



LEGISLATIVE NEWSLETTER LEGISLATIVE NEWSLETTER

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Budget & Legislative Action

Governor's Budget Plan: Gov. Roy Cooper's first budget plan, largely ceremonial, calls for increased funding for education and other goals he says will drive a more prosperous state. Republicans scoffed at the proposal, calling it a return to Democratic overspending. The governor's plan will go to the GOP-led legislature but the Senate will come up with its own plan that will then be submitted to the House.

Here are education highlights of the plan, unveiled by Cooper last Wednesday:

- Public school teachers would get average 10 percent raises over two years – which Cooper said would mark the largest increase in 10 years – and \$150 stipends to purchase classroom materials.
- The governor said his plan also is designed to position North Carolina in the top 10 most educated states by 2025 by:
 - a. Increasing enrollment in early-childhood education from 22 to 55 percent (an additional 4,700 slots)
 - b. Raising the overall high school graduation rate from 85 to 91 percent
 - c. Expanding the number of adults with higher education degrees from 38 to 55 percent.
- A scholarship program would be established to forgive \$10,000 loans for tuition and fees in exchange for a commitment to teach in public schools for four years or three years in low-performing/low-wealth schools.
- Another program would benefit community college and recent high school graduates who otherwise would be without other sources of financial aid.

Other Top Budget Items, GOP Reaction: Cooper said his budget plan would move toward his call for a better-educated, healthier and more prosperous state -- goals shared by Republican lawmakers but that have been funded at lesser levels than the governor's plan. The \$23.4 billion that Cooper's two-year budget would spend in the coming fiscal year represents a \$1 billion increase over the current budget, or a 5.1 percent increase, followed by a 1.6 percent increase to \$24 billion in the second year.

The budget plan, unveiled to reporters at Durham Technical Community College, would not raise taxes or fees, cut services or tap special funds. The governor said efficiencies in the budget and better technology will help streamline spending. The 161-page document outlines in numbers the ideas that Cooper has been promising.

The budget plan will be presented to a legislative committee on Thursday. While Cooper said legislators will find common ground in his budget, the top Republican legislator said it returns to high taxes and deficits.

"We believe a more prudent approach is investing generously in public education and other priorities while still saving for a rainy day and returning hard-earned tax dollars to our taxpayers," Senate Leader Phil Berger said. "The governor's proposal is a step backward from this successful approach that has led to a booming North Carolina economy and helped generate close to 500,000 new jobs."

What Else is Up

School Calendars: A couple of dozen or so bills have been introduced to relax state mandates on the start and end dates for the school year. The move comes at a time when a state report recommends only giving such flexibility to low-performing schools as a way of raising student achievement.

In 2004, the General Assembly passed a school calendar law in 2004 at the urging of the tourism industry and some parents who were concerned how schools were shortening summer break. Some school districts were starting traditional-calendar classes in the first week of August. Under existing law, schools can start no earlier than the Monday closest to Aug. 26 and end no later than the Friday closest to June 11. Charter schools and year-round schools are exempt.

Class-Size Reductions: Any state-mandated class-size reductions should be funded by the state, Gov. Cooper said recently. "You can't tell these local school districts to do this and that, and this and that, and not provide the right kind of funding," he said. Cooper visited Guilford Child Development's Elm Street Center to tour the facility.

His comments come at a time when North Carolina school leaders are concerned that state lawmakers won't soften a mandated reduction in class sizes that could lead to cuts in art, music and physical education classes. The state House unanimously passed House Bill 13 after school districts said they might have to cut arts and PE classes to help pay for new class-size limits in kindergarten through third grade this fall. But the legislation, which reduces but doesn't eliminate the class-size cuts, has stalled in the Senate.

School Closing: The State Board of Education voted unanimously Thursday to close Kestrel Heights' high school in Durham but will allow the charter school to remain open for students in grades K-8. The high school will close July 1 but can apply to reopen in three years. The state board agreed to close the school after the discovery that 40 percent of the students received diplomas they didn't earn in the past eight years. Kestrel Heights has 10 days to appeal the decision.

Noteworthy

Charter Schools: The North Carolina Association for Public Charter Schools has named Rhonda Dillingham as its new executive director. Dillingham co-founded Uwharrie Charter School in Asheboro and brings a decade of teaching and leadership experience from both public charter schools and district schools, according to the group. "

Quotes of the Week

"Get busy living or get busy dying."

- Stephen King, writer

"Maybe it's been on for a couple weeks."

- Secretary of Military and Veterans Affairs Larry Hall, getting laughs as he referred to a battery-run microphone that wasn't working at the start of his appearance before the Senate Committee on Commerce and Insurance. Hall had declined three previous invitations from the committee but appeared on Thursday after being subpoenaed (WRAL News, 3/02/17)

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