



REPRESENTATIVE RAY ZIRKELBACH'S

STATEHOUSE NEWS

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Students Must Stay in School Through Age 17

The House Education Committee approved a bill that would require students to remain in school through age 17. Current law requires students to remain in school until reaching age 16.

House File 40 was amended and passed on a vote of 12 - 9. As passed, the bill requires students who attend public and accredited non-public schools, to remain in school through age 17. The bill requires students who reach 18 on or after September 15, who intend to leave school, to file a declaration of their intent and to participate in an exit interview. Additionally, they must complete a survey which will be used by the Department of Education to track the reasons that students leave school prior to graduation.

Two Working Groups Established

The bill requires two working groups to be convened, one at the local level and one by the Department of Education.

Local school districts are required to convene a working group made up of educational and community stakeholders to review financial and programmatic supports for students affected by the change in the dropout age. The working group is required to look at various areas including summer school offerings, mentoring and tutoring services, before and after school supports, and at-risk allowable growth provisions.



The Department of Education is required to convene a working group during the 2009-2010 school year to review the various supports in place for students who are identified as at-risk of dropping out of school. The group is to consider whether it is necessary to expand supports to include online at-risk academy courses, and career

academies, as well as funding for these programs. A report is due to the General Assembly by January 15, 2010.

Committee members voiced support for this bill stating that the focus should be to engage our youth in a learning environment and to support them in ways that meet their needs so they can be successful in school. Graduation from high school is one step to ensure attainment of future goals in life.

Other members, while they did not argue the importance of graduating from high school, stated their concern that increasing the age that students are required to remain in school could increase the need for alternative education offerings to accommodate students identified as at-risk of leaving school.

The new compulsory age requirement would become effective beginning with the 2010 school year.

The bill now goes to the full House for debate.

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Mental Health and Substance Abuse Insurance

This week, the House Human Resources committee adopted a bill that would require insurance companies to cover mental illness and substance abuse treatment. House File 139 passed committee by a vote of 12-9.

Current law requires insurance policies to provide coverage for a small number of illnesses, such as schizophrenia, bi-polar disorders, or major depression. House File 139 would require coverage of all mental illnesses and alcohol or substance abuse treatment services.

This bill only applies to state

regulated insurance plans, which is approximately 22-25% of all insurance plans in Iowa. It does not apply to Medicare or Medicaid insurance coverage, which is covered by federal law.

The intent is to mirror insurance coverage for medical coverage. If your insurance covers 80% for your broken leg costs, it should cover 80% of your substance abuse treatment costs. This is why some people call the bill “mental health parity.”

Proponents of the bill feel it will increase the number of people entering treatment without increasing

their costs, and also ease the pressure on our state budget by cutting health, correctional, and welfare costs.

Opponents argue that this will increase insurance rates from five to ten percent. They also say there are already existing options that businesses and individuals may purchase.

The bill is now before the full House for consideration.

* I will be co-floor managing this bill. I have been in support of mental health issues since I came to the Capitol.

More Iowa Bars Charged with Violating Smoke-Free Law

Lynn Walding, Administrator of the Alcohol Beverages Division of the Department of Commerce, says that since the new Smoke-Free Air law began last July, 24 bars have



been referred to his agency for violating the law. The first two cases involved Otis Campbell's in West Burlington and Fro's in Wilton.

In speaking to the Administration and Regulation Budget Subcommittee this week, Walding indicated that two more bars are set for hearings, although negotiations are underway with both of them. Another 20 cases have been referred to the Alcoholic and Beverages Division for action. The Division has an agreement with the Department of Public Health to handle these cases.

According to Walding, an establishment is not charged with violating the law until law enforcement officials have made at least two separate visits to the location to witness the violation. This is in addition to the two or more visits made by the Department of Public Health. Once the charges are filed, an ad-

ministrative law judge with the department holds a hearing and issues a decision. Fro's received a 21 day license suspension and Otis Campbell received a 30 day suspension. Both establishments have appealed the decision to Administrator Walding. His decision is considered “final agency action.” After that point, the establishment has the right to appeal to Iowa District Court.

The division's website at <http://www.iowaabd.com/smokefree/> has more information about the law and a list of establishments that have been charged to date.

Benefits Study for Iowa Veterans

Lack of information is the greatest barrier veterans face to receiving available benefits. Many Iowa veterans are unaware of the Iowa Department of Veteran Affairs (IDVA) or county offices. This information was contained in the Iowa Veterans Benefits Study, which was presented to the House Veterans Affairs Committee this week.

