

Education Recap



March 6 – 12, 2026

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SESSION STATUS

At 3:30 p.m. on Wednesday, February 4, 2026, the House stands adjourned until Monday, March 23, 2026, at 12:00 p.m., unless sooner recalled by the Speaker.

At 1:59 p.m. on Wednesday, February 4, 2026, the Senate recessed until Monday, March 16, 2026, at 1:00 p.m. unless sooner recalled by the President Pro Tempore.

UPCOMING SESSION DAYS

House

March 23-25
April 13-15, 27-29
May 4-6
June 1-3, 8-10, 15-17, 22-30
Sept. 28-30
Oct. 5-7, 19-21
Nov. 9, 10

Senate

March 16-18, 23-25
April 20-22
May 4-6
June 1-3, 8-10, 22-26, 29-30

The Education Recap is a comprehensive weekly report on legislative and executive actions on education-related legislation in Pennsylvania state government, as compiled and edited by PLS. Additional information, including video, transcript and testimony, is available to [PLSGovTrac](https://www.pslgovtrac.com) users. For more information, contact sales@mypls.com.

Press Conferences

PLS coverage of Capitol events including press conferences, bill signings and media availabilities

No press conferences this week.

Committee News

Comprehensive coverage of the House & Senate public hearings and voting meetings

House Judiciary Committee

03/10/2026, 10:00 a.m., Room 140, Main Capitol
By Kyle Purchase, Pennsylvania Legislative Services

The committee met to consider several bills.

Before conducting the business of the day, Chair Tim Briggs (D-Montgomery) asked the committee to join him in a moment of silence for the death of Pennsylvania State Police (PSP) trooper Corporal Timothy O'Connor Jr., who was killed in the line of duty during a traffic stop in Chester County.

[HB 300](#) - (PN 1797) Amends the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act, further providing for the title of the act, for findings and declaration of policy, for right to freedom from discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodation, for definitions, for unlawful discriminatory practices and for prohibition of certain real estate practices; providing for protection of religious exercise; and further providing for powers and duties of the commission and for construction and exclusiveness of remedy. Adds sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression to the title of the act, findings and declaration of policy. Asserts public policies reflecting an open and welcoming environment stimulate economic growth within the commonwealth and the absence of nondiscrimination protections hinders the efforts to retain a diverse community of individuals and enterprises which contribute to a strong economy and public sector. Asserts sexual identity, gender identity and expression as civil rights. Provides definitions. Prohibits unlawful discriminatory practices against the actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. Asserts the refusal to expand or build new facilities is not an unlawful discriminatory practice. Prohibits employers from eliciting information regarding sexual orientation, gender identity or expression on any application for employment. Adds restrictions for employers regarding eliciting and using information from potential employees regarding sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, as well as outlines other unlawful employment discrimination practices. Outlines additional unlawful discriminatory practices on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. Outlines additional unlawful discriminatory practices on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression regarding the prohibition of certain real estate practices. Prohibits this act from being construed to require an individual or religious entity to engage in conduct that constitutes a substantial burden on the free exercise of religion without a compelling interest. Defines "religious entity." Outlines powers and duties for the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC) in the governor's office. Prohibits this act from being construed to supersede the provisions of any municipality or any other law of this commonwealth relating to discrimination due to the actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. Asserts nothing in this act prohibits employees from requiring employees to adhere to reasonable dress and grooming standards not prohibited by other provisions of federal, state

or local law, provided an employee permits an employee to adhere to the dress or grooming standards consistent with the employee's gender identity or expression. Effective in 30 days. The bill was **reported as committed**, along a party-line vote, with Republicans voting in the negative.

Rep. Jessica Benham (D-Allegheny), a co-sponsor of the bill, thanked the committee for taking the bill under consideration and said the bill would "provide long-needed protection and affirmation to our communities who have for so long fought to be recognized." She discussed her experience as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and assured the bill does not create "new rights."

Rep. Malcom Kenyatta (D-Philadelphia), the bill's prime sponsor, elaborated on the purpose of the bill, saying, "It crystallizes and puts into statute a basic principle that Pennsylvania is better when it is fairer." He mentioned the history of the founding of Pennsylvania, referencing William Penn and his ship, *The Welcome*. He explained the bill does not address sports and bathrooms, and predicted similar topics would be brought up in future discussions and debates on the bill in committee today. Rep. Kenyatta noted the bill previously passed the House with bipartisan support and hoped it would pass with bipartisan support again.

Minority Chair Rob Kauffman (R-Franklin) explained his opposition to the bill and said, "Unfortunately, good intentions do not necessarily produce good legislation." He voiced concerns about the bill's potential unintended effects on the Human Relations Act, as well as women's sports. He criticized the "self-identification" provision being applied to "one protected class."

Rep. Stephanie Borowicz (R-Clinton) asked the makers of the bill how many genders there are. Chair Briggs asked Rep. Borowicz to discuss the bill. Rep. Borowicz rebutted, saying, "They're adding in gender identity — I would like to know how many genders they believe there are that would be added into Pennsylvania law, I think that that's a serious question." Rep. Kenyatta asked for a point of order. Chair Briggs granted it. Rep. Kenyatta asked about House rules regarding addressing other members of the House and if they apply to a committee. Chair Briggs confirmed they do apply and said he recognized Rep. Borowicz to speak on the bill, but not to ask questions. Rep. Borowicz reiterated her question about the number of genders. Rep. Kenyatta asked if Rep. Borowicz is asking for interrogation or speaking "extemporaneously, free flow of thought." Rep. Borowicz repeated her question. Rep. Kenyatta said, "The gentle lady has yet to ask either member if they would like to stand for interrogation, and again, continues to engage in this sort of rhetoric." Rep. Borowicz replied, "Does this not pertain to the bill?" Chair Briggs asked everyone to "take a breath" and said the committee was not going to "go back and forth" among members. Chair Briggs suggested that Rep. Borowicz, if she has a question, she should direct it to the chair. Rep. Borowicz answered her question, stating that there are two genders, and cited examples of injuries occurring in women's sports and teachers being fired for refusing to use preferred pronouns. She regarded the bill as "a perversion of God's creation."

Rep. Chris Pielli (D-Chester) explained the discrimination members of the LGBTQ+ community face. He told a personal story of an Army comrade whom he served with under the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy and noted his comrade "suffered in silence." He mentioned the time his two children came out to him and revealed he reacted with "acceptance and love." He said, "I respectfully ask you to worship your God in your way, and I'll worship it in mine, and I choose a loving and accepting God."

Rep. Josh Kail (R-Beaver) acknowledged the sincerity of the makers of the bill but voiced concern with the bill's language and encouraged looking at similar bills across the country and their application in those states. He asked if the bill requires medical providers, a doctor or a medical facility to perform gender reassignment surgery. Michelle Batt, majority legal counsel, said that the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act does not pertain to medical professionals. Rep. Kail thanked counsel for the response but said the answer "really didn't answer the question," and noted a similar bill in California. Rep. Kenyatta said the answer to Rep. Kail's question was no. Rep. Kail thanked Rep. Kenyatta for his answer and reiterated points made earlier about implementation issues. He dismissed the argument that the bill does not affect sports or bathrooms.

Rep. Kenyatta criticized opponents of the bill, which he says are making "straw man" arguments. "None of the opponents of this bill actually had opposition to what is written in the bill, which lets you know that the bill is just fine," he said.

Rep. Borowicz asked for a point of order and asked if someone accusing another of "making up" impugned motive. Rep. Kenyatta explained his comments were in response to earlier remarks made by both Rep. Kail and Rep. Borowicz, which he said he found "despicable." Chair Briggs allowed Rep. Borowicz to explain her point of order. Rep. Borowicz argued that her motive was being impugned, with her comments being called "despicable," and pointed out her religious beliefs. She criticized Chair Briggs for "controlling the committee" and for failing to answer a "basic question." Chair Briggs rebutted, "I allowed you a lot of remarks."

Rep. Kenyatta said, "Nobody in this building has ownership over the Christian faith." He reiterated his view that comments made calling some people "perverse" are "despicable."

Rep. Kail said he was "pleased to hear" the bill is not about sports and suggested making an amendment. Chair Briggs said, "You could have done that."

[HB 632](#) - (PN 642) Amends Title 18 (Crimes and Offenses), in public indecency, further providing for the offense of prostitution and related offenses. Removes language providing for a third-degree felony for a person who committed the offense knowing they were HIV positive or manifesting AIDS. Provides resentencing to a misdemeanor if the person has completed the sentence and is not currently serving a sentence on any other matter. Provides resentencing to a misdemeanor if the person is currently serving the imposed sentence. Effective in 60 days. The bill was **reported as committed**, along a party-line vote, with Republicans voting in the negative.

Rep. Ben Waxman (D-Philadelphia), the bill's prime sponsor, mentioned a previous hearing on the bill and said his bill would amend Section 5902 of the Criminal Code.

Chair Kauffman said he understood the importance of people living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) to have dignity, but that "compassion for those living with HIV and protection for innocent victims are not mutually exclusive — my issue with this bill is that it frames criminal accountability for intentionally or knowingly exposing another person to HIV as inherently unjust." He cited his concerns as the bill would provide legal changes, pointed out a conviction has not happened in 10 years and noted a potentially unconstitutional provision by referencing the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruling in *Commonwealth v. Sutley*. He said he would support a version of the bill that replaces references to HIV and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

Rep. Emily Kinhead (D-Allegheny) provided some elaboration on the term "knowingly" in the legal context and urged the bill to "keep up with medicine." She acknowledged the last conviction was 10 years ago and argued the portion statute is not being used and therefore "impacts nothing." She dismissed the case law previously mentioned and said that the particular ruling does not apply to the bill's aim.

Rep. Kenyatta thanked the sponsors and mentioned he sponsored similar legislation in past sessions. He urged the commonwealth to "clean up" the code and reflect the "medical reality."

[HR 393](#) - (PN 2782) Resolution designating February 28, 2026, as "HIV is Not a Crime Awareness Day" in Pennsylvania. The resolution was **reported as committed**, along a party-line vote, with Republicans voting in the negative.

Rep. Waxman, the resolution's prime sponsor, explained that his resolution acknowledges a national movement to decriminalize HIV.

Chair Kauffman cited his similar criticisms of HB 632 and called the language of the resolution "demonstrably false" as it pertains to being "disproportionately used to prosecute people of color," and noted six convictions in 10 years, where four of those convicted were white.

[HB 1311](#) - (PN 1504) Amends Title 18 (Crimes and Offenses), in general provisions relating to offenses involving danger to the person, further providing for definitions. Asserts the term "serious provocation" does not include the discovery, knowledge or potential disclosure of a victim's actual or perceived gender identity or expression or sexual orientation, including circumstances in which the victim made an unwanted nonforcible romantic or sexual advance toward the defendant or if the defendant and victim had a romantic or sexual relationship. Effective in 60 days. The bill was **reported as amended**, along a party-line vote, with Republicans voting in the negative.

[A02585](#), by Briggs, elaborates on the definition of "serious provocation." The amendment was **adopted**, along a party-line vote, with Republicans voting in the negative.

Rep. Ben Sanchez (D-Montgomery), the bill's prime sponsor, discussed the use of the "LGBTQ+ panic defense" and its effect in convictions, jury determining sentences and the "bolster of harmful stereotypes." He criticized the defense as having "inherent homophobia and transphobia" and urged the commonwealth to join other states that have banned the defense.

On his amendment, Chair Briggs said he believed it was a "good clarification."

On the amended bill, Chair Kauffman voiced concerns about the legal implications of definition changes and urged the committee to be "very cautious about passing legislation that restricts the ability of juries to hear evidence and assess culpability."

Rep. Borowicz asked the maker of the bill what the "+" means in LGBTQ+. Chair Briggs said Rep. Sanchez was not going to stand for interrogation. Rep. Borowicz replied, "So we can't ask questions anymore in the committee chairman, is this now a new precedent that is being set?" Chair Briggs said it is not in the bill and pointed out "plenty of notice" was given to review bills. He suggested that Rep. Borowicz ask counsel if she had a question.

Rep. Kinkead pointed out there is no “panic” defense for a woman to use against a man who is making unwanted advances, but noted there is one for a certain group of people. She argued it is the definition of discrimination.

Rep. Kate Klunk (R-York) asked what specific definitions will be used in the amended sections for gender identity, expression or sexual orientation. Batt replied that the terms are not defined in the bill.

[HB 1315](#) - (PN 1508) Amends Title 54 (Names), in judicial change of name, further providing for court approval required for change of name. Asserts that if the petition requests a name change to conform to the petitioner's gender identity, the notice required in subparagraph (ii) shall be waived by order of the court and the court shall seal the file. Stipulates that in all cases filed under this subparagraph, whether or not the name change petition is granted, there shall be no public access to any court record of the name change petition, proceeding or order. Explains that the records shall only be opened by order of the court in which the petition was granted based upon a showing of good cause or at the petitioner's request. Effective in 60 days. The bill was **reported as committed**, along a party-line vote, with Republicans voting in the negative.

Rep. Sanchez, the bill's prime sponsor, highlighted potential difficulties for LGBTQ+ individuals changing their names. He said, “We are acknowledging the sobering reality that coming out as a transgender person is potentially dangerous, while recognizing and removing the costly barrier to name changes that disproportionately impact our LGBTQ plus community.”

Chair Kauffman criticized the bill as applying to “only one category of petitioners.” He noted that victims of human trafficking, stalking and domestic violence “are not entitled to an automatic waiver of the notice requirement.”

Rep. Joe Hohenstein (D-Philadelphia) mentioned his personal connection to the bill by referencing his child and urged the passing of the bill. “I will always be here for communities that don't have a voice, that have historically been set aside, put on the margins and placed in danger simply because of who they are, and I will always protect people from that community,” he said.

[HB 1800](#) - (PN 2214) Amends Title 23 (Domestic Relations, in preliminary provisions relating to marriage, further providing for the definition of “Marriage” to be a civil contract between two individuals; and, in miscellaneous provisions relating to marriage, repealing provisions relating to marriage between persons of the same sex. Effective immediately. The bill was **reported as committed**, with Republicans voting in the negative, except Reps. Tim Bonner (R-Mercer) and Brenda Pugh (R-Luzerne).

Rep. Kenyatta, the bill's prime sponsor, mentioned the anniversary of his marriage to his husband, the U.S. Supreme Court ruling, *Obergefell v. Hodges*. He urged the “clean up” of state statutes with bipartisan support.

