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FULL TEXT

Alabama one of five states taking part in NGA program to improve birth outcomes

Al.com

January 10, 2014

Mike Cason

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- Gov. Robert Bentley will speak this morning about the state's participation in a program to improve birth outcomes as measured by the incident of preterm births and infant mortality.

Alabama is one of five states taking part in the in the final round of a Learning Network on Improving Birth Outcomes in the United States.

The National Governors Association organized the program.

Alabama has historically ranked high among states in infant mortality, which is the proportion of children who die before their first birthday.

In October, the state Department of Public Health reported an increase in the infant mortality rate. Alabama's 2012 infant mortality rate was 8.9 infant deaths per 1,000 births. By comparison the U.S. rate was 6.0 in 2011, the last year available.

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Alabama's state budgets: Agencies could face spending cuts next year

Al.com

January 9, 2014

Mike Cason

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- The outlook for funding Alabama state agencies should become clearer early next week but might not become any prettier.

The Alabama Legislature begins budget hearings on Monday, one day before the annual legislative session cranks up.

Most agencies supported by the state General Fund were level-funded this year.

Rep. Steve Clouse, R-Ozark, who chairs the General Fund committee in the House of Representatives, said that might not be possible in fiscal year 2015, which begins Oct. 1.

Clouse said the big factor is the Alabama Medicaid Agency, which consumes one-third of the General Fund. Clouse said Medicaid is expected to seek an increase of about \$100 million above this year's appropriation, which was \$615 million out of the total General Fund budget of \$1.75 billion.

“If we have to kick in that much more for Medicaid, it's probably going to be difficult to level-fund (other agencies),” Clouse said. “They may be taking some cuts from what they got last year.”

The budget hearings begin at 9:30 a.m. Monday at the State Capitol Auditorium. Medicaid's budget hearing will be at 1 p.m.

The Department of Corrections, which ranks behind Medicaid as the second largest consumer of General Fund dollars, will make its presentation at 1:45 p.m.

The prison system received \$389 million, an increase of about \$17 million, about 4 percent, in this year's budget. But the prisons, which are filled beyond capacity, understaffed and considered chronically underfunded, aren't likely to receive that big an increase next year, according to Clouse and Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, who chairs the Senate's General Fund committee.

Arthur Orr
Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur

"If we can do it (an increase for Corrections), it will be minimal," Orr said. "We're going to do well to level fund most agencies."

That's even with \$146 million borrowed from the Alabama Trust Fund to support the General Fund. Fiscal year 2015 will be the third and final year of transfers from the ATF to the General Fund approved by voters in 2012 to shore up the sagging budget.

To scrape by in this year's budget, lawmakers also used \$48 million in one-time money from a national settlement between tobacco companies and states. That money won't be available this year. Orr said there are some fund balances that could be used to help balance this year's budget, but nothing as large as the tobacco settlement. Tax revenues that support the General Fund aren't expected to grow significantly.

"It's going to be a very challenging year as we budget for 2015," Orr said.

The Legislature approved a change to a managed care plan for Medicaid last year, a move that is intended to slow the growing cost and improve patient care. Clouse said he expects that to help eventually, but not in the short-term.

"Ten years ago, Medicaid made up 17 percent of the budget," Clouse said. "The budget we're in now, it makes up 35 percent. So it's doubled. Everything is predicated on Medicaid in the General Fund. It's pushing everybody else aside."

The legislative session begins at noon Tuesday. Gov. Robert Bentley will present his State of the State Address at 6 p.m. Tuesday.

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Area lawmakers preview issues for 2014 session

Tuscaloosa News

January 9, 2014

Ashley Chaffin

The League of Women Voters of Greater Tuscaloosa brought West Alabama legislators together with the community Thursday night.

State Sen. Gerald Allen, R-Tuscaloosa, as well as four representatives — Rep. John Merrill, R-Tuscaloosa; Rep. Christopher England, D-Tuscaloosa; Rep. A.J. McCampbell, D-Livingston; and Rep. Bill Poole, R-Tuscaloosa — talked about the issues they'll be facing in the upcoming session, which begins Tuesday.

Allen said the two biggest priorities this session are going to be the two budgets — the general fund and the education budget.

Focusing on the general fund, Allen said no projections have been made in Montgomery about how much money the legislators are going to have to work with. However, taking into account onetime funds used last year, the budget will be starting with less than the last session.

“We are starting off with

\$77 to \$78 billion dollars less than we had in this past session,” he said. “It’s going to be difficult to do that. I don’t see any new revenue streams developing at all. So as far as the session itself, the two budgets are the main priorities that we’ll see a lot of movement on.”

Poole, who will serve as chairman of the House Education Committee, focused on the other budget — the education trust fund.

“We are still recovering in a very dramatic way from the economic downturn,” he said.

Poole said that in 2008 there was \$6.75 billion appropriated for the education budget, but in the current fiscal year only \$5.57 billion was appropriated. He said that although the state is trending in the right direction now, the budgets are still feeling the stress from catching up. He also said he thinks the year will end in a surplus, as it did last year.

Outside of the budgets, Merrill said there will also be a focus on job growth and job creation, which will create new wealth.

“Those are the things that we’re focusing on because those are the things that we know are going to generate new wealth in our community and in the other 66 counties throughout the state of Alabama,” he said.

Merrill also spoke about his hope to improve the pay of education and public employees statewide, an issue that was echoed by England.