In 2007, the Legislature requested a study of veterans bene-

fits and needs, which was conducted from February to October, 2008. The study consisted of a task force of stakeholders, focus groups of veterans and county officials, and a comparison of fourteen other states.

Due to the lack of information available to veterans, the task force recommends increased outreach to ensure that all veterans receive benefits for which they are eligible.

In addition, the study shows there is a lack of availability of statewide mental health services. The task force also recommends the establishment of an advisory group to the IDVA and the Veterans Commission focused solely on mental health.

The House Veterans Committee is working on various pieces of legislation this year based on the study's recommendations.

Rankings Indicate Iowa Good For Business

There have been several national reports that have indicated Iowa is “good for business.” Here are a few:

- CNBC, in its second annual review of America's Top States for Business, has ranked Iowa 2nd in the nation for cost of doing business. Overall, Iowa ranked as 9th best in the nation for all ten categories of competitiveness covered by CNBC rankings. The best category scores for Iowa came in Cost of Doing Business (2nd), Business Friendliness (11th), Cost of Living (13th), and Education (15th).
- The 2008 Site Selection Magazine ranked states in terms of competitiveness. Iowa ranked 6th in the country.
- Iowa ranked 11th in the country in performance according to the Development Report Card of States done by the Corporation for Enterprise Development in 2007. The index asked, “How well is the state’s economy providing opportunities for employment, income, and improving quality of life?”
- The most cited job growth ranking is the Milken Institute’s study, “Best Performing Cities.” In the 2008 study, for larger cities, Des Moines ranked 25th, Council Bluffs 82nd, and Cedar Rapids 86th. In the smaller cities, Iowa City ranked 25th, Dubuque ranked 54th, and Waterloo ranked 69th.
- Iowa ranked 4th best state for business careers according to Forbes Magazine, 2007.
- According to 2008 Career Builder, the greater Des Moines area made the list of the “25 Best Places to Find a Job.”
- Iowa City ranked 2nd as best small place for business and careers and 8th for up-and-coming technology cities according to Forbes, 2008.
- A recent report from the U.S. News and World Report gave Iowa a poor ranking for business, but a closer look at the details of their rankings reveal they used inaccurate data in making their determination.

Attorney General Praises Work of Crime Victim Programs

At the joint Justice Systems Budget Subcommittee, Iowa’s Attorney General, Thomas Miller, appealed to the committee for funding for local crime victim service programs. Attorney General Miller stated that there are 31 rape crisis and domestic violence centers around the state, and each center plays a vital role in the victims’ lives.

Currently, these centers receive funding from the state’s Victim Compensation Fund, and some federal and local funding. The state fund is made up of a percentage of various criminal fees and penalties and is authorized to be

used for out-of-pocket expenses of victims of violent crimes that weren’t covered by insurance. Examples are medical, counseling and burial expenses. Some years ago, the legislature required some of the large ending balance to be used to fund the local crime victim service programs. Now, there isn’t an ending balance to cover those local programs.

In his fiscal year 2010 budget proposal, Governor Culver proposed \$4 million from the general fund for these local programs, and Attorney General Miller applauds that proposal saying that it shows the Governor has the right priorities. Last year, with transfers from the Victim

Compensation Fund and a small general fund appropriation, there was \$4.1 million for victims.

Attorney General Miller stated that it won’t be easy for his office to make cuts that could equal approximately 10%, but it can be done. These cuts, if needed, could be achieved through hiring persons at lower salaries, administrative and travel cuts, and even furloughs. The Attorney General’s office is keeping positions open as much as possible, and if they do hire, downgrading the position.

Applications for Plumbing Licensure On-Line

The Plumbing and Mechanical Professional Licensing Board announced that those wishing to be licensed under the board can now complete their application on-line.

The new updated web site is located at www.idph.state.ia.us/eh/plumbing.asp. The licensure page link will provide information and a direct link to the on-line application.

Anyone having questions may contact the board directly at 515-281-6881.

Major General Dardis to Head Disaster Recovery Efforts

The retiring commander of the Iowa National Guard, Major General Ron Dardis, has been appointed Executive Director of the Rebuild Iowa Office. He will oversee all operational, administrative,



Governor Culver and Major General Dardis

executive and legislative functions of the office. The appointment was made by Governor Chet Culver and Dardis began his duties on February 9.