Chair Kauffman warned of the bill's definition of marriage as a “civil contract” and how it is “legally incoherent.” He argued the definition of marriage as a civil contract could also mean “a lease agreement could constitute a marriage.” He believed more work needed to be done on the bill.

Rep. Borowicz regarded marriage as “a sacred covenant institution created by God between a man and a woman.” She referenced previous comments made by former presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden in 2008 and 2006, respectively.

Rep. Kenyatta rebutted, “That beautiful ceremony I mentioned on February 4, 2022, I was not asking, nor do countless other people get married for the blessing of the gentle lady from Clinton County or anybody else — you weren't invited, we had a wonderful time and we want the government out of our business.” He noted it as a “pretty libertarian view.”

[HB 1902](#) - (PN 2371) Amends Titles 18 (Crimes and Offenses), 42 (Judiciary and Judicial Procedure) and 53 (Municipalities Generally), in assault, further providing for the offense of ethnic intimidation; in particular rights and immunities, further providing for civil rights violations; and, in employees, further providing for definitions and providing for annual officer training on hate-based intimidation. Changes ethnic intimidation to hate-based intimidation. Provides that a person commits the offense of hate-based intimidation if, with malicious intention toward the race, color, religion, national origin, ethnicity, ancestry, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation and disability of another individual, group of individuals or a person with whom the individual or group is associated, the person commits a personal injury crime as defined in section 103 of the Crime Victims Act, which results in bodily injury. Asserts that nothing in the section may be construed to prohibit, limit or punish religiously motivated speech or conduct protected in the Constitution of the United States, the Constitution of Pennsylvania or the Religious Freedom Protection Act. Expands the definition of “malicious intention.” Provides for a redress for personal injury related to hate-based intimidation and the right of action in a court of common pleas for preliminary or permanent injunction against the actor, the individual who has solicited the actor to engage in the conduct and a person who has knowingly attempted to provide or provided aid to the actor with the intent that the actor engage in the conduct. Asserts that nothing in the section may be construed to prohibit, limit or punish religiously motivated speech or conduct protected in the Constitution of the United States, the Constitution of Pennsylvania or the Religious Freedom Protection Act. Defines “hate-based intimidation.” Requires the development, implementation and provision of annual training on hate-based intimidation to officers, outlining what the training shall include, but not be limited to.

Defines “officer.” Effective in 60 days. The bill was **reported as amended**, along a party-line vote, with Republicans voting in the negative.

[A02582](#), by Briggs, changes the construction sections of the bill to protect all speech. The amendment was **adopted**, along a party-line vote, with Republicans voting in the negative.

Rep. Dan Frankel (D-Allegheny), the bill’s prime sponsor, spoke on both the merits of HB 1902 and HB 1905. He summarized the hate crimes inspired by antisemitism and conspiracy theories, urging the commonwealth to act. “By passing these bills, we can update our laws and take meaningful steps to better prevent and address hate crimes,” he argued.

David Vitale, majority executive director, provided more specifics on the bill, noting the change to the definition for “ethnic intimidation” and expanding current protection.

Rep. Borowicz asked if the amendment removes construction provisions pertaining to prohibit, limit or punish religiously motivated speech or conduct. Vitale explained that the amendment broadly protects all constitutional rights, not just religious rights. Rep. Borowicz argued the removal indicates a “walk all over people’s religious liberty.” Vitale explained that the drafting of the amendment accounts for all constitutional rights to be treated as the same. Chair Briggs agreed and said, “It’s a much more inclusive, including religious rights.”

Chair Kauffman provided comments for both HB 1902 and HB 1905. He assured that “acts of violence or intimidation motivated by hostility towards another person’s skin color or background are reprehensible and should always be taken seriously.” He voiced his concerns in the bills due to “ambiguous terminology” and a lack of definitions of other terms, including “gender identity or expression.”

Rep. Borowicz criticized the lack of definitions. “So, you now see what happens with truth that gets marginalized in a committee when you’re asking honest questions, trying to get definitions of a bill that’s going to be added in,” she remarked. “Gender identity, gender expression, there’s no definition, and we can’t even ask the question.”

Rep. Kenyatta thanked the maker of the bill and pointed out that no committee member is being silenced, criticizing those who “pretend to be a victim.” Chair Briggs asked Rep. Kenyatta to stay on the bill. Rep. Kenyatta said he understood Chair Brigg’s comment but added, “I’m just listening to the tiniest violin, and it’s hitting me at a frequency that is deeply grating.” He reminded the intent behind the bills and emphasized the importance of the statutes to be prepared to “meet the vicious hatred that can be inflicted upon members of our communities here in Pennsylvania for practicing their faith, for being who they are.”

Rep. Frankel pointed out that the definitions are “well known” by those who target certain groups. He referenced the Orlando nightclub shooting and listed other states that have enacted similar bills protecting groups. He encouraged the committee to pass the legislation and “rise above some of the partisan discussion.”

[HB 1905](#) - (PN 2374) Amends Titles 18 (Crimes and Offenses) and 42 (Judiciary and Judicial Procedure), in assault, further providing for the offense of ethnic intimidation; and, in particular rights and immunities, further prohibiting civil rights violations. Changes ethnic intimidation to hate-based intimidation. Provides for intimidation related to ethnicity, ancestry, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation and disability in the offense definition. Provides for an offense of an individual committing a personal injury crime resulting in bodily injury. Asserts that nothing in the section can be construed to prohibit, limit or punish religiously motivated speech or conduct protected in the Constitution of the United States or the Constitution of Pennsylvania. Adds to the definition of “malicious intention.” Provides for a redress for personal injury related to hate-based intimidation and the right of action in a court of common pleas for preliminary or permanent injunction against the actor, the individual who has solicited the actor to engage in the conduct or the individuals who provided aid to the actor with the intent of conduct. Asserts that nothing in the section can be construed to prohibit, limit or punish religiously motivated speech or conduct protected in the Constitution of the United States or the Constitution of Pennsylvania. Effective in 60 days. The bill was **reported as amended**, along a party-line vote, with Republicans voting in the negative.

[A02583](#), by Briggs, changes the construction sections of the bill to protect all speech. The amendment was **adopted**, along a party-line vote, with Republicans voting in the negative.

[SB 9](#) - (PN 177) The Fairness in Women’s Sports Act provides for sport activities in public institutions of higher education and public school entities to be expressly designated male, female or coed; and creates causes of action for harm suffered by designation. Provides definitions. Prohibits athletic teams or sports designated for females, women or girls from being open to students of the male sex. Allows students to participate in an interscholastic, intercollegiate, intramural or club athletic team or sport designed for the student’s sex or designated coed or mixed. Prohibits a government entity, licensing or accrediting organization or an athletic association or organization from entertaining a complaint, opening an investigation or taking any other adverse action against a school or institution of higher education for maintaining separate interscholastic, intercollegiate, intramural or club athletic teams or

sports for students of the female sex. Permits a student who is deprived of an athletic opportunity or suffers direct or indirect harm as a result of a known violation to bring a cause of action for injunctive relief, damages, psychological, emotional and physical harm suffered, attorney fees and costs and any other relief available under law against the school or institution of higher education. Allows a student who is subject to retaliation or other adverse action by a school, institution of higher education or athletic association or organization as a result of reporting a violation to an employee or representative of the school, institution or athletic association or organization or to any federal or state agency with oversight of schools or institutions of higher education in Pennsylvania to bring a cause of action. Permits a school or institution of higher education that suffers direct or indirect harm as a result of a violation to bring cause of action. Prohibits a person from bringing a civil action later than two years after the day on which the harm underlying the cause of action occurs. Provides that if a part of this act is found invalid, all valid parts that are severable from the invalid part shall remain in effect. Effective in 60 days. The bill was **re-referred** to the House Children and Youth Committee, with Republicans voting in the negative, except Rep. Klunk.

Chair Briggs motioned to re-refer the bill.

Chair Kauffman motioned to challenge Chair Briggs' motion, and he motioned to report the bill as committed. The motion **failed**, along a party-line vote, with Democrats voting in the negative.

Chair Briggs said the bill could be sent to many committees, but he believed the House Children and Youth Committee would best serve the bill.

Chair Kauffman criticized the motion for re-referral and the Democratic majority for not taking the bill as a priority. "This language is widely supported among all peoples, Republicans, Democrats and independents in our commonwealth," he argued.

Rep. Klunk said that she provided her experience as a mother and coach, and the importance of spaces for girls. "If this is where we put it, I will gladly fight to bring up this bill," she asserted. "I will vote every single day to protect my daughters, to protect little girls in this commonwealth." She said she hopes Rep. Jeanne McNeill (D-Lehigh), chair of the House Children and Youth Committee, brings up the bill.

Rep. Borowicz disagreed with the re-referral. "How sad they must be scared to defend women and protect women and to keep biological males out of women's sports, this is absurd," she said.

Rep. Kenyatta agreed to the bill having proper jurisdiction and criticized members who spoke out for not introducing legislation that would aim to invest in girls' sports. "In terms of protecting women and girls, there are some files that you might want to read called the Epstein files, which the president that you voted for is in multiple times," he retorted.

Chair Briggs urged members in the future to "keep it a little bit tighter."

Rep. Robert Leadbeter (R-Columbia) disagreed with the motion. "Girls across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania do not need us as a body to find a new committee," he remarked. "They need us to find the courage to vote."

Rep. Joe Hamm (R-Lycoming) opposed the re-referral, calling it "insanity."

Chair Briggs reasoned the re-referral was based on comments he was given by Rep. Kathy Rapp (R-Warren), minority chair of the House Health Committee, about traumatic brain injuries and the bill addresses children. "She said this bill was about children, and I think today's motion to send it to the Children and Youth Committee will encourage that committee to take action that Representative Rapp was so adamant about," he argued.

Chair Briggs closed the meeting by mentioning an upcoming informational hearing that will be held on March 23 at 10:30 a.m. about the constable system in the commonwealth.



House Appropriations Committee – Budget Hearing with State-Related Universities

03/11/2026, 10:00 a.m., House Chamber

Pennsylvania Legislative Services

The committee held a budget hearing with state-related universities.

The state-related universities were represented by:

- Brenda Allen, president, Lincoln University (Lincoln),
- Neeli Bendapudi, president, The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State),
- John Fry, president, Temple University (Temple), and
- Joan Gabel, chancellor, University of Pittsburgh (Pitt).

Chair Jordan Harris (D-Philadelphia) opened the budget hearing for state-related universities. He highlighted Lincoln's historical significance and notable alumni.

Minority Chair Jim Struzzi (R-Indiana) overviewed Gov. Josh Shapiro's funding proposal for the universities. He noted they were level-funded from the previous year but had requested additional funds. Chair Struzzi stated Penn State is set at \$207 million, Temple at \$158 million, Pitt at \$155 million and Lincoln at \$23 million. He mentioned a \$30 million performance funding allocation and the need to discuss various financial issues affecting the universities.

Allen highlighted Lincoln's historic role as the nation's first degree-granting historically Black college, founded in 1854, and its ongoing mission to expand opportunity for first-generation and low-income students. She said more than 90% of Lincoln students are first in their families to attend college, and nearly 70% qualify for Pell Grants. Allen mentioned Lincoln ranks highly for advancing social mobility. She noted Lincoln's regional economic impact, including roughly \$294 million in economic activity and more than 1,000 jobs generated in the surrounding area. Allen expressed that Lincoln is facing enrollment declines, rising operating costs and uncertainty around federal policies affecting diversity initiatives that have disrupted partnerships and experiential learning opportunities. She asked for increased state funding to support scholarships, maintain operations, invest in technology infrastructure and continue serving Pennsylvania students.

Bendapudi said state funding is significantly impactful in supporting students, research and outreach programs across the commonwealth, including agricultural extension services available in all 67 counties. She noted that Penn State educates more Pennsylvania residents than any other institution and enrolls over 19,000 first-generation students. Bendapudi emphasized that Penn State has not received an increase in its general state appropriation since 2019 and said funding has declined in real terms compared with early 2000 levels. She argued that Penn State receives significantly less funding per student than other state-related institutions and called that disparity a "big hurdle." Bendapudi said their funding request includes a commitment to freeze undergraduate tuition if fully funded and aims to support economic development, research and workforce preparation across the state.

Fry mentioned that state support helps Temple provide affordable education to students from diverse backgrounds and communities throughout Pennsylvania. He highlighted Temple's new strategic plan, "Forward with Purpose," which focuses on student success, research and innovation and community impact. Fry noted that Temple recently enrolled its largest first-year class, with 63% of students from Pennsylvania and nearly half of them being the first in their families to attend college. He described plans to expand research and economic development through a proposed innovation corridor along Broad Street in Philadelphia. Fry emphasized new public safety investments on campus. He pointed to statewide initiatives, including a dental clinic in Tamaqua and a medical training partnership in York. Fry stated that both initiatives aim at strengthening health care workforce pipelines, notably in rural areas.

Gabel expressed that state funding enables Pitt to provide significant tuition discounts for in-state students and saves them almost \$21,000 per year on average. She highlighted strong student outcomes, including graduation rates among the top 5% nationally and nearly half of undergraduate students graduating without debt. Gabel discussed targeted financial aid initiatives such as "Finish Line" grants designed to help students complete their degrees during their final semesters. She emphasized Pitt's broader economic impact, including "billions" in statewide economic activity and partnerships that support job creation and workforce development. Gabel asked lawmakers to consider a proposed appropriation increase tied to inflation while continuing collaboration on performance-based funding initiatives.

Rep. Ben Sanchez (D-Montgomery) asked about efficiency in Temple's strategic program as laid out by Fry.

Fry discussed the enrollment decrease at Temple from over 40,000 to 30,005 from 2017 to the present. He mentioned the implementation of cost-cutting measures totaling \$40 million last year, as well as a successful faculty early retirement program that saved \$15 million. Fry highlighted growth in the first-year class size and an increase in applications and deposits, despite cuts, with

a goal for enrollment between 33,000 and 35,000 students. He noted Temple's presence in Japan and Rome, which contributes to a total domestic enrollment of approximately 29,500 students. Fry emphasized the importance of balancing the budget without heavily relying on reserves. Rep. Sanchez asked Fry about significant milestones achieved in the investment in the community, specifically the Broad Street corridor. Fry described the development progress along a five-mile stretch from Center City to the Health Sciences Campus. He highlighted the strategic acquisition of properties for development in partnership with developers to foster science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)-based commercial work and residential projects. Fry highlighted these developments' contributions to safety and security.

