FEA: Salary increase welcomed; work remains to be done

TALLAHASSEE — The proposed education budget finalized today by the state Legislature makes clear that the voices of the Florida Education Association (FEA) have been heard, but much work remains to be done to move public education forward and better serve our students.

Two years ago, the state budget increase for education worked out to 47 cents per student, and the teacher pay plan was a failed bonus program. Now bonus schemes have been scrapped, $500 million is set aside for teacher pay, and base funding will increase by $40 per student.

“We have brought to the forefront the issues of educator pay and education funding with our Fund Our Future campaign, through our members’ work in their communities and the state capital,” said FEA President Fedrick Ingram.

To overcome more than a decade of underfunding for public education, the Florida Education Association has called for a Decade of Progress, with a substantial investment this year in programs for students, the public schools that educate 90 percent of Florida’s children, and in retaining and recruiting teachers and support staff. That investment would include money to raise salaries for all school employees.

“We appreciate that the Legislature recognized that salaries and not bonuses are a better approach to teacher compensation,” Ingram said. “The allocation of $500 million for teacher salary increases is welcomed and appreciated. We recognize this is an important down payment in what must be a multi-year investment, and it was accomplished while facing significant challenges.”

With the budget finalized today, almost all teachers and instructional staff in the state should see pay increases next year. It is not a perfect plan, but a good start. However, the $40 in the base student allocation will make it challenging to provide pay increases for our bus drivers, paraprofessionals, food-service workers, custodians and other staff essential to our schools.

For classroom teachers, the plan sets an aspirational minimum salary of $47,500 annually, although not all districts will be able to meet that goal this year with the funds allocated. In a positive move, the plan includes certified pre-K teachers, who were ignored in previous pay-enhancement plans.

Florida has a severe teacher shortage, and more than 300,000 students started school last fall without a qualified, permanent teacher. We need to retain experienced educators as well as recruit new teachers for our classrooms.

Lawmakers have signaled that they will take a multi-year approach to increasing salaries. The FEA will continue to advocate for lawmakers to work with us to ensure that all school employees are included in future pay initiatives. “We look forward to building upon this salary plan next year with a keen focus on our veteran teachers and our education staff professionals,” Ingram said.

We also look forward to working with lawmakers in future sessions to free districts and teachers from the many burdensome laws and rules that interfere with local control and the professional judgment of teachers.
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.