Major General Dardis has been working on Iowa's recovery efforts since last summer. He was Chairman of the Rebuild Iowa Advisory Committee, which Governor Culver appointed to provide both short-term and long-term recovery recommendations.

After forty years, Major General Dardis is retiring from the National Guard. During the last few years,

he has headed the Guard as Adjutant General.

In the announcement, Dardis said, "he appreciated the magnitude of this historic disaster and the importance of the Rebuild Iowa Office mission."

The RIO office was created by executive order last June 27 to coordinate all state activity concerning rebuilding Iowa after last summer's tornadoes and floods. To date, more than \$1.5 billion in federal, state and private funds have been committed to this effort.

Rebuild Committee Questions RIO Office

The House Rebuild Iowa Committee spent two days questioning Major General Ron Dardis, new head of the Rebuild Iowa Office (RIO), and Chief of Staff Emily Hajak about the RIO office. Dardis said he believes it is important to have good communication and transparency.

Legislators want to make sure that the federal and state funding earmarked for disaster recovery is being used appropriately. Of particular concern was the purchase of new carpeting for the RIO office, at an expense of \$19,000. Dardis

told the committee the carpet was more than 30 years old and was duct taped in places, making it a danger for employees and visitors. However, committee members noted that this was the third or fourth explanation given.

Committee members also asked about the staffing of the office and the salaries being received. Dardis said RIO needed to staff up quickly due to the magnitude of the disaster created by the flooding and tornadoes, and that initially staff were lent to RIO by other state agencies, but assured the committee that best

practices was used in hiring. He called the original staff the "heroes" of the recovery phase.

Dardis was also asked why a new office – RIO – was created rather than relying on Homeland Security and Emergency Management. Dardis said Homeland Security did not have the capacity to handle what is now known to be the fifth largest disaster in our nation's history.

Committee members made clear that the first priority must be the victims of the flooding and tornadoes.

State Parks Took \$4 Million Hit in Storm Damage

Thirty-eight out of Iowa's 48 major state parks received severe damage due to last summer's tornadoes and flooding. The preliminary estimate amounted to over \$3 million in storm damages, and the State Parks Bureau saw nearly \$1 million in lost revenue because Iowans weren't camping due to closed parks or campgrounds and shelter houses being under water.

Members of the House Natural Resources Committee received this news from Kevin Szcodronski, Iowa's State Parks Bureau Chief. Mr. Szcodronski said parks will be

a little rough around the edges this summer with less mowing and upkeep due to the current budget constraints. They plan to give priority to their revenue generating areas, such as campgrounds, shelter houses, and picnic areas.

The federal emergency management agency (FEMA) will pick up most of the costs of storm damage repairs; however, they no longer pay for repairs of buildings. The department is asking the Legislature to help pay for the costs.

Mr. Szcodronski said last summer's storms caused them to con-

tact family reunions, weddings, and other large events so they could find alternate locations. Ninety-nine percent of George Wythe State Park alone was under water.

In addition, evacuated residents from Palo camped at Pleasant Creek State Park and stranded Illinois residents camped at Geode State Park. The department waived the 14-day maximum stay for these people, and also worked with the Red Cross to make sure they were provided with needed services.

DOT Moves to Central Issuance to Fight Identity Theft

The Department of Transportation spoke to the House Transportation Committee about their plans to mail drivers licenses from one central point to Iowans obtaining a driver's license. The department is moving to this process because it is a good business practice in the continual fight against identity theft.

Identity theft is one of the fastest growing crimes in the U.S. In 2008, the Department of Transportation (DOT) investigated over 300 cases of stolen licenses or id cards. Once licenses and id cards issued by the department or a county

treasurer are out in the public, retail and commercial businesses are the ones at a loss due to fraudulent checks or government aid.

Currently, persons obtaining a license or id card can go to either a DOT station or county treasurer office, and they walk out with their plastic card (either license or id card). Under DOT's proposal, persons are still able to go to these same stations and offices, but will walk out with their old license or id and a paper temporary permit.

While at the station or office, the person's photograph is captured (same as current procedure), but

their image will be run through a photo recognition software program to identify those individuals who obtain multiple licenses or ids under different names. The department currently owns this photo recognition software, but it takes too long to have customers wait while their photos are run through the program.

The department stated that they are going to be putting frequently asked questions about this topic on their website, www.iowadot.gov.