Rep. Zachary Mako (R-Northampton) asked the panel about the impact of proposed flat funding on tuition fees for both in-state and out-of-state students. Gabel mentioned that Pitt anticipates a tuition increase and noted that they have kept tuition increases below the rate of inflation for the past decade. Gabel added that keeping the tuition rates lower than the rate of inflation has constrained their ability to make other strategic investments. Fry mentioned that Temple is considering tuition increases between 3.6 and 3.95%. He explained that a 6% increase in appropriation was requested to avoid additional charges for in-state residents. Bendapudi explained that Penn State moved to a two-year budget model to reduce uncertainty. She noted no increases in tuition at the commonwealth campuses for four years and a University Park in-state tuition increase of about 2% for the year, which is below inflation. She highlighted that, adjusting for inflation, students are paying \$1,000 less than a decade ago despite no increases in appropriations. Rep. Mako requested updated budget numbers for further review and inquired about the impact of performance-based funding on their budget. Bendapudi said she was a strong supporter of performance-based funding. "It ties the goals of the commonwealth, U.S. stewards of taxpayer dollars and our mission and what we are trying to do," she said. Bendapudi mentioned it was important to secure funding first and then make the initiative "truly performance-based." Rep. Mako asked Bendapudi about renewable energy initiatives at Penn State. Bendapudi highlighted Penn State's involvement with nuclear reactors, including a partnership with Westinghouse Electric Corporation for micronuclear reactions. She expressed concern about Pennsylvania falling behind due to insufficient funding. Rep. Mako noted the military's interest in micro nuclear reactors for electricity supply.

Rep. Tarik Khan (D-Philadelphia) discussed the decline in union membership and the recent trend towards increased unionization, specifically among university faculty. He asked the panelists to commit not to use university or taxpayer funds to discourage unionization. Bendapudi affirmed and mentioned Penn State is already represented. Fry, Allen and Gabel all affirmed their positive relationships with unions and agreed not to use resources to spread misinformation about unions. Rep. Khan inquired about the impact of federal HR 1, which reclassified certain degrees and affected financial aid availability. Gabel acknowledged the issue and mentioned advocacy efforts to amend the list. Fry highlighted a potential loss of \$520 million in Medicaid funding for Temple University Health System (TUHS) due to the reclassification. "The impact of HR 1 is devastating," he continued. "I'm not being dramatic."

Rep. Eric Nelson (R-Westmoreland) discussed college affordability and the governor's proposal of \$30 million for a new performance-based funding program. He asked about the state-related universities' participation in supplying information for the funding formula. Gabel expressed satisfaction with the bipartisan effort towards the performance-based funding formula and optimism for its inclusion in the budget. She anticipated it would lead to increased enrollment in high-demand fields. Bendapudi expressed support for performance-based funding. She emphasized the importance of a "collegial and collaborative" approach and accountability. Rep. Nelson highlighted the Grow PA scholarship, which allocates around \$32 million to students for high-demand careers, and asked about potential adjustments to the Classification of Instruction Programs (CIP) codes. Bendapudi described issues with CIP coding at Penn State that affect pre-major education. She noted certain students were not receiving "the amount of money that they ought to" in the pre-major level due to the way the CIPs are coded. Bendapudi stated Penn State was working internally to make adjustments. She requested support from the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) to ensure changes are enacted appropriately.

Rep. Regina Young (D-Philadelphia) emphasized the importance of safety and success for college-aged children. She questioned what the state-related universities do to ensure safety on campuses. Fry discussed efforts to enhance public safety at Temple, including hiring a former police commissioner to audit safety practices. He mentioned Temple has implemented 98% of his recommendations with plans to implement the rest within the year. Allen discussed the impact of gun violence on campus safety and the implementation of new safety measures following a tragic incident. "We now have a strong partnership between my campus police, state police, emergency medical technicians in the area and fire," she explained. Rep. Young asked about the impact of federal challenges on creating a strong classroom-to-pipeline for students. Gabel described the uncertainty surrounding federal funding for research as a significant challenge. She noted the importance of research funding for health care issues.

Rep. Jeff Olsommer (R-Wayne) asked about updates on workforce development and efforts to enhance artificial intelligence (AI). Gabel emphasized aligning educational programs with workforce demands, which results in a high placement rate for graduates, as well as aiding talent retention in the commonwealth. She mentioned the collective advocacy for a performance-based funding model that focuses on workforce needs. Gabel highlighted Pitt's integration of AI competencies across different academic programs, with a special focus on the intersection of health and AI, and the implementation of a generative pre-trained transformer (GPT) with

cybersecurity measures. She talked about the launch of “First,” an initiative aimed at extending Pitt’s AI knowledge into community engagement centers and K-12 education.

Rep. Justin Fleming (D-Dauphin) asked about Penn State’s involvement in responding to the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) outbreak and how Penn State is assisting the Department of Agriculture (PDA) and other entities. Bendapudi explained that Penn State is deeply involved in emergency response efforts with a focus on surveillance, diagnostics, biosecurity, depopulation, disposal and ensuring continuity of operations, with a 24/7 commitment to these efforts. Rep. Fleming inquired about how colleges are adapting to changes in college athletics, specifically regarding name, image and likeness (NIL) and the transfer portal. Bendapudi discussed Penn State’s self-sustainable financial model for its athletics program and expressed concern over maintaining this model amidst the changing landscape. Fry emphasized the importance of prioritizing the academic success of student athletes at Temple and acknowledged financial constraints. Gabel emphasized a student-centered philosophy for Pitt student-athletes and the importance of maintaining excellence and competitiveness in athletics.

Rep. Jim Rigby (R-Cambria) inquired about the existence of articulation agreements between universities and community colleges for 2+2 programs. Allen, Bendapudi, Gabel and Fry all confirmed their institutions have multiple articulation agreements with community colleges. Rep. Rigby asked if the state-related universities have any other arrangements with Pennsylvania community colleges. Allen and Gabel confirmed that all the represented universities have at least one articulation agreement with a community college.

Rep. Aerion Abney (D-Allegheny) asked Gable for an update on the Pitt 2028 plan. Gabel outlined the strategic plan with a focus on student success, research, fiscal accountability and strategic risk. She mentioned a record year in applications, strong enrollment, high graduation and placement rates, growth in health sciences research and commercialization efforts. She highlighted progress in fiscal transparency and strategic investments like the BioForge initiative in Hazelwood Green and emphasized Pitt’s community engagement and development efforts. Gabel highlighted Pitt’s significant economic and social contributions and noted the importance of investing in education and community service. She mentioned every federal dollar invested generates almost \$3 locally. She stressed the importance of focusing on educational opportunities in high-demand areas for social mobility and the broader impacts of their students, families and research investments on the community.

Rep. Ann Flood (D-Northampton) discussed the potential benefits and risks of AI. She emphasized the need for parameters around AI technology. Rep. Flood asked about the state of AI research at universities, whether there are university-wide policies on AI use in classrooms and how these decisions are made. Allen discussed integrating AI into their university’s curriculum through a partnership with International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) and providing AI certification courses to all first-year students. She highlighted the use of AI in administrative tasks and its potential as a learning tool. She emphasized the importance of adapting university curricula for future work in an AI-integrated world. Bendapudi announced that starting in 2026, every Penn State student will be exposed to AI, regardless of their major, to ensure they understand its basics by graduation. She highlighted Penn State’s commitment to researching the ethical use of AI and the importance of adapting to changing job expectations. Rep. Flood asked about concerns regarding students using AI to cheat and how to ensure the authenticity of student work. Bendapudi acknowledged the lack of clear guidelines for AI use in academia and mentioned the development of policies to dictate AI’s permissible uses in courses and projects. She shared her practice of encouraging students to use AI to debate philosophical perspectives and emphasized the importance of ethical AI utilization.

Rep. Steven Malagari (D-Montgomery) asked Bendapudi about efforts to upgrade and update dormitories and student housing at Penn State. Bendapudi emphasized the high priority of deferred maintenance at Penn State and noted the university’s ownership of over 1,200 buildings and the schedule for renovating residence halls. She highlighted the need for continued investment in these facilities. Rep. Malagari asked about the importance of investing in and maintaining public transportation for university campuses across the commonwealth. Fry described the critical importance of public transportation for Temple and highlighted that around 12,000 people rely on Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) buses and rail to access the campus daily. He emphasized public transport’s role in economic development and quality of life. Gabel mentioned the critical importance of public transportation for faculty and staff. She noted that students in health sciences at Pitt rely on public transportation for commuting throughout the city for clinical environments. Bendapudi discussed the reliance on public transportation by students at University Park and in Abington and highlighted it as a concern. Rep. Malagari asked about the effects of potential transportation funding issues on university staff and faculty. Fry responded that reverting to remote work due to transportation challenges would be a significant setback for campus communities. He noted the economic impact of reduced campus attendance on local businesses and the difficulty of attracting new commercial entities to the area.

Rep. Jamie Barton (R-Schuylkill) brought up the collaboration on the Temple Dental Clinic in Tamaqua. He asked Fry about the specific investment amount. Fry detailed the financial contributions from various sources totaling over \$13 million and expressed hope that the dental students starting in Tamaqua would become permanent community members. Rep. Barton inquired about the state’s financial contribution to Temple Dental. Fry specified that the \$158 million received from the state is allocated entirely for student financial aid, not directly to the dental school. Rep. Barton asked about discounts or scholarships for state students at

Temple Dental. Fry indicated he would need to follow up on the specifics. Rep. Barton discussed the benefits of the rural dental program in Tamaqua and the new chancellor at the Schuylkill campus. He praised the presence of Penn State and Temple in Schuylkill and asked about the Invent Penn State program. Bendapudi described it as a commitment to rural health and innovation, supporting business ideas statewide and highlighting its impact on job creation and benefits to Pennsylvanians.

Rep. Joe Webster (D-Montgomery) emphasized the crucial role of higher education in providing opportunities and skills. He expressed concern over stagnant support for educational institutions in Pennsylvania. He sought insights on how increased resources, reduced in-state tuition and efforts to retain students within the commonwealth could improve Pennsylvania's future. Allen discussed the significant role of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in educating African Americans and their success in producing professionals, despite funding disparities with predominantly white institutions (PWIs). She speculated on the potential of HBCUs with increased funding. Rep. Webster spoke about the potential for higher income and investment in Pennsylvania.

Rep. Charity Grimm Krupa (R-Fayette) criticized Penn State for closing seven commonwealth campuses, including one in her district, despite seeking more state funding. She called for legislation for transparency in campus closures and questioned the future of the nursing program at the Fayette campus. Bendapudi specified that certain expenditures were self-sustaining, not using appropriations, tuition or fees. Rep. Krupa labeled the explanation as "smoke and mirrors." Bendapudi described the decision to close campuses as "difficult" and dependent on ticket sales and philanthropy. She suggested different outcomes with expected funding levels. Rep. Krupa inquired about the nursing program's future. Bendapudi explained a team's efforts to ensure campus success and deemed it inappropriate to comment on specific programs due to ongoing evaluations. Rep. Krupa asked whether Penn State had formally notified the Department of Education (PDE) about campus closures. Bendapudi confirmed no formal notice had been submitted but assured it would happen within the required timeframe, including plans for affected students. Rep. Krupa inquired about economic impact studies of the campuses on local communities. Bendapudi acknowledged ongoing studies but promised to follow up with details. Rep. Krupa requested extra time to ask about faculty and staff commitments at closing campuses. Bendapudi stated plans for priority hiring for faculty and staff, with many already accommodated, and allowing transfers to other campuses or University Park. Bendapudi mentioned the ongoing productive conversations with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) and her willingness to follow up on the matter.

Rep. Emily Kinkead (D-Allegheny) raised concerns about the shortage of dentists in rural areas and asked about plans to address this issue. She noted efforts from Pitt and Temple. Gabel discussed the commitment to improving dental care in underserved areas and mentioned the development of programs for dental and dental hygienist training, including a new master's program in dentistry. Fry discussed the potential of the Tamaqua model for dental care in rural areas and its expected breakeven by the end of year two. He expressed hope for its replication in other communities. Rep. Kinkead mentioned her belief in the self-sustainability of the program at Pitt. Gabel agreed with the concept of self-sustainability for dental care programs and emphasized the importance of local education and community engagement. Fry stressed the role of Tamaqua's leadership in the success of the dental care project.

Rep. Chad Reichard (R-Franklin) addressed Bendapudi about a blog post regarding state appropriations for in-state students at Penn State. He expressed concern about the closing of the "gateway to opportunity" at certain campuses. Rep. Reichard asked how Penn State will navigate the appropriations process, considering the closure of campuses. Bendapudi acknowledged the pain caused by discontinuing programs at some Penn State campuses due to low population and high costs. She mentioned Penn State's efforts to strengthen other communities with state funding and mentioned a new program called Primary Care Emergency Medicine (PC Medic) aimed at improving rural health. Rep. Reichard highlighted the growth in population in Franklin County and questioned Penn State's obligation to the campuses and communities affected by their decisions. Bendapudi explained that Penn State receives significantly less funding per student compared to Temple and Pitt. She stated this contributes to the challenges faced by its campuses and described Penn State's commitment to strengthening communities through collaboration with private and public partners. She assured that the campuses would not be abandoned and emphasized a continuous Penn State presence and involvement until each institution is successfully transitioned. Rep. Reichard asked for Penn State's commitment to ongoing maintenance and involvement at each campus until a warm transition is achieved. Bendapudi affirmed Penn State is "working so hard." He noted the unique relationship between Penn State and the commonwealth and the absence of General Assembly representation on Penn State's Board of Trustees. He praised the expansion efforts of other institutions and expressed optimism about opportunities at Mon Alto.

Rep. Kyle Mullins (D-Lackawanna) expressed appreciation for the opportunity to discuss state support for neurodegenerative disease research and highlighted the announcement of the first-ever state funding of \$5 million for research into diseases like Alzheimer's, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) and Parkinson's. He noted the personal significance of this issue and informed that the Department of Health (DOH) would soon roll out the program to utilize this funding. Rep. Mullins mentioned the governor included a similar \$5 million line item in next year's budget proposal. He sought feedback on the importance of this funding. Gabel thanked Rep. Mullins and others for their support of legislation funding research into neurodegenerative diseases. She emphasized the importance of bipartisan support, the impact of these diseases and the positive effects of funding, including increased ability to conduct research and recognition of efforts. She mentioned the competitive grant process and interest from foundations and

philanthropic partners. Allen mentioned that state investment in research on large campuses compensates for lost federal funding and enables researchers at institutions to offer direct instruction and undergraduate research opportunities to students from various campuses. She highlighted the importance of such grants in facilitating critical research experiences. Fry mentioned that investments from the commonwealth have significantly boosted philanthropy. He noted that Temple recently received its “largest gift” ever for public health and acknowledged the importance of such investments as a vote of confidence that attracts further philanthropic interest. Rep. Mullins shared a personal story about his father’s diagnosis with ALS and highlighted the significance of supporting world-class researchers. He expressed gratitude for the opportunity to contribute to their mission.

