



# Bill to raise teacher pay, years for tenure also raising concerns



Many local education professionals have concerns about a piece of legislation currently known as the "PREP Act." "PREP" is short for Preparing and Rewarding Education Professionals.

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By BRITTANY BUBOSE, Special to The Daily Home | Updated 6 hours ago

A bill that would raise teacher pay in Alabama but also raise the number of years it takes to earn tenure is also raising concerns for area educators.



The most recent draft of the bill is called the PREP Act — Preparing and Rewarding Education Professionals. It was previously called the RAISE Act, for Rewarding Advancement in Instruction and Student Excellence.

The third draft of the bill (out of at least five expected drafts) says it would increase the number of years required to gain tenure from three to five. It also provides a procedure for observing and evaluating teachers, principals and assistant principals on performance and student achievement.

“I want to make sure in this bill that there is a fair evaluation between teachers,” said Sen. Del Marsh, R-Anniston, president pro tempore of the Alabama Senate and the sponsor of the bill.

Marsh said starting teachers who decline the tenure track altogether would be paid more than starting teachers receive now, and “all teachers over time” would receive a higher average salary.

The Alabama Education Association, a lobbying organization for teachers, is “taking this bill very seriously because we would not want to hurt the way our teachers earn their living,” said Amy Marlowe, AEA’s assistant executive secretary for member advocacy and outreach.

The bill would allow a governing board to evaluate a tenured teacher every other year. A tenured teacher who receives two consecutive ratings of “below expectations” would be subject to personnel action by the governing board.

Reached last week, superintendents and educators from St. Clair and Talladega counties did not respond favorably to the bill. Efforts to reach Talladega City School interim Superintendent Dr. Frank Costanzo were not successful Friday.

Pell City Superintendent Dr. Michael Barber said he has some concerns about proposed legislation that could change the way teachers are evaluated.

“I would like to see how they are going to determine student performances,” he said. And while legislation could increase the number of years a teacher to earn tenure from three to five years, Barber said it could actually take longer to become tenured, if a teacher’s job performance is based on student performance.

"I have concerns and questions," he said.

## Questions and concerns

He questions how student performance is measured, and who is going to do the evaluation for teachers. Barber said students perform at different levels, so are student performances based on grades, test scores or how an individual student actually improves from one year to the next? He said teacher evaluations could vary from school to school or from system to system.

"We want to be consistent," he said.

He also said what may work for one school system, may not work for another.

"What's broken here?" Barber asked. "We have good teachers and a good system."

He said changes made in the legislation could divert the energy and direction of school administrators who are making strides with improving a school system, forcing a school system to start over with a new set of rules that may not be beneficial to a school or system as a whole.

"The bill is problematic for several reasons," said Talladega County Schools Superintendent Dr. Suzanne Lacey. "First, the bill suggests that teacher pay increases will be tied to student performance. Research indicates that student performance is certainly a critical component of the overall effectiveness of a teacher, but should not be the sole component. There are many additional components that should be considered and are a part of the current evaluation instrument in Talladega County Schools, which I believe gives an accurate account of a teacher's performance."

Sunni Wyatt, who is an instructional support specialist for Eden Elementary and Williams Intermediate, said legislation that changes the way educators are evaluated for tenure and advancement could become more subjective. Currently, she said, pay raises for teachers are based on education and experience.

"We already have an evaluation system," she said. "I don't think we should spend more time, energy and money on a new evaluation system."

Educators should be involved with any process that involves changes in the way a teachers are evaluated, Wyatt said.

"Let educators handle the business of education, not people who are not in the profession," she said. "It's been a long time since teachers have seen a raise. And it is unclear if this act will actually increase pay for teachers."

St. Clair Schools Superintendent Jenny Seals said her system has an evaluation system in place that seems to work.

"Sometimes, students do better in one classroom than in other classrooms," she said. "Sometimes, principals place students with teachers who can help their needs better. I am not for tying the teacher bill with student performance. There are issues dealing with that."

## Taking tenure?

Seals said she didn't have a problem with the tenure portion of the bill.

"Teachers who do their job, fulfill their responsibilities and care about their students are not worried about tenure," she said.

Talladega County's Lacey agreed.

"The part of the bill that addresses teacher tenure is workable in my opinion," she said. "Good teachers do exceptional work and are extremely conscientious."

