

Leaders

A Newsletter for Florida School Board Members

“The worst has not arrived yet”

Regardless of how much funding schools lose in the 2008-09 budget, it could just be the beginning, the chairmen of the House Schools and Learning Council and the Senate Education PreK-12 Appropriations Committee warned school board members.

Both Rep. Joe Pickens, R-Palatka, and Sen. Steve Wise, R-Jacksonville, recipients of last year’s FSBA Legislator of the Year Award, delivered dire budget predictions during FSBA’s Day in the Legislature in Tallahassee in mid-April.

Both were speaking following release of their respective budget proposals—the Senate’s, showing a net \$65.9 billion total and a \$115 per student spending cut and the House’s totaling \$65.1 billion and an \$85 per student cut. In comparison, the budget that the Legislature passed last year—before several special legislative sessions sliced into that total—was \$71 billion.

Rep. Pickens told school board members that “The worst has not arrived yet” and “the 2009-2010 year will be worse unless alternative revenue sources are looked at. I’m already down \$110 million in lottery from the budget I proposed. Revenues are also down from what the Revenue Estimating Conference said they would be. We rely on the Revenue Estimating Conference, we based our budget on their last estimate and they were wrong. They’ve been wrong the last few times.”

There was a push for the Legislature to tap into the State’s so-called rainy day fund which totals about \$260 million. “Guess what? It’s raining,” commented FSBA Executive Director Wayne Blanton.

There was even a proposal that teachers and other educators stand outside schools with umbrellas to drive home to lawmakers that they need to use this money to minimize budget cuts, not only to education but to other critical areas as well, such as health and human services.

The problem with the rainy day fund, said Rep. Pickens, is that it’s non-recurring dollars “that we would have to pay back.” In other words, it’s a one-time fix, akin to a shell game.



FSBA President Jeanne Dozier, Lee County School Board, welcomes Sen. Steve Wise to FSBA’s Day in the Legislature.

“We add in and then we take away.”

Besides, if revenue increases next year, the Legislature will likely want to use that money for other purposes rather than replace the lost rainy day fund dollars, Rep. Pickens added.

Suggested one school board member, Beverly Gallagher, Broward County: “If we could get the budget cuts up front and not worry about the cuts coming piecemeal, like they did last year and this, we could handle it a lot better.”

The representative agreed. “I understand you can deal with any adversity as long as you know it’s coming,” he said.

“We’ve tried to give you as much flexibility as possible” to deal with the funding crisis, Sen. Wise commented.

Concerning possible tax increases, Rep. Pickens added, “We can’t tax ourselves out of a recession.” Sen. Wise agreed. “We’re not raising taxes, I’ll tell you that.”

Regarding gambling as a source of revenue, the representative said: “We shouldn’t fund education on the backs of the weaknesses of others.”

Concerning teacher pay raises, Rep. Pickens commented: “I can’t imagine that anyone can afford to give raises. If you’re planning for 2009-10, you should get with your union now and make plans to hunker down.” In the initial House and Senate budget proposals, salary cuts for legislators were also included.

Bottom line, said Rep. Pickens: “Education funding is not going to get better until our economy gets better.”



Rep. Joe Pickens, speaking to school board members at FSBA’s Day in the Legislature, says funding could worsen before improvements are seen.

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Leadership Calling

Rep. Pickens: 'You are my family'

Rep. Joe Pickens, R-Palatka, a former Putnam County School Board attorney who is in his last year in the Legislature due to term limits, was given a standing ovation by school board members following his presentation at FSBA's Day in the Legislature.

This is his eighth year and six of those times he has received FSBA's Legislator of the Year honors.

"You are my family, the reason I ran in the first place," he said. "I ran because I was a school board attorney and my wife was a teacher, and having gotten here, nothing has disappointed me. As I leave here, my biggest regret is that I won't be representing you. From the bottom of my heart, I can't thank you enough."

"We hate to see you leave," said Lee County School Board Member Jeanne Dozier, FSBA president, during the loud, and lengthy ovation the representative was given.

