

Committee on Education Postsecondary

CS/CS/HB 1279 — Education

by Education & Employment Committee; Careers & Workforce Subcommittee; and Rep. Kincart Jonsson and others (CS/CS/SB 7038 by Rules Committee; Appropriations Committee on Pre-K - 12 Education; and Education Postsecondary Committee)

Virtual Instruction and School Choice

The bill modifies provisions related to virtual and digital instruction and school choice. The bill:

- Revises notification requirements for school districts to include all public and private virtual instruction options, rather than only the Florida Virtual School, and to provide student access based on student choice.
- Authorizes students receiving a Family Empowerment Scholarship for Unique Abilities to satisfy the regular and direct contact requirement by attending a private school's physical location at least two school days per week.
- Requires the Department of Education (DOE) to make specified CAPE Digital Tool certificates available to middle grades students and limits such students to two certificates per school year.

Student Health and Safety

The bill modifies provisions related to epinephrine devices and safe-school officers. The bill:

- Authorizes public and private schools to purchase, maintain, and administer Food and Drug Administration-approved epinephrine delivery devices, rather than limiting references to epinephrine auto-injectors.
- Clarifies that, notwithstanding local ordinances or development orders, a school district or charter school may use any combination of safe-school officer options authorized by law.

Early Learning Accountability

The bill modifies provisions related to early learning provider accountability. The bill:

- Updates Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) accountability provisions by removing obsolete kindergarten readiness-rate provisions and revising related accountability references.
- Revises the criteria to maintain a designation as a Gold Seal Quality Care provider to specify the consequence for class I violations requires a determination that the provider is the primary cause of the violation.

Education Courses and Programs

The bill requires applied algebra courses as a part of mathematics pathways, clarifies Title I expenditures, and provides a dance course substitution for graduation. The bill:

- Directs the DOE to identify and publish mathematics pathways for students by September 1, 2026.
- Directs the DOE to develop applied algebra courses aligned with the identified mathematics pathways and career and technical education career clusters by January 1, 2027, for district implementation in the 2029-2030 school year.

- Requires each applied algebra course to prepare students for the statewide, standardized Algebra I end-of-course assessment, satisfy applicable mathematics credit requirements for high school graduation and middle grades promotion, and be accepted as a mathematics credit for state university admissions.
- Authorizes a school district to reserve up to one percent of Title I funds for specified STEM-related educational services, technologies, and instructional supports.
- Authorizes a qualifying one-credit dance techniques course to satisfy a physical education or performing arts credit required to earn a standard high school diploma.

Student Supports, Literacy, and School Improvement

The bill modifies provisions related to individual education plans (IEP), educational emergencies, and students struggling with reading. The bill:

- Requires a school district to notify a parent within 10 school days when a related service identified in a student's IEP is not provided as scheduled, explain the reason the service was not provided, and discuss a plan for make-up services.
- Requires a school district to inform parents at each IEP meeting of the right to access all service provider logs or progress notes within 15 school days after the service is provided.
- Expands the definition of an educational emergency to include designated persistently low-performing schools, thereby allowing a district school board to exercise specified authority over personnel contracts in the selection, placement, and compensation of instructional personnel to improve student performance.
- Requires, for a student with a reading deficiency, the student plan and parent notices include information about eligibility for the New Worlds Reading Initiative.
- Expands summer bridge program eligibility for VPK students by raising from the 10th to the 25th percentile the eligible score threshold for student achievement on the final administration of the statewide assessment in English Language Arts.

Acceleration and Advanced Coursework

The bill modifies provisions related to advanced and acceleration courses and examinations. The bill:

- Requires the State Board of Education to establish a statewide uniform weighted grading system for honors courses and articulated acceleration mechanisms, which must be used by district school boards when calculating high school grade point averages.
- Authorizes bonus funds for school districts and teachers for students' successful completion of Florida advanced courses and tests, which are aligned with bonuses offered for other advanced and career examinations.
- Specifies that the postsecondary institutions eligible to participate in the dual enrollment program are Florida public postsecondary institutions and eligible not-for-profit independent colleges and universities.

Consumer Protections and Disability Services

The bill strengthens consumer protections and oversight for providers serving individuals with disabilities. The bill:

- Requires fee-based service providers serving individuals who are blind or visually impaired to disclose whether equivalent or substantially similar services are available at no cost through the Division of Blind Services or another public agency.
- Replaces the vocational rehabilitation service provider registration process with an application and approval framework, establishes minimum qualifications and annual approval requirements, and requires the development of an annual effectiveness report for approved providers.

Postsecondary Governance and Institution Operations

The bill revises provisions relating to private postsecondary institution governance, transfer degree approvals, and licensure. The bill:

- Provides that colleges and schools licensed or approved by another state agency are exempt from licensure by the Commission for Independent Education (CIE).
- Specifies that institutions approved by another state agency to offer one or more licensed programs or courses are not exempt from CIE licensure solely because of such licensure or approval, but clarifies that existing exemptions for contract training, continuing education, or professional development programs are still in effect.
- Reduces from 60 to 30 days the timeframe for Florida College System institutions and state universities to submit comments on proposed specialized associate in arts transfer degree programs.
- Extends the date from September 1, 2027, to September 1, 2032, for a qualifying master's degree to be conferred under a licensure pathway for a marriage and family therapist.
- Extends the repeal date from July 1, 2026, to July 1, 2027 for the Statewide Data Repository for Anonymous Human Trafficking Data at the University of South Florida (USF).
- Changes the due date for the next annual report from July 1, 2026, to January 31, 2027, and requires the USF Trafficking in Persons - Risk to Resilience Lab to consult with the Department of Law Enforcement on the report and analysis of its findings.

Institution Accreditation

The bill revises requirements for changes to institutional accreditation and authorized accreditors. The bill:

- Requires institutions to seek a one-time change in accreditation within three years after reaffirmation or a fifth-year review, rather than in the year following such review, and removes the requirement that accreditation be sought only from a regional accrediting agency.
- Removes references to accreditation by the American Bar Association relating to the Florida A&M University College of Law and the Florida International University College of Law.

Performance-Based Funding and Accountability

The bill modifies the State University System performance-based funding model to include, with the four-year graduation rate metric, an adjusted cohort graduation rate for engineering students, and revises the access rate metric to measure the percentage of first-year undergraduate students receiving a Pell Grant, rather than all undergraduate students.

Student Financial Aid and Tuition Policies

The bill revises provisions relating to residency, tuition waivers, the Benacquisto Scholarship Program, and Florida Prepaid College program administration. The bill:

- Expands resident tuition protections to specify that individuals and their dependent children do not lose Florida-resident status by serving outside the state as active-duty or civilian personnel of the United States Department of State or the Department of Defense, or teaching at a Department of Defense Dependent School.
- Specifies that to qualify for the tuition and fee exemption for homeless students, a student must have previously been determined to be homeless by a Florida public school, and a distance learning homeless student residing out of state is ineligible for the exemption.
- Allows eligible students to defer receipt of an initial Benacquisto Scholarship Program award for up to one year while retaining eligibility.
- Authorizes the chair of the Florida Prepaid College Board to appoint a qualified designee to serve as the director of the board's direct-support organization and on the board of directors of Florida ABLE, Inc.

If approved by the Governor, or allowed to become law without the Governor's signature, these provisions take effect on July 1, 2026.

Vote: Senate 36-1; House 81-16