



# Legislative Link

*A Publication for the Members of the N.C. Association of School Administrators*

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## **NCASA Members Visit General Assembly**

On Wednesday, more than 200 North Carolina Association of School Administrators members from across the state walked the halls of the General Assembly to urge their lawmakers to minimize the budget cuts that already are being considered for public schools as state leaders grapple with a revenue shortfall for the current fiscal year and begin work on the state spending plan for the next two years. The NCASA members who made these legislative visits participated in the opening portion of the organization's 2009 Annual Conference that was held March 11-13 at the nearby Raleigh Convention Center.

Some of the NCASA members were joined by their school board members in the legislative visits, and all shared the same concerns about the need to prevent devastating state budget cuts from affecting public schools and the 1.4 million students they serve.

The NCASA group also heard from some key lawmakers about the budget outlook and other major issues facing the 2009 General Assembly. The briefings were presented by House Speaker Joe Hackney, D-Orange; Rep. Tricia Cotham, D-Mecklenburg; Rep. Douglas Yongue, D-Scotland; and Sen. Tony Rand, D-Cumberland.

Speaker Hackney addressed the major issues facing the General Assembly this year and noted that our state Constitution requires the Governor to balance the budget by June 30, which will be particularly challenging with current shortfalls. Despite the state's budget problems, he noted that North Carolina will keep education at the top of its agenda, since Governor Perdue this week indicated her desire to be an "Education Governor." He also said he expects the passage of legislation calling for North Carolina voters to decide whether the State Superintendent of Public Instruction should be elected or appointed, and he pledged that the State House will continue to focus on efforts to reduce high school dropouts.

Rep. Yongue discussed the state budget outlook for public schools and outlined the tentative schedule for the various stages the state budget must go through over the next few weeks. The first step will be the Governor's rollout of her budget proposal on March 17, and then legislators will hold meetings for the remainder of that week to review her spending plan. The Senate hopes to have its version of the budget completed by April 9, according to Yongue, and the House budget subcommittees hope to finish work on their various sections of the budget by May 8, with the budget plan to be

finalized by the full House by May 22. The target date for House and Senate negotiators to iron out their expected differences in the state budget is June 26.

Sen. Rand shared with the NCASA group some of the changes that have been proposed for the State Health Plan, which is facing a financial shortfall and is one of the factors contributing to the state budget problems. He noted that the changes are included in his Senate Bill 287 that this week cleared two Senate committees and then were aired in a briefing held for the full Senate. Those proposals were highlighted in the Feb. 20 edition of NCASA's *Legislative Link*, which may be viewed at <http://ncasa.net/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=7>, and they are scheduled for a Senate floor debate on March 16 at 7 p.m. Rand emphasized that it is important to minimize the additional funding the state needs to invest in the State Health Plan so that funds for education can be preserved. He also noted that while many of the proposed changes to the Plan will require higher out-of-pocket costs for employees and retirees, the changes are in lieu of the need for the state to start requiring all employees to pay a portion of their own health insurance premiums that are now fully covered by the state.

"If we charged every employee \$10 a month for coverage, we could bring down the costs and have a much better plan," Rand said. "There is great opposition to that, so we won't do it. But I did want you to be aware that option is out there." He added that opponents say that asking employees to pay for their own health care premiums for the first time is a "slippery slope" that eventually could have them contributing more and more each year.

On a brighter subject, Rep. Cotham updated NCASA participants on her House Bill 537, which seeks a law change to ensure that assistant principals do not face a pay decrease when they leave the classroom to become a school leader. She emphasized that she had worked with NCASA, the North Carolina Principals & Assistant Principals' Association and other stakeholders in developing this proposal and a separate proposal that will soon allow North Carolina to pilot a National Board Certification program for principals.

Rep. Cotham also urged NCASA members to get involved in the legislative process to educate lawmakers about the important role that school administrators play in public schools and about the challenges they face in their jobs daily.

"Your legislators need to hear from you!" Rep. Cotham said.

## **Governor Pledges K-12 Support In Address**

In her first State of the State address, Gov. Beverly Perdue on Monday night delivered a sobering message that painful budget cuts are ahead for most state agencies, but she also pledged that despite the deepening recession, she would propose higher per-student spending for public schools.

She said that she would find a way to get more money into the classrooms of secondary and elementary schools "even in these tough times," which prompted a standing ovation of a joint session of the legislature, her gathered Cabinet and other state officials.

House Speaker Joe Hackney later told the NCASA members who visited the General Assembly this week: "We'll be looking for a road map from her on that. ... We've had 16 years of education governors, and she has just announced that she is going to follow that tradition, and we will be right there with her in that."