“Those elements, those two entities, are backbones of the state of Alabama,” he said. “Most of the citizens of Alabama have some connection to a state employee or a school teacher, so I think our priority should start there, making sure that they are taken care of.”

England also said he hopes to be able to tackle true constitutional reform that will deal with the problem he sees of using certain taxes to fund the general fund budget.

“If you’re basing it on property taxes, the money that you get is static, but the cost of doing business always goes up,” he said. “Every year we’re fighting the battle that we have a static amount of money and we have a rising cost of business.”

McC Campbell discussed the importance of developing people in Alabama, not just business.

“I’m serious about our social agenda that’s not keeping up with our economic development agenda. ... I think that’s what I’m going to focus on is trying to get a consensus in Montgomery that’s going to understand the hurt that people are having out here,” he said.

The audience asked the legislators questions via comment cards, many focusing on whether there would be any changes to current legislation this session. Some of those issues included Medicaid, immigration and taxes.

The legislators agreed that there probably wouldn’t be any restructuring of income taxes, expansion of Medicaid or revision to recent immigration legislation.

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan organization committed to the informed and active participation of citizens in the government. According to the press release, the organization invited 10 local legislators to be a part of the night’s event.

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Legislators discuss upcoming session

Clanton Advertiser

January 9, 2014

Neal Wagner

Chilton County’s legislative delegation were among those who shared their thoughts on topics ranging from Common Core educational standards to expanding the state’s Medicaid rolls during a question-and-answer session a few days ahead of the 2014 legislative session.

In addition to Rep. Kurt Wallace, R-Maplesville, and Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, state Reps. Mary Sue McClurkin, R-Indian Springs, Jim Carns, R-Birmingham, Jim McClendon, R-Springville, April Weaver, R-Brierfield, and state Sen. Jabo Waggoner, R-Vestavia Hills, fielded questions from about 75 people during a legislative preview session sponsored by the Greater Shelby County Chamber of Commerce on Wednesday.

During the session, the legislators shared their thoughts on Common Core education standards, which would standardize Alabama’s public education system based on nationwide criteria.

Wallace and Ward, along with McClurkin, Carns, McClendon and Weaver, said they opposed Common Core standards, as it would “federalize” Alabama’s education system.

“It’s just another way the feds are telling us how to run our lives down here,” McClendon said. “You can rest assured I will oppose Common Core.”

Waggoner said he would side with the Alabama Department of Education on the Common Core issue.

“I’ve talked with the state Board of Education, and they liked the Common Core idea,” Waggoner said, noting the issue likely will be “debated at length” in 2015. “If I had to vote on it this year, I would stand by the state Board of Education.”

The local legislators also said they were opposed to expanding the state’s Medicaid enrollment. McClendon said the state currently has about 930,000 residents on Medicaid, and said Alabama financially is “having trouble taking care of what we’ve got now.”

McClendon said the federal government has agreed to cover the expense of a Medicaid expansion for two years, but said Alabama would be required to pick up 10 percent of the cost in three years.

“You are simply adding to the welfare rolls,” McClendon said. “All that’s doing is kicking the ball down the road to the next legislature.”

The legislators also shared their recent efforts to add efficiencies to state government. In 2013, Ward sponsored a bill to consolidate control of state agencies’ vehicle fleets, Weaver sponsored the “Red Tape Reduction Act” to cut down on the amount of paperwork small businesses are required to fill out and Waggoner said he worked to reduce the number of state agencies with law enforcement responsibilities from 22 to six.

McClendon said he has pre-filed a bill for the 2014 legislative session to begin replacing school textbooks with electronic readers and tablets.

“That will save \$15 (million) to \$20 million a year, and that’s easy to document,” McClendon said. “That will get our students into the 21st century.”

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Paltry December jobs report falls far below expectations

Al.com

January 10, 2014

Kelli Dugan

The national unemployment rate decreased in December from 7.0 to 6.7 percent, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported Friday, but weak employment gains spell uncertainty for a slipping job market.

The measly 74,000 nonfarm jobs added last month fell far below the anticipated 197,000 jobs, raising questions about whether recent job market gains risk being negated.

By contrast, the average job gains for the past four months have hovered closer to 214,000, compared with average monthly gains of 182,000 for all of 2013.

And while December's unemployment rate marks the lowest level since October 2008, the drop is attributed largely to long-term unemployed residents suspending their job searches. Specifically, the BLS estimates the percentage of people seeking employment currently hovers around a 36-year low at 62.8.

According to the latest jobs report, retail trade and wholesale trade employment rose, contributing to the overall increase in nonfarm payroll employment, yet information jobs decreased.

The health care sector, meanwhile, experienced its first cut in a decade, eliminating 6,000 jobs in December, while government shed 13,000 positions.

And despite gaining 9,000 jobs, talk of a manufacturing resurgence is "premature," industry officials said.

"The last two years were very weak for manufacturing employment, and 2014 won't be much better unless Congress and the administration get their collective acts together. Now that the Federal Reserve had signaled a 'tapering' of its monetary stimulus, a jobs plan must be priority number one," Scott Paul, president of the Alliance for American Manufacturing, said in a prepared statement.

"That means public investment in infrastructure, research, and worker training; a focus on cutting the trade deficit by passing currency reform legislation; and enacting a manufacturing plan along the lines of what Senate Democrats have proposed," Paul said.

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Alabama to release new list of failing schools next week

Al.com

January 9, 2014

Challen Stephens

The Alabama Department of Education is expected to release a new list of failing schools at some point next week, as the state updates a list based on old test scores.

