

Legislative Link

A legislative update provided by the United Way of Florida, Inc.

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United Way of Florida, Inc.
307 E. Seventh Avenue
Tallahassee, FL 32303
850/488-8287

FULL SPEED AHEAD!

One legislator this week likened the Florida Legislature to Chicago's O'Hara Airport. He noted, that there are hundreds of bills circling the Legislature that have been passed by Committees and are waiting to "land" on the Senate and House floors to be voted out and sent to the Governor. Those bills started landing fast and furious on Wednesday...they haven't stopped.

This abbreviated version of your *Legislative Link* contains a summary of the Learning Gateway legislation that has risen in recent days from what appeared to be the ashes of defeat to possible passage. Because other bills have been passed at such a dizzying rate this week, it will take days – if not weeks – to fully and accurately understand what has and hasn't been passed. Consequently, we will not attempt today to clarify what is not yet known!

As this *Legislative Link* went to press, the Senate was considering an amended budget proposal. Next week, we will provide you a comparison of what ultimately passes in the House proposed 2002-2003 budget.

As this *Legislative Link* went to press, it was also unclear what the future holds for the 2002 Legislative Session, or future Special Sessions. On Wednesday and Thursday, breakthroughs on the tax reform issue that has held up the Legislature the entire session, and a new offer by the Senate of a reapportionment map that better accommodates the Speaker's desires for a successful Congressional run, surfaced. As a result, the discussions at the beginning of the week that had focused on the Legislature ending today and returning in two weeks to finish their business in Special Session has turned to discussions of extending the Session, working through the weekend, and completing much of the business – including perhaps the budget – next week. The decision on how to proceed will be made by the Speaker and the President sometime today.

Quote of the day . . .

"No. 1, to determine what it is, at different age and ability levels, that children ought to know, believing that we can never determine if children know what they ought to know if we haven't determined what it is we think they ought to know." - Kentucky Governor Wallace Wilkinson on his education reform package in the 1970's.

KUDOS TO PFIZER

Pfizer Pharmaceutical Company launched its Share Card Program on January 15th. The program allows 1) individuals who are 65 or older, or otherwise Medicare eligible, 2) who have individual gross annual incomes below \$18,000 or joint gross incomes below \$24,000, 3) and who are without prescription coverage to receive a Pfizer for Living Share Card. For \$15 per month each, Share Card holders will be able to fill all of their prescriptions with Pfizer prescription drugs, as well as two co-promoted drugs. There is no membership or enrollment fee, the Share Card will be accepted at most retail pharmacies in the United States, and there is no limit on the number of prescriptions or medications. Enrollment opened on February 1st, and on March 1st cards were authorized to be used at participating retail pharmacies. For additional information on the Pfizer program or to receive an application to participate, call 1-800-717-6005, or visit www.pfizerforliving.com.

PARENTS' AND CHILDREN'S DAY CELEBRATES FAMILIES

On March 14, Governor Bush signed HB 1283 into law, creating Parents' and Children's Day in Florida on the first Sunday of April each year. The bill, sponsored by Representative Lorraine Ausley and Senator Richard Mitchell, promotes Florida's early childhood efforts and is intended to raise awareness of the importance of supporting Florida's families. Class XX of Leadership Florida, of which Representative Ausley is a member, has taken on the issue of school readiness and adopted the Parents' and Children's Day legislation. The bill draws attention to children and family issues, and encourages all citizens of the state to wear a white ribbon on Parents' and Children's Day indicating that our children are considered to be special gifts and are valued for their part in the "circle of life".

Did You Know . . ?

It is impossible to lick your elbow.
A duck's quack doesn't echo, and no one knows why.
Mel Blanc (voice of Bugs Bunny) was allergic to carrots

BEFORE AND AFTER SCHOOL ISSUE CLARIFIED

The 2001 Florida Legislature repealed Section 402.3015, Florida Statute, effective January 1, 2002. Since the statute expressly authorized use of subsidized child care funds to provide before and after school care to school age children, it appeared to many – school readiness coalitions, school districts, United Ways, and others – that continued use of subsidized child care funds for school age care was, at best, questionable. This raised the specter of about 50,000 school age children and their families losing critically needed services.

This Tuesday, 10 months after the 2001 Legislature acted, and more than three months after the statute was repealed, the effect of the repeal was clarified by Agency for Workforce Innovation attorneys. To the relief of all, they concluded that the statutory repeals do not prohibit the Florida Partnership for School Readiness from funding before and after school care for children under the age of 13 with Child Care Development Funds (CCDF). The reason?...

Although the express authority was repealed in Florida Statutes, the Partnership has been designated as the "lead agency" for the CCDF, and is therefore required to comply with lead agency responsibilities specified under federal law. Federal law provides that one of the purposes of the CCDF is to increase the availability of before and after school care for eligible children. At its meeting last week, acting on the advice of the attorneys, the Partnership concluded that in order to provide before and after school care in addition to school readiness programs, coalitions will be required to specify in their plans the extent to which, if any, they will provide before and after school services in the future.