Rep. Marla Brown (R-Lawrence) discussed Penn State’s tuition compared to other Big Ten Conference public universities. She noted Penn State has the highest tuition and sought to understand the reasons behind Penn State’s notably higher tuition. Bendapudi explained the reasons behind Penn State’s high tuition, including inflation adjustments, deferred maintenance, investments in its extensive footprint, efforts made to control costs and the challenges of managing multiple campuses. She expressed her commitment to keeping tuition low and requested support in this endeavor. Rep. Brown emphasized the importance of providing constituents with detailed plans to keep tuition low and expressed anticipation for further details on the matter. She discussed the potential savings from campus closures and asked about the state-related universities’ involvement in the commonwealth’s first strategic plan for higher education. Fry responded that Temple Deputy Provost Marylouise Esten was involved in the plan and recognized Temple’s unique role. Allen viewed the strategic plan as an opportunity for institutions to contribute to Pennsylvania’s economic goals.

Rep. Anthony Bellmon (D-Philadelphia) inquired about aligning academic programs with Pennsylvania’s workforce shortages in nursing, teaching and technology. Allen highlighted the launch of the Center for Excellence in Workforce Development, which focuses on training medical technicians and offers cybersecurity certification. Gabel discussed her institution’s strategic approach to workforce development, including various initiatives to address skill shortages. Fry talked about Temple’s involvement in civic leadership and workforce development, particularly at the Navy Yard in Philadelphia. Rep. Bellmon asked about measures to retain talent in Pennsylvania. Fry emphasized the importance of incentive programs and working at the grassroots level to provide opportunities for meaningful employment.

Rep. Eric Davanzo (R-Westmoreland) recalled a question he asked Gabel last year about a political rally for former vice president Kamala Harris held at Pitt. He remembered asking questions about the costs and security for the event. Rep. Davanzo stated he never received follow-up answers from Gabel about the question. Gabel apologized for the lack of information and assured him it would be provided. Rep. Davanzo asked about leveraging Pennsylvania’s workforce and natural gas resources in the development of data centers. He emphasized the importance of utilizing local resources. Bendapudi focused on Penn State’s leadership in STEM education and research innovations, including the development of a two-dimensional computer chip for data warehouses and Penn State’s commitment to sustainability and collaboration with industry partners. Fry expressed his interest in utilizing vacant land and underutilized buildings in North Philadelphia to revitalize the area’s industrial sector. Rep. Davanzo expressed his support for utilizing Pennsylvania’s resources, jobs and economy to benefit the state.

Rep. Ben Waxman (D-Philadelphia) highlighted the benefits of investments made by state-related universities in Center City, Philadelphia and asked about the investments being made in real estate benefits. Fry explained that Temple accommodated nearly 380 displaced students from the University of the Arts (UArts) and purchased Terra Hall for \$35 million for infrastructure improvements. He explained the university’s aim to consolidate Temple’s presence in Center City and support cultural nonprofits and Philadelphia school children. Rep. Waxman appreciated the investments made and emphasized the importance of academia in making tangible investments and pursuing knowledge. He asked about the significance of investing in areas like the Extraterrestrial Intelligence Center at Penn State. Bendapudi emphasized the importance of balancing research that addresses current problems with research driven by curiosity and discovery. She highlighted the role of research universities in contributing to the economy and technological advancements. She mentioned discoveries like BlackCAT, a satellite created to study gamma rays, as examples of curiosity-driven research leading to significant advancements. Bendapudi stressed the need to anticipate future questions while addressing today’s needs.

Rep. Joshua Kail (R-Beaver) asked about campus safety, specifically in relation to antisemitism following the events of Oct. 7, 2023. He questioned how recent events in the Middle East have affected college campuses and how the safety and security of Jewish students are being ensured while maintaining open dialogue. Gabel condemned antisemitism at Pitt and mentioned the close work with Jewish students and community leadership, including the launch of an antisemitism task force. She noted the constant level of student activism and the balanced slate of speakers facilitating diverse discussions. Fry discussed reconvening the antisemitism task force at Temple and meeting with groups like the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Jewish Federation to improve policies and practices. He emphasized the importance of implementing advice to strengthen campus practices and ensure student safety and working with Hillel and Chabad. Bendapudi expressed pride in Penn State’s handling of antisemitism. She highlighted the introduction of the “Open for Debate” series aimed at encouraging dialogue among faculty, staff, students and community members. Allen emphasized the importance of teaching students to engage in discussions on significant issues respectfully and civilly, as well as challenging them to recognize the humanity in others.

Rep. La'Tasha Mayes (D-Allegheny) inquired about how the institutions are preparing students for the workforce, specifically in addressing the maternal and rural health crises. She highlighted the contributions of Lincoln, Penn State, Temple and Pitt in producing health care workers. Allen explained Lincoln's commitment to preparing students for careers in health sciences by focusing on health disparities, especially maternal and child health, and the importance of understanding historical and systemic issues leading to these disparities. Bendapudi described Penn State's approach to addressing health disparities and building trust in rural communities through "tailgate medicine," involving interdisciplinary teams. She highlighted efforts to prepare more primary care physicians (PCPs), investments in telehealth and the introduction of the PC Medic program. Bendapudi mentioned a \$50 million philanthropic donation to the Golisano Children's Hospital and emphasized collaboration to tackle health challenges. Fry discussed the significance of Temple's new Women & Families Hospital, set to open in June of 2025. He emphasized its role in providing specialty services for women and acknowledged the financial challenges and heavy investment in the facility. Fry highlighted the under-resourced status of St. Christopher's Hospital for Children and the importance of leadership in addressing maternal health crises. He thanked the Pennsylvania Black Maternal Health Caucus for its support.

Rep. Peter Schweyer (D-Lehigh), chair, House Education Committee, highlighted the Grow PA program and mentioned the initiative offers up to \$5,000 grants for students in critical academic programs. He asked for feedback on its effectiveness. Bendapudi praised the Grow PA program but pointed out challenges with CIP codes for pre-major students. She emphasized the need for flexibility to cover students interested in fields like nursing or engineering. Fry described the Grow PA program as "outstanding" but admitted that Temple is not utilizing it to its full capacity. He acknowledged the need for improvement in this area. Rep. Schweyer suggested that the issue with Grow PA is more of an internal matter for the finance department to address in collaboration with students. Fry acknowledged the need for improved marketing of the Grow PA program to ensure students are aware of its possibilities. Allen discussed the challenge of aligning liberal arts majors with professional-oriented CIP codes. She highlighted the difficulty in finding a fit for their graduates within those codes. Bendapudi agreed with Allen on the challenges faced by liberal arts students in finding their fit within professional CIP codes. Gabel praised the Grow PA program for its effectiveness in attracting new talent and preparing them for professional success. She acknowledged the need for operational improvements. Rep. Schweyer addressed concerns about coding issues with Grow PA and the potential for statutory changes. He mentioned ongoing discussions within the General Assembly and concerns about efforts in the Senate to reclaim already appropriated funds. Gabel mentioned dealing with significant delays in federal financial aid due to changes in the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. She explained that Pitt covered all their students financially during uncertainty and emphasized the importance of communication and finding alternative resources.

Chair Struzzi acknowledged the importance of higher education and the discussions around demographic challenges. He mentioned various plans proposed in the General Assembly and expressed interest in the outcomes. Chair Struzzi highlighted a perception challenge within higher education and noted the governor's proposal for flat-line funding. He asked about recent trends in enrollment increases or decreases. Gabel mentioned that enrollment across their system has increased, with the commonwealth campuses remaining stable over the last few years despite being below historical peaks. She noted growth at the Oakland campus. Fry mentioned that domestic enrollment had significantly decreased over the last two years but expressed hope for a significant increase by the coming September. Bendapudi mentioned that Penn State's enrollment is slightly down and attributed part of the decline to confusion over the commonwealth campuses. She emphasized overall stability and looking toward future trends. Allen mentioned Pitt's enrollment numbers are down, and they have undergone a process of right-sizing, which led to a change in what they now consider an increase in enrollment compared to their standards before 2020.

Chair Struzzi highlighted the funding requests from various universities and noted the significant increases despite the governor's proposal for flatline funding. He stressed the importance of honesty and transparency in discussions about the allocation of taxpayer dollars to higher education. Chair Struzzi recalled last year's House Appropriations Committee Budget Hearing with state-related universities, where Bendapudi was asked about campus closures. "I was personally somewhat offended, because literally, you were in front of us, and said you didn't know," he said. "From our standpoint, it's a lack of transparency that we're concerned about." Bendapudi responded to concerns about transparency regarding campus closures at Penn State. She explained that she couldn't have provided specific details until after Penn State's board meeting, where it was decided that 12 campuses would be under review. "I told you all options are on the table," Bendapudi said of last year's question regarding closures. Chair Struzzi emphasized the importance of transparency in the future of higher education. Bendapudi highlighted that "every dollar" Penn State receives is aimed at reducing in-state tuition. She emphasized that Penn State's in-state tuition is still about half of the national average.

Chair Harris expressed concern about the closure of UArts and inquired about further plans for Temple on South Broad Street. Fry detailed plans to utilize the space on South Broad Street and combine professional programs with significant investments in arts programs. Chair Harris thanked Temple for its contributions to the arts on South Broad Street. He asked Allen what Lincoln would prioritize if they had increased funding. Allen explained that Lincoln's enrollment decline was not due to a lack of interest but due to insufficient resources. "We had nearly 350 students who had put down a deposit, but who could not attend because we didn't have enough resources to actually clear them," she said. She emphasized the need for more appropriations for student support to allow more students to apply and attend Lincoln.

Chair Harris reflected on the potential global impact of providing financial access to higher education. He speculated on the problems that could have been solved, like cures for cancer or Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), if more individuals could afford college. He shared personal stories about his family's educational journey and stressed the transformative power of education and its role in shaping the future. Chair Harris acknowledged the importance of viewing budget allocations for educational institutions as investments in the future. He adjourned the budget hearing.



House Democratic Policy Committee

03/11/2026, 12:00 p.m., Room G-50, Irvis Office Building
Pennsylvania Legislative Services

The committee held a public hearing on laws to protect “Good Samaritans.”

Rep. Mary Isaacson (D-Philadelphia) thanked Reps. Paul Friel (D-Chester) and Emily Kinkead (D-Allegheny) for hosting the event.

Rep. Friel emphasized that thousands of students live on college campuses and those students must feel comfortable calling police in the event of a medical emergency, whether related to alcohol, drugs or another type of health crisis. “Good Samaritan laws exist for a simple and powerful reason, and that is fear should never stand in the way of saving someone’s life or getting medical attention,” he said. He explained that he and Rep. Kinkead have worked to introduce [HB 1944](#) and [HB 1945](#) to protect students who report those life-threatening issues.

Rep. Kinkead noted she previously worked in criminal defense and has seen how “minor brushes with our criminal justice system” can lead to life-altering circumstances. “We want people to step up. We want that kind of society, and that’s the kind of society we should be encouraging,” she said. “No one should be afraid of criminal consequences because they tried to help someone in need.” She highlighted that the bills will allow people to help others without fear of consequences.

Rowan Price, student, Shippensburg University, shared his story of facing legal and financial challenges after assisting an incapacitated student while attending Bloomsburg University. He stated that although he did not ingest any drugs or alcohol, the campus police charged him with reckless endangerment. He later transferred from Bloomsburg University and lost part of his scholarship. He noted that although county prosecutors agreed to expunge his record in exchange for 40 hours of community service, his reputation was tarnished and he was forced to pay for a lawyer and miss classes. He advocated for HB 1944 and 1945, stating that the legislation would have protected him from charges.

Rep. Kinkead noted that while the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) has a policy on its campuses that protects people who have been drinking or consuming drugs in cases where they report a medical emergency, there may be consequences for people who have not been drinking or taking drugs. “Effectively, what these bills together do is protect someone who offers assistance in these situations to allow people to do what I think we all have the instinct to do, which is help what Rowan did and not face those consequences, that we are clear and explicit, that that is protected action,” she said.

Rep. Friel highlighted the discrepancy in how individuals who abandon their friends during emergencies face no consequences, while those who help, like Price, do. Price confirmed that those who left their friend were not investigated. Rep. Friel expressed astonishment at the lack of consequences for them compared to Price’s situation.

Rep. Friel asked Price about the public nature of an incident at Bloomsburg University and its potential to deter students from aiding others. Price confirmed the incident was well-known and led to reluctance among students to get involved. He mentioned that about four people helped the individual in need, but only he and another student were charged due to their detailed accounts of the events.

Rep. Melissa Cerrato (D-Montgomery) questioned why only two students were charged despite many being involved. Price explained that they were charged for leaving a student alone while seeking help.

Rep. Dan Deasy (D-Allegheny) inquired if the sick student or the one who supplied alcohol was cited. Price responded that neither was cited, and the campus officer was not informed about who supplied the alcohol.

Rep. Steven Malagari (D-Montgomery) emphasized the need for legislative action to prevent such incidents and commended Price for his actions.

Rep. Kinkead asked Price if he would still choose to get involved in a similar situation, knowing that it would mean he would still be charged. Prince said he would not be able to leave a fellow student in need. He credited his upbringing for his moral character.

Rep. Isaacson commended Price for his integrity and suggested his actions could inspire legal change.

Sara Jacobson, executive director, Public Defender Association of Pennsylvania (PDAP), expressed support for HBs 1944 and 1945. She shared personal experiences to highlight the importance of the legislation in aiding individuals in moments of crisis without fear of legal repercussions. Jacobson detailed the limitations of Pennsylvania's current overdose response immunity statute and proposed a modest expansion to include individuals who use drugs together. She emphasized the bills' potential to reduce the negative impacts of criminal convictions.