That original list of 78 "failing" schools used test data from 2007 through 2012 to find the schools that ranked in the bottom six percent at least three times over six years.

The new list will use test scores from last school year. Those scores were released without fanfare this fall. That means school will now be evaluated based on performance from 2008 through 2013.

Malissa Valdes-Hubert, spokesperson for the state department, said the state anticipates releasing the new list next week, although she could not specify a day.

Under the Alabama Accountability Act, passed last year, students at a "failing" school can request a transfer to another school or another system.

Most significantly, the new state law allows students in a failing school to use public money to switch to private school. Parents can receive a refunded tax credit of about \$3,500 for each student who leaves a failing school for a participating private school.

Just 52 students switched to private school last summer. But 719 transferred to another public school within their same system under the Alabama Accountability Act. Only 18 found transfers to a willing neighboring system.

If a school comes off the list, the state act allows students to keep their transfer through the highest grade available at the school they left.

But don't expect many schools to come off the list. Given the way the math works, only eight schools have enough success behind them to have a shot at improving next week. [Click here to see that list.](#)

The state combined results in math and English across all grades and across three different tests to arrive at a single accountability score for each school. The state has refused to release those scores for non-failing schools, so it's impossible to say how many non-failing schools are at risk of landing on the new list.

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School board no-shows cancel second round of meetings, delay key votes

Al.com

January 9, 2014

Evan Belanger

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- For a second time in as many days, the Alabama State Board of Education has canceled scheduled meetings because not enough members showed up to legally conduct business.

A spokeswoman for the Alabama Department of Education said all business scheduled for the board's K-12 meeting at 1 p.m. today and a postsecondary meeting at 3 p.m. will be carried over to be board's next meetings slated for Feb. 12.

The two scrubbed meetings were initially scheduled for Wednesday, but with only four of eight members available, they were pushed back until today. At least five members must be present for the board to conduct business.

State Superintendent Tommy Bice said he did not recall anytime in the past when the board was unable to do business because too few members were available.

"There are a variety of reasons why some of the board members were not here. I'm not here to question that," he said.

However, Bice added, the cancellation does put education business behind schedule.

"There are some very timely things on our agenda that we needed to get done, but as things occur, we'll just adjust and deal with them in a different way."

School board members Charles Elliott of Decatur, Mary Scott Hunter of Huntsville, Yvette Richardson of Fairfield and Ella Bell of Montgomery were present and able to conduct K-12 and postsecondary work sessions today, which do not require a majority of the board to be present.

Board members said Wednesday that fellow board member Stephanie Bell of Montgomery was unable to attend because she was stranded during air travel.

They also said members Jeffery Newman of Millport was unable to attend due to illness, Betty Peters of Kinsey was unable to attend due to a serious illness in her family and Tracy Roberts of Spanish Fort had a prior engagement scheduled in advance.

The cancellation puts off a key vote to adopt new social studies textbooks after some concerned citizens complained last month that some of the books were pro-Islamic.

It also delayed consideration of proposed revisions to the state's courses of study for math and English that school officials said were intended to tweak the state's common core standards.

Bice said it also put off some personnel decisions that were crucial to providing support at priority schools.

During a work session Hunter said she had planned to miss the next meeting in February because her husband is leaving on a military deployment, but she would change those plans if it appeared the board would fail reach a quorum without her.

Ella Bell said she was "very, very disappointed" they were not able to have the meetings.

"We just need to work very diligently to ensure that we have a quorum to do the business for which we were elected," she said.

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Republican Greg Wren won't seek re-election to Alabama House

Montgomery Advertiser

January 9, 2014

Brian Lyman

Rep. Greg Wren, who has represented eastern Montgomery in the Alabama House of Representatives for 16 of the past 20 years, announced Thursday he would not seek re-election this November.

In a statement, Wren, a Republican, did not give a specific reason for his decision, but thanked the voters of the 75th District “for giving me the honor to serve.”

“Humbled by the trust and confidence placed in me by the voters over eight primary and general elections during my sixteen-year career, I stand and offer my hands and heart of gratitude for the blessings of serving my constituents and the state of Alabama,” Wren said in the statement.

Attempts to reach Wren for comment Thursday were unsuccessful.

Wren’s decision likely leaves the field open for Montgomery County Commissioner Reed Ingram, who announced late last year that he would challenge Wren for his seat in the GOP primary. Ingram, owner of Reed Ingram Motors on East Boulevard, told the Advertiser last November that he felt he “could do a better job” for the district.

“We entered this race to win it and we are going to continue to run an aggressive campaign,” Ingram said in a statement Thursday.

In a campaign finance report filed last week, Ingram reported \$10,356 on hand through Dec. 31. Wren reported \$15,216 on hand on Dec. 31, and had received donations through Dec. 27.

Wren, an insurance agent by trade, serves as vice chair of the House Insurance Committee, and also has a seat on the House Ways and Means General Fund committee. He also has held several positions with the National Conference of State Legislatures. Wren also chaired joint committees dealing with energy policy and Medicaid.

The outgoing representative said in November that he would focus his attention in the upcoming legislative session on the state’s troubled General Fund budget, which faces a potential shortfall in the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1. He reiterated that commitment in his statement, but praised fellow Republicans for cuts, consolidations and debt repayments they had made since taking power in 2010.

“The hard-fought reforms enacted during the last three years have built a more stable foundation of fiscal transparency and accountability, yet work remains as our citizens are increasingly returning to new jobs across the state,” the statement said.

