

*State legislators
and governors see
education as a
priority in most of
their 2000
sessions.*

BY ELAINE STUART





Education is the mega issue for 2000 in state legislatures. Just as in 1999, states are focusing on standards, vouchers, accountability, teacher quality and finance.

State Government News queried a sampling of legislators and surveyed governors across the country in the fall of 1999 on what they saw as the key policy and budget items facing 2000 sessions.

Education, economic development, health care and tax relief topped the issues states will consider this year. All states have regularly scheduled legislative sessions except Arkansas, Montana, Nevada, Oregon and Texas. Also coming into play in 2000 are the inevitable effects of presidential and, in many states, state legislative elections as well as preparation for redistricting following the Census. Here's what the road ahead looks like:

MIDWEST

Minnesota Senate Majority Leader Roger Moe said, "You never know what will happen in a session. There is always that 'bill out of nowhere' that will occupy your time. Major items will possibly include agricultural issues and personal privacy questions such as the sale and transfer of personal information, especially electronically. An upcoming constitutional topic will be the question of a unicameral legislature in Minnesota."



Minnesota Sen. Roger Moe

Gov. Jesse Ventura has asked the Legislature to place the question of a single-house legislature on the Nov. 7 ballot.

Michigan Senate Majority Leader Dan DeGrow saw electricity deregulation as a potential carry over from 1999. Education, health and managed care will be important issues. On Medicare, the question will be, DeGrow said, "Will we have funded it enough?"



Michigan Sen. Dan DeGrow

Nebraska Sen. DiAnna Schimek said, "We are still struggling with education funding issues, in terms of fairness. Where does the funding come from? We also have infrastructure needs that we are going to have to continue to fund."



Nebraska Sen. DiAnna Schimek

North Dakota

Gov. Ed Schafer's top issues are job creation and diversification of the economy; education issues including standards, enrollment stabilization, funding in the face of changing demographics; finding the right tax mix and balance; community development and high-tech infrastructure; and water development. Tax relief is a possibility.

South Dakota Gov. William J. Janklow's staff named as his priorities: early childhood development, effective schools, tax relief, affordable housing and recreational development. The state plans to implement property tax relief.

Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson, CSG past president, said his state is in an enviable position. "Our unemployment is at a record low, the state is returning more than \$1 billion in income tax cuts and a rebate check to

taxpayers, and it was just announced the number of Wisconsin residents without health insurance fell to a new low of 4 percent."

The governor will propose a new licensing system that rewards educators who strengthen their skills.

His *Pathways to Independence* program will help disabled individuals hold a job without fear of losing their health benefits. Thompson said, "These two initiatives, in addition to BadgerCare, which provides affordable health insurance to low-income working families, and Family Care, an innovative redesign of long-term care programs, will help make Wisconsin an even better place to live, work, play and most importantly, raise a family."

SOUTH

Kentucky Gov. Paul Patton, CSG president, said, "As we enter the 21st century, building the intellectual capital of our people through education will be the No. 1 priority in Kentucky. During these next four years we will address the educational needs of our society in every aspect, with a new focus on early childhood development



Kentucky Gov. Paul Patton

and adult literacy. We'll invest in more infrastructure, including a comprehensive effort to bring potable water to every Kentucky household. We'll tackle health care and make our tax system fairer. We'll protect the environment with a statewide garbage pickup and recycling program. And we'll improve our economy, targeting the Appalachian region of our state. All of these initiatives are aimed at providing a quality of life for our residents

that is second to none.”

Patton is the first Kentucky governor in 200 years re-elected to a successive term, but also is the first Democratic Kentucky governor who will face a Republican Senate.

Mississippi Speaker Tim Ford, chair of CSG’s Southern Legislative Conference, doesn’t anticipate the



Mississippi Speaker Tim Ford

House vote to choose a new governor will distract the session from its main business of deliberating on a budget. Ford said funding prison beds built over the last five years would be a priority along with funding education and mental health facilities.

Missouri Speaker Steve Gaw said session priorities include establishing a tobacco trust fund from the proceeds of the settlement between the state and cigarette manufacturers. The proposal possibly could go to the ballot. The session also will consider how to assist family farmers in marketing. It will explore the causes of youth violence, alternatives for transportation funding and measures addressing domestic violence. Also on the agenda are safeguards to protect seniors from abuse and neglect in nursing homes, public school accountability, the loss of accreditation of two large school districts, and consumer protections addressing telemarketing fraud, financial exploitation of the elderly, Internet fraud and privacy, and car-title and pay-day loan services.

Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating’s office sees education reform, especially tougher academic standards, as a major issue. Other top concerns are workers’ compensation reforms, and rural

development, including telecommunications infrastructure and health care. The governor supports another cut in the individual income tax, eliminating the franchise tax and estate tax, and cutting auto tag fees.

South Carolina Speaker David Wilkins said, “We will continue to make education the No. 1 priority and make schools better by emphasizing accountability and measuring results.”

