The General Assembly officially convened Monday for the 2013 legislative session. There is no telling how long the session will last because it is comprised of 40 “legislative days,” that are convened and recessed at the pleasure of the elected leadership.

This week, the General Assembly completed four legislative days, leaving 36 to go. Next week there will be budget hearings before a joint committee of House and Senate Appropriations members, but none of those days count as legislative days, as the General Assembly is officially in recess until Monday, Jan. 28 when they will have the 38th legislative day.

At any rate, this was a very busy week at the Capitol, highlighted by the Governor’s State of the State Address and major progress on the administration’s tax-tracked hospital provider fee bill, SB 24 (Bethel-54th). Here are my notes on each:

State of the State Address
You can click here to read the text of the State of the State, or here to watch the archived version.

Below are the major child-focused points of the address.

Juvie Justice Reform: $5 million in the FY 2014 budget for a program to incentivize communities to develop and use community-based options such as substance abuse treatment for family counseling as alternatives to confinement for low-risk offenders.

Boating Safety: Proposing the “Kile Glover Boat Education Law” that would place age limits and educational requirements on young boat operators and require those 15 or younger to wear life jackets when riding in a moving open boat. (This proposal has not yet appeared as legislation this session.)

Georgia Pre-K Program: Gov. Deal reiterated his plan to restore 10 days to Georgia’s Pre-K Program, bringing it back to a full school year of 180 days.

Education: Requested $1.6 million in this year’s budget to continue the reading mentor program that began last year, which shows educators better ways to teach reading to children. Requested $159M in additional funding for enrollment growth in K-12 schools in FY 2013 and $147 million for enrollment growth and salary increases for teachers based on training and experience for FY 2014. Also added an additional $41 million to fully fund the revised Equalization formulas adopted last year. Alluded to plans to continue the modernization of K-12 funding formula and to look at problems with school system accreditation.

Childhood Obesity: Mentioned the importance of the Department of Agriculture’s Georgia Grown, which has a farm to school component, and the HB 73 program, overseen by the Department of Public Health.

Health: Requested that he does not plan to expand Medicaid eligibility. Pushed for the passage of legislation (see notes on SB 24 below) to authorize the Department of Community Health to assess a provider fee for hospitals that is needed to draw down federal Medicaid dollars (without which there will be a very serious healthcare access problem for children of all economic levels).

Legislation of Interest This Week
SB 24 – Hospital Provider Fee
SB 24 would authorize the Department of Community Health to assess a provider fee on hospitals for the purpose of continuing to draw down federal Medicaid dollars. The current provider fee is due to expire in the end of June this year. The state needs the fee to secure about $700 million in Medicaid dollars. Without having the fee, the only way to keep Medicaid solvent would be to reduce reimburments to hospitals by 20%. This would seriously jeopardize many of our state’s child-centered and rural hospitals.

The Message: “Please SUPPORT Senate Bill 24 when it comes before you for a vote. Our state needs this reliable way to secure Medicaid funding and prevent healthcare access for Georgia’s children. We can not risk the diminution or closure of hospitals serving our children across the state.”

The How: Click here to find your elected officials, and then call or email them with the message above.

HB 42 (Slappy-34th) Restores austerity cuts made to local school systems since 2002 in the General Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2014.

HB 73 (Lindsey-54th) Every health benefit policy shall provide coverage for the full cost of one hearing aid per hearing impaired ear subject to a $2,500.00 minimum and up to $3,000.00 per hearing aid for covered individuals 22 years of age or under and for the replacement for one hearing aid per hearing impaired ear every 36 months.

HB 74 (Linsey-54th) Each insurer providing a prescription drug benefit or reimbursement for health care costs shall provide coverage and reimbursement for medical foods used in the diagnosis and treatment of inherited metabolic and genetic disorders and food tolerance and absorption disorders where the attending physician has issued a written order stating that the medical food is medically necessary.

HB 70 (Colick-40th) The State Board of Education can require a local board of education to expedite the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and to waive the prior school year requirement for a special needs scholarship to a non-school-based science program by a student with autism.

HB 46 (Mitchell-88th) No early care and education program or similar facility shall employ any person who has a child protective services report that reveals a confirmed report of child abuse, or allow any such person to reside at or be domiciled at such facility. The department shall either deny the issuance of or revoke the license, commission, or registration of any such facility violating the provisions of this subsection.

HB 21 (James-35th) A resolution requesting that all physicians include autism spectrum disorders screening in all well-child visits no later than 18 months of age.

HB 22 (Oliver-82nd) An adopting parent or parents, a child’s birth relatives, and the child may voluntarily enter into a written post-adoption contact agreement to permit continuing contact between a child’s birth relatives and the child if the agreement is found by the court to be in the best interests of the child at the time the final order of adoption is entered. A post-adoption contact agreement shall be filed with the court no later than 30 days after filing of a petition for adoption.

HB 47 (Fort-59th) Each individual accident and sickness policy sold shall provide coverage for treatment of dependent children with cancer and provide coverage for autism.

SB 1 (Ligon-3rd) No insurer shall have a policy of denying, or which effectively prevents, a parent of a child the right to inspect, review, or obtain copies of health insurance records relating to his or her own child, in all types of custody arrangements, unless a court order has specifically removed the right of the noncustodial parent to such information or unless parental rights have been terminated.

SB 47 (James-35th) Reiterated that he does not plan to expand Medicaid eligibility. Continued to push for the passage of legislation (see notes on SB 24 below) to authorize the Department of Community Health to assess a provider fee for hospitals that is needed to draw down federal Medicaid dollars (without which there will be a very serious healthcare access problem for children of all economic levels).

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Legislative Updates: Week of 1/14/13

2 Minute Advocate for the Week!

The “Ask”: Contact your State House Representatives and ask them to SUPPORT SB 24 when it comes for a vote. (Not sure who your representative is? Click Here to find out.)

The Why: SB 24 would authorize the Department of Community Health to assess a provider fee on hospitals for the purpose of continuing to draw down federal Medicaid dollars. The current provider fee is due to expire in at the end of June this year. The state needs the fee to secure about $700 million in Medicaid dollars. Without having the fee, the only way to keep Medicaid solvent would be to reduce reimbursements to hospitals by 20%. This would seriously jeopardize many of our state’s child-centered and rural hospitals.

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Education
HB 2 (Mitchell-88th) No early care and education program or similar facility shall employ any person who has a child protective services report that reveals a confirmed report of child abuse, or allow any such person to reside at or be domiciled at such facility. The department shall either deny the issuance of or revoke the license, commission, or registration of any such facility violating the provisions of this subsection.

HB 7 (Ligon-3rd) No insurer shall have a policy of denying, or which effectively prevents, a parent of a child the right to inspect, review, or obtain copies of health insurance records relating to his or her own child, in all types of custody arrangements, unless a court order has specifically removed the right of the noncustodial parent to such information or unless parental rights have been terminated.

HB 27 (James-35th) A resolution requesting that all physicians include autism spectrum disorders screening in all well-child visits no later than 18 months of age.

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Juvenile Justice/Vulnerable Youth