Currently a boot-shaped district with its heel in Montgomery County and a shaft in Elmore County, House District 75 will be re-centered around Pike Road for the June 2014 primary, due to redistricting. Much of the new territory will come from House District 76, currently represented by Rep. Thad McClammy, D-Montgomery.

Besides Wren, Sen. Bryan Taylor, R-Prattville, has announced that he will not seek re-election this November. Rep. Dimitri Polizos, R-Montgomery, won a special election in November to succeed former Rep. Jay Love, R-Montgomery, who stepped down in August to take a position with the Business Education Alliance, an education group affiliated with the Business Council of Alabama.

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Montgomery Rep. Greg Wren won't seek reelection

Al.com

January 9, 2014

Kim Chandler

MONTGOMERY Alabama -- Rep. Greg Wren, R-Montgomery has announced that he will retire from the Alabama Legislature when his term ends in November.

"Humbled by the trust and confidence placed in me by the voters over eight primary and general elections during my sixteen year career, I stand and offer my hands and heart of gratitude for the blessings of serving my constituents and the State of Alabama" Wren, 58, said in a statement.

Wren is a four-term veteran of the Alabama Legislature. He was first elected to the Alabama Legislature in 1994. He left the legislature between 2002 and 2006, but returned in 2006.

"It's bittersweet because I'm passionate about the work," Wren said.

Wren's legislative positions have included chairman of the Joint Legislative Medicaid Committee, He was also named chairman of the National Conference of State Legislatures Task Force on Federal Health Reform Implementation.

He is one of several Republican lawmakers who have announced they will not seek reelection.

Montgomery County Commissioner Reed Ingram had announced that he will challenge Wren for his legislative seat in this year's GOP primary.

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Longshot Republican candidate for governor campaigning again

The Associated Press

January 9, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama (AP) — A longshot Republican candidate for governor is campaigning again after being sidelined for three months by illness.

Former Morgan County Commissioner Stacy George said Thursday he was diagnosed with idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura on Oct. 2. The illness, commonly called "ITP," involves a low blood platelet count.

"It's not cancer and it's not terminal," George said. But it did involve lots of treatments to get his platelet count back to normal and end his fatigue.

"I missed a lot of campaigning but I'm back up running," he said.

George has reported raising less than \$2,000, while Republican incumbent Robert Bentley has taken in \$3.6 million. George said he will stick it out to the Republican primary on June 3 despite the lopsided figures.

"I know I'm running against an incumbent with \$3 million, but I'm in it to win it," George said.

George said he hopes to rejuvenate his campaign by stressing two issues that would create the most contrast with Bentley: calling for Alabamians to vote on creating a state lottery and advocating the expansion of the state Medicaid program under the federal health care law.

George said he will also tell voters that he won't work for free like Bentley. "I am going to take a paycheck because you get what you pay for," he said.

Bentley was elected in 2010 on a jobs creation platform and promised not to take a paycheck until unemployment falls to 5.2 percent. Alabama's rate was 6.2 percent in November, and it was one of the lowest rates in the South.

On the Democratic side of the ballot, Fayette businessman Kevin Bass is running for governor and Democratic state Sen. Billy Beasley of Clayton said he's considering it. Democratic and Republican candidates have until Feb. 7 to sign up to run.

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State lawmakers attack Common Core standards at Shelby County legislative forum

Al.com

January 8, 2014

Martin J. Reed

PELHAM, Alabama -- Various Republican state lawmakers representing parts of Shelby County spoke tonight in favor of repealing Common Core standards pertaining to students in Alabama's public schools.

During a meeting hosted by the Greater Shelby County Chamber of Commerce in Pelham, six of the seven members of the Shelby County delegation attending the gathering said they supported repealing the standard.

Although he co-sponsored a bill to repeal the Common Core standards, state Sen. J.T. "Jabo" Waggoner of Vestavia Hills said he would side with the Alabama Board of Education's stance on the matter today.

Waggoner said "we have been bombarded with statements from both sides. I'm educated, but I'm not an educator. We have a State Board of Education that is elected statewide just as we are. ...

"If I had to vote this session, I would stand by the State Board of Education," he said, adding he will review the issue when it next arises during the legislative session. "I don't know what to believe. ... If I had to vote this year, I would stand by the State Board of Education."

During the forum that arrives days before the legislative session begins on Tuesday in Montgomery, other lawmakers tonight indicated their strong support behind repealing the controversial standards that some see as loss of local control over education.

"I was a cosponsor of the bill last year to repeal Common Core, which got out of committee but did not get voted on," Rep. Mary Sue McClurken of Indian Springs Village said.

McClurkin, who is retiring from the Legislature at the end of her term this year, said lawmakers have had numerous conversations with officials at the Alabama Department of Education and State Board of Education. She has heard discussions that they are receptive to some changes.

"I don't foresee anything happening from a legislative point on that this year, but we will continue to work on not having the federal government dictate what we teach and how we teach in Alabama," he said.

Sen. Cam Ward of Alabaster noted he also cosponsored a bill to repeal Common Core. He drew a parallel to the No Child Left Behind Act passed under President George W. Bush, calling it a "horrible bill."

"It should be state lawmakers, state school board members writing those policies" and not the federal government, Ward said.

Rep. Jim Carns of Birmingham said he supports local control over government matters. "I'm for state control of just about everything we could do," he said. "Washington picks and chooses. They let marijuana alone in Colorado but went after Arizona and Alabama on our immigration laws. We do have a federal government that is out of control."