HOPE FOR LEARNING GATEWAY EMERGES IN LAST WEEK OF SESSION

A new issue joined the list of ‘must-pass’ bills this week. Familiar now to many legislative observers is the Learning Gateway bill by Senator Pruitt. This bill, SB 88, passed the Senate on March 6 unanimously. However, in the House, an earlier version of the bill, HB 1435, was killed by a 6-11 vote in the Council for Lifelong Learning last month. To ensure the bill’s success in light of its status in the House, Senator Pruitt this week amended ten Senate bills on the floor with SB 88 language. These are bills that are likely to pass both houses and were seen as a promising vehicle for the Learning Gateway. As you may remember, the Learning Gateway bill passed both houses last year but was vetoed by the Governor.

This year’s bill differs from last year’s in the locations of the pilot projects. Last year’s version would have located the projects in Broward, Manatee, and St. Lucie counties. SB 88 would locate the demonstration projects in Orange, Manatee and St. Lucie counties. The bill was further changed to address the concerns Governor Bush expressed in his veto message, in which he stated that many of his concerns were “grounded on the potential for excessive intrusiveness of government in the lives of Florida’s families.” He was specifically concerned about the provision for mandatory newborn testing; lack of parental consent for referral, assessment and intervention services for identified children and their families, mandatory referrals; the absence of a public records exemption to protect the privacy of families and children; lack of a clear definition of “high risk children”; and the potential fiscal impact if the pilot projects were expanded statewide. He estimated that such a future expansion could cost close to \$100 million annually.

This year’s Learning Gateway proposal includes the following provisions:

- Creates a 3-year demonstration program with the purpose of providing parents access to information, referral, and services to lessen the effects of learning disabilities in children from birth to age 9.

- Requires parental consent for initial contact and referral for evaluation and services provided through the Learning Gateway.
- Provides that each pilot program must design and test an integrated, community-based system to help parents identify learning problems and access early-education and intervention services in order to minimize or prevent learning disabilities.
- Requires the Learning Gateway to be available to parents in the settings where they and their children live, work, seek care, or study.
- Creates an 18 member steering committee including parents, service providers, and representatives of the disciplines relevant to diagnosis of, and intervention in, early learning problems to ensure that parents of children with potential learning problems and learning disabilities have access to the appropriate necessary services and supports to provide policy development, consultation, oversight, and support for the implementation of three demonstration programs, and to advise the agencies, the Legislature, and the Governor on statewide implementation of system components and issues and on strategies for continuing improvement to the system.
- Provides that the demonstration projects shall recommend to the steering committee the linking or combining of some or all of the local planning bodies, including school readiness coalitions, Healthy Start coalitions, Regional Policy Councils, Department of Children and Family Services community alliances, and other boards or councils that have a primary focus on services for children from birth to age 9, to the extent allowed by federal regulations, if such changes would improve coordination and reduce unnecessary duplication of effort.

The goals of the Learning Gateway are to:

- Improve community awareness and education of parents and practitioners about the warning signs or precursors of learning problems and learning disabilities, including disorders or delayed development in language, attention, behavior, and social-emotional functioning, including dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, in children from birth through age 9.
- Improve access for children who are experiencing early learning problems and their families to appropriate programs, services, and supports through improved outreach and referral processes among providers.
- Improve developmental monitoring and the availability to parents of appropriate screening resources, with emphasis on children from birth through age 9 who are at high risk of having learning problems.
- Improve the availability to parents of appropriate education and intervention programs, services, and supports to address learning problems and learning disabilities.
- Identify gaps in the array of services and supports so that an appropriate child-centered and family-centered continuum of education and support would be readily available in each community.
- Improve accountability of the system through improved planning, integration, and collaboration among providers and through outcome measurement in collaboration with parents.

The Learning Gateway system consists of the following components:

- A central information and referral access phone number for parents in each pilot community.
- strategies for offering hospital visits or home visits by trained staff to new mothers.

- public awareness strategies to disseminate information about developmental milestones, precursors of learning problems and other developmental delays, and the service system that is available.
- guidelines for screening children from birth through age 9.
- adoption of a comprehensive checklist for child healthcare checkups and a corresponding training package for physicians and other medical personnel in implementing more effective screening for precursors of learning problems, learning disabilities, and mild developmental delays.
- reduction of duplication of cross-agency screening.

The bill provides that by January 2005, the steering committee shall make recommendations to the Governor, Legislative leadership, and the Commissioner of Education related to the merits of expansion of the demonstration projects and develop a model county-level strategic plan to formalize the goals, objectives, strategies, and intended outcomes of the comprehensive system, and to support the integration and efficient delivery of all services and supports for parents of children from birth through age 9 who have learning problems or learning disabilities. The model must include a statement of the cost of implementation.

For detailed information of the Learning Gateway bill, visit www.leg.state.fl.us and type in 88 in the box at the top of the homepage. The bill states that the Legislature shall allocate funding for the demonstration programs and authorize selected communities to blend funding from existing programs to the extent that this is advantageous to the community and is consistent with federal requirements. However, with budget negotiations still underway, it is unclear if the \$2.6 million in the Senate budget – which is currently not in the House budget - will be included in the final budget