Rep. Dan Williams (D-Chester) expressed his struggle with reconciling legality and morality, particularly in the context of the legal system's design, which he perceives as being legal but not necessarily moral. He asked for insight on whether it's possible to align legal actions with moral ethics, referencing the ethical stance demonstrated by Price as an example. Jacobson emphasized that the proposed bills aim to prioritize saving lives by clarifying immunity protections and removing any hesitation to act in life-threatening situations. She highlighted the bills' role in establishing clear guidelines for judges and prosecutors.

Rep. Friel asked if, as a student and citizen, there is an obligation to help someone in distress. Jacobson stated that while individuals might feel a moral obligation to help others in distress, there is no legal requirement to do so. Rep. Friel criticized the current legal framework for putting individuals at risk when they choose to help others in distress. He emphasized the importance of considering the intentions and the inexperienced nature of individuals, particularly college students, who may be facing such situations for the first time. Jacobson emphasized the importance of immediate action in emergencies and mentioned that the proposed bills aim to eliminate such doubts and incentivize people to act without fear of jeopardizing their future, including concerns about student aid and other collateral consequences. Rep. Friel highlighted the importance of the bills, noting that while many colleges have handbooks and policies with similar content, they lack the force of law. Jacobson agreed and pointed out that police and prosecutors often make different choices due to their lack of daily interaction with students, unlike college campuses. She highlighted that the proposed bills would eliminate this disparity by aligning everyone's understanding of what constitutes a crime and what actions should be recognized as courageous help.

Rep. Kinkead discussed the situation involving Price and how he was pushed into a plea deal. She questioned whether the proposed legislation would offer protection in such cases by limiting prosecutors' ability to charge or pressure individuals into plea deals. Jacobson explained that the Immunity Act is designed to provide clear guidance for prosecutors, judges and defense attorneys to prevent unnecessary prosecutions. She highlighted that the Act allows defense attorneys to use it as a tool to argue against prosecution, especially in cases involving overzealous prosecutors, potentially stopping legal proceedings early and avoiding the time and expense of a plea deal. Jacobson agreed that the measure should serve as a preventative tool so that defense mechanisms are not necessary.

Rep. Malagari detailed how he was involved with Student Emergency Response Volunteers (SERV) at Ursinus College while attending. He asked if those students could be placed in the same situation as Rowan. Jacobson explained that legal interpretations can vary, but the proposed bills aim to clarify legal ambiguities to ensure that providing aid is not seen as reckless endangerment.

Rep. Isaacson highlighted the case of Rowan, who had family support during his legal troubles, and inquired if many students seek help from organizations like the Public Defender Association of PA in similar situations. Jacobson responded that public defenders are eager to assist those without means and stated that clearer laws would help public defenders better serve their clients by reducing ambiguity and preventing unnecessary prosecutions.

Rep. Friel highlighted the importance of his bills, which are aimed at addressing the chilling effect on campuses caused by fear of involvement in incidents due to legal ambiguities. He emphasized the need for common-sense legislation to protect students.

Rep. Kinkead expressed optimism about moving forward with the legislation, especially considering bipartisan support for the bills. She thanked Rowan for his "incredibly powerful" testimony.



House Appropriations Committee – Budget Hearing with PASSHE

03/11/2026, 1:45 p.m., House Chamber

Pennsylvania Legislative Services

The committee held a budget hearing with the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education.

The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) was represented by:

- Christopher Fiorentino, chancellor, PASSHE,
- Sharon Minnich, vice chancellor, PASSHE,
- Dr. Karen Riley, president, Slippery Rock University, PASSHE,
- Dr. Tuesday Stanley, president, PA Commission for Community Colleges,
- Megan Coval, president, Butler County Community College, and
- Dr. Alycia Marshall, president, Community College of Philadelphia.

Minority Chair James Struzzi (R-Indiana) provided an overview of Gov. Josh Shapiro's proposed budget for higher education. He explained that Gov. Shapiro proposed level funding for both PASSHE and Pennsylvania Community Colleges. He added that it includes \$625.8 million for PASSHE and \$277.3 million for community colleges in the upcoming fiscal year. He noted that both systems had requested more funding than what was proposed, with approximately \$651.8 million for PASSHE and \$294 million for community colleges. He said the hearing would help legislators understand why the systems requested additional funding and why Gov. Shapiro chose to maintain level funding instead.

Rep. Emily Kinkead (D-Allegheny) highlighted a discrepancy between the proposed budgets and Gov. Shapiro's proposal, seeking clarification. Fiorentino explained PASSHE's request for a 5% budget increase to maintain current tuition levels, emphasizing the importance of investment in higher education for the commonwealth's future and expressing hope to avoid tuition hikes. Stanley detailed the community colleges' 6% funding increase request, stressing the impact of flat funding on student success and access. Rep. Kinkead inquired about amendments to PASSHE's Good Samaritan policy to protect students helping others in emergencies. Fiorentino acknowledged the policy's complexity and expressed general support.

Rep. Eric Nelson (R-Westmoreland) discussed the funding model for community colleges, emphasizing the gap between the ideal and actual funding contributions from state, local sources and tuition fees. Riley explained that although Pennsylvania law outlines a third funding model for community colleges, with funding ideally coming equally from the state, local governments and student tuition, this formula has not been fully implemented in practice. He stated that funding levels vary across institutions depending on local financial support and state contributions. She noted that community colleges remain relatively affordable, which helps maintain access for students, but the funding burden still differs significantly depending on each college's local resources and support. Rep. Nelson discussed the funding of community colleges, highlighting that they serve around 245,000 students at a cost of approximately \$1,000 per student, in contrast to state-related institutions, which receive \$569 per student. He then addressed an issue with PASSHE regarding a discrepancy in the Classification of Instruction Programs (CIP) codes that affected about 1,700 students, who were initially awarded \$5,000 scholarships but later found potentially ineligible due to a mismatch with CIP codes. He asked about efforts to resolve this issue. Fiorentino described the CIP codes issue as a "silly problem," explaining that PASSHE does not create the CIP codes but rather they are assigned to them. He explained that programs are classified within CIP codes with varying levels of refinement, including two-digit and six-digit codes. He added that discrepancies in program classification were never intended.

Rep. Nelson expressed his desire to see PASSHE schools actively seeking solutions to the CIP code issue. Fiorentino answered that they are actively working on addressing the CIP gap issue and asked if there was any updated information available on it. Rep. Nelson discussed concerns about glitches in the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) funding affecting student finances and emphasized the importance of supporting Pennsylvania students to prevent them from facing unexpected financial burdens. Fiorentino responded that they are collaborating with organizations to address and resolve the issues at hand. He continued that they are committed to not charging students an additional \$5,000 during the current financial gap as long as the funding is clear.

Rep. Regina Young (D-Philadelphia) shared her personal connection to the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) and praised CCP's leadership for nurturing students in a holistic way. She asked how institutions manage tight budgets while still creating initiatives that bridge classroom learning to career pathways. Stanley emphasized the prioritization of health and safety in budgeting for community colleges, acknowledging the rising costs and the necessity to find alternative funding sources to support innovation and meet workforce demands. Coval discussed the importance of collaboration and partnership in keeping costs down in the competitive higher education landscape. She highlighted the launch of a Radiological Technology Program at Butler County Community College, achieved through a partnership with a hospital and a private donor. Marshall explained that additional funds supported by Perkins were used for the lab. She announced the launch of a Navy expansion project, a public partnership with the

U.S. Navy involving a \$2.7 million investment for naval welding and non-destructive testing programs, emphasizing the college's commitment to innovation and high-quality education despite funding challenges.

Rep. Marci Mustello (R-Butler) welcomed individuals from Butler County and inquired about the dual enrollment program facilitated by the Department of Education (PDE), asking how it operates and whether universities actively recruit high school students for the program. Coval noted a 25% growth in dual enrollment, attributing this to cost adjustments and strengthened relationships with high schools, and emphasized that the program is expanding to all high schools in Butler County. Rep. Mustello then asked Coval if Butler County Community College still has a campus in Lawrence County and about outreach efforts there. Coval announced the opening of a new campus in Lawrence County, named BC three at Lawrence and mentioned the Early College pioneers program starting this fall. Rep. Mustello asked if Slippery Rock has any programs related to expanding educational opportunities. Riley mentioned growth in dual enrollment, particularly in STEM and engineering programs, and highlighted a partnership with the carpenters' union that allows training and education to be recognized as credit towards a degree. Coval described Butler County Community College's close ties with local businesses and industries, exemplified by a program developed for Cleveland Cliffs to train employees on new machinery and equipment.

Rep. Kyle Mullins (D-Lackawanna) discussed the significant growth in students enrolling in online programs, noting that about 45% of students in fully online programs attend institutions outside of the state, and asked about PASSHE's plans to expand its online learning offerings and inquired about any barriers or challenges being faced. Fiorentino explained that the online education market is rapidly expanding, particularly for undergraduate programs. He noted that traditional enrollment — primarily 18- to 22-year-old students — attending in person has been declining, which has pushed universities to adapt. He said the shift toward online instruction accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when institutions were forced to move courses online and discovered they could deliver them effectively. He added that while PASSHE universities have long offered online graduate programs, they are now expanding undergraduate online options and targeting nontraditional students, such as individuals who previously earned some credits but left school and want to return to finish their degrees. He added that PASSHE is also working on program sharing among universities to expand online offerings more efficiently and compete in the growing digital education market. Rep. Mullins appreciated Fiorentino's insights on online learning for non-traditional students.

Rep. Jim Rigby (R-Cambria) asked about the specifics behind community colleges' request for \$10 million in new funding for first responder training. Stanley explained that the funding would help offset the high costs of first responder training programs, which are provided at a loss. Rep. Rigby highlighted the discontinuation of funding for first responder training at community colleges decades ago and questioned whether the requested \$10 million would be sufficient. Coval stated that the Regional Training Center for firefighters at Butler County Community College serves 35 out of 67 counties and incurs an annual loss of about \$500,000, emphasizing the program's importance despite financial losses. Rep. Rigby expressed his support for integrating police academy training into community colleges.

Rep. Gina Curry (D-Delaware) asked about partnerships with community colleges to address student needs like housing, food and clothing insecurities. Marshall discussed the Community College of Philadelphia's efforts to support students facing insecurities and their partnerships with four-year institutions. Riley highlighted the collaboration between Slippery Rock University and community colleges, including an 18-month training program and a \$60,000 grant for their food bank, to facilitate the transition for students to four-year institutions.

Rep. Ann Flood (R-Northampton) inquired about efforts to attract more non-traditional age students in response to the decline in traditional age high school graduates. Fiorentino described the progress in re-engaging students who had previously left their studies incomplete, emphasizing the need for a tailored approach to support non-traditional students. Rep. Flood asked how universities are marketing educational opportunities to adults who want to change careers or return to school. She emphasized the importance of reaching people who may already be established in their careers but realize they want a different path. She noted that many of these individuals now have families and other responsibilities, so institutions need to highlight flexible options such as online courses. She asked how colleges ensure that potential students know they are welcome to return to school and understand that education can provide a pathway out of a struggling or "dead-end" career. Riley discussed the addition of a "third arm" to Slippery Rock University's academic offerings, emphasizing the need for collaboration with industry and flexibility in program formats to meet the needs of non-traditional students and respond to market changes. Rep. Flood highlighted her work with Northampton Community College and the importance of community and industry partnerships for workforce training, asking how an additional \$15 million in funding for non-credit workforce development would be used. Stanley described the PA Works initiative, funded by the requested \$15 million, to expand workforce development programs across Pennsylvania's community colleges, including a pre-apprenticeship academy, micro-credential academy and a career in technology academy.

Rep. Steven Malagari (D-Montgomery) inquired about the role of community colleges in expanding biotech and life sciences workforce pathways and how the legislature could support this effort. Stanley highlighted the involvement of Lehigh and Montgomery County Community Colleges in attracting pharmaceutical companies to Pennsylvania and developing curriculum to meet their needs, requesting legislative support for Workforce Funding. Rep. Malagarie asked for more details on how community colleges are

meeting those needs in the in-demand fields. Stanley highlighted the creation of programs in biochemistry-biomedical fields for Eli Lilly and tailored programs for Johnson & Johnson's needs, with Amazon Web Services (AWS) collaborating to develop programs across Pennsylvania. Rep. Malagari highlighted that community colleges are highly adaptable in their academic offerings, allowing students to choose career paths that align with local workforce needs. He emphasized that these institutions are particularly effective at responding quickly to labor market demands in their surrounding regions, helping students train for jobs that are currently in demand. He then asked how the universities are similarly adapting programs and educational offerings to match workforce needs. Fiorentino discussed PASSHE's focus on preparing graduates in fields that align with the state's employment demands, citing over 13,000 students who graduated in key areas last year. Riley added that Slippery Rock University introduced three new programs in construction management, electrical engineering and nursing, which have attracted nearly 400 applications, demonstrating the university's alignment with industry demands.

Rep. Charity Grimm Krupa (R-Fayette) asked whether the integration of six universities in the Penn West and Commonwealth universities, now in its fourth budget year, is considered complete. Fiorentino responded that the integration is an ongoing process due to challenges such as demographic shifts, the increase in online education and a decrease in high school graduates attending college. He noted the success in offering program opportunities in rural areas and the efficient realignment of administrations among the integrated schools but stated that the process is not yet complete. Rep. Krupa noted the potential closure of the Fayette Penn State branch campus and speculated on its impact on student enrollment in PASSHE institutions. She inquired about the achievement of specific milestones and the accuracy of financial projections from the integration plan. Minnich explained that savings from non-faculty personnel exceeded initial estimates due to adjustments in response to declining enrollment, aligning with the board-approved plan. Rep. Krupa asked about measures taken to address the structural deficit at Penn West and requested a timeframe for its elimination. Minnich explained that the deficit was partially addressed by defeating approximately \$65 million of system-issued bonds, reducing annual debt service by about \$8 million. She added that Penn West is on a two-year plan to further address this deficit, with similar efforts underway at the state level. Rep. Krupa inquired about any unexpected issues or challenges during the integrations. Fiorentino acknowledged overestimated savings projections in administrative overhead and mentioned a review of the allocation formula for state appropriations based on revised savings opportunities.