Rep. Jim McClendon of Springville criticized the federal government's role in Common Core. "It's just another way the feds are telling us how to run our lives out here. I think we could do a better job," he said.

McClendon said he is "opposed to Common Core, I'll vote against it."

Reps. April Weaver of Brierfield and Kurt Wallace of Maplesville also voiced opposition to Common Core. "You can rest assured my vote will be no," Wallace said.

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Will the Legislature weigh in on Common Core in 2014? (Steve Flowers)

Montgomery Advertiser

January 7, 2014

The 2014 Legislative Session begins next week. The session starts early in the fourth year of the quadrennium because it is an election year. Legislators want to come in and get out early so that they can go home and campaign.

Usually legislatures do not do much other than pass the budgets in a campaign year session. They especially do not try to tackle any controversial issues that could stir up any ire with voters. However, this current group of legislators will tackle anything controversial as long as it has a right wing slant to it.

It would be hard to think of any major conservative issue they have not addressed in the first three years of their super Republican majority reign. In years one and two they passed a stringent anti immigration bill as well as dismantled the AEA.

Last year, this bevy of reactionary elephants passed an anti abortion bill. They also adhered to the NRA demands to affirm gun rights laws in Alabama. The legislation allowed people to carry guns openly even into their parking lots at work. The Business Council of Alabama adamantly opposed this provision. However, the NRA prevailed.

They enacted a controversial private school voucher bill that allows parents of children enrolled in “failing” public schools to take a tax credit for tuition they pay to private schools.

They revamped the state’s Medicaid program from the current fee-for-service system into a managed care program.

The Governor’s prize victory came when he got his wish to construct an \$85 million luxury lodge and convention center at the location of the Gulf Shores State Park. It will be a joint public/private partnership. The state will own the property. The project will be funded with BP money from the gulf oil spill.

They also voted to allow Alabamians to make a limited amount of beer for personal consumption without a license or fee. We were the last state to allow home brewing.

One issue that has remained on the back burner is the Common Core State Education Standard. This Common Core concept spells out specific expectations of what students should know at the end of every grade. It goes from kindergarten through high school. Common Core covers the entire spectrum of learning, including reading, writing, listening, vocabulary and mathematics. It addresses the fundamentals of these subjects. Students are tested and asked details about what they have learned.

Conservatives around the country have come out stringently against Common Core. Some Tea Party activists have decried it as being developed by “extreme leftists.” Two extreme right-wingers, Glenn Beck and Phyllis Schafley, have attacked the effort as a dangerous threat from the Obama administration. However, other conservatives, like former Governors Jeb Bush of Florida and Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, are in support of Common Core.

These new standards have the endorsement of major business groups, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is giving grants to support Common Core's implementation.

Some opponents are implying that Common Core is a Washington based idea. Beck and Schafley have stated as much. However, that is not factual. The Common Core concept grew up from the states. Government and state education people developed the standards.

State school professionals and legislators were concerned that an alarming number of students entering college were having to take remedial math and English classes before they could take classes for college credit. The federal government was not involved. Today, 45 states have voluntarily adopted the math and English standards.

Some critics say that Common Core would nationalize education. Proponents counter that the standards are goals and not mandates. There are no set requirements made upon educators. Teachers choose their own books and suggested reading lists.

Two state led groups are preparing the annual assessments that will be matched to the Common Core Standards. They plan to have them ready for the 2014-15 school year. It will be interesting to see if the GOP legislature will weigh in on this issue.

See you next week.

Steve Flowers served 16 years in the state Legislature. He may be reached at www.steveflowers.us.

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David Blair, Huntsville school board president, yet to raise money for state Senate campaign against Paul Sanford

Al.com

January 10, 2014

Paul Gattis

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama - David Blair, the president of the Huntsville City school board who made a noisy entrance into the District 7 state Senate race in November, has yet to raise any money for his campaign.

Blair said Thursday the decision to delay any fundraising is part of a "winning strategy" to defeat incumbent Sen. Paul Sanford in the Republican primary on June 3.

"We have a strategy," Blair said. "We think it's a winning strategy. This has been the plan all along. We've got a lot of support out there. We're going to strike when we feel like it's the appropriate time to strike."

Blair has not filed as a candidate with the Alabama Secretary of State nor filed a monthly campaign finance report, which candidates are required to do when they raise money, according to the Fair Campaign Practices Act.

Blair confirmed his campaign has not raised any money.

While outspending an opponent does not translate to automatic success in an election or a primary, a candidate's campaign war chest is considered a telling marker in evaluating the strength of a campaign. And by now, most declared candidates are well into their fundraising efforts.

In the crowded Republican primary for state Senate District 8, three challengers to Sen. Shadrack McGill - who has said he is not seeking re-election - have combined to raise more than \$90,000.

Sanford, who is completing his first full term as the District 7 senator, has \$46,296 in cash on hand for the campaign, according to his December campaign finance report.

When we win, after we win, and we're at the victory party, we can talk about some of the ways we went through the strategy.

Blair said his effort to raise money for his campaign will take off once a state-imposed moratorium on fundraising ends Feb. 4. The moratorium begins with the start of the legislative session on Tuesday.

"We've got a tremendous amount of support from the community," he said. "We've got a lot of pledges. We had our time frame in mind. We didn't want to interrupt the holidays and folks' family time and we're about to the blackout period. We've got lots of things ready to hit right after the blackout period."

