

Southern Early Childhood Association

Public Policy Notes

State Budgets Feeling the Pain

With most states beginning their budget year on July 1, 2008, the outlook for FY 2009 is mixed. Some states in the SECA region are facing significant revenue shortfalls and other states are experiencing stable or growth revenues.

Impacted by the housing slump and rising energy prices, states are encountering a mix of economic conditions that will significantly impact the revenue available to fund education, social programs, highways, law enforcement, prisons and other programs.

A fiscal survey of the states that was released on June 19th by the National Governors Association and the National Association of State Budget Officers confirmed the depth of the weakening in state finances. According to the report, "general fund spending, which finances the day-to-day cost of operating government, is projected to rise 1 percent in FY 2009, compared to 6.7 percent in an average year. This is the third-lowest spending increase in the last 31 years."

Step Up for Kids Day—September 16, 2008

September 16, 2008 has been designated "Step Up for Kids Day" by *Every Child Matters* and a group of national advocacy organizations. "The goal: to let the presidential candidates know that we want to hear their plans for closing the "investment gap" in health, education, and social programs.

Dr. T. Berry Brazelton is the honorary chairman of the event which will begin with a press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. At the

Sales tax collections are an important source of funding in the region, and most SECA states anticipate a small increase. Two SECA states, Arkansas and Florida, anticipate a decline in sales tax collections in FY 2009. (Arkansas recently eliminated 1/2 of the sales tax on food, accounting for the anticipated decline.)

Anticipated Sales Tax Collections in 2009

(Percentage increase or decrease)

Alabama/+5.22% Arkansas/-0.14%

Florida/-1.76% Georgia/+5.32%

Kentucky/+5.36% Louisiana/+1.25%

Mississippi/+6.37% Oklahoma/+12.6%

S Carolina/+4.52% Tennessee/+2.99%

Texas/+4.88% Virginia/+5.84%

West Virginia/+5.25%

Source: *Fiscal Survey of the States*, June 2008, National Governor's Association and National Association of State Budget Officers

same time, on the steps of every state capitol, advocates will "step up" at their own press events and show their support for smart investments in America's families.

If you're interested in participating in events, contact Ursula Ellis, State Campaigns Director at 202-223-2243 or you can find information at www.everychildmatters.org. Click on Campaigns to find information specific to your state.

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Inside this issue:

Complete Streets	2
Vouchers for Special Education	2
Pre-K for All Louisiana	2
State Updates: AL, FL, KY	3
State Updates: MS, OK, SC	3
State Updates: TN, VA, WV	3
Newborn Screening	4

What Does FY 2009 Mean?

Most state fiscal years are based on a beginning date of July 1 with an end date of June 30th.

The fiscal year actually occurs over two different calendar years.

FY 2009 began on July 1, 2008 and will end on June 30, 2009.

Complete Streets

The American Planning Association and the National Complete Streets Coalition have announced a research project designed to develop a *Best Practices Manual on Complete Streets* that will be utilized in community planning, urban design and engineering street design.

What is a “complete street”? The term is used to describe streets and highways that serve all forms of vehicular and non-vehicular transportation. This includes



Children need sidewalks for safe outdoor play.

pedestrians (including pedestrians with disabilities), bicyclists, transit, and cars.

Why should members of SECA be interested? Approximately 5,000 pedestrians and bicyclists die each year on U.S. roads. The roads and streets on which these fatalities occur have characteristics in common: a lack of sidewalks or crosswalks, lanes too narrow to share with bicyclists, little or no room for transit riders and no accommodations for people with disabilities.

Children are particularly vulnerable on these streets, and the groups are working to ensure that we have safe and effective streets and roads within our states and communities. For more information, contact completestreets@planning.org.

Source: www.planning.org/completestreets

Georgia Issues Vouchers for Special Education Students

Georgia created a program in 2007 to provide vouchers for special education students to attend private schools. During the 2007-2008 school year, 899 children with disabilities received vouchers to leave their public schools and attend private schools.

Officials anticipate that more children will apply to receive the vouchers this year, and the number of participating private schools has risen from 117 to 125 in 2008.

The Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program uses public funds to provide vouchers. Modeled after a similar voucher program in Florida, it is designed to give families more schooling options. Some new private schools are opening to accept the students, including schools such as the Center

Academy, a Florida-based company. The schools must provide proof of financial stability and accreditation or be in the process of accreditation.

Source: *More School Success Expected*, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Laura Diamond, July 8, 2008

“A lot of parents are so stuck and don’t know how they can afford private school. There are so many bills and other costs that pile up between doctors bills and therapy costs. But this gave us courage.”

Kelly Long, mother of Grant who has Asperger ‘s Syndrome

Pre-K for All in Louisiana

The Louisiana Legislature handed a major victory to pre-K advocates in June 2008 with the passage of the *Pre-K for All LA Bill*, Senate Bill 286. This bill passed both the House and Senate unanimously with 84 co-authors.

The bill provides for a phased in expansion of the eligibility for LA 4 pre-K until the 2013-2014 school year, when all four-year-olds, regardless of income, can be served. The phase-in will begin with the 2009-2010 school year, increasing eligibility from the current levels of families whose income is at or below 185% of the federal poverty level to families who are at or below 300% of that level. After that year, eligibility will rise by 50% each year until it includes all four-year-olds.

According to the Pre-K for All Louisiana Campaign, two major challenges still exist:

1. The creation of a diverse delivery system.
2. The appropriation of adequate funding to ensure that the bill’s access targets will be met.

