School reform tops agenda

Jeremy Alford
Capitol Correspondent

Published: Monday, March 12, 2012 at 11:58 a.m.

Last Modified: Monday, March 12, 2012 at 11:58 a.m.

BATON ROUGE — Education reforms aimed at students, teachers and administrators are expected to capture the most attention during the 85-day legislative session that kicked off today.

Lawmakers were set to convene at noon. Gov. Bobby Jindal was scheduled to speak an hour later to a joint session of the House and Senate.

The Republican governor’s agenda is dictating the tone and main topics to be considered in the three-month session. He’s pushing large changes to teacher pay and education funding, and he’s proposing to shrink retirement benefits for thousands of state workers.

“This is a lot to get done in a 12-week session,” Jindal said. “We’re going to focus on education first. But retirement is also a very important priority.”

Jindal has been crafting his education agenda for the past few years, beginning with a teacher-evaluation process approved by lawmakers in 2010, continuing through with longterm negotiations that remain in progress and culminating with last year’s elections for the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, which he heavily influenced.

The evaluation system is set to take effect with the new school year this fall, but some Democrats and Louisiana’s two teacher unions want the system delayed amid questions both have regarding its impact on public schools.

Jindal said he is confident, especially with a Republican majority in the Legislature, that his evaluation system will go unscathed during the session, and he wants to link several parts of his education package — such as teacher salaries and job security — to the system.

There are several moving pieces to Jindal’s education package, but it can be grouped into four distinct categories.

Choice: Parents with children in poorly performing public schools would be eligible for taxpayer-funded vouchers to send them to private schools.
Charter schools that perform well would also get the chance to open up new schools, including those that might be faith-based.

Revamping tenure: Teachers who fail under the new evaluation system would lose tenure. Additionally, seniority would no longer be a factor in personnel decisions, and annual pay raises based on years of service would be eliminated in favor of a merit-based system.

Power restructuring: Local superintendents would be afforded greater authority when it comes to personnel decisions, and granted more independence from their school boards.

Early-childhood development: Some preschool programs would become eligible for new state funding, but they would have to face the same accountability requirements as everyone else.

Bills related to these topics is expected to be debated by the Legislature’s education committees as soon as Wednesday or Thursday.

Many members of the Terrebonne-Lafourche legislative delegation said Jindal’s administration looks strong in terms of achieving its goals in terms of early-childhood development.

Sen. Troy Brown, D-Napoleonville, whose district includes much of Thibodaux and Assumption Parish, said the governor may also gain ground early on with his tenure plan.

“What the teacher unions are arguing has merit,” Brown said. “But I don’t believe in a blanket tenure system for every teacher. I’m not sure that should be there.”

The Louisiana Federation of Teachers and School Employees has issued statements declaring that due-process rights would be “gutted” under Jindal’s plan.

“Virtually every decision made about teachers’ professional lives will depend on the new, unproven teacher evaluation system,” the union published in a letter to its membership. “Teachers rated as ‘ineffective’ even once will be subject to termination. Up to 10 percent of Louisiana teachers could be immediately fired!”

As for Jindal’s plan to expand the state’s private school voucher program, a report released last month by the Louisiana Budget Project, a Baton Rouge-based advocacy group, described it as “lacking the strong accountability and transparency requirements that parents need to make informed decisions about their children’s educational needs.”

Rep. Dee Richard, a Thibodaux independent, said he’s heard more concerns voiced about the voucher provisions than anything else.

“I’m not dead set against the vouchers, but I do have concerns about how these failing schools are going to be labeled,” Richard said. “There are a lot of questions that are going unanswered.”
Asked which of Jindal’s policies will cause the most heated debate, some lawmakers said there’s little that won’t inspire thousands to visit the Capitol this spring.

“All of the above,” said Sen. Bret Allain, R-Franklin, whose district covers parts of Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes. “Everything seems to be generating a reaction from the public.”

During his speech at the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry’s recent annual meeting, Jindal forecasted as much.

“Throughout this process, there are going to be a lot of accusations made and a lot of name-calling, but through it all remember why we are in this fight. It’s to give our kids a world class education,” Jindal said. “We all need to check our party affiliations, ideologies, and political agendas at the door when it comes to improving our schools.”

Jindal’s agenda, however, isn’t the only one up for debate this year.

For example, LABI may explore privatizing transportation and food services in public schools.

Richard, the only local delegation member serving on an education committee, is pushing legislation that would enhance school discipline procedures and reign in sick leave regulations.

Rep. Joe Harrison, R-Napoleonville, wants to limit public school class sizes for kindergarten through fourth grade to 15 students and at least two teachers per class.

Harrison has introduced more than a dozen bills this session related to education, including the following:

House Bill 293 limits how bus drivers can achieve tenure.

House Bill 294 establishes a maximum award of $1,600 per semester for TOPS scholarships from 2013 to 2018.

House Bill 436 requires “instruction on the Founding Principles of the U.S. to be integrated into the high school American history course.”

House Bill 673 requires 80 percent of total school funding to be spent on classroom instruction for students.

House Bill 808 creates a program to grade parents on their participation in the educational progress of their children.

House Bill 944 eliminates extended sick leave for public school teachers and employees.

To review all of the education bills filed for the session, visit www.legis.state.la.us.