



As budget negotiations continue, legislators turn to other measures

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Texting while driving, budget transparency, vocational-technical education, child day care subsidies and concussions: While much attention is focused on the state budget, the state legislature is spending its last few days of the regular session dealing with myriad other issues as well.

One bill sent to Gov. M. Jodi Rell Monday is aimed at improving the operation and funding of the state's 15 vocational-technical schools.

Rep. Andrew W. Fleischmann, D-West Hartford, co-chairman of the Education Committee said, the bill "addresses all of the shortcomings" at the state's vo-tech schools.

The bill passed unanimously in the House today and in the Senate last week.

During a public hearing last month, numerous people testified on the deteriorating conditions at the 15 state-funded schools. There are 10,200 high school students and 5,500 part-time adult students currently enrolled at the schools.

The bill does several things, including requiring the State Board of Education to hold a hearing and develop a plan if a vo-tech school is to be closed and to transport students from the closed school to another school. It also adds two members with backgrounds in vocational-technical education or manufacturing to the board.

The bill also requires the State Bond Commission to vote twice a year on whether to allocate money for maintenance and equipment at the vo-tech schools and it requires the vo-tech superintendent compile an annual report on the adequacy of funding and resources.

Rep. Vincent J. Candelora, R-North Branford, ranking Republican on the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee, expressed concern with requiring the bond commission to vote on additional funding twice a year.

The final requirement would retire all school buses 12 years and older, spurred from a Hartford Courant article that reported the majority of vo-tech school buses have major safety violations.

Last month, Patricia Ciccone, superintendent of the vo-tech schools, said about half of the school's 90 buses are 10 years or older. The Bond Commission responded by giving the schools \$2 million to help replace the aging buses.

Rell's office would not say whether she will sign the bill, but during public hearings several agency officials testified against the it.

Robert L. Genuario, Office of Policy and Management Secretary testified against the bill, saying it creates a bureaucratic system and would "alter the executive power" of the bonding commission.

Phones and texting and driving

Texting while driving may soon be illegal in Connecticut, as the Senate passed a bill forbidding the practice.

The measure also would crack down on talking on a cell phone while driving without using a hand-free device. It would end the policy of giving first-time violators a waiver if they buy a hands-free device, and instead imposes a \$100 fine. It also increases fines for subsequent violations.

Justifying the hikes, proponents say the law has been around for five years and people should know better than to use their phones behind the wheel.

The legislature's budget office said in 2008, 14,500 received a warning for using their phone while driving and 22,500 received a fine.

Rell introduced a similar bill this session, saying 19 states prohibit text messaging and six states prohibit using hand-held cell phones while driving. AAA supports laws banning drivers from texting, but a recent study from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety found no reduction in crashes in states with laws that ban hand-held cell phone use.

The bill, approved by the Senate 32-1, now heads to the House for final passage.

Warnings for closure of childcare subsidy program

A bill is headed for the governor's desk that requires parents and childcare centers be notified before enrollment closes for the state's childcare subsidy program.

The bill, passed unanimously in both the House and Senate, was spurred after enrollment last year closed to new applicants who are not on federal assistance programs. The closure was accidentally

discovered by an inquiring daycare provider last year just a few hours before applications were cut off -- leaving parents and providers who had been caring for then-eligible children scrambling to get their applications filed.

The number of children receiving a subsidy dropped from 22,000 in May to 17,000 children in October, when the program again began accepting applications.

Child advocates warn that enrollment will likely close again July 1 because the state, struggling to close a \$726 million deficit, may not allocate enough to fully fund the program.

DSS spokesman David S. Dearborn said the program will continue at least through this June, but the department does not know what will happen after that.

Giving a 30-day warning, Dearborn said "could make it difficult to achieve required savings when necessary to live within the budget," because of the anticipated flood of applications.

State budget transparency

The House voted unanimously today to put a searchable database of the state's checkbook and payroll online for public review.

The site will mirror a [new website](#) launched by a conservative think tank earlier this year.

Proponents say it is necessary for the legislature's non-partisan budget office to launch its own site because of inaccuracies on the Yankee Institute for Public Policy's site.

The Yankee Institute has said any inaccuracies are due to errors the information they received from the state's chief financial officer, Nancy S. Wyman.

The Yankee Institute's CtSunlight.org is generating a flood of traffic. The site averages about 5,000 page views a day and 63,000 unique users have visited the site since it launched, said Heath Fahle, policy director of the [Yankee Institute](#).

The [bill](#) now heads to the Senate, and is expected to face little opposition. If it becomes law, the site will go live in July 2011.

Several other states have decided to open their records - including in [Utah](#) and [Nebraska](#). In other states, non-profits have taken on the task - including [New York](#) and [Maine](#). The federal government lists its expenditures at [USASpending.gov](#).

House and Senate butt heads on concussions bill

The House rejected the Senate's attempt to water down a bill requiring that student athletes suspected of suffering a concussion sit out for 24 hours and get a licensed medical professional to clear them before returning.

The Senate last week approved an amendment essentially undoing the original intent of the bill by giving coaches the authority to put a player suspected of a concussion back in the same game he or she was just removed from.

The House rejected the amendment unanimously Monday, and sent their amended bill with the original intent back to the Senate to vote on once again.

"I have serious concerns that someone that has had abbreviated training making that determination," said Deputy Minority Leader Themis Klarides, R-Derby, about the Senate amendment.

Rep. Jason D. Perillo, R-Derby, said it also makes school system's liable and could result in lawsuits if a coach determines the player is fit to play and later determined the player did have a concussion.

Statewide, 5,000 to 8,000 student athletes suffer from a concussion each year, estimated Paul Hoey, associate director of the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference. There are currently 107,000 high school athletes in the state.

Connecticut would have been the third state to have a law regarding possible concussions in student athletes, said Senate Majority Leader Martin M. Looney of New Haven. Oregon and Washington adopted the law last year.