

March 24, 2017

House and Senate lawmakers finalized negotiations Wednesday to marry competing variations of the state's 2018 spending blueprint, a record \$25 billion in state appropriations that includes pay raises for tens of thousands of state employees. The budget, which also includes an additional \$24 billion in federal funds for federal programs that are administered by the state, now awaits final approval by Governor Nathan Deal.

Education

Governor Deal's underperforming schools initiative—his second attempt to turnaround chronically failing public schools—advanced out of the Senate Education Committee earlier this week and passed the full Senate overwhelmingly today. The Senate version differs from the House version but it is expected that the House will agree with the Senate's actions next week.

That same committee green-lit legislation that would simplify the process of charter schools procuring unused public school facilities. The bill now sits in the Rules Committee and is expected to gain a vote next week.

The Senate Finance Committee approved an increase in the state tax credit for private school scholarships but dramatically scaled back the scope from the House-passed proposal, which would have increased the cap on the tax credit over time to \$100 million from its present \$58 million. The Senate version increases the cap to only \$65 million and also limits the nonprofit administrators of the scholarship programs to overhead costs of 3 percent.

Legislation stipulating additional due process rights for students accused of sexual assault at higher education institutions was tabled in committee this week for further study after victims advocates objected that the bill left students who have been assaulted vulnerable.

Fantasy sports

The Senate Regulated Industries Committee has advanced legislation to formally regulate fantasy sports in Georgia, though it awaits action by the Rules Committee before it can move to the floor.

Craft Brewers and Distillers

The Senate gave final approval this week to House amendments on legislation allowing Georgia's craft brewers and distillers to make on-site sales to consumers. The House expanded the earlier Senate version to include distillers in the new three-tier carveout.

Opioid abuse

In an effort to combat "doctor shopping," the Senate passed House legislation to require prescribing physicians to consult a state patient library before doling out potentially addictive opioids. The House must now agree to the new amendments, expected as early as today, before it can move to the governor for final approval.

Child welfare

An overdue update to Georgia's adoption law was tabled this week by the Senate Judiciary Committee after a controversial amendment was attached. The amendment would have empowered private adoption agencies that work with the state to refuse to place children with families if such placement violated their religious beliefs. Opponents of the amendment feared it targeted LGBTQ families and Governor Deal worried it would jeopardize federal funding.

A mandate that insurance policies cover children's hearing aids passed overwhelmingly this week out of the House. Due to a change in the bill's effective date, the Senate must agree to the bill once more before it moves to Governor's desk.

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