

Leaders

A Newsletter for Florida School Board Members

Property tax reform still ahead

With Florida's Legislature taking what amounts to a one month break, all Floridians' eyes are still on them as to what they will develop in the way of property tax reform.

Lawmakers could not reach agreement during the 60-day regular session and decided to come back for a special 11-day special session beginning June 12.

House Speaker Marco Rubio, R-Miami, has already crafted one plan that calls for up to 80% of the first \$300,000 of a homeowner's assessed value to be exempt from property taxes. Speaker Rubio didn't get far during the regular session with his first plan that would have eliminated most property taxes while raising Florida's sales tax rate 2.5 cents.

Cities, counties and school districts are anxiously awaiting this special session to see what the Legislature will come up with this time. Schools are particularly vulnerable since much of their revenue comes from property taxes. Of course, cities and counties are faced with the same problem and many are having to postpone adopting their final budget for next fiscal year until they see what kind of financial hit they may have to take.

"If Florida education is going to continue to make strides, we have to have a stable tax base to be effective," said FSBA Executive Director Wayne Blanton. "That means if the state is not going to raise the sales tax—and I don't think it will—we have to be held harmless on all education property tax."

For example, he explained, if the homestead exemption rate was raised to \$50,000, that move would affect only cities and counties in calculating property tax. If schools were held harmless, their tax revenue would still be figured based on the current \$25,000 exemption.

However, even if counties and cities suffer property tax cuts, it could still affect schools. "Counties and cities help supply school resource officers and crossing guards," said Dr. Blanton. Those positions could be the first to be cut, which means school districts would have to make up the slack.

That's why he said he is "urging all our districts to hold back a bigger reserve, because they may need that extra money to meet services they'll have to pick up."

The "Save Our Homes" initiative, which passed in 1992 and went into effect in 1995 as a constitutional amendment,

is causing many of the problems homeowners are experiencing today. This amendment places a limitation of 3% on any annual assessment increases on homestead properties in Florida. The problem is it's not portable; homeowners can't take it with them. "We must address the portability issue if we're to have an equitable tax reform," said Dr. Blanton.

He also believes that with property tax reform for homeowners, businesses may take a bigger hit and they need to receive some kind of tax break as well, such as a \$25,000 tangible personal property break.

What he fears is an over-reaction to increased property tax assessments. "They (assessments) have to be looked at carefully, because assessments are actually currently going down," he added. If assessments decline 10% and "you roll back property taxes 10% we all could take a double hit."

Finally, whatever is done in the coming special session needs to be handled legislatively and not by a constitutional amendment. "Then we'll have a year to look at possible unintended consequences." If it's in the constitution, it's much harder to change, said Dr. Blanton.

Under Rep. Rubio's proposal, which he outlined in a column in the *Orlando Sentinel* in May, Florida's current \$25,000 homestead exemption would zoom to 80% of the first \$300,000 of a home's taxable value. That means a homestead exemption could be as high as \$240,000. For those homes valued above \$300,000, 70% of the home's value up to \$1 million would be exempt, with 30% of anything above \$1 million exempt.

Rep. Rubio also wants to extend a similar exemption to businesses, second homes and all other property owners.

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Speaker Rubio

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Leadership Calling

Martin County School District wins Magna Award honorable mention

Martin County School District earned an honorable mention in the 2007 Magna Awards presented at the National School Boards Association Conference in April. The awards, sponsored by the organization's magazine, the *American School Board Journal* and corporate partner, Sodexo School Services, honor those districts and schools which represent educational excellence.

Martin County was chosen based on the success of Warfield Elementary School's Action Plan, which brought the school up from a "D" in 2002 just before the plan was implemented, to an "A" ranking under Florida's A+ plan for the past three years. It also earned the Florida Title I Distinguished School Award for Sustained Achievement in 2006. That same year, it was named a No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon School.

As part of the action plan, the school board initiated community forums, endorsed policies to allow a restructuring of school staff, instituted programs to better meet students' needs and created a financial supplement so that area schools might attract more teachers.

Lorie Shekailo is Martin County School Board's chairman and Sara Wilcox is its superintendent. In addition, FSBA's president this year, Sue Hershey, is a member of that school board.

School board members appointed to state education advisory group

Three school board members have been named to serve on the Florida Department of Education Professional Practices Advisory Group.