For more information, go to <http://www.prekforalla.org>.

pre-k for all
Louisiana

State Legislative Updates from Alabama, Florida & Kentucky

Alabama: The \$6.36 billion budget for education (down from the current year) will hopefully save the jobs of 1000 teachers who were laid off. Additionally, the budget included money for expanding pre-kindergarten, and reading, science and math initiatives. (It required an additional special session after the regular session to adopt this budget.)

Reporter: Pauline Vu

Florida: The Legislature closed a \$4 billion budget gap in part by cutting funding to schools, nursing homes and programs for the disabled. However, Governor Crist was successful in winning a new health care program to cover some of the 3.8 million uninsured Floridians. A week long sales tax holiday for back-to-school clothing was canceled. Law-



Some SECA states had special sessions after their regular sessions.

makers also required all health insurance companies to cover diagnostic screening and treatment of autism.

Reporter: Pamela M. Prah

Kentucky: Governor Steve Beshear's proposal to bring casino gambling to a vote this fall and a separate proposal to boost cigarette taxes by 70 cents a pack failed. The casino proposal was designed to bring significant tax revenues into the state to help the state pay for programs for everything from education to health care. Without a new source of revenue, the state's finances are very precarious and state bonds were recently downgraded from stable to negative.

In a special session called in June, the Legislature overhauled the state employee pension system, which is under-funded and faces a shortfall of \$26 billion.

Reporter: Stephen C. Fehr

Source: www.stateline.org

State Legislative Updates from Mississippi, Oklahoma & South Carolina

Mississippi: The state boosted pay for its most experienced teachers but remained at an impasse over how to cover a \$90 million shortfall in Medicaid. (This impasse lasted through both a regular and special session.)

Reporter: Stephen C. Fehr

Oklahoma: State lawmakers decided to address the childhood obesity problem by increasing the requirement for physical education in schools from 60 to 120 minutes per week. They also approved a law that would require that ultrasounds be conducted at least one hour before abortions.

Reporter: Stephen C. Fehr

South Carolina: The Legislature enacted a law that pun-

ishes employers for hiring illegal workers and eliminated the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT) which was used to meet the No Child Left Behind guidelines and the state's accountability system. Students will take a new end of the year test.

Reporter: Pauline Vu

Source: www.stateline.org

During regular and special legislative sessions in 2008, SECA states grappled with funding current programs/ services and divided political control of state legislatures.

State Legislative Updates from Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia

Tennessee: The General Assembly passed a lower than expected budget and Governor Bredesen was forced to discard his proposal to expand pre-kindergarten programs. To avoid tax increases, legislators cut \$468 million from the proposed budget.

Reporter: Pauline Vu

Virginia: The Legislature rejected Governor Kaine's proposals to extend health care coverage to the uninsured and to raise taxes to pay for transit and road improvements. Lawmakers did support enhancing the state's mental health system and directed additional funding to that system.

Reporter: Stephen c. Fehr

West Virginia: Lawmakers provided funding for the biggest school construction project in history and gave teachers a 3% raise. The university and community college systems were separated to ensure that the two-year institutions focused on job training, rather than preparing students for four year institutions.

Reporter: Christine Vestal

Source: www.stateline.org



States resorted to reserves and budget cuts to balance the budget.

Southern Early Childhood
Association
1123 S University, Ste 255
Little Rock, AR 72204

Phone: 800-305-SECA
Fax: 501-227-5297
info@SouthernEarlyChildhood.org

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**We're on the Web at
www.SouthernEarlyChildhood.org**

Public Policy Resources Available from SECA

- **Position Statements** on issues that are pertinent to the field of Early Childhood Education
- **Summaries** of reports and data for the SECA states

You'll find all of this on the SECA website at
www.SouthernEarlyChildhood.org.

Check out the Public Policy and Position Statement pages. This information is not copyrighted and is available for your use. You'll also find links to the public policy pages of your state affiliate websites. Be an informed and prepared advocate for children!

Newborn Screening

Beginning July 2008, the state of Arkansas began screening newborns for 29 rare but treatable genetic disorders that can lead to serious mental and physical disabilities if not caught and treated early. (The state previously screened for 6 conditions and hearing problems.) In 2007, nearly 90% of babies in the U.S. were screened for at least 21 disorders, an increase from 38% in 2004, according to the March of Dimes.

Arkansas will now be in line with the national screening recommendations developed by the American College of Medical Genetics, joining 19 other states and the District of Columbia. An expert panel developed the guidelines from these principles:

- Universal newborn screening is an essential public health responsibility.
- Policy development should be driven by what is in the best interest of the affected newborn.
- Newborn screening is a coordinated and comprehensive system consisting of education, screening, follow-up, diagnosis, treatment and management, and program evaluation.

- To be included as a primary target condition in a newborn screening program, a condition should meet these criteria: it can be identified with 24-48 hours after birth when it would not be clinically detected; a test with appropriate sensitivity and specificity is available; and there are demonstrated benefits of early detection, timely intervention & efficacious treatment.
- Public awareness coupled with professional training and family education is a significant program responsibility.

(Excerpted from *Newborn Screening: Toward a Uniform Screening Panel and System*, American College of Medical Genetics, www.acmg.net, 2006.)

Experts from SECA states participated on the panel. They included representatives from the University of Louisville, University of North Carolina, University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, Emory University School of Medicine, University of Miami School of Medicine, and the San Antonio Metropolitan Health District.