

Beshear proposes state pre-K funding for every 4-year-old ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

FRANKFORT, Ky. (AP) — Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear on Monday proposed a massive budget increase for Kentucky education, calling for state-funded preschool for every 4-year-old as he looked to reshape the debate after House Republicans preempted him with their own spending plan.

The governor said his two-year budget proposal includes nearly \$2 billion in additional funding for preschool through 12th grade. Beshear will present his overall state spending blueprint Thursday evening in a speech to lawmakers and a statewide television audience.

"Right now is when we must make the game-changing investments that turn two years of economic gains into 20 years of great prosperity for our people," the governor said. "It's how we leapfrog other states. It's how we ensure we are never 40th or 45th in anything ever again."

Meanwhile, emergency funding for tornado-stricken parts of Kentucky began advancing with bipartisan support. A bill proposing \$200 million of aid cleared a House committee Monday.

The plan is to pump an initial \$45 million into stricken communities, with \$15 million for temporary housing and \$30 million for schools. More aid will be released later to help meet other recovery needs, House Speaker David Osborne said.

"We know that there's going to be additional monies that are needed for local governments," he said. "We know that there's going to be insurance shortfalls. We know that there are going to be some school construction monies that are needed. We just don't know what those are yet."

The measure, requested by the governor, is a response to the storms that devastated several Kentucky communities last month, killing 77 people.

As for the state's next two-year budget, Beshear plans to reveal more details of his proposal ahead of his budget speech. His requests for new spending stay well within the state's means, he said, amid record-high revenue surpluses and unprecedented highs for statewide business investments and job creation in 2021.

Some GOP legislative leaders prefer more restrained spending, cautioning that the economy has benefited from huge amounts of federal aid amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beshear's administration indicated it was blindsided by the release of a House budget bill last Friday as Republicans opted not to wait for the governor's budget plan. Lawmakers traditionally have used a governor's spending blueprint as the starting point for writing budget bills.

The governor blasted House Republicans for circumventing his office in filing the bill covering most state services, including education, health care and public safety.

"Drafting and filing an executive branch budget without the knowledge or input of the executive branch itself is unprecedented," Beshear said at a news conference. "It's unprovoked. It's unprofessional, unwise and perhaps even unlawful."

Osborne said introducing the House budget bill was the first step in a process that will include consideration of the governor's recommendations and the Senate's priorities.

House Appropriation and Revenue Chairman Jason Petrie said last week the bill reflected months of work with input from stakeholders. He said the measure provides "a solid, responsible approach consistent with our state's needs and obligations and our philosophy that we must carefully consider every allocation we make."

Beshear said his plan provides considerably more funding for education.

A cornerstone of Beshear's plan is to guarantee pre-kindergarten learning for every 4-year-old, with the state fully funding the initiative. The cost — \$172 million in each year of the next biennium — is "more than affordable," amounting to a fraction of the state's massive budget surplus, he said.

“No longer will tens of thousands of our children be left out of preschool or Head Start, programs that we know provide positive outcomes on children’s early literacy and mathematic skills and foster long-term educational success,” Beshear said.

Beshear's plan includes a 12.5% increase in per-pupil funding under SEEK, the state’s main K-12 funding formula. That would amount to an extra \$397 million in the next two years, he said.

The governor’s two-year budget would raise the amount to \$4,300 in the first year and to \$4,500 in the second year. Under the House GOP plan, the amount would go to \$4,100 in the first year and \$4,200 in the second. The current amount is \$4,000.

Beshear's plan would fully fund school districts’ costs for student transportation, freeing up local funds for districts to use on other initiatives. The House GOP said its plan would increase the state's share to a minimum of 70%, with the state fully covering transportation costs for some districts.

Both versions would provide state funding to cover the entire cost of full-day kindergarten.

The governor proposed a minimum 5% pay raise for all school personnel.

Beshear said he would propose a nearly 12% funding increase for Kentucky's higher education system – the largest in decades.

Region: United States ^[3]

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