

Governor changes plan; full-day pre-kindergarten restored

By Rep. Debbie Buckner

Responding to the voices of educators, parents and lawmakers from across the state, Gov. Nathan Deal has reversed course on his proposal to reduce the instruction day for Georgia's pre-kindergarten program from 6.5 hours to 4 hours. On March 7, the Governor announced his new proposal, which restores the full-day program and instead shortens the Pre-K year from 180 days to 160. He also cut back on his original proposal to add 5,000 slots to Pre-K enrollment, now recommending only 2,000 new slots.

House Democrats had been working with our Republican colleagues on bipartisan alternatives to reducing the Pre-K class day since the Governor announced his original proposal for cutbacks to Pre-K and the HOPE Scholarship program. At this time, funding for both Pre-K and HOPE is limited to Georgia Lottery revenue, which has been unable to keep up with rising costs for both programs in recent years. Changes to the Pre-K program will be finalized in the annual state budget for fiscal year 2012, which was approved by the House of Representatives on March 11 and is now under consideration in the Senate.

HOPE Plan on Governor's Desk: A majority of the Senate voted March 8 to approve legislation that proposes changes to the HOPE Scholarship program to help offset its financial deficit caused by college tuition increasing faster than Lottery revenues. Most HOPE recipients would see their benefits reduced to 90 percent of their tuition costs under HB 326. That percentage would increase or decrease in future years based on the rise or fall of Lottery proceeds. Students who come out of high school with a 3.7 grade point average (GPA) and at least a 1,200 Scholastic Aptitude Test score and are able to maintain a 3.3 GPA in college would retain a full HOPE Scholarship for tuition. Other changes include a low-interest loan program for students who need more financial aid, reduced sales commissions for Lottery retailers and limits on salary bonuses for Lottery employees. HB 326 went back to the House of Representatives for consideration of Senate changes, including the extension of full HOPE Scholarships for the top two graduates from each high school in the state. On March 10, a majority of House members voted to agree with those changes, sending the measure to the Governor's desk for his signature.

FY 2012 Budget: The House voted March 11 to approve an \$18.25 billion annual state budget proposal for fiscal year 2012. HB 78, which now goes to the Senate for its consideration, would impose a 20 percent increase on health insurance premiums paid by Georgia educators and other state employees to deal with a \$250 million shortfall in revenue for the state health benefits plan. Although state revenues have increased by 8.3 percent through the first eight months of fiscal year 2011, legislative budget writers have had to deal with the loss of \$1 billion in federal stimulus funds that were used to balance the budget last year. The overall budget plan reflects a 7 percent average cut in spending by state agencies and changes in the Lottery-funded HOPE Scholarship and pre-kindergarten programs to deal

with revenue shortfalls. Cuts in Medicaid reimbursement rates paid to health care providers are also a part of the House budget proposal. I voted “no” because these budget cuts disproportionately affect education, public safety, health care and human services, all important to the hard-working families of District 130.

Midyear Budget Finalized: The House and Senate have agreed on final changes to the midyear adjustment to the \$18 billion state budget for fiscal year 2011, which ends June 30. The budget amendment reflects an overall reduction of about \$300 million in state spending. HB 77 now goes to the Governor for his signature.

Interstate Health Insurance: A majority of House members voted March 10 to authorize insurers to sell health insurance policies in Georgia that have been approved in other states. I voted against HB 47 out of concern the out-of-state policies would not provide coverage for certain procedures that are mandated in Georgia to ensure high-quality coverage for our citizens. The measure now goes to the Senate for its consideration.

Controlled Substances: The House voted March 8 to approve legislation that would add certain chemicals used to manufacture bath salts to the state’s list of controlled substances. The chemicals can be used in the manufacturing of methamphetamines. HB 199 now goes to the Senate for its consideration.

2012 Election Dates: House members voted March 8 in favor of HB 302, which would set the general primary election date for July 31 of next year. The candidate qualifying period would begin May 23 at 9 a.m. and end May 25 at noon. On Thursday, House members approved HB 158, which would change Georgia’s nonpartisan elections, including judicial races, back to being contested in conjunction with primaries rather than the November general election. Both measures now go to the Senate for its consideration.

Boating Safety: Legislation approved by the House on March 8 would reduce the maximum blood-alcohol level for someone operating a boat from 0.10 grams to 0.08 grams. HB 315 now goes to the Senate for its consideration.

PSC Bill Defeated: On March 8, House members defeated legislation that would have changed the way the chairman of the Public Service Commission is selected. Under HB 216, the chairman would have been elected by a majority vote of the five PSC members. The 103-60 House vote against the measure means the regulatory board’s chairmanship will continue to rotate to a different member each year.

General Assembly Online: Throughout the session, you can read the details and check the status of legislation and watch live broadcasts of House and Senate proceedings online at www.legis.ga.gov. Lawmakers were scheduled to return to the Capitol on Monday, March 14, for Day 29 of the 40-day session. Wednesday, March 16, is Day 30, also known as “cross-over” day because it is the final day for

either the House or Senate to pass legislation in time for it to be considered by the other chamber this year.

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