Blair announced his candidacy with a press conference on Nov. 5 and attacked Sanford for not fighting to get Huntsville money for roads, his lack of a legislative record and not working to bring jobs to the area.

"Paul Sanford has received well over \$200,000 in salary serving as our state senator over the past four years," Blair said at the November press conference. "What do we have to show for it? Mr. Sanford has passed only four bills in four years and those bills have had no economic impact on our district."

Asked following that press conference about the comments about Sanford, Blair said, ""We want folks to come out and vote. We wanted to make sure that we captured the contrast for folks. This is going to be a long campaign. We want to give folks a contrast to start thinking about, 'Do I want a viable option?' there's a lot of trying to set a stage of here's what you've got.

"You need to look at what you've got. If you're happy with that, vote for that. I'm not happy with that. I want to give everybody an option."

Asked about the strategy for a delayed start on fundraising, Blair predicted he would defeat Sanford.

"I think I'd rather keep that to myself at this point," he said this week. "It's our internal strategy. We've got a team and we talk these things through. This is the timeline we came up with. We have our reasons.

"When we win, after we win, and we're at the victory party, we can talk about some of the ways we went through the strategy."

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Fresh off oath, Congressman Byrne joins latest Republican effort to repeal Obamacare

Al.com

January 9, 2014

Brendan Kirby

U.S. Rep. Bradley Byrne has wasted no time trying to make his mark on a major national policy issue, announcing on his first full day in office that he has signed on to the latest Republican effort to repeal Obamacare.

Byrne, R-Montrose, announced Thursday that he will co-sponsor the American Health Care Reform Act of 2013, a plan pushed by the chairman of the influential House conservative caucus to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act. The bill, originally filed in September, has 118 co-sponsors.

"Over the past six months, I promised my constituents that if elected, I would fight to repeal the destructive Obamacare law and replace it with common-sense, conservative reforms," Byrne said in a prepared statement. "As my first legislative act as Congressman, I am making good on that pledge."

The bill would repeal President Barack Obama's signature health care overhaul with a plan that its sponsors promise would rely on market-based solutions to cure America's health care problems.

The bill would provide a tax break of \$7,500 for individuals and \$20,000 for families to help Americans purchase health insurance. The government also would fund statewide high-risk pools to help people with pre-existing medical problems that make it difficult to buy insurance.

Insurance companies would be able to sell policies across state lines under the proposal, which also would expand Health Savings Accounts and limit medical malpractice lawsuits.

The Republican-led House has voted dozens of times to repeal the Affordable Care Act, but the GOP does not have the votes in the Senate to pass any of the bills. And even if they did, their proposals would face a certain veto.

The bill that Byrne signed on to received a cool reception from liberal groups when its sponsors unveiled it last year. The left-leaning group Think Progress criticized it as rewarmed ideas dating back to the George W. Bush administration that would do little to help the uninsured and could unravel the employer-sponsored health care system.

But Byrne said the bill would create competition that would bring down prices.

“This measure eliminates billions in taxes and thousands of pages of burdensome regulations by repealing Obamacare, which is weighing down our economy and hurting families across south Alabama,” he stated. “However, it’s not enough to just be against something – to govern, we have to provide conservative alternatives and do what is right for the American people.”

Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., the chairman of the House Republican Study Committee, praised Byrne.

“It is significant that on Bradley Byrne’s first day as a member of Congress, he has already shown determination to solve problems facing hardworking families in Alabama by co-sponsoring our bill to lower health costs and put patients back in charge of their health care decisions,” he said in a statement.

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Alabama auto output tops 915,000 last year, another record for the state industry

Al.com

January 9, 2014

Dawn Kent Azok

The workers at Alabama's three auto assembly plants set another record high for production in 2013, as they combined to turn out more than 915,000 vehicles.

Two of the manufacturers -- Hyundai and Mercedes-Benz -- set individual plant records, while Honda fell slightly from its record output achieved in 2012.

The number of vehicles produced last year climbed 4 percent from more than 880,000 made in the state in 2012.

The growth in output has meant new jobs for the industry, particularly among suppliers, said Bill Taylor, head of the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama and former chief of Mercedes' Alabama operations.

Read more about new and upcoming supplier projects.

The industry's success also helps attract others, he said.

"Automotive is advanced manufacturing all day long," he said. "Industry leaders recognize that, and to be able to have an advanced manufacturing industry growing and successful, it speaks volumes about the work environment in the state."

See the videos: 4 cool things about Alabama's auto industry in 2013

One reason the automakers are able to maintain their numbers is the addition of new models to their Alabama assembly lines, Taylor said. That offers a measure of flexibility: when sales are down for certain models, they can lean on others.

New additions also widen the market for a plant's products. For instance, Mercedes' Alabama plant will begin producing the C-Class this year, marking the first sedan on assembly lines now dominated by SUVs.

Toyota's engine plant in Huntsville also is expanding, in a \$150 million project that will boost machining capacity and parts production for V-6 engines.

Those kind of moves mean the state industry will continue to move the needle when it comes to production, Taylor added.

"We haven't hit the ceiling yet. There are still a lot of opportunities for growth," he said.

The final numbers aren't in yet, but North American car and truck production reached an estimated 16.6 million vehicles in 2013, a 4 percent improvement, according to the Automotive News Data Center.

That's also the first time since 2005 that production passed the 16 million mark. A deep sales slump in 2008 and 2009 prompted widespread cuts in production and jobs, and the industry has been rebuilding since then.