Bill Defines Statewide Interoperability Board Membership

The House Public Safety Committee passed a bill which makes small, but needed changes to the state's Public Safety Communications Interoperability Board. This board was created in 2007 to improve emergency communications between law enforcement, fire, emergency medical services, and other public and private first responders during a crisis.

House File 232 specifies that of the current two members repre-

senting fire fighters, one must be a career fire fighter and the other must be a volunteer. The bill also increases the board by four legislative members, who will serve as nonvoting members. Each party in the House and Senate will appoint one person. House File 232 is now ready to be debated by the full House.

The board has been working on collaborating with all governmental agencies to identify and capture

available state and federal funding, and use that funding to invest in equipment that assists all emergency providers during a crisis. Last year, the board hired a consultant, which will assess the communications within Iowa as well as write a comprehensive statewide communications plan.

For more information on the interoperability board, please visit <http://www.dps.state.ia.us/ISP/Interoperability/index.html>.

Website to Post Suggestions to Improve Iowa Government

The Legislature created a link on the General Assembly's Home Page that allows Iowans to post their suggestions for improving Iowa Government. Iowans are encouraged to provide their ideas to assist the General Assembly in performing its lawmaking and state budgeting responsibilities.

All postings will be reviewed by the non-partisan Legislative Services Agency staff prior to being released for public view. The Legislative Services Agency reserves the right to post only responses that are not libelous, crude, obscene, personal in nature, offensive, or otherwise inappropriate to the subject

matter and goal of the Iowa General Assembly in receiving suggestions for improving Iowa Government.

This link will take you directly to the suggestions page: http://www.legis.state.ia.us/asp/SurveyForm/Improving_StGvt/.

ISU Wants to Upgrade Veterinary Medical Center

Iowa State University is asking the Legislature for the authority to borrow money to upgrade the university's veterinary medicine college. The university said they need to borrow \$38 million to complete the renovation; they'll raise an



additional \$5.3 million through private fundraising.

The university said they must complete the moderniza-

tion and renovation of its medical center to retain full accreditation, recruit and retain quality faculty and students, and stabilize the referral service and financial management of the medical center.

Vet Diagnostic Lab

The university is also requesting \$4 million for operating costs at the veterinary diagnostics lab. Governor Culver has recommended this funding.

The primary focus of the lab is providing a timely, comprehensive,

and high quality diagnosis to Iowa farmers that have animal diseases within their livestock herds. The vet diagnostic lab is also the leading lab on avian influenza disease research.

On average, the lab conducts more than 1.3 million tests annually and processes 45,000 to 50,000 cases a year from livestock producers. The farmer provides a sample to their local vet, who sends it to the lab for analysis. The lab's turnaround time is one to three days.

Gender Balance on Local Boards and Commissions

All boards and commissions at the local level of government will be required to be gender balanced under a bill approved by the House State Government Committee. Statewide boards and commissions have been gender balanced since 1987, but according to the Commission on the Status of Women, the practice has been slow to be adopted at the local level.

House File 243 requires boards and commissions, whose members are appointed at the local level, to be gender balanced. The bill provides some exceptions to this requirement including:

- Cities with a population of fewer than 1,000.
- Boards or commissions with three or fewer members.

- Board or commissions pertaining to professional licensure or requiring other highly specialized technical expertise.

Political subdivisions unable to meet this requirement, may fill vacant positions on boards and commissions after three months by showing they have made a good faith effort to comply.

Public Health Modernization Proposal

This week, Director Tom Newton of the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH), presented the department's proposal to modernize public health in Iowa to the House Human Resources Committee. He said Iowa's public health system is fragmented, there are no benchmarks or standards, and there are new or re-emerging diseases.

Director Newton said their department introduced House Study Bill 111, the Iowa Public Health Modernization Act, to modernize

an integrated sustainable public health system that ensures a basic standard of service delivery to all Iowans. The bill was developed as a result of collaboration and planning, since 2004, among local and state public health officials and private entities.

With the IDPH as the lead agency, the act will establish a Governmental Public Health Advisory Council to propose standards that will be used as the basis for voluntary accreditation of local health agencies and the department.

The bill also establishes a Governmental Public Health Evaluation Committee, which collects and reports baseline information. The data will be used to find gaps in service delivery effectiveness and needs.

Governor Chet Culver recommended re-allocation of \$955,000 to cover the costs of the department's proposal for FY 2010. House Study Bill 111 is under consideration by the House Human Resources Committee.