Rep. Justin Fleming (D-Dauphin) shared his educational journey and inquired about the approach to deferred maintenance within community colleges and PASSHE universities. Fiorentino explained that decisions regarding deferred maintenance are made locally due to budget constraints, leading to a crisis level of deferred maintenance across the system. Riley highlighted that the university faces about \$180 million in deferred maintenance, with 35% of its engineering buildings over 50 years old. She stressed the urgency of repairs, such as investing several million dollars in heat pumps, and pointed out that deferred maintenance limits the educational experience and poses significant cyber risks. Minnich noted that they only have three sources of funding for deferred maintenance, adding that they have started using some of the Department of General Services' (DGS) capital funding totaling \$70 million a year for all 10 universities. Stanley highlighted the challenges community colleges face with outdated infrastructure and deferred maintenance, noting the difficulty in securing state funds and the necessity for local matching funds. Marshall discussed the Community College of Philadelphia's deferred maintenance projects, mentioning a specific \$12 and \$20 million project and the challenge of finding matching funds. Rep. Fleming suggested the idea of establishing a fund for K-12 and higher education maintenance.

Rep. Jeff Olsommer (R-Wayne) asked whether the need for remedial education is increasing or decreasing. Coval noted a slight increase in the need for remedial education at Butler County Community College and her commitment to adjusting courses to meet student needs. Marshall reported an increase in remedial education needs at the Community College of Philadelphia and detailed initiatives like "Math pathways" and partnerships with school districts to address this. Fiorentino discussed the shift in remedial education at PASSHE institutions towards credit-bearing summer courses and comprehensive support systems to assist students. Rep. Olsommer asked what the success rate was for students who start off in the summer. Fiorentino answered that his general sense is that the program is successful, but that he can provide numbers as a follow-up. Riley talked about the success of Slippery Rock University's Jumpstart program and the university's efforts to accommodate students with various learning needs.

Rep. Tim Brennan (D-Bucks) revisited a question about allocating \$10 million for first responder training, highlighting the financial challenges faced by local municipalities and inquiring about the specific benefits and programs constrained by funding shortages. Coval explained that firefighter training programs at community colleges are expensive to operate because they require specialized equipment, facilities and strict safety standards. She noted that Butler County Community College maintains facilities such as a burn building, railcar simulations and flashover training structures, all of which require regular maintenance. She emphasized that the college works to provide heavily subsidized or sometimes free training for firefighters, particularly for local departments and smaller municipalities that rely on volunteer firefighters and cannot afford high training costs. She warned that the college is currently facing annual losses of about \$500,000, which threatens its ability to continue offering affordable training. She stated that additional funding would help maintain training equipment and keep firefighter education accessible, especially for small or volunteer fire departments. Stanley highlighted the efforts of community colleges in recruiting junior firefighters and encouraging volunteerism among young people, especially in rural areas, emphasizing the need for low or nonexistent costs and the provision of equipment and training. She pointed to the challenges of limited resources for these efforts and suggested a need for expanded support. Rep. Brennan

acknowledged the challenges faced by first responders and mentioned his collaboration on a bill to address funding issues with Bucks County Community College. He inquired about the schools or regions most in need of a 5% funding increase for passion schools. Fiorentino explained PASSHE's funding distribution formula, taking into account factors like campus size and program costs. He highlighted efforts to reduce costs through consolidations and emphasized their commitment to equitable fund distribution across campuses.

Rep. Chad Reichard (R-Franklin) highlighted the importance of workforce development and praised Shippensburg University for its work-based learning initiatives. He inquired if these efforts were part of a wider initiative across PASSHE. Fiorentino described observing a program at Shippensburg University that exemplifies the partnership between education and businesses, stating that this model is common across many institutions within PASSHE, including Slippery Rock. Riley emphasized Slippery Rock University's commitment to providing experiential learning opportunities accessible to all students, including those who are Pell eligible and first-generation, by finding ways to fund these activities. Rep. Reichard asked how to better partner on experiential learning opportunities, acknowledging the need for funding. Riley suggested incentivizing corporations and industries to offer internships and practica through a credit system similar to the EITC, to encourage corporate funding for these opportunities.

Rep. Marla Brown (R-Lawrence) highlighted the achievements of Lawrence County's schools and discussed the need for creative repurposing of system facilities through community partnerships. She asked how partnerships have facilitated academic hall renovations at Slippery Rock University. Riley specified that Slippery Rock University does not have excess space or housing, detailing the university's strategic plan to become a first-choice organization for partnerships. She added that the reorganization of departments and a shift towards interdisciplinary teaching resulted in increased effectiveness, nimbleness, cost savings, a significant upturn in a down market and a record-setting retention rate. Fiorentino discussed PASSHE's efforts to address the issue of empty buildings by seeking opportunities to repurpose them for community benefit. He mentioned the financial burden of maintaining these structures and the ongoing discussions to find additional funding sources for demolition to reduce carrying costs. Rep. Brown asked Coval to discuss examples of successful partnerships in Lawrence County following Butler County Community College's move and integration into the community. Coval described the college's relocation to Lawrence County, highlighting the collaborative opportunities with local institutions, such as sharing a chemistry lab with Shenango High School and hosting the Lawrence County Learning Center.

Rep. Bryan Cutler (R-Lancaster), minority chair, House Education Committee, inquired about the Grow PA program, asking for suggestions to make the program more efficient and reduce bureaucracy. He asked about the sustainability of student workloads and measures to ensure students remain enrolled and on the correct career path. Fiorentino described the Grow PA program as beneficial, especially for in-state students, and mentioned efforts to improve recruitment of out-of-state students. He highlighted that 80% of graduates remain in the state for their first job. Rep. Cutler asked whether colleges face challenges maintaining student enrollment and progression through four-year programs, particularly in light of the funding concerns raised earlier in the hearing. He questioned whether institutions are able to keep students on track once they enroll in a program. He asked what strategies colleges use to encourage retention and help students remain in their intended career pathways, noting that students sometimes change majors and may no longer qualify for certain programs. Riley discussed Slippery Rock University's support for the Grow PA program, citing that the university supports 381 students with approximately \$1.8 million in funding. She highlighted efforts to identify eligible students and the university's commitment to workforce development programs, utilizing about \$7 million from its budget to fill financial aid gaps and increasing efforts in philanthropy to ensure students receive a high-quality education at the lowest possible cost. Rep. Cutler expressed his willingness to assist with any future issues related to the Grow PA program, stating his door is always open as the education chair to find resolutions.

Chair Struzzi shared his educational journey in Pennsylvania and praised Indiana University of Pennsylvania for establishing the first college of osteopathic medicine in the state system. He discussed the governor's flat funding for higher education and asked about enrollment trends in PASSHE, noting geographical discrepancies. Fiorentino answered that enrollments have stabilized and slightly increased after years of decline, despite an anticipated decrease in the high school graduating population. He discussed efforts to attract non-traditional students and the importance of student retention. Fiorentino noted a modest uptick in applications and commitments from prospective students and a 4% increase in community college enrollments, though it's too early to predict next year's outcomes. Chair Struzzi emphasized the importance of right-sizing higher education to meet the needs of young people across the state.

Chair Jordan Harris (D-Philadelphia) asked for an update on the new partnership with Cheyney University. Marshall announced the launch of the Cheyney at CCP program, which provides bachelor's degree pathways at CCP, initially focusing on business and education to address the teacher shortage. The partnership aims to expand and create more opportunities. Chair Harris expressed enthusiasm for the partnership between community colleges and state system schools, highlighting its potential to strengthen relationships and reduce costs for students. He emphasized the importance of such collaborations in addressing professional shortages and announced a 15-minute break before the next session with the Pennsylvania State Police.



House Appropriations Committee – Budget Hearing with the Governor’s Office of the Budget and Executive Offices

03/12/2026, 10:00 a.m., House Chamber

Pennsylvania Legislative Services

The committee held a budget hearing with the Governor’s Office of the Budget and Executive Offices.

The Governor’s Office of the Budget (BO) was represented by:

- Sec. Zachary Reber, BO.

Minority Chair Jim Struzzi (R-Indiana) expressed concerns about the governor’s \$53 billion budget proposal, a \$2.72 billion increase over the current budget and its impact on the rainy day fund and surplus.

Rep. Gina Curry (D-Delaware) asked about the impact of the budget impasse on missed payments. Sec. Reber explained that approximately 106,000 pre-audited payments totaling about \$7.2 billion were delayed. Rep. Curry inquired about the impact of a delayed capital budget on BO. Sec. Reber highlighted the challenges of issuing debt for capital projects and the importance of timely bond sales.

Rep. Joshua Kail (R-Beaver) expressed frustration over the governor’s budget projections, questioning the realism of projected growth versus spending increases. Sec. Reber explained the basis of the budget projection and the challenges in predicting overall costs, emphasizing that budgeting is done annually and acknowledging the negotiation process. Rep. Kail criticized the Governor’s Office for budget projections forecasting growth of 0.78%, which Rep. Kail deemed was “not a good faith projection.” Sec. Reber said the projection is based on the information available to the Governor’s Office. Rep. Kail once again criticized the projections and questioned the accuracy of the Department of Education’s (PDE) spending projections. Sec. Reber said PDE’s budget is projections made by BO for the current fiscal year, stating that BO can not predict what the General Assembly will implement in future fiscal years. Rep. Kail discussed the annual budget increases for education since 2019, noting a proposed increase of 5.4% for the current year and projections of 0.8% for the next four years. He questioned the reliability of these projections for future planning. Sec. Reber responded that the projections are based on confirmed expenses and that new proposals are made annually based on investment needs. He anticipated discussions about investments in the next fiscal year.

Rep. Joseph Webster (D-Montgomery) discussed the impact of [HB 2370](#) of the previous session on K-12 adequacy funding, highlighting its significant effect on Norristown area schools and the aim to close a \$4.8 billion funding gap within seven years. He emphasized the importance of adhering to the seven-year timeline and asked for insights on maintaining this trajectory. Sec. Reber discussed the bipartisan effort to address the K-12 adequacy gap, noting an increase in funding from \$526 million to \$565 million over the past two years. He mentioned the proposal to maintain the \$565 million funding for fiscal year 2026 and the importance of ongoing discussions about future funding. He said the increased funds have resulted in increased academic success, full-day pre-K and workforce development. Rep. Webster asked how committing to a seven-year timeline for funding would aid in budget projections. Sec. Reber explained that committing to a seven-year timeline aids in building economic success and revenue growth for Pennsylvania, supported by changes in the business climate and initiatives like the Working Pennsylvanians tax credit.

Rep. Zachary Mako (R-Northampton) asked about the governor’s request for an enhanced enterprise security budget of \$10 million for cybersecurity, questioning why the existing IT infrastructure could not support the cybersecurity enhancements. Sec. Reber explained the necessity of an additional \$10 million investment in cybersecurity due to increased cyberattack attempts and the importance of election security. He differentiated between the Office of Administration (OA) and the Office of Digital Experience (CODE PA), an initiative to reduce reliance on external IT contractors. Rep. Mako asked about the total amount of money the commonwealth is spending on IT. Sec. Reber mentioned that the IT shared service billing model projection is \$384 million, billed to other agencies for enterprise-wide services. Rep. Mako inquired about the budget for the Integrated Enterprise System (IES), which increased from \$31.3 million to \$100 million. Sec. Reber explained that the S4 project, with a budget of \$60 million, aims to replace the Systems, Applications and Products (SAP) software at the end of its 20-year life cycle, enhancing reporting and supporting commonwealth systems. He said the program is planned to live in the next fiscal year. Rep. Mako asked about the timeline for phasing out the SAP system. Sec. Reber mentioned that the existing system will lose its support at the end of the calendar year. Rep. Mako discussed concerns with Department of Human Services (DHS) Sec. Val Arkoosh’s budgeting approach for Medicaid, which constitutes 42% of the budget and has been increasing by at least 5% annually. He questioned whether projections would cover these increases, referencing a \$200 million increase estimate. Sec. Reber discussed cost containment efforts and changes implemented to address Medicaid expenses, noting U.S. HR 1 is set for 2028 implementation.

Rep. Regina Young (D-Philadelphia) asked about the impact of not adopting past revenue proposals on the current budget shortfall, highlighting a projected \$4.7 billion shortfall. She mentioned legalized recreational marijuana, skill games, closing the Delaware loophole and increasing the minimum wage as examples. Sec. Reber mentioned that these proposals would have generated approximately \$3 billion in additional revenue.

Rep. Marla Brown (R-Lawrence) mentioned that the rainy day fund had a balance of \$7.63 billion, which could sustain the commonwealth for about 56 days. She inquired about the financial benefits of recent credit upgrades caused by the high rainy day fund. Sec. Reber explained that the credit upgrades have led to significant interest savings and noted that many states are dipping into their rainy day funds as well. Rep. Brown asked about the impact of the governor's proposed withdrawal of \$4.5 billion. Sec. Reber said the competitive bond rates earned by the commonwealth will keep interest rates down regardless of the budget.

Rep. Ben Waxman (D-Philadelphia) sought clarification on the state's bond rating, asking if it was influenced solely by the rainy day fund or other factors like timely budget passage. Sec. Reber explained that several factors, including timely budget passage, surplus amounts and general economic investments, influence the state's bond rating. Rep. Waxman then shifted the conversation to arts funding, expressing concern about the shift in funding for arts organizations and questioning whether the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts had assessed the fiscal needs of these organizations. Sec. Reber acknowledged a policy shift aimed at maximizing funding impact on arts projects but was unaware of specific fiscal need assessments. Rep. Waxman urged the administration to address the needs of art communities that have been impacted by federal cuts.

Rep. Eric Nelson (R-Westmoreland) discussed the importance of permitting reform, highlighting the passage of [Act 45 of 2025](#), which improved transparency and efficiency in the permitting process. He inquired about the current budget's funding to maintain these improvements. Sec. Reber explained that the Office of Transformation and Opportunity (OTO), responsible for implementing the system, is funded through the Department of Community and Economic Development's (DCED) General Government Operations line, with additional funding proposed for CODE PA to enhance the online system for various agencies. Rep. Nelson asked about the development of the permit tracking system and which organization would be responsible. Sec. Reber explained that CODE PA, in collaboration with OTO, is working on developing the infrastructure for the online databases. Rep. Nelson inquired about the budget allocation for CODE PA. Sec. Reber responded that \$3.7 million is proposed specifically for the tracking database. Rep. Nelson asked if OTO would lead the Governor's Responsible Infrastructure Development (GRID) program. Sec. Reber explained OTO's involvement in aligning government permitting decisions with business pace and detailing the governor's standards for the project. Rep. Nelson expressed support for Pennsylvania contractors and new natural gas power plants, asking who oversees these projects. Sec. Reber stated that the Fast Track program, operated by OTO, requires meeting specific standards before providing incentives. Rep. Nelson further inquired about the leadership hierarchy for the accelerated permitting process for data centers. Sec. Reber confirmed OTO's management in collaboration with other agencies.