Video updates keep FSBA members informed

This year marked the first time FSBA began broadcasting weekly, via the Web, a series of video updates concerning legislative happenings and other items of interest to board members.

"We are very pleased with the positive reaction we've received from our members about these telecasts," said FSBA Executive Director Wayne Blanton.

Once a week, usually Friday, FSBA members are sent a link to a streaming five minute video of Dr. Blanton or others explaining what happened that week in the Legislature. But the updates aren't limited to legislation. For example, one update also included FSBA President-Elect Beverly Slough, St. Johns County School Board, briefing members on the results of that week's executive board meeting.

Once the Legislature adjourns May 2, Dr. Blanton said there will be a 10-15 minute video summarizing this year's session. Video updates will then be scaled back to one every two weeks, he added.

All updates can be accessed at FSBA's Web site, www.fsba.org.

Thanks to sponsors

FSBA would like to thank the following companies for their generous support and sponsorships during our 21st Annual Day in the Legislature, April 9-11 in Tallahassee:

- Compass Learning, FSBA Reception
- Johnson Controls, Breakfast Meeting
- Mobile Modular, FSBA Reception



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Upcoming Events

May 2	Florida Legislature adjourns	
June 11-13	FSBA/FADSS Annual Spring Conference Grand Hyatt Tampa Bay	
Noon June 16 - Noon, June 20	Qualifying period for re-election	
July 21-23	NSBA Southern Region Conference, New Orleans	

Clay board member returns from Iraq; presents flags to public officials, FSBA

Between the 20 days a month he spends with the National Guard and time as a Clay County School Board member, Major Charlie Van Zant doesn't have time for what others might consider a "day job." Up until September of last year, Mr. Van Zant had spent 16 months in Iraq and Kuwait, flying helicopters.

During that tour, he also flew with American flags, lots of them, which he has since presented to every Clay County School Board member, all 36 Clay County schools, every legislator representing all or part of Clay County and, last month, to the association representing school boards. Each recipient also received a certificate about the flag.



Sen. Evelyn Lynn, R-Daytona Beach, who represents a portion of Clay County, is one of the recipients of a flag from Major Van Zant.

FSBA Executive Director Wayne Blanton, a Vietnam war veteran, said he was honored to receive the flag Mr. Van Zant presented to the association.

The Black Hawk helicopter pilot had been a member of the school board for eight years before his National Guard unit was mobilized in June, 2006 while he was seeking re-election to the board. It didn't matter. He won easily with 68% of the vote.

"I was the personnel officer (something like a human resources director) for about 600 army aviators, soldiers, and Navy Medevac and Heavy lift units assigned under our Battalion Task Force Headquarters," said Mr. Van Zant. "Our area of responsibility covered all of Kuwait and the southern portion of Iraq. We (the Aviation Task Force) 1-111th Aviation Regiment were headquartered in Jacksonville and were comprised of units from four other states and Puerto Rico. We provided general aviation support, transporting soldiers, general officers and VIPs through our sector as well as providing support and flying several



Major Charles Van Zant, center, Clay County School Board member, presents a U.S. flag flown over Iraq to FSBA Executive Director Wayne Blanton. Congratulating them both is Gov. Charlie Crist.

different types of supplies throughout the area," he added.

"As for me as a pilot in the Florida National Guard, at the rank of Major and the extra responsibilities and time commitments that go with it, I work pretty much for the school board and the National Guard without a 'day job.' I usually work about 20 or more days a month for the Florida Guard doing different projects and taking care of personnel issues for units which have or are about to mobilize in support of the global war on terrorism," he said.

Don't forget new election qualification dates!

Last year, legislation was enacted to change the time frame for elections in Florida. The new dates for qualifying and for the primary election are now about two weeks earlier than prior years. If you are seeking re-election this fall, take careful note of these new election dates so that you meet the required deadlines.

School board members up for re-election this year need to qualify between noon, June 16 and noon June 20.

The Primary Election will be held Aug. 26 and the General Election, Nov. 4.

FSBA fights TABOR



Leon County School Board member Joy Bowen, FSBA vice president, and Wayne Blanton, the association's executive director, answer questions from the media following a press conference urging defeat of the Taxpayers Bill of Rights constitutional amendment proposal, or TABOR. For more information, see page 4.

