FEA: DeSantis fails to provide real solutions for public schools

TALLAHASSEE — Thousands of educators and supporters delivered the “state of the state” for public education at the Capitol on Monday. A sea of red-clad demonstrators shouting “fund our future” spoke to a system under great duress, strained to near breaking by years of disinvestment in the public schools that serve nearly 90 percent of Florida’s students, and in the teachers and support staff essential to providing students with a high-quality education.

In addition to delivering their message of a need for higher wages for all public school employees, the participants focused on the need for all of Florida’s students to attend fully staffed schools. The start of the 2019-20 school year saw more than 3,000 teacher vacancies; the number is currently still over 2,440 – a 10 percent increase from January 2019. Florida’s students deserve better, and they are relying on the governor and Legislature to invest in their future.

As Gov. DeSantis reiterated Tuesday during his State of the State address, he has begun to see the light on the need for increased teacher salaries. However, a proposal that fails to reward veteran teachers for their skill and years of experience will fail to cure this state’s ongoing and ever-worsening educator shortage, as well as yet another doomed-to-fail bonus scheme. On pay and other public education issues, DeSantis has failed to listen to the voices of educators while shaping his proposals.

“So far the solutions offered by DeSantis are the same ‘solutions’ that have been offered for the past two decades: further encroachment on local control and the seventh bonus program in 14 years. You can’t fix the problem with the same policies that created it,” said FEA President Fedrick Ingram.

Educators need real, reliable salaries, and any mention of bonuses was roundly booed by demonstrators on Monday. The governor’s pay proposal also fails to provide any pay relief for counselors, librarians, bus drivers, paraprofessionals and the host of other staff necessary to meeting our students’ needs.

The Florida Education Association (FEA) remains hopeful that the governor will start to see the bigger picture, that what Florida needs is not just a so-called “year of the teacher,” but a long-term sustainable plan for all of our students and educators. The FEA is calling for a “Decade of Progress” starting with a $2.4 billion investment in public education this legislative session.

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The Florida Education Association is the state’s largest association of professional employees, with more than 145,000 members. FEA represents PreK-12 teachers, higher education faculty, educational staff professionals, students at our colleges and universities preparing to become teachers and retired education employees.