Rep. Anthony Bellmon (D-Philadelphia) raised concerns about affordability issues, including high costs of gas, groceries and inflation. He asked how the budget addresses these concerns. Sec. Reber explained the governor's proposal aims to make purchases more affordable, mentioning the governor's proposed Housing Action Plan, a critical infrastructure fund for energy and tax cuts and credits to reduce costs. Rep. Bellmon asked about the property tax rent rebate program. Sec. Reber explained the benefits that came from increasing the eligibility for property tax rebates and linking it to an inflationary index. He noted the change in funding mechanism to cover the program itself and payments to seniors.

Rep. Marci Mustello (R-Butler) asked about the funding and budgetary allocation for OTO and CODE PA. Sec. Reber explained that CODE PA is funded by appropriation funds, while DCED funds OTO. Rep. Mustello sought clarification on a discrepancy regarding the governor's budget request for CODE PA. Sec. Reber confirmed a \$3.7 million dedicated amount towards the tracking program being discussed and an overall increase of just over \$3 million for CODE PA. Rep. Mustello questioned the fiscal responsibility and oversight of budget proposals related to the Department of Environmental Protection's use of general government operations (GGO) funding and the infrastructure management by OTO. Sec. Reber explained the collaborative efforts across agencies and the oversight managed by the budget and comptroller's office.

Rep. Justin Flemming (D-Dauphin) discussed the issue of affordability and the lack of cost-of-living adjustments for pre-Act 9 retirees, mentioning [HB 411](#) aimed at providing these adjustments. Sec. Reber noted the fiscal impact of approximately \$170 million a year for the adjustments and emphasized the need for communication about the impacts on funded liability and the necessity for additional appropriations. Rep. Flemming described the investment in cost-of-living adjustments as exceptional and urged that addressing the needs of workers and retirees should be a priority.

Rep. Eric Davanzo (R-Westmoreland) inquired about the governor's proposed \$1 billion critical infrastructure investment program, expressing concerns over the lack of detail on administration and fund distribution. He criticized the governor's housing action plan for using state funding to pressure local governments into adopting specific zoning policies. He asked whether communities with significant farmland would be excluded from the plan. Sec. Reber responded by explaining that the housing action plan was

developed with input from stakeholders and might involve amendments to the municipal planning code, requiring action by the General Assembly. He emphasized the importance of the legislative process and stakeholder buy-in. Rep. Davanzo asked if communities that do not adopt the housing plan's recommendations would be excluded from the plan. Sec. Reber explained that the details of the ordinances under the housing action plan are still being determined and emphasized the plan's broader strategy to ensure housing access, highlighting the goal to benefit everyone by addressing housing comprehensively. Rep. Davanzo expressed concerns about the lack of details regarding community participation in the housing plan and questioned the fairness of imposing a billion-dollar cost over four years on taxpayers in communities that might not be able to opt into the program. Sec. Reber explained that the critical infrastructure fund aimed at developing additional housing does not require sequential steps but can progress on concurrent paths. He proposed that the program should be managed by BO to stimulate interest in various areas like energy and housing development, with funds allocated based on project merits. Rep. Davanzo expressed concerns that some communities might be left out of the critical infrastructure fund but looked forward to working together to ensure they are included.

Rep. Pat Gallagher (D-Philadelphia) discussed the Pennsylvania State Police's (PSP) funding, mentioning last year's executive budget proposed reducing PSP's reliance on the motor fund from \$250 million to \$200 million, but the enacted budget maintained the \$250 million level. He inquired if there was a similar proposal in the current budget and whether \$250 million is a reasonable amount for PSP to draw from the motor fund. Sec. Reber explained that despite last year's proposal, the plan was not enacted due to negotiations and the fiscal position of the general fund. He mentioned that the original intent was to allocate more funds for road and bridge projects, highlighting that actions taken have already freed up approximately \$625 million for such projects, with an expectation of \$2 billion being available over the next five years. Rep. Gallagher asked Sec. Reber to elaborate on the benefits of consolidating multiple county-based funding streams into a new appropriation. Sec. Reber explained that the consolidation into a block grant was aimed at enhancing efficiency and flexibility in the use of funds appropriated by the General Assembly for community services, developed in collaboration with the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime (PCCD), DCED and the Department of Corrections (DOC) to address restrictions in existing programs and benefit counties and other entities by providing more flexible funding options.

Rep. Jamie Barton (R-Schuylkill) highlighted the lack of utility-scale natural gas projects in Pennsylvania since joining the Regional Green Gas Initiative (RGGI) in 2019. He questioned the prospects for enhanced energy investment in the state. Sec. Reber responded by emphasizing the governor's plan to attract new energy investments through tax credits, infrastructure funds and changes to the Alternative Energy Portfolio Standards (AEPS) and permitting processes. He mentioned efforts to improve the business climate by reducing corporate net income taxes (CNITs). Rep. Barton questioned the effectiveness of reducing CNITs to 4% by 2031, comparing it unfavorably to Ohio's rate of 0%. He asked Sec. Reber if he would recommend reinvesting in a coal-fired power plant given the regulatory environment. Sec. Reber stated that the focus should be on moving forward with the current economic development strategy, citing significant investments and developments as evidence of its effectiveness. Rep. Barton expressed concern about the Pennsylvania climate emissions reduction plan, which includes a cap and investment program to regulate carbon emissions.

Rep. Steven Malagari (D-Montgomery) discussed his bills, HB 411 and [HB 1289](#), which provide cost-of-living adjustments to retirees and police officers and firefighters, respectively. He inquired about budget support for these initiatives. Sec. Reber replied that the funding of fire pensions and other municipal pensions currently comes from insurance proceeds, discussing the need to examine changes to the funding structure and potential new revenue streams. Rep. Malagari mentioned the possibility of achieving the goal of providing cost-of-living adjustments for retirees and municipal workers by utilizing certain revenue streams and making changes within the budget structure. Sec. Reber noted the ongoing discussion with the General Assembly regarding the allocation of resources to priorities. Rep. Malagari emphasized the importance of striving to fulfill the needs of the commonwealth's retirees, including state workers, educators, support professionals, municipal police and firefighters.

Rep. Chad Reichard (R-Franklin) raised concerns about bureaucratic inefficiencies faced by his constituents and criticized the reliance on outdated communication methods by the Department of Transportation (PennDOT) and DHS. He asked about the governor's budget proposal's measures to enhance government efficiency and responsiveness. Rep. Reichard highlighted CODE PA as an initiative to improve interactions between residents and the government. Rep. Reichard criticized current efforts for focusing on making bureaucracy accessible online without addressing the underlying issues, such as the inability to email forms to certain agencies. He questioned the governor's actions to eliminate bureaucratic red tape. Sec. Reber discussed the use of CODE PA for developing forms for agencies and mentioned efforts to simplify processes, like reducing application process complexity. He acknowledged federal requirements for hard copies but expressed openness to further discussions on process improvement. Rep. Reichard expressed concerns about bureaucratic inefficiency and rigidity, citing difficulties faced by constituents with PennDOT. He highlighted a significant budget increase for the Governor's Office and questioned future financial plans amid a projects 0% budget increase. Sec. Reber explained that budget projections are based on existing collective bargaining agreements and known costs, aiming to maintain a strong negotiating position without setting specific expectations. Rep. Reichard mentioned that the cost-of-living adjustment is determined by statute and expected to occur, yet it is not included in current budget projections. Sec. Reber noted efforts across all agencies to manage and reduce personnel costs, highlighting progress in lowering the rate of increase in appropriations.

Rep. Manuel Guzman (D-Berks) criticized certain members of the committee for demanding more government services while calling for fiscal responsibility. He highlighted that 80% of the budget goes to essential services and questioned what areas they would propose cutting amid federal decisions affecting food assistance and health care. He asked about the consequences if the budget, including proposed revenue increases, does not pass. Sec. Reber explained that failing to enact proposed revenue increases would necessitate difficult decisions, affecting schools, county governments, nonprofits and businesses. He emphasized the importance of continuing investments to make Pennsylvania attractive. Rep. Guzman mentioned that without the proposed revenue sources, Pennsylvania would need to identify \$4 to \$6 billion in cuts. He asked if freezing or cutting budgets for all agencies outside of certain essential services would cover at least half of the deficit. Sec. Reber indicated that most general fund appropriations go to PDE and DHS, suggesting that appropriations outside these areas are minimal and some reliance on the existing surplus would still be necessary.

Rep. Jim Rigby (R-Cambria) questioned the necessity and potential conflict of interest regarding the governor's proposal to increase voter registration and education appropriations from \$598,000 to \$2 million for the 2026-2027 fiscal year, noting a 250% increase without specific plans for the new funding's use and no new voter initiatives since 2013-2014. Sec. Reber explained that the budget increase for voter registration and education is a historical practice during even-year election cycles to accommodate better turnout and interest, stating it does not constitute a conflict of interest as the focus is on informing the public about voting methods and timelines. Rep. Rigby inquired about the specifics of the fund's distribution for voter registration and education, highlighting a significant increase from \$458,000 in 2013-2014 to a proposed \$2 million and asked whether it would be allocated to certain counties and how it would be dispersed. Sec. Reber mentioned his willingness to collaborate with the Department of State (DOS) to understand the intended use of funds related to election matters, deferring to DOS on election issues as they manage the Bureau of Elections and ensure fair, safe elections throughout the commonwealth.

Rep. Emily Kinkead (D-Allegheny) mentioned that the Attorney General had testified about leaving lawsuits against the federal government's overreach to the Governor's Office, noting that the governor joined 20 lawsuits, all resolved in favor of Pennsylvania. She inquired about the expenditure on these cases by the Governor's Office. Sec. Reber specified that all legal work on the lawsuits was done in-house without hiring outside counsel, utilizing the existing resources of the Office of General Counsel. Rep. Kinkead asked if the necessity to take on certain cases means that other cases have to be left unaddressed, referencing the Attorney General's decision-making process. Sec. Reber explained that the Office of General Counsel utilizes its finite internal attorneys and avoids hiring outside counsel, mentioning that while they strive to provide all necessary services to agencies, the allocation of attorney time to various cases could potentially detract from other services. Rep. Kinkead asked if reallocating funds from the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) to ensure sufficient resources and attorneys for addressing cases the Attorney General is unwilling to take on would be appropriate. Sec. Reber deferred that decision to the General Assembly. Rep. Kinkead discussed the effectiveness of Pennsylvania's farmland preservation program and its inaccessibility to urban farmers due to definitions that do not accommodate small patches of land, inquiring about the significance of the state's agricultural conservation easement purchase program in keeping land as farmland and how it could be made accessible to urban and smaller farmers. Sec. Reber said the Department of Agriculture (PDA) is a vocal proponent of urban agriculture and said he felt that conversations about its expansion would be beneficial. Rep. Kinkead asked whether legalizing cannabis could serve as an additional revenue source for farmland preservation. Sec. Reber discussed the proposal of using revenue from legalized cannabis as a policy to support farmers by diversifying crops and entering new markets, placing the initiative under PDA.

Rep. Jeff Olsommer (R-Wayne) inquired about the governor's proposal on modifying tax credit programs, including the Education Improvement Tax Credit (EITC), and the reallocation of caps within the EITC program as outlined in the executive budget. Sec. Reber explained the administration's approach to ensuring full utilization of funds allocated for EITC, noting that \$103 million went unused in the 2024 fiscal year. Rep. Olsommer highlighted the high utilization rate of the EITC program's credits and expressed concern that expanding Education Improvement Organizations (EIOs) should not reduce scholarship credits. Sec. Reber mentioned that proposed adjustments would involve changes to existing caps in the school code. Rep. Olsommer asked about data on scholarship distribution between urban and rural students. Sec. Reber explained the legal restrictions on data collection. Rep. Olsommer expressed concern about the proposal's impact on students seeking better education opportunities and the waiting list for businesses seeking tax credits.

Rep. Abigail Salisbury (D-Allegheny) described her efforts to address concerns about fraud, waste and abuse reports in the Woodland Hills School District, noting the Auditor General stopped school audits in 2022. Sec. Reber explained that schools are subject to federal single audits and that selective audits are conducted based on capacity, emphasizing the collaborative process with the PDE and school districts. Rep. Salisbury asked about BO's auditing staff capacity compared to the Auditor General. Sec. Reber said they do not have a comparable staff but stressed that BO takes waste and fraud seriously. Rep. Salisbury asked whether the \$5 million saved from dissolving the Bureau of School Audits was transferred to enhance auditing capabilities elsewhere. Sec. Reber mentioned there wasn't a direct transfer of resources but highlighted collaboration with the General Assembly to secure additional resources for BO. Rep. Salisbury noted efforts to increase staffing for audits but pointed out the absence of 46 specific auditors. Sec. Reber offered to provide the correct funding information later.

Rep. Charity Grimm Krupa (R-Fayette) questioned the necessity of transferring funds away from OAG, noting the Office of General Counsel has a larger staff. She inquired about the specifics of the proposed federal response fund in the governor's budget, asking what federal actions or inactions it aims to address. Sec. Reber explained the fund is to assist Pennsylvanians when federal action or inaction, like the lapse in SNAP funding, causes crises, emphasizing it's not meant to cover all federal changes but to prevent abrupt service terminations. Rep. Krupa expressed concerns about using \$100 million from the rainy day fund for the federal response fund, arguing it's intended for fiscal emergencies, not political disputes. Sec. Reber justified the proposal, noting the interest generated on the rainy day fund could mitigate impacts from federal government actions. Rep. Krupa expressed concerns about the potential misuse of taxpayer dollars to obstruct federal immigration enforcement, seeking assurance that no funds would undermine Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activities. Sec. Reber mentioned the creation of the fund would require legislation and ongoing discussions, highlighting the state's compliance with all laws.

