

## Teachers hope Florida Legislature gives failing grade to Senate Bill 736 - POLL

By KATHERINE ALBERS

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NAPLES — The legislative session hasn't started yet, but Florida teachers already feel like they're under attack.

They have seen plans to evaluate them on student testing, place new teachers on one-year contracts and force them to contribute 5 percent to their retirement — a portion presently paid by their employers.

State officials said the changes would save money and get rid of bad teachers while elevating good teachers. Teachers wonder why the changes are coming now, when a national report finds Florida making gains faster than any other state in the nation.

And, teachers have vowed to fight back.

This past week, the Florida Senate Education Committee unanimously passed Senate Bill 736. The bill, written by Committee Chairman Steve Wise, R-Jacksonville, would change how teachers are paid and evaluated. Teachers hired in Florida after 2014 would be placed on one-year contracts. Their pay raises would be based in part on how well their students perform on standardized tests.

Current Florida teachers wouldn't be affected by the legislation. There is no similar legislation currently proposed in the House.

Wise has said that the legislation is meant to improve the academic performance of students, not punish teachers.

"You are creating two classes of teachers," said Cal Boggess, president of the Collier County Education Association, the union that represents teachers.

Senate Bill 736 is the state's second attempt to develop a system that would pay teachers on merit. The Legislature passed Senate Bill 6 last year among much protest that the bill was unfair and unworkable, but then- Gov. Charlie Crist vetoed it.

The new legislation leaves current pay plans, which are based largely on the number of years worked, for teachers on the job. New teachers would get raises based on their performance and wouldn't have the tenure-like protections current teachers have.

All teachers would be evaluated under the system that would use student growth on tests as a key measurement, but also would take into account factors outside a teacher's control, like students' absentee rates.

In addition, Gov. Rick Scott this past week announced his budget, which includes plans for public employees — the majority of whom work in the schools — to contribute 5 percent of their paychecks to the Florida Retirement System, which is the government pension plan. Scott has said those contributions will save taxpayers \$2.8 billion over the next two years.

“It’s an assault (on teachers). It is essentially giving employees a 5 percent pay cut,” Boggess said. “Teachers have been hired under the impression that they would be paid a salary and the school district would put money into retirement for them.”

The big question, teachers assert, is why these bills are coming forward now.

Florida was ranked fifth in the nation in a Quality Accounts report published by Education Week. The report grades states on its academic standards, school-accountability rules and improvements on national tests and high school graduation rates.

Florida has made impressive gains on the annual review in recent years, jumping from 31st to fifth, according to Jonathan Tuttle, executive director of the Collier County Education Association, the union representing teachers.

“To go from 31st in the nation to fifth, we’re doing a better job than anyone else in the country,” he said. “I just don’t understand why we are trying to overhaul a system that is working, that has been proven to work.”

Tuttle said the government is working on a “bumper sticker” mentality that is permeating society — that government needs to “reward good teachers and fire bad teachers.”

“People need the real facts. Facts are getting left out,” he said. “The question is why? Why is there all of this radical change?”

Teachers Association of Lee County President Mark Castellano agreed.

“Why is everything being thrown at continued improvement? We have gone from 31st to fifth — where is the big urgency? It is not broken, so why fix it?” he said.

Boggess said the plan for the teachers is to inform the public of how this legislation will affect teachers.

Castellano said the union will meet with legislators to discuss its concerns with the delegation, but said plans for anything public now haven’t been discussed.

“I think the conversation has been more civil,” he said. “They are doing some of the same things, but some things they are doing are worse. I am not sure why.”

Still, Castellano said public education is suffering.

“I am not sure public education will survive (Rick Scott),” he said. “But that seems to be his goal.”

When speaking to reporters after his keynote address at the Cato Institute luncheon this past week, Scott refuted that his plans would gravely affect education.

“As you know, our budget continues to fund the same thing the state funded through the general revenue fund last year. So we’re committing the same amount of money. Like everybody in this country, everybody had to figure out how to do things better, but we’re continuing to fund education,” he said. “Every agency, everybody in this country, in your family, everybody is figuring out how to do things better with less money. But we’re continuing to fund education at the state level the same way we did before.”

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Staff writer Ryan Mills contributed to this report.

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