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Louisiana Lawmakers Approve Nation's Broadest School Choice Bills

By Joy Pullmann

Louisiana lawmakers sent to Gov. Bobby Jindal two education bills that would establish the largest voucher program in the country, curtail teacher tenure, tie educator pay and job security to student performance, and expand charter schools.

House Bills 974 and 976 passed by solid margins a month after they were introduced, amid rancorous debate and demonstrations. They comprise the bulk of Jindal's education agenda, which he announced in January.

"This is not about the next election. This is not about the next poll. This is about the next generation," Jindal said several hours after the bills passed. "This is important for Louisiana. It's also important for America. If we want to preserve the American dream for our children, if we want them to do better than we did, then it is important they get a great education."

Louisiana currently spends approximately \$12,000 annually per student and ranks 49th in overall education performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Implementation Challenges

Most of the legislation is set to go into effect this fall. The teacher tenure changes will wait until a new evaluation system is available for 2013-14, which will calculate the "value-added" boost a specific teacher gives to each student's test scores.

Students statewide from families at 250 percent of the poverty line, or approximately \$60,000 for a family of four, will be eligible for a voucher. Nearly 400,000 students will qualify.

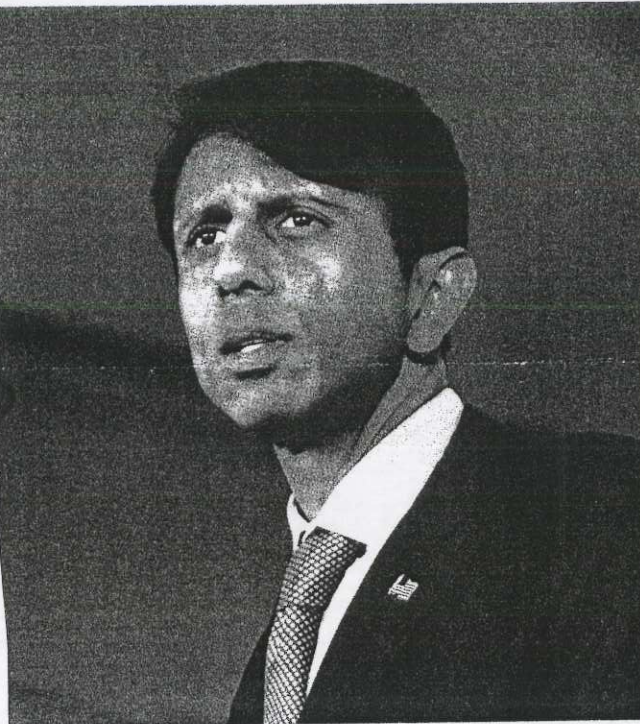
State teachers unions have promised a legal challenge to the voucher program and tenure limits.

Gubernatorial Leadership

Jindal (R) made the education bills his top legislative priority for this year, announcing his support for them after months of public and private discussions with teachers, superintendents, school board members, and policy analysts.

"Gov. Jindal and state lawmakers have demonstrated a clear commitment to prioritize the educational rights of Louisiana's next generation above all else," said State Superintendent John White.

The governor's leadership has been essential to moving the bills forward, said Matthew Ladner, research director at the Foundation for Excellence in Education.



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BOBBY JINDAL
GOVERNOR - LOUISIANA

"Jindal has put the full weight of his office behind the effort," he said. "Gov. Jindal is setting a bold example for other governors to follow in his all-out effort to improve public education."

Jindal acknowledged protests at the capitol from teachers union members, public school advocates, and some lawmakers, but he did not apologize for his policy stance.

"I was elected to help lead our state," he said. "I was not elected just to hold an office."

Two more bills from the governor's agenda await votes. One would organize state oversight of publicly funded preschool programs. Another would give individuals and corporations state tax rebates for donating to nonprofit organizations that grant private school scholarships.

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House Bill 974: Teacher Quality and Tenure

Teachers rated "ineffective" would lose tenure and could face dismissal. The teacher could appeal the rating to a panel of educators and the courts.

New teachers, and those not now tenured, must be rated "effective" for five out of six years to earn tenure.

Abolishes school boards' ability to select teachers and personnel, giving superintendents and principals that authority.

Bans using seniority as the only factor in layoffs.

Allows local administrators to revamp pay schedules to include teacher effectiveness, subject demand, and school location, rather than seniority and credentialing.

Bans pay raises for teachers rated "ineffective."

House Bill 976: Charter Schools and Vouchers

Expands voucher eligibility to all Louisiana students attending "C," "D," and "F"-rated schools whose family income does not exceed 250 percent of the federal poverty level.

Covers up to 380,000 students.

State-funded students in private and parochial schools take certain standardized state tests. The state Board of Education may require those students to pass the state test in their grade level to move to the next grade.

Parent Trigger: 51 percent of parents in an "F"-rated school district can vote to require that their school be converted to a charter after three years of failure.

Community groups, nonprofits, universities, and local groups that meet state qualifications can be authorized to approve charter schools. Also creates standard application for charter school applicants statewide.