

School Start Date Debated In S.D. House

PIERRE (AP) — A South Dakota House committee has passed a measure that would prevent public schools from starting classes before the last Monday in August. The State Affairs Committee voted 8-5 to advance the bill. Supporters say it will allow more time for students to gain additional summer work experience, attend the State Fair and take vacations with their families. Tourism industry representatives say the bill will be good for business. Some supporters hope to push all school start dates to after Labor Day.

Opponents counter that individual school districts should decide when classes start in the fall. Officials representing schools say education should be the top priority and starting school earlier allows more time to prepare for mandatory testing.

House Pushes To Extend Term Limits

PIERRE (AP) — The South Dakota House has endorsed a proposed constitutional amendment that would extend the term limits that apply to state lawmakers. Senate and House members can serve no more than four consecutive two-year terms in a chamber, for a total of eight years. But a lawmaker can run for another chamber after being term-limited in one. The House voted 54-16 to approve extending those limits to six two-year terms, or a total of 12 consecutive years in a chamber. The measure next goes to the Senate. The measure is a proposed amendment to the South Dakota Constitution. If the Legislature passes it, the proposal will be put to a statewide public vote on the November ballot.

Tax Measures Could Benefit Retirees

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Retirees and low-income elderly residents could see their tax burdens lowered in Nebraska under measures in a legislative committee. The bills presented Wednesday would allow more elderly Nebraskans to qualify for homestead exemptions, and exempt a portion of Social Security income from state taxes. One bill would ensure that the state's tax brackets keep pace with inflation. Sen. Galen Hadley, chairman of the Revenue Committee, says the tax-bracket bill amounts to a tax cut that would benefit residents of all incomes. The proposals were introduced after a series of public hearings held by the Legislature's Tax Modernization Committee. The bills are LB986 and LB987.

Senate Passes Shared Parenting Bill

PIERRE (AP) — The South Dakota Senate has voted unanimously to pass a bill encouraging joint physical custody of children in divorce proceedings. Other bills dealing with the issue have failed in recent legislative sessions. This year's bill is based on an Iowa custody law and is designed to give children substantial time with both parents. It does not establish a presumption of equal parenting, and judges will still have the final say in assigning custody. The bill's sponsor says it reflects changes in society and research that indicates it's better for children to have contact with both parents. It goes next to the South Dakota House.

Neb. School Funding Bill Advances

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A bill that would keep some \$35.7 million in state aid for Nebraska's public schools has won first-round approval in the Legislature. The bill that advanced Wednesday would increase state aid by about \$35.7 million for fiscal year 2015. The state budget approved last year included \$940 million for school aid in that period, based on estimates. But the current state aid formula calls for \$900 million. Sen. Kate Sullivan of Cedar Rapids, chairwoman of the Education Committee, says the bill would ensure roughly the same amount of funding for schools that was approved in the budget. Supporters say increasing state aid helps reduce pressure on property taxes, though not all districts receive equalization aid. Lawmakers voted 29-0 to advance the bill LB725.

Three S.F. Policemen Injured In Arrest

SIOUX FALLS (AP) — Authorities in Sioux Falls say three policemen have been treated for injuries they sustained when trying to arrest a man following the report of a suspected domestic dispute. Police on Wednesday said the officers were transported to a hospital. Police say 31-year-old Rocky T. Traversie Jr. allegedly hit two relatives with a brick and threatened to not let them leave a northern Sioux Falls home. Authorities say three more people were at the home during the incident. Police say a teenager escaped through a window and called police. Eighteen police officers responded to the scene. Police say the Sioux Falls man has been arrested on three counts of aggravated assault on law enforcement, five counts of kidnapping and two counts of aggravated assault domestic. Traversie's attorney information couldn't be found.

S.D. Lawmakers Push For Quick Relief For Ranchers With Farm Bill

BY HENRY C. JACKSON
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — South Dakota's congressional delegation lobbied hard for the new federal farm bill, which will cost \$100 billion per year for the next half-decade and has something for nearly everyone in agriculture.

President Barack Obama is set to sign the bill Friday in Michigan, but South Dakota's representatives in Washington were already busy Wednesday pressing their top priority: urging Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to restart an expired livestock disaster program that will help the many ranchers in the Dakotas and Nebraska who suffered heavy losses in an early-October blizzard.

Sens. John Thune, R-S.D., and Tim Johnson, D-S.D., signed a letter Wednesday with North Dakota Sen. Heidi Heitkamp and other lawmakers pressing Vilsack to act quickly to restart the livestock disaster program.

"Passing a farm bill that included livestock disaster programs was an important first step, and now that relief needs to reach those affected by the storm as quickly as possible," Johnson said in a news release.

In their letter, the lawmakers said the blizzard killed more than 20,000 cattle, sheep, horses and bison in South Dakota and parts of North Dakota and



Johnson Noem Thune

Nebraska, and in some cases left producers with less than half of their herds. They said last time a farm bill was passed, in 2008, it took just over a year for ranchers to receive payment for routine cattle losses, and that it shouldn't take that long this time.

