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KIDS CAUCUS UNVEILS LEGISLATIVE AGENDA, TOUTS ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Increasing opportunities for SEED scholarship, sign language and autism diagnosis among issues for bipartisan group

DOVER – The Kids Caucus, a bipartisan panel with members from all four caucuses in the House and Senate, released its legislative agenda for the session on Thursday, which includes legislation addressing children’s issues such as health care, education and child care.

Formed in 2005 and operating on an ad-hoc basis, the Kids Caucus has established a state mission that all children deserve:

- to be free from hunger and preventable disease and to receive regular health care;
- a safe and nurturing start in the first 3 years of life, including access to quality early child care;
- an education that prepares them to meet the future and inspires them to achieve their potential;
- to grow up free from abuse, violence, and the devastation of alcohol and other drugs;
- a secure future and to grow up in an economically stable family;
- to live in a community that provides a clean, safe environment with economic opportunities for all.

“Legislators from all four caucuses formed the Kids Caucus because we believe that children – besides being our most precious resource and our future – needed a voice,” said Rep. Teresa L. “Terry” Schooley, D-Newark, a caucus co-chair and retired teacher. “We have worked in a bipartisan fashion to pass legislation that will improve the education, health and quality of life of children throughout the state, and we will continue to address those issues and be that voice for the kids in Delaware.”

One bill on the caucus’ agenda, House Bill 345, was filed Thursday. Sponsored by Rep. S. Quinton “Quinn” Johnson IV, D-Middletown, the legislation would recognize American Sign

Language as a world language so it would allow high schools to teach American Sign Language and the students would receive graduation credits for these classes.

“Currently, these classes do not count toward graduation requirements,” Rep. Johnson said. “Like many other special education fields, there is a shortage of sign language interpreters. It is our hope that this early exposure to American Sign Language will encourage individuals to enter into this very rewarding career.”

Another bill Rep. Johnson is sponsoring that is on the caucus’ agenda is House Bill 328, which would prohibit schools and school districts from using an artificially low standard in assessing the needs of students with disabilities. The legislation would bar schools and school districts from providing students with disabilities with educational services that are the “functional equivalent of a serviceable Chevrolet” – the actual legal standard that some districts now use – and require them instead to provide educational services that offer a real educational benefit to those students.

“By raising the bar and ensuring that in fact all children are receiving a world-class education, we will be ensuring that more students with special needs will graduate and will be productive citizens of our society,” Rep. Johnson said. “It is our responsibility to provide an education that does not limit students’ ability to achieve success and allows them to meet their full potential.”

Senate Bill 41, sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Sen. Patricia M. Blevins, D-Elsmere, would allow children who are leaving foster care to have access to the Success Excellence Equals Degree (SEED) scholarship, without the condition that they begin their higher education immediately after high school. The measure also allows them to attend school part time. The SEED scholarship provides tuition for full-time students enrolled in an associate’s degree program at Delaware Technical & Community College or the associate of arts program at the University of Delaware.

Sen. Blevins said that these exceptions are necessary because children aging out of foster care have the unique responsibility to support themselves and might not be able to follow the traditional timetable that children with the support of a more traditional family are able to follow.

”The Kids Caucus has moved forward many issues that benefit Delaware’s youngest citizens. One of those issues that we hope will move forward this year is access to the SEED Scholarship Program for youth who are aging out of foster care,” Sen. Blevins said. “The additional challenges of self-sufficiency faced by children aging out of foster care should not block them from the higher education advantages that all other youth in our state enjoy. This legislation will allow these youth to attend college part time and will recognize a GED as high school completion.”

Children’s safety has been at the forefront of people’s minds in recent months after the revelation of the unthinkable acts allegedly committed by Lewes pediatrician Earl Bradley against dozens of young children. The Kids Caucus has taken steps to identify issues that might exist and determine how to prevent such situations from occurring again. In January, the Kids Caucus held

a forum with officials from various areas of the medical community, including Delaware Health Care Association, the Medical Society of Delaware and the Nemours Foundation.

“Legislators wanted to appropriately respond as opposed to just reacting, so we gathered a group of stakeholders to discuss what is being done and what could be done,” said Rep. Michael A. Barbieri, D-Newark. “On very short notice, we were able to get many members from various groups to attend. During this forum, we talked about professional regulations and whether changes need to be made to better protect the young patients and their families. We discussed information-sharing among states of physician career histories and other areas where we can seek improvement. Their insights helped us discover areas where we can improve what we do and make it safer for everyone.”

The Kids Caucus will hold a rally next Thursday, April 1, on the steps of Legislative Hall to raise awareness and kick off Child Abuse Awareness Month. Sen. Catherine L. Cloutier, R-Heatherbrooke, has personally seen how children who were abused had great difficulty in acknowledging and facing those issues.

“We have to keep bringing this issue up and raising awareness because so many families and children are affected at a young age, and those effects can linger for the rest of their lives,” Sen. Cloutier said. “We have to reach children at an early age to make them aware of how to acknowledge and address abuse while at the same time working to prevent future child abuse from happening.”

The Kids Caucus also is supporting Senate Bill 204, sponsored by Senate Minority Whip Sen. Liane M. Sorenson, R-Hockessin, which would provide for insurance coverage for the diagnosis and treatment of autism spectrum disorders in people younger than 21 years old. Different people with autism can have very different symptoms. Health care providers think of autism as a “spectrum” disorder, a group of disorders with similar features. One person might have mild symptoms, while another may have serious symptoms, but they both have an autism spectrum disorder.

“Autism appears early in a child’s life and can present challenges for both the family and the child in their development,” Sen. Sorenson said. “Each year, more than 80 families in Delaware will learn that one of their children has autism. Worrying about whether their child’s autism spectrum disorder will be covered by their insurance carrier should be the least of parents’ concerns.”

Two other bills the Kids Caucus is working on would address school boards and their responsibilities regarding due process actions. The proposals would ensure that school board members receive training regarding due process actions. They also would create a notification process that would require districts to notify board members that a due process hearing has been scheduled. Also, if it is recommended that the board appeal a decision of the due process hearing, this could only be done by a majority vote of the board.

The Kids Caucus has supported several initiatives during the 145th General Assembly that have been signed into law, including:

- House Bill 139, which expands health insurance coverage for children of families with personal incomes above 200 percent of the federal poverty level;
- House Bill 199, which requires screening for developmental delays for infants and toddlers, and requires that private health insurers in Delaware cover the screenings;
- Senate Bill 32, which makes all cases of child abandonment a felony, with children under 14 a class E felony and those 14 or over a class F felony;
- Senate Bill 33, which qualifies that a child can be a witness to an act of domestic violence by sound as well as sight, acknowledging that a child might have only heard the violent act from another room, but nonetheless be a witness who is emotionally impacted by it;
- Senate Concurrent Resolution 21, which establishes a Teen Dating Violence Task Force to evaluate and make recommendations on policies for Teen Dating Violence Awareness Education in Delaware.

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