From the Executive Director

By WAYNE BLANTON



WAYNE BLANTON

TABOR defeated, other serious constitutional issues still remain

Florida dodged what I would call a constitutional crisis when the Taxation and Budget Reform Commission in mid-April voted against the so-called Taxpayers' Bill of Rights constitutional amendment, also known as TABOR. Had it made it to the November ballot, its name alone might have led to passage. That, combined with the recently-passed Amendment 1 calling for a rollback in Florida's property taxes, plus another amendment proposal requiring elimination of the required local effort, would have led to what we used to call "piling on." The potential for devastating cuts beyond what schools are likely to experience from this year's Legislature, would be felt long after Florida's economic climate recovers.

Well, we can breathe a little easier now, even though we still have our work cut out for us if we're to defeat that tax swap amendment proposal eliminating RLE.

TABOR, which would have capped government revenues and its ability to raise taxes or fees, failed 14-9 (it needed 17 votes to appear on the ballot). This is a tremendous relief to all local governments and we are grateful to the members of the TBRC who voted against it.

This proposal would have required voter approval for any new tax or fee that any government entity—city, county, school district, special taxing district—wanted to impose. It also would have limited how much budgets could be increased. For example, school districts would have been limited to revenues for the prior fiscal year plus an adjustment for growth.

The amendment was modeled after one passed in 1992 in Colorado that later suspended it because of an economic slump that reduced spending on schools, health care and roads. As I noted in a press conference about the issue, when does a bad amendment in Colorado become a good one in Florida? Thankfully, the TBRC saw our side of the issue and decided not to pursue it any further.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case with the tax swap proposal, known as CP 2. That one passed handily 21-4 but still must appear one more time before the TBRC after the measure has gone through final drafting. As of this writing, there was still hope we could derail the proposal and, according to some news reports, support for the issue was eroding.

The proposal requires the Legislature to eliminate RLE property taxes as of Jan. 1, 2011. The revenue impact of this elimination is supposed to be offset by up to a one cent sales tax increase and removal of some sales tax exemptions. We're concerned about the long-term effects on public education funding if this proposal is approved while school districts (actually all Floridians) struggle with a de-

clining state economy plus revenue losses from the Amendment 1 property tax reform measure which passed earlier this year.

At least one commission member, who originally voted for the measure, said he has changed his mind because he thought lawmakers would be able to raise the sales tax more than a penny.

Doing away with the RLE could cost schools some \$4 billion and it's doubtful a one cent sales tax increase would bring in enough revenue.

We also have concerns about the stability and reliability of sales tax revenue and are disappointed that this represents, at best, a static investment in education, rather than providing any enhanced investment.

Another constitutional amendment proposal that will be on November's ballot—it narrowly passed by one vote, 17-9—would repeal a century-old provision of Florida's Constitution that forbids public dollars being spent on religious-based organizations.

It would delete a portion of Article 1, section 3 of the state Constitution, referred to as the "Blaine Amendment," that says "no revenue of the state or any political subdivision or agency. . . shall ever be taken from the public treasury directly or indirectly in aid of any church, sect, or religious denomination..." and replaces it with language that provides that "Individuals or entities may not be barred from participating in public programs because of religion."

If approved by voters, the plan would take effect in 2011. It, like all constitutional amendment proposals now, must receive a 60% voter approval rate, but the property tax proposal approved by voters in January gathered 64% of the votes.

The jury is still out on another proposal, dubbed the "65% solution" that would mandate that nearly two thirds of funding be spent on classroom instruction rather than administration. By the time you read this, TBRC members would probably have voted the measure up or down, we hope down.

This is another of those "sounds good on paper" measures that could harm education. It would all depend on how "classroom instruction" and "administration" are defined and what's included in the definitions.

Please consult your Daily Email Updates from FSBA Legislative Relations Director Ruth Melton and myself or watch our weekly video posted on our web site for the latest information on TBRC and the Legislature.

Dr. Blanton is executive director of the Florida School Boards Association.