Production is rebounding as sales rise, driven in part by pent-up demand and easy access to credit. In 2013, U.S. auto sales rose 7.6 percent from 2012.

Here's a look at 2013 production for Alabama's auto assembly plants:

Honda: Workers at the Talladega County plant built an estimated 333,531 vehicles in 2013. That's down from the record 336,766 produced in 2012; officials attributed the slip to the ramp up associated with the addition of the Acura MDX to the plant's assembly lines last spring.

Hyundai: The automaker added a third shift in September 2012, so a full year of its operation was bound to push the output of the Montgomery plant higher in 2013. The plant's 2013 output was 399,495 vehicles, up 10.6 percent from the 361,348 produced in 2012 and a new record.

Mercedes: The company will not pinpoint its annual output for 2013 until later this year. But Jason Hoff, head of Mercedes' Alabama operations, said at a recent event that the Tuscaloosa County plant had surpassed its 2012 record output of 182,000 vehicles.

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10 landmarks selected for Alabama tax credits

The Associated Press

January 9, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Ten landmarks have been selected for Alabama's new tax credits for rehabilitation projects.

The Alabama Historical Commission says more applications were submitted than the \$20 million in tax credits that are available annually. The commission says 10 projects have qualified for 2014 tax credits and 10 more are on a wait list.

Applications were approved for four Birmingham projects: the Federal Reserve Bank, the Redmont Hotel, the Brown Marx Building and the Cain Furniture building. Also approved were the Norton-Cochrane-Fitts residence and the First National Bank building in Tuscaloosa, the Edwards Brothers Furniture building and the 951 Government Building in Mobile, the Jefferson Davis Hotel in Montgomery, and the Fort McClellan Headquarters and Barracks in Anniston.

Owners can claim tax credits for 25 percent of the eligible costs of rehabilitation.

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Feds recognize same-sex couples in Utah

The Associated Press

January 10, 2014

WASHINGTON — Attorney General Eric Holder on Friday extended federal recognition to the marriages of more than 1,000 same-sex couples in Utah that took place before the Supreme Court put those unions in the state on hold.

Holder's action will enable the government to extend eligibility for federal benefits to these couples.

The attorney general said the families should not be asked to endure uncertainty regarding their benefits while courts decide the issue of same-sex marriage in Utah.

More than 1,000 gay and lesbian couples took home marriage licenses from local clerks after a federal judge overturned Utah's same-sex marriage ban on Dec. 20. Utah voters approved the ban in 2004.

On Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court put a halt to same-sex marriages in Utah while the Denver-based 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals considers the long-term question of whether gay couples have a right to marry in Utah.

“In the days ahead, we will continue to coordinate across the federal government to ensure the timely provision of every federal benefit to which Utah couples and couples throughout the

country are entitled — regardless of whether they are in same-sex or opposite-sex marriages,” Holder said in a video on the Justice Department’s website.

The attorney general said that “for purposes of federal law, these marriages will be recognized as lawful and considered eligible for all relevant federal benefits on the same terms as other same-sex marriages.”

Chad Griffin, president of the Human Rights Campaign, the nation’s largest gay rights group, said, “This is only the beginning of this fight, and this work continues until marriage equality returns to Utah for good.”

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GOP governors may still go for Medicaid expansion - and cash

Politico

January 10, 2014

Republicans counting on a year of nonstop Obamacare-bashing may be in for an unwelcome surprise: more red-state governors ditching the political script to take a second look at the law’s huge expansion of Medicaid.

The party plans to make Obamacare and its early stumbles a central campaign issue in 2014; the House plans two anti-Obamacare votes Friday. But in the states, the Medicaid expansion — a giant, dangling carrot worth billions of federal dollars to states that sign up — has proved attractive to nearly a dozen GOP governors, and a handful more are on the fence.

Governors like Rick Perry of Texas and Bobby Jindal of Louisiana remain firmly in the “no way” camp. But Pennsylvania and Tennessee are actively working with the Obama administration to expand Medicaid, although their efforts to squeeze policy concessions on the GOP wish list — like requiring enrollees to pay more — could be a dead end.

Indiana and Oklahoma are eyeing alternative versions of expansion and were granted a one-year reprieve by the Obama administration to extend existing state health care programs while they think about it.

(PHOTOS: The GOP governors who said yes to Medicaid expansion)

Virginia, where Democrat Terry McAuliffe is succeeding Republican Gov. Bob McDonnell, is considered a likely candidate to embrace expansion this year. In Maine, Democrats in control of the state Legislature are pressuring Republican Gov. Paul LePage to accept the Medicaid expansion this year, during his reelection effort. New Hampshire, too, where only a Republican-led Senate has blocked expansion, is considered a likely candidate to flip this year.

Governors in small, Republican-dominated states like Wyoming, Kansas and Utah say they’re keeping an open mind in 2014, despite their hatred for the overall health law. And in every

undecided state, an unusual alliance of powerful hospital, business and religious interests has been leaning on Republican leaders to reverse course.

In short, the 26 states that have already approved Medicaid expansion are likely to be joined by at least a few more in 2014 — and the “hell no” states could find themselves an increasingly isolated bunch, concentrated in the South.

“We really are not taking any state for granted,” said Tim Phillips, president of the conservative Americans for Prosperity, which is fighting expansion efforts around the country. He expects Republicans will distance themselves from expansion the closer the elections get, but says AFP won’t leave it to chance. “We’re going to continue to run a very aggressive grass-roots and paid media campaign,” he said, with ads running in states on a case-by-case basis, as they consider expansion proposals.