The group will discuss Florida's process for reporting and sanctioning educator certificates, review other states' processes, and make recommendations based upon that information.

Board members appointed to the committee include:

- ✓ Virginia Childs, Alachua County School Board;
- ✓ Jennifer Faliero, Hillsborough County School Board;
- ✓ Julie Ulmer, Suwannee County School Board.

Also serving on the advisory group are Dr. Wayne Blanton, executive director, Florida School Boards Association, and Bill Montford, CEO, Florida Association of District School Superintendents.

Upcoming Events

June 13-15

FSBA Annual Spring Conference, Grand Hyatt
Tampa Bay, Tampa

July 11-14

NSBA Southern Region Conference, San Antonio, Texas

October 8-12

FSBA School Board Academy, Gainesville

December 4-7

FSBA Annual Joint Conference, Tampa



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Here's a recap of some education bills which passed the 2007 Legislature

A new teacher pay program and implementation of another sales tax holiday for school supplies, were among the bills that passed this year's Legislature, while one calling for a three-year DROP extension, one giving school districts a little more latitude in setting school start dates and another setting a referendum on an elected education commissioner all failed. More than 3,000 bills were filed during the session and about 300 passed, including some 30 regarding education.

Here's a brief look at just a few of the education bills which passed. Keep in mind they still must pass gubernatorial scrutiny. A more complete analysis of these bills was offered at FSBA-sponsored Legislative Update sessions around Florida in May. If you missed these, the final day of FSBA's Spring Conference June 15 will feature a legislative review.

A bill creating a Merit Award Program (MAP) for teachers and school-based administrators was one of the first major education bills which passed the Legislature. (*See the April issue of Leaders for a full explanation of that bill.*) Gov. Charlie Crist signed the bill in early April.

Florida Teachers Lead Program stipend/pre-K extends Florida Teachers Lead Program stipend to teachers of prekindergarten students in public schools and public charter schools who are funded through FEFP.

High school athletics/drug testing requires the Florida High School Athletic Association to implement a one-year drug testing program to randomly test certain students for steroids.

A public records drug test bill exempts from public records requirements records relating to drug tests. It also exempts from public meetings requirements portions of the meeting at which records relating to drug tests will be discussed.

High performing school districts two mill levy provides criteria for designating academically high-performing school districts; it provides for notice concerning property and casualty insurance costs and provides criteria for using district school tax funds.

Physical education bill requires the education commissioner to provide professional development to physical

education teachers and curricula developers and requires school boards to provide specified physical education for certain students. It also requires the State Board of Education to review and revise the Sunshine State Standards relating to physical education.

High-risk offenders. This amendment to the Jessica Lunsford Act requires distinctive markings for driver's licenses and ID cards issued to persons who are designated as sexual predators and revises background screening requirements for certain non-instructional school district employees and contractors.

Statewide tobacco education and prevention bill requires the Depart-

ment of Health to establish a comprehensive statewide tobacco education and prevention program and to expand smoking cessation initiatives to each county.

A career and professional education bill creates the Florida Career and Professional Education Act to improve academic performance and to respond to Florida's workforce needs. It also requires school boards to develop strategic plans to meet local and regional workforce needs and for public schools and school districts to offer career and professional academies.

Sales tax holiday. Books, clothing, and school supplies are exempt from sales taxes, state and local, from Aug. 4 to Aug. 13.

Education heading for 6.65% funding increase

Public schools will see a 6.84% increase in total funding, or 6.65% increase in unweighted FTE funding, a \$455 per student increase, bringing it to \$7,306.

The 2007-2008 budget for PreK-12 totals \$19.3 billion. Base student allocation will be \$4,163 per student, up from last year's \$3,982.

The required local effort (RLE) millage will stay the same: 5.010 mills.

Here's a brief look at some other education items in the 2007-08 budget (2006-07 figures are in parenthesis):

- Sparsity supplement, \$40 million (\$35 million);
- Safe Schools, \$77.2 million (\$75.4 million);
- Performance pay, \$147.5 million, same as last year;
- DJJ Supplemental, \$12.5 million (\$0);
- Transportation, \$493.6 million (\$483.0 million);
- Instructional materials, \$271.9 million (\$266.7 million);
- Teachers Lead, \$48.0 million (\$45.0 million);
- Class size reduction, \$2.7 billion (\$2.1 billion).