In 2007-08, total per-pupil spending in North Carolina was \$8,521. The state share of that amount was \$5,616 per student. Appealing to critics of testing requirements, Perdue proposed that the state end "testing mania" in the public schools by "eliminating duplicative or unnecessary tests" which take away from instructional time. Perdue also mentioned her recent reorganizing of North Carolina's public school system with the appointment of Dr. Bill Harrison as the CEO of the Department of Public Instruction and Chairman of the State Board of Education. She said that this appointment would add "accountability and clear direction to a system badly in need of both."

The Governor outlined her plan for education, a “pathway that offers courses of study that fit students’ needs – all the way through vocational, community college, or college. Seamless learning, pre-K through 20, that’s the goal.” She said.

Perdue’s “College Promise” aims to remove financial barriers to higher education access, which she identified as “not a luxury” but a “necessity” for students today. Access to technology in the classroom and programs such as North Carolina’s Virtual Public High School were identified by Perdue as ways to assure educational equity and level “the education playing field for students.”

Governor Perdue is scheduled to unveil her state budget proposal next week to the General Assembly. Education funding is a priority for Perdue even with the tight budget, and she emphasized that it is “the engine that propels North Carolina’s future.

“It cannot – and will not – be sacrificed,” she pledged.

## **Perdue Takes Further Action On Budget Crisis**

On Wednesday Gov. Beverly Perdue seized nearly \$800 million in state reserves and said she plans to use \$250 million of the \$787 million fund to shore up the ailing State Health Plan. She didn’t lay out any further plans to spend the money but emphasized the necessity of the move, saying in a written statement, “securing the Rainy Day Fund is necessary for the continuance of day-to-day government operations. Put simply, this move makes sure we will have the cash to pay the bills.”

The Senate has planned legislation that would put the same amount into the State Health Plan and is expected to vote on that proposal next week.

The state Constitution gives the Governor emergency powers that include seizing appropriated money when the budget is out of balance and day-to-day government operations need funding. Speaker of the House Joe Hackney, D-Orange, said designating money for savings does not amount to an appropriation. “She can’t spend it without legislative authority, in my opinion,” Hackney told the media this week.

Senate leader Marc Basnight said he agreed with Perdue’s decision. “I recommended to her that she do it some weeks ago,” said Basnight, D-Dare. He said the financial crisis facing the state justifies the Governor’s move and that she faces a difficult predicament.

The shortfall for the current fiscal year is now up to \$1.2 billion and expected to reach \$2.2 billion by the end of the fiscal year. State Budget Director Charlie Perusse has predicted an economic and revenue recovery beginning in the 2010-11 fiscal year, but not before major budget cuts occur.

“The decisions that the Governor has to make are some of the toughest ... in the last 80 years,” Perusse told reporters.

## **Healthy Youth Act Continues Sex Ed. Discussion**

Students packed the House Education Committee Tuesday to urge lawmakers to provide them a choice in sex education curricula. The students attended the meeting to support the Healthy Youth Act (House Bill 88), which would provide parents and students a choice between abstinence-until-marriage and comprehensive sexuality education programs.

The bill, which passed the House Education Committee by a party line 32-21 vote, would require all LEAs to offer both an abstinence-until-marriage program and an abstinence-based comprehensive sexuality health education program. Parents and legal guardians would be allowed to select one of the two available tracks for his or her child each year in grades 7-9.

Sponsors Rep. Bob England (D-Rutherford), Rep. Susan Fisher (D-Buncombe), Rep. Alma Adams (D-Guilford), and Rep. Winkie Wilkins (D-Person) stressed to members the advantages of providing parents a choice in which curriculum their child takes.

"Parents will decide, not politicians, the content of sex education that is right for their children," said Rep. England.

"This bill keeps the abstinence until marriage curriculum and allows ... a choice," said Rep. Fisher.

North Carolina currently ranks 9<sup>th</sup> in the nation for highest teen pregnancy rate and the number of youth contracting STDs have increased even with the abstinence-only education program.

"There is an urgent need in North Carolina to address this public health concern," said Rep. England. Current law requires schools to provide an abstinence-until-marriage sex education curriculum. School districts that wish to provide a more comprehensive course must hold a public hearing and make course materials available to the public.

Approximately 12 school districts in North Carolina, including New Hanover County Schools, offer a comprehensive sex education curriculum. New Hanover has been providing the two-track curriculum since 1993-1994. There the comprehensive curriculum is three times more often chosen over the abstinence-only curriculum.

House Bill 88 was referred to the House Health Committee, where it faces another vote before it can move on to the House floor.

## **Summary Of This Week's Action On Bills Affecting Public Schools**

For a complete summary of this week's legislative actions on legislation affecting public schools and their personnel, please see this week's "Weekly Bill Action Summary" at: <http://www.ncasa.net/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=227>. The same site offers a status report on all bills NCASA is tracking for our members during the 2009 legislative session, and that information is arranged in categories to make it easier to locate specific legislation of interest.

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