The bill is now ready to go to the floor. Senators once again requested the sponsor make more improvements to the bill before final passage.

The amended bill would prohibit any state employee who retires from being re-employed as a state employee for 6 months. Currently, state employees cannot return after retirement for 30 days.

Some opponents call this bill a punitive and excessive knee-jerk reaction to a problem that has been overblown. What drove this legislation to stop double-dipping — as it is commonly called — was the media attention being paid to some of the high earners on state payrolls who would retire, then return 30 days later to collect their large paychecks and pensions.

The House version — HB 479 by Rep. Robert Schneck (R-Springhill) — was heard and passed by a vote of 106 to 10 of the full House. The bill is now in Senate Messages awaiting Senate action.

Senate Resolution honoring Jade Thomas Moore

This week the Senate paid tribute to one of our own — Jade Thomas Moore, former executive director of the Pinellas CTA and ESPA who passed away last December. Jade was the longest serving local executive director in FEA’s history. Senate Resolution 2770 honored the memory of Jade and posthumously commended him for his dedication to the preservation of public education in Florida. The Resolution was published in the April 23 Senate Journal and can be read at:

<http://www.flsenate.gov/data/session/2009/Senate/bills/billtext/pdf/s2770.pdf>

The Resolution noted that Jade “armed with a keen intellect and irreverent sense of humor, traveled frequently and tirelessly to the State Capitol to advocate for public schools, befriending many in government with his colorful, outspoken style.” We truly miss Jade’s presence in Tallahassee.

Darts and Laurels

The votes were unanimous: Rep. Kelli Stargel gets a Dart this week for pushing the anti-teacher, anti-union, anti-tenure bill. Erroneously and deceptively named “Quality Teachers for All Students Act” had nothing to do with teacher quality and everything to do with getting principals off the hook so teachers could be fired for any reason without due process or no reason at all.

Laurels go to the Sen. Dennis Jones (R-Seminole) for many things but this week especially for his fight against the “anti-tenure” bill.

Member lobbyists visiting Tallahassee

This week FEA welcomed member lobbyists from Alachua, Brevard, Orange, Pasco, and Pinellas counties. Alachua CEA president Gunnar Paulson brought members and students to Tallahassee to complete a mission: Deliver 7,000 letters to their legislators. Guidance counselor Karen McCann orchestrated a letter writing campaign collecting over 7,000 letters which they painstakingly passed through Capitol security screening and delivered to Speaker Larry Cretul (R-Ocala) and their legislative delegation calling for no more cuts education funding. Kudos to Alachua for their efforts to Make Our Schools a Priority!

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http://www.associationstudios.com/Publisher_Main.aspx?PublisherId=325

Questions? Call FEA Public Policy Advocacy at 850.224.2078

Thanks to Lynda Russell for her help with this report!