Property tax

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Oh, and let's not forget the Taxation and Budget Reform Commission which began its work in 2007 for just the second time in 17 years.

The commission was originally established by constitutional amendment in 1988 and first met in 1990. Changes adopted by voters in 1998 called for the commission to meet again in 2007 and every 20 years thereafter to examine the state budgetary and taxation process. The commission has full authority to place amendments on the ballot without legislative approval. These amendments, if any, would appear on the 2008 general election ballot.

Yet, legislators chose not to rely on the commission to solve the property tax situation. The only question now is whether lawmakers in 11 days will be able to agree on something they couldn't in 60 days earlier this year.

From the President

BY SUE HERSHEY



Sue Hershey

Highlights of a year gone by

A year goes by too quickly nowadays. It only seems like yesterday that I was being sworn in as your 2006-2007 president, following in the footsteps of some great FSBA presidents. This year we have a new governor, a new education commissioner and, will wonders never cease, this was the first time in three years that a hurricane didn't disrupt our annual board retreat.

My year as your president was made easy thanks to our wonderful members and the many fine FSBA staff which work hard to provide you with the types of services you need. They also provided me with outstanding support.

Any accomplishments made this year are not mine but yours, our members.

Growth management was a big issue this year—when has it not been—as school districts worked on their interlocal agreements while negotiating with developers for a growth plan in each district that can help all of us, particularly our clients, school children.

Your FSBA staff traveled every nook and cranny of the state training and educating board members on what's allowed in the new growth management legislation.

Your staff also traveled throughout Florida to fill you in on what legislators did—and didn't do—to school districts following the 2006 session. These legislative update sessions were also held this month to review the 2007 session. The final update, by the way, will be held June 15—the final day of our Spring conference—in Tampa. So if you missed any of the other sessions, this will be a good time to catch up.

In addition to our post-session wrap-ups, FSBA's annual Day in the Legislature in March was one of the best attended yet.

Legislatively, we were able to gain another funding increase for education, \$455 per student, at a time when state revenue projections are down. (*See the story on funding increases on Page 3.*)

One of my keys this year was to continue to develop partnerships with the various educational sectors—including PTAs, the unions, chambers, and universities—that can only benefit all children in Florida. In furtherance of this goal, your FSBA Executive Committee attended the Learning First Alliance Conference in Washington, D.C.

We believe an alliance could, and should, be formed in Florida. We believe that the alliance has the potential for creating a common voice for education at the state and national levels.

FSBA this year also conducted strategic and long range planning sessions and we added two at-large members to our executive committee to give additional focus and representation.

Finally, FSBA has gone high tech! We hope that you have availed yourself of our new technology, such as our improved web page. More improvements will follow.

Nationally, we are proud of our own Jane Gallucci, Pinellas County School Board, who served as president of the National School Boards Association in 2006-2007.

Thanks again for allowing me the privilege of serving as your president this year and I look forward to assisting our incoming president, Jeanne Dozier, Lee County School Board, as she takes office in June. I urge all of you to offer her any support she might request. I certainly will.

Ms. Hershey, a member of the Martin County School Board, is the 2006-2007 president of the Florida School Boards Association.

Legislators of the Year to be honored in the fall

F SBA has chosen four legislators—two senators and two representatives—as recipients of its Legislator of the Year honors.

Two of them, Rep. Joe Pickens, R-Palatka, and Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Niceville, were instrumental in passage of this year's teacher Merit Award Program, better known as MAP.

"They both worked long and hard to develop a teacher pay program that's very workable," said FSBA Executive Director Wayne Blanton.

Sen. Gaetz is chairman of the Senate Education PreK-12 Committee and Rep. Pickens heads up the House Schools and Learning Council. Both received accolades from Gov. Charlie Crist during the MAP bill signing ceremony.

The third recipient, Sen. Steve Wise, R-Jacksonville, is chairman of the Senate's PreK-12 Education Appropriations Committee and was instrumental in helping schools receive the 6.85% funding increase this year.

The fourth honoree, Rep. Will Kendrick, R-Carrabelle, serves on the K-12 Committee and chairs the Conservation and State Lands Committee.

"All four helped education achieve a very successful year," added Dr. Blanton.

Rep. Pickens, a former Putnam County School Board attorney, has received the award several times, including last year.

The awards will be presented during FSBA's fall conference Dec. 4-7 in Tampa.