Extending tenure for two additional years would give beginning teachers more time to develop a strong foundation for innovative methodology, the integration of technology and intervention strategies."

Springville Middle School teacher Faith Burns said while Marsh's proposal sounds great in theory, there are many things the senators have not considered about the operations of a school.

"Attaching teacher pay to variables outside of the teacher's control could potentially lead to a teacher shortage," Burns said. "Imagine a school system in a low socio-economic region with limited community support and educational apathy trying to recruit teachers. Those school systems already experience difficulties recruiting teachers without pay being attached to variables out of their control."

As for delaying tenure for five years, Burns said three years is an adequate length of time for a school's administration to determine the capabilities of an educator.

"The instability of a teacher's fate and future should not be drawn out," she said. "This instability, like attaching teacher pay to uncontrollable variables, could lead to a teacher shortage and be detrimental to school's recruiting and maintaining teachers."

Burns said she could not speculate about the goals of the bill to end or significantly change tenure.

"I do believe the idea of tenure will continue to be a heavily debated topic," she said. "I have regularly heard the argument that good teachers shouldn't have anything to worry about. As a teacher in her 21st year in education whose teaching career almost ended after being non-renewed in her tenure year in another school system, I personally know that heartache and stress. If tenure is abolished, what protections would be put into place for teachers to know that schools systems would not abuse the termination of teachers."

Burns also said that as a former school librarian, she has often wondered what the basis would be for certificated personnel who are not in a traditional classroom setting.

"Many special education students do not participate in traditional student performance assessments," she said. "What would be the basis for pay for special education teachers? Sen. Marsh should spend a great deal of time with educators, administrators and superintendents before proceeding with a bill that could dramatically affect public education."

Lacey also said she was concerned that the "bill was developed by non-educators. Valuable information could be learned from educators who understand best practice and the overall framework for creating a solid learning environment."

Sylacauga City Schools Superintendent Dr. Todd Freeman believes a standardized test alone cannot possibly determine a teacher's effectiveness.

"The first point for clarification needed is the definition of 'student performance,'" Freeman said. "In Sylacauga, student performance is measured based on our mission to prepare our students for college, career, and community readiness. A standardized test alone cannot possibly determine a teacher's effectiveness in fulfilling that mission."

### **Making things fair**

He said a fair evaluation system would consider measures such as success in dual enrollment credit, qualifying scores on AP tests, acceptance to military service, mastery of soft skills, and citizenship.

"A fair evaluation system would apply to all teachers that work in schools that receive state education funds; these would include teachers in private schools that receive funds by virtue of the Alabama Accountability Act, Charter Schools, and virtual schools. A fair evaluation system would be preceded by fair and equitable funding of resources, teachers, and support for every school no matter what their address is," Freeman said.

On extending the tenure track from three to five years, Freeman said when used appropriately, tenure is a vital protection for good teachers.

"Tenure has an important place in insuring that our best teachers stay in the profession. Unfortunately, it is too often associated with protecting bad teachers," he said. "I believe that our strongest teachers and administrators would be concerned about whether it was three years or five years. Our great teachers focus on doing what is best for students, not trying to figure out how to keep their jobs."

Marsh also says his bill is an avenue to higher pay, especially for starting teachers, but also for increasing average teacher pay overall.

Freeman said research has proven time and again that the most important in-school variable in student achievement is the classroom teacher.

"Appropriate pay is one component of a system to recruit and retain the best teachers," he said. "It must also include fully funding our education system, protecting the pension system, and ensuring a tenure system that protects good teachers."

What remains unclear is how much more the starting salary will be for teachers who opt out of the tenure track compared to new teachers who choose tenure; how much the bill will cost the state overall; and where the money will come from.

The main drawback with assessing the bill seems to be that there have been so many versions of it.

"The bill is ever-changing," Seals said. "I'm not sure that what was said today will be said tomorrow."

Because there are so many versions of the RAISE or PREP Act, state Superintendent of Education Dr. Tommy Bice declined to comment.

A final version of the bill could be introduced this week.

*Brittany DuBose is a Journalism and Communication senior at Troy University. Daily Home staff writers David Atchison, Gary Hanner, Denise Sinclair and Chris Norwood contributed to this report.*



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