He expects new money to go to teacher recruitment and training,



South Carolina Speaker David Wilkins

funding alternative schools created last year and funding college scholarships for good students. The session also will take up streamlining state government and removing the sales tax on food on top of last year’s \$250 million in property tax relief. The session also will work on implementing legislation for the proposed constitutional amendment on a state lottery. In addition, campaign finance is pending in the Senate.

Wilkins hopes the long-standing dispute over flying the Confederate flag over the Capitol won’t “dominate the session or fragment us so we can’t deal with other issues.” The NAACP has supported a boycott of the state over the flag.

West Virginia Senate President Pro Tem Bill Sharpe sees the ban on mountaintop removal in coal mining as the top issue in his state. A federal judge Oct. 20 ordered the practice stopped as a violation of the federal Clean Water Act. Sharpe said that if it stands the court decision will have severe economic consequences for merchants, miners, land development

and education. “In West Virginia, mining is everything,” Sharpe said. Counties depend upon taxing mining equipment to fund schools, for example. In a December interview, Sharpe was hopeful that all sides would reach a solution to let miners go back to work.

WEST

California Senate Majority Whip Richard Alarcón said California must act to maintain its leadership in transportation, education and technological advancements in light of deterioration in its infrastructure and educational system. Alarcón said, “We must rebuild and maintain our infrastructure, rejuvenate our educational system and capitalize on high-tech opportunities. In addition, we must ensure that our educational system does not contribute to the digital divide and that every child is prepared to compete in the job market of the 21st century.”



California Sen. Richard Alarcón

Hawaii Gov. Benjamin J. Cayetano’s office responded that his top issues are civil service reform and modernization, government restructuring, updating regulations, development of high-technology industries, information technology systems that provide speedy, efficient public services, and the impact of e-commerce on state sales tax revenues.

Cayetano supports a tax incentive to spur hotel construction and improvements in the visitor industry. In the past two years, Hawaii approved income tax cuts amounting to \$2 billion over a six-year span.

While there’s no regular 2000 session, **Montana** Gov. Marc Racicot’s

staff named as his top priorities: economic development, tax reform, open-space preservation, tax relief, education funding and teacher quality.

Nevada is not scheduled to meet this year, but Sen. Maurice Washington said the upcoming Census has far reaching implications. Because Nevada is a fast growing state, it is due for a third seat in Congress. Washington said, "With the Census comes redistricting and party control for the next decade." The winners will control the purse strings and the budget for education, health and human resources, he said. Nevada is considering privatizing prisons and ways to make state government more efficient and consumer oriented.



Nevada Sen. Maurice Washington

New Mexico Senate President Pro Tempore Manny Aragon, CSG chair-elect, said the Legislature will re-evaluate prison classification in light of recommendations by a Board of Inquiry into several violent incidents at state prisons. In the 30-day session, the other big issues are education reforms proposed by a task force, government reorganization and implementation of performance based budgeting. "The change to PBB establishes an overall vision for where we want New Mexico to be in four to five years," Aragon said. He also expects the administration to advocate school vouchers, which were defeated in 1999. Republican Gov. Gary Johnson in November called on people to urge state legislators to legalize drugs.

EAST

Maine Sen. Anne Rand said, "There will be great discussion over what to do with an unprojected surplus of funds. Other ongoing issues are the discrepancy in economic growth between the western and southern parts of the state." November estimates put the surplus at \$250 million.



Maine Sen. Anne Rand

Rand also expects debate over how to fashion a patients' bill of rights.

Rep. Carol Donovan said **Massachusetts** is at the end of a seven-year education funding act and so must revisit its school funding formula. The act resulted from a court case brought by poor urban districts to force equality in education finance. The Legislature will have to renew the current formula or devise a new one. Under the current formula, the bulk of the money has gone to inner-city schools and spending has leveled off for other schools in richer areas. "We have to figure out how to continue this," Donovan said.

New York Sen. Efrain Gonzalez Jr., said the state faces important issues in education and worker training. The state needs to prepare people who otherwise would be left behind. For early 2000, the big issue is ensuring that New Yorkers turn in their Census forms. The Census count is important because the federal government uses it to put money into communities and because the private sector uses it to invest in communities. Gonzalez said, "It's a major issue that will help us with education, housing and economic opportunities."

Puerto Rico Gov. Pedro Rosselló's top issues include health care reform by giving 100 percent of people broad, private market insurance protection in 2000. The governor also advocates action on education, including community schools, better teacher salaries, high-tech classrooms and school choice. His new economic development model by coupling sharply lower income tax rates with enhanced investment incentives is yielding sustained growth, as evidenced by a 20-year low in unemployment.



Puerto Rico Gov. Pedro Rosselló

Other priorities are housing, public security and addressing school violence, overcrowding, funding and teacher quality. Rosselló is a past CSG president.

Vermont Sen. William T. Doyle said issues are escalating health insurance costs, the pull-out of several health insurers and the cost of prescription drugs. Another issue is the state's long-term contract with Hydro-Québec, because the state feels it is paying too much for electricity. Vermont also hopes to expand passenger railroad service.

Doyle said Vermont ranks 49th in state aid to higher education. Students rallied at the state capitol for more college aid. Doyle, who chairs the Senate Government Operations Committee, said his committee plans hearings on civic participation, especially among young people.

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