"They've waited long enough for much-needed support," said Rep. Kristi Noem, R-S.D., who worked on the committee that combined the House and Senate versions of the farm bill.

Noem said she had separately already been in touch with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to get the program functioning as soon as possible. The reauthorized program will cover losses from 2012, when the last program expired.

The immediate push for the USDA to get the program up and running again reflects a reality of the massive farm bill, which provides clarity to farmers and others associated with agriculture. But at \$100 billion per year over five years, the bill's size and scope mean it contains various elements that will

need to be scrutinized, lawmakers said.

While disaster relief is the most pressing element of the new farm bill for South Dakota, other components will have an effect on the state's agriculture community and lawmakers said they would be watching them closely.

Thune said he is interested in the execution of language on forestry that he worked to include in the bill. The bill provides more flexibility in dealing with the health of forests and gives the Forest Service greater ability to treat some environments before they are affected by pine beetles, which is an issue in South Dakota.

Lawmakers have also said they will watch how new conservation language is implemented. The new bill ties subsidies for farmers to compliance with conservation initiatives. For farmers who want to plant on certain types of protected lands, it cuts subsidies in half.

Thune said in a statement that he was satisfied with the final product, but would continue to pressing for ways to help farmers.

"I will continue fighting for commodity policy reforms that provide a better market for farmers and a better value for taxpayers," he said.

The Senate passed the bill on Tuesday, less than a week after the House passed it.

Panel Kills Bill To Drug Test People On Welfare

BY NORA HERTEL
Associated Press

PIERRE — A South Dakota Senate committee killed a bill on Wednesday that would have established drug testing of welfare recipients. The Health and Human Services Committee voted 5-2 to defeat the measure.

Similar bills have been rejected by South Dakota lawmakers in recent years. The bill's main sponsor, Sen. Mark Kirkeby, R-Rapid City, was the only person who testified in favor of the measure, arguing it would discourage illegal drug use and promote stable families.

"I ask committee members to have the courage, and it is courage, to support our citizens in need, to discourage illegal drug use," Kirkeby said.

He said people were lobbying against the bill before he had even released it.

Opponents said there are already systems in place to protect children in households with drug abuse and said the measure would discriminate against low-income people.

"This bill is really bad policy. It's based on the perception that there's a large number of welfare recipients who use illegal drugs," said Lynne Valenti, Deputy Secretary of the South Dakota Department of Social Services. She said there is no data to demonstrate that people on welfare use drugs more than the rest of the population.

The bill would have required the Department of Social Services to develop a drug screening and testing program for people getting financial assistance benefits. It did not include a cost

estimate or funding source.

The federal government does not permit drug testing of people on Medicaid or the Supplemental Food Assistance Program, often referred to as food stamps. People who receive funding from South Dakota's welfare program, called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, would have been subject to the testing.

Other states have passed laws to allow drug screening or testing of people receiving public benefits. Florida's law was challenged in court and found unconstitutional.

South Dakota state Sen. Phil Jensen, R-Rapid City, who voted for the bill, asked opponents, "why can't we come up with a simple drug testing program that provides some accountability?"

Deb Bowman, senior adviser to Gov. Dennis Daugaard, told Jensen there was no reason to do the drug testing.

"None of us condone illegal drug use, but I don't think this is the way we go at it," Bowman said.

Terry Dosch, executive director of South Dakota Council of Substance Abuse Directors, asked why not drug test recipients of other publicly-funded programs, including student loans and agriculture subsidies.

Sen. Bruce Rampelberg, R-Rapid City, supported the concept behind the bill but voted against it because the cost of the program was not included.

"There's no doubt in my mind that this is going to require funding," Rampelberg said.

"For a low return on investment," he added, "that's a lot of money and effort to go through"

Iowa Senate Approves School Funding Boost Plan

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP)

— The Democratic-controlled Iowa Senate approved legislation Wednesday that would provide more than \$200 million in additional school funding for the 2015-2016 academic year, but the bills are unlikely to advance in the Republican-majority House where lawmakers don't want to take this issue up until next year.

The Senate approved three bills dealing with school funding. Two that would boost funding were approved 26-23, in straight party-line votes. A measure to pay for the increase using state dollars, rather than through a hike in property taxes, was approved 49-0. The bills will now move to

the state House for review.

Funding for the 2014-2015 school year has already been established. Under state law, the General Assembly is supposed to set funding for elementary and secondary education more than a year in advance, though Republicans have not always followed that rule in recent years.

Democrats want to provide an additional \$222.5 million in state funding for the 2015-2016 school year. Per-pupil spending would increase by 6 percent, going to \$6,748, according to the nonpartisan Legislative Services Agency. As part of the plan, this increase would be funded by the state, not by a hike in property taxes.

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