(PHOTOS: 25 unforgettable Obamacare quotes)

Already, seven states have approved expansion with the blessing of Republican governors — including Arizona’s Jan Brewer, Ohio’s John Kasich and New Jersey’s Chris Christie. Medicaid is growing quickly under Obamacare, with an estimated 3.9 million people determined eligible for the program in the first three months. Supporters say that if all 50 states expanded Medicaid, another 5 million people would become eligible.

In general, Republican-dominated states outside of the South aren’t taking as hard a line against expansion as conservatives would prefer.

Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback, who three years ago sent back a major \$31.5 million federal grant to set up a state-run health insurance exchange, hasn’t shut the door on expansion this year.

“Gov. Brownback is still considering whether or not to expand Medicaid,” spokeswoman Sara Belfry wrote in an email. “The governor will consider all bills passed by the Legislature this session.”

Kansas’s top hospital trade group signaled that it’s readying a new Medicaid offensive in the coming legislative session. Just before the holidays, the Kansas Hospital Association hired former HHS Secretary Mike Leavitt, who’s advising GOP states on Obamacare implementation, to craft a Medicaid expansion plan that its members could pitch to reluctant state lawmakers.

In deep-red Utah, state lawmakers and a special Medicaid commission have met over the past few months to consider conservative approaches to the Medicaid expansion. After winning special concessions from the Obama administration last year for the state’s small-business exchange, Utah policymakers seem poised to once again test the feds’ health care flexibility, say advocates closely tracking the debate.

In two legislative hearings in November and December, “it became abundantly clear they’re going to push beyond” reforms Obama administration said it would allow for the Medicaid expansion program, said Jason Stevenson, communications director for the Utah Health Policy

Project. Gov. Gary Herbert has remained on the sidelines of the expansion debate so far, but he's expected to weigh in soon.

Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead also isn't ruling anything out.

"At this time Gov. Mead is not recommending that the Legislature go ahead with the optional expansion. He plans to monitor the implementation of the ACA and remains open-minded if improvements are made to address his concerns," said Mead spokesman Renny MacKay. That's not an endorsement, but it's not the kind of flat rejection that governors like Perry have made.

Deborah Bachrach, a consultant who works on Medicaid, said even more Republicans might move toward expansion after the primary season. If they escape intraparty challenges or win a primary, they won't be as scared about the politics of Obamacare, she said.

Bachrach also described an intensifying push by hospitals and business coalitions to lean on undecided states, which are missing out on federal dollars every day they shun expansion. She said this effort, combined with the opportunity for states to propose alternative, private-sector-style Medicaid models "lead us to believe that more states will consider (or reconsider) and ultimately approve expansions."

Entrenched political opposition will likely leave the Obama administration without its biggest Medicaid expansion prizes — Florida and Texas, which have a combined 2 million people expected to be eligible for Medicaid expansion.

Although Florida's Republican Gov. Rick Scott supported expansion last year, his GOP-led Legislature rebuffed him, and efforts at compromise appear to have stalemated. Scott, who is seeking reelection, has since made efforts to distance himself from the Medicaid expansion.

"I think the politics make the policy more difficult now," said Don Gaetz, Florida's Senate president, a Republican. "The politics have gone sour for Obamacare, and that makes it more difficult, I think, to work out something with the federal government to do things their way."

Gaetz said any chance of moving toward the Obama administration's position slipped away during the law's miserable rollout in October — and he's relieved Florida waited to move forward.

"We have a newly elected senator who was an infantry captain in Iraq. He reminded me that sometimes it's good to be the second one in the minefield," he said. "I think that's a good way for states to look at Obamacare."

Another set of Republican states began 2014 by reaffirming their commitments to shun Medicaid expansion. Idaho Gov. Butch Otter, for example, said he won't touch expansion this year. Nor will Republican governors in Alaska and South Dakota, despite bright-red North Dakota's surprise embrace of the policy last year.

“On the issue of Medicaid expansion, we should not jump into the deep end without knowing what’s on the bottom,” Otter said in his annual address to state lawmakers on Monday. Otter, who last year lobbied hard for a state-run exchange, said he’s carefully tracking the expansion experience in conservative states.

Mississippi, too, appears unlikely to move in the new year. The state’s governor, Republican Phil Bryant, reiterated his opposition to expansion last week.

“We have a group that will not step over the political, Republican line to accept those funds,” said Bobby Moak, the Democratic leader of the Mississippi House.

It’s that entrenchment that has some experts doubting whether the Medicaid expansion map will change at all this year, in the shadow of the midterm elections.

“As more bad news emerges about costs, coverage, access problems, etc., polarization will prevent movement,” emailed Dennis Smith, a conservative health care consultant who has worked on Medicaid for President George W. Bush, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and The Heritage Foundation..

Robert Blendon, a Harvard University health policy professor, predicted states would wait for the outcome of the 2014 elections before committing to expansion because Republican legislators are afraid of primary challenges from the right. However, he added that expansion is more likely where governors have unilateral authority to expand.

To others, though, the allure of billions of dollars in federal funding and a sharply reduced uninsured population — as well as the fear that hospitals without enhanced Medicaid funding could shut down or shed jobs — will keep expansion in play in the unlikeliest of states.

“In general I agree that states like Texas, Louisiana, South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi will not change,” said Ray Scheppach, former executive director of the National Governors Association. “I do think it is possible for some of the others as the numbers are overwhelming in terms of the positive economic impacts.”