Rep. Paul Friel (D-Chester) discussed the state's budget and revenue forecasts, mentioning the use of the rainy day fund and proposed revenue sources like the legalization of marijuana, skill games and closing the Delaware loophole. He asked if acting on these proposals three years ago would have prevented dipping into the rainy day fund and inquired about the total financial impact of not acting sooner. Sec. Reber responded that had the proposed measures been enacted when they were proposed, it would have resulted in about \$3 billion. Rep. Friel mentioned that Pennsylvania has missed out on approximately \$3 billion by not regulating and taxing industries such as skill games, which would bring fairness by treating them like other similar industries within the state. Sec. Reber stated that Pennsylvania is a national leader in gaming regulation, emphasizing the importance of the Gaming Control Board's role in ensuring fair and equal gaming and highlighting the consumer protection benefits of regulated gaming. He mentioned the potential increase in addiction and other concerns with more gaming opportunities. Rep. Friel compared the potential regulation of the marijuana market to the gaming industry, highlighting the benefits of bringing a black market under state control for quality, testing and safety. Rep. Friel shifted the discussion to health care and budgeting, specifying that the state's budgeting process is based on annual proposals and contractual obligations. Sec. Reber explained that their budget proposal is designed to support investments that will drive progress, serving as the foundation for future negotiations. Rep. Friel expressed concerns about the impact of proposed federal cuts to Medicaid and Medicare on Pennsylvania's budget and health care access, noting that they could lead to billions of dollars being reduced from Pennsylvania's budget. Sec. Reber confirmed that changes enacted in HR 1 will impact access to the Medicaid program and other benefits in Pennsylvania, mentioning there is still time for the United States Congress to make adjustments before these changes take effect in 2028. Rep. Friel revisited a previous topic regarding the \$100 million allocated for federal response, highlighting Pennsylvania's 45 successful lawsuits against federal actions deemed illegitimate. Sec. Reber mentioned that the lawsuits filed against the federal government were in response to the commitment of resources to the commonwealth and that all the decided cases have been ruled in their favor.

Rep. Kyle Donahue (D-Lackawanna) inquired about the significance of certifying over \$1 billion in property tax relief for the first time last year for the commonwealth and its impact on everyday Pennsylvanians. Sec. Reber explained that the certification of over \$1 billion in property tax relief brought the total to approximately \$13 billion since the program began. He detailed the historical amounts and the proposal to certify at least \$1.025 billion again. He highlighted how this relief directly helps to mitigate potential increases in property taxes for individuals. Rep. Donahue asked about the governor's proposed energy plans and their impacts on energy prices. Sec. Reber discussed the administration's approach to developing new data centers, focusing on protecting local communities, environmental resources and ensuring the use of local labor. He proposed requiring developers to supply their own energy to avoid increasing costs for local businesses and residents and stressed the importance of keeping locals informed and involved.

Rep. Tim Brennan (D-Bucks) expressed appreciation for the governor's business plan and voiced concern about Pennsylvania's infrastructure. He mentioned the governor's proposed critical infrastructure investment program aimed at addressing housing, energy, school districts and local government needs. He asked for more details on how this program is intended to function. Sec. Reber explained the critical infrastructure program's intent to increase affordability through supply enhancement, including housing development and rehabilitation. He mentioned considering non-taxable and taxable bonds for funding and highlighted significant investments in school facility improvements, totaling around \$400 million in recent years. Rep. Brennan emphasized the importance of building and protecting infrastructure in Pennsylvania and mentioned the potential of investing up to \$500 million a year into infrastructure and other programs. He expressed concern about the uncertainty at the federal level affecting research institutions and asked for thoughts on providing more stability for these educational institutions in Pennsylvania. Sec. Reber discussed the state's investments in biotech and neurodegenerative research and highlighted the importance of these investments as part of Pennsylvania's economic development strategy. He mentioned the state's strong relationships with universities and the potential benefits of the proposed Innovate in PA 2.0 program included in the budget.

Chair Struzzi summarized the governor's budget proposal, highlighting a spending plan of just above \$53 billion against expected revenues of around \$47 billion. He noted the plan to balance the budget by drawing down the rainy day fund by approximately \$4.5 billion and introducing new revenue sources. He expressed concerns that these measures could lead to a more challenging fiscal situation in future years. Sec. Reber mentioned that approximately \$3 billion in revenues were not utilized, which could have mitigated the need to draw down surplus funds. He acknowledged that while these revenue sources are speculative, noting that all revenue sources in the commonwealth were once nonexistent and speculative. He emphasized the importance of negotiation and

collaboration with the General Assembly to enact these revenue sources and continue investments. Chair Struzzi criticized the reliance on speculative revenue sources to balance the budget, arguing it is irresponsible towards taxpayers. He expressed concern over the misleading projection of a mere 0.8% growth in expenditures. He questioned the sustainability of finances once the rainy day fund and surplus are depleted without adequate revenues. Sec. Reber explained that the Constitution mandates proposing a balanced budget, aligning expenditures with revenues. He mentioned that for the past four years, new revenues have been proposed when expenditures exceeded available funds. He emphasized the intention to pursue common-sense policy changes to generate revenues, enabling continued investment in Pennsylvanians.

Chair Struzzi asked about the source of revenues for the commonwealth. Sec. Reber responded that revenues come from taxes, fees and federal sources, emphasizing the importance of proposals and discussions with the General Assembly. Chair Struzzi mentioned the risk of taxpayers covering shortfalls if speculative revenues are not realized. Sec. Reber acknowledged that it would be the General Assembly's responsibility, in collaboration with the administration, to enact a budget that might involve new revenues or decreased expenditures if revenues are not available. Chair Struzzi inquired about the determination of budget line items, noting discrepancies between requested and received amounts by various agencies. Sec. Reber detailed the budgeting process, highlighting the scrutiny of agency submissions, especially on personnel costs and vacancies and the alignment with policy priorities and previous investments. Chair Struzzi asked if the budget process starts with a predetermined number or builds up to one, and whether it considers current revenues or proposes a hypothetical number. Sec. Reber explained that the budget is constructed based on the best use of taxpayer dollars and necessary revenues to support investments.

Chair Jordan Harris (D-Philadelphia) asked if government budgets are speculative or an educated guess. Sec. Reber replied that the budget proposal is a recommendation for program appropriations and necessary revenues, emphasizing negotiation with the General Assembly. Chair Harris pointed out that budget documents label revenues as "estimated." Sec. Reber explained that revenue estimates are determined through a process involving economic factors and growth trends. Chair Harris inquired about the nature of these estimates. Sec. Reber described them as conservative, citing a 25-year average revenue growth of 3.5%. He said the certified amount for 2025 was 2.9%, with the estimate for 2026 being 3.1%. Chair Harris asked about the current status of revenue estimates. Sec. Reber mentioned they were 1.4% ahead of expectations, amounting to about \$244 million. Chair Harris referenced statistics given to him by his staff, noting that the commonwealth is roughly \$381 million ahead of what was estimated. Sec. Reber mentioned they are adjusting their revenue estimate up, aligning with Revenue Secretary Pat Browne's estimation strategy for a plus or minus 2% accuracy, currently being about 2% over the estimated \$380 million, reflecting positive economic adjustments. Chair Harris explained that the commonwealth's actual revenue exceeded initial budget estimates by almost \$400 million year to date, indicating an underestimation in expected revenue. He asked about the significant collection months in the yearly cycle. Sec. Reber mentioned that April is significant for personal income tax collections and March for corporate net income tax. Chair Harris emphasized that the commonwealth is nearly \$400 million ahead of its revenue estimates before entering the most significant revenue-collecting months of March and April.

Chair Harris asked if budget impasses hurt the commonwealth's bond rating. Sec. Reber confirmed they do. He said it could cause increased interest payments and scrutiny when the commonwealth attempts to borrow money. Chair Harris asked who pays the difference in interest. Sec. Reber stated that the difference comes out of tax money from the general fund. Chair Harris mentioned that the budget includes revenue generators such as skilled games, legalization of cannabis and raising the minimum wage. He asked about the implications for the budget proposal if these initiatives do not occur. Sec. Reber mentioned that to cover additional interest costs due to a potential drop in bond rating, the state would need to use more of the rainy day fund or surplus or make tough choices regarding expenditures. Chair Harris asked for clarification on what "difficult decisions" regarding budget levels would actually entail in layman's terms. Sec. Reber explained that to address budget concerns, it would be necessary to review every appropriation from the general fund and make decisions on potential reductions, which could affect programs, services or personnel.

Chair Harris explained that if proposed revenue generators fail, the state might need to use the rainy day fund or cut services, including funding for schools, human services, rural hospitals and programs for intellectual disabilities. He highlighted that no counter-budget proposals have been received, urging critics to offer solutions for balancing the budget without service cuts or to suggest alternative revenue sources, emphasizing the importance of preparing for potential funding gaps and the consequences of reduced state and federal support. He concluded the hearing with a call for transparency in proposed cuts.



House Appropriations Committee – Budget Hearing with DOH and DDAP

03/12/2026, 1:15 p.m., House Chamber

By Kyle Purchase, Pennsylvania Legislative Services

The committee held a budget hearing with the Department of Health and the Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs.

The Department of Health (DOH) was represented by:

- Dr. Debra Bogen, secretary, DOH, and
- Kristen Rodack, executive deputy secretary, DOH.

The Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs (DDAP) was represented by:

- Dr. Latika Davis-Jones, secretary, DDAP, and
- Kelly Primus, deputy secretary, DDAP.

Chair Jordan Harris (D-Philadelphia) welcomed the representatives from the departments and mentioned that it was the last budget hearing.

Minority Chair Jim Struzzi (R-Indiana) provided the specific budget request for both departments under Gov. Josh Shapiro's proposed budget and noted many topics would be addressed throughout the hearing.

Chair Harris reminded committee members about the time allowed for questions and answers and swore in the testifiers.

Sec. Bogen provided opening remarks that highlighted her department's accomplishments and what the current budget proposal is requesting. She emphasized the importance of emergency medical services (EMS), rural health and the workforce in healthcare.

Sec. Davis-Jones outlined the mission of DDAP and its hopes in continuing programs and helping Pennsylvanians who are struggling.

Rep. Dan Frankel (D-Allegheny), chair, House Health Committee, asked about the medical marijuana program and a recent story of a patient who died due to a fungus. He mentioned his office spoke with researchers who published an article explaining the cause of her death, and asked what oversight DOH has regarding the program. Sec. Bogen assured her department's commitment to patient safety and acknowledged concerns about labs and lab oversight. She said she was looking forward to working with legislators to see available options. Rep. Frankel mentioned [HB 33](#), which he believes would help address the issues discussed, and asked about the federal Health Quality Initiative. Sec. Bogen gave an overview of the program and its role during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rep. Mark Gillen (R-Berks), minority chair, House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee, asked if the EMS system could be currently characterized as "in crisis." Sec. Bogen agreed that the system faces a number of challenges in terms of finances and workforce. Rep. Gillen asked if Sec. Bogen is optimistic about future assistance from Medicare reimbursements and mentioned [HB 1152](#) as a potential remedy. Sec. Bogen pointed out that some changes have been made, including funds being released to ease burdens, but said there are future opportunities. Rep. Gillen mentioned his career in EMS and asked Sec. Bogen for her perspective to explain the high turnover. Sec. Bogen suggested the reasons are various, including stress, a "24/7" job that involves bad weather, reimbursements and low salaries. Rep. Gillen agreed with the stress of working in EMS and asked about effective recruitment for those jobs. Sec. Bogen noted her work with regional councils and summer camps with students who have an interest in that line of work.

Rep. Dan Williams (D-Chester), chair, House Human Services Committee, asked about increases in overdose deaths by stimulants, what led to the rise in deaths and strategies to address them. Sec. Davis-Jones said DDAP is working to ensure people who need access to care get it and has expanded mobile units across the commonwealth as well as telehealth. Rep. Williams asked what the department is doing to address the rise in intoxicating substances, such as synthetic opioids, and what actions the legislature could take to help them. Sec. Bogen said the department "lumps" them together and acknowledged the growing issue. She pointed out regulation and enforcement challenges, and reiterated DOH's role in surveillance, tracking and education. She provided an example of people being confused with medical marijuana products and products that are not regulated. Sec. Davis-Jones said DDAP is looking at what her department can do to monitor substances, for example, intoxicating hemp. Sec. Bogen elaborated on the hemp loophole not being closed until the fall and said other products don't fall in that loophole.

Rep. Doyle Heffley (R-Carbon), minority chair, House Human Services Committee, asked about DDAP's oversight on recovery houses and the federal, state and local standards that are needed for the houses to comply. Sec. Davis-Jones explained it was a "tool in the toolbox" for her department to use and explained how "recovery housing is not treatment." She mentioned the licensing involved and the required standards that must be met. Rep. Heffley reiterated his question about DDAP's responsibility for recovery houses complying with regulations. Sec. Davis-Jones elaborated on DDAP's process for compliance. Primus added that DDAP

works with local communities and experts when they have problems and ascertains what specific needs are requested. Rep. Heffley explained he was asking because of his concerns about other compliance issues at the local level that may be at play. Rep. Heffley inquired about delayed payments and what single county authorities (SCAs) and DDAP are doing to expedite them. Sec. Davis-Jones explained the reasons for delays were various but cited the budget impasse at both the state and federal levels as contributing factors, but assured DDAP is working “diligently” to get the contracts out. Rep. Heffley expressed providers’ concerns for services not being reimbursed and asked what DDAP can say to those concerns. Sec. Davis-Jones said as long as SCAs have their agreements and are submitted to DDAP, reimbursements will be sent.

Rep. LaTasha Mayes (D-Allegheny) discussed required reports that address maternal deaths and asked what the legislature, DOH and DDAP are doing to assist with Black maternal health. Sec. Bogen praised the funding provided by the General Assembly for addressing maternal health coalitions and mentioned the creation of a maternal health plan. She provided examples of action steps taken in the field to prevent deaths and emphasized the multiagency efforts but said it would take time to see the effect on the mortality rate. Sec. Davis-Jones assured DDAP’s commitment to providing and expanding pregnancy services. Rep. Mayes mentioned [HB 1234](#) to ask about steps to address insurance coverage for blood pressure monitors and overall cardiovascular health in pregnant women. Sec. Bogen agreed the issues contribute to illnesses and mortality and mentioned existing programs, such as Women, Infant and Children (WIC), that link those women to education services and programs about addressing high blood pressure.

Rep. Marla Brown (R-Lawrence) inquired about opioid settlement money and if contracts agreed by DDAP were multiyear. Sec. Davis-Jones confirmed they do have multi-year agreements. Rep. Brown asked if the contracts have provisions that would void the contract if the dollars are not appropriated within a given period of time. Sec. Davis-Jones said it was a good question. Primus pointed out other clauses that allow the ability to separate funds, but said funds would need to be reallocated if not spent. Rep. Brown provided an overview of [HB 1528](#) and asked if she was correct that DDAP had concerns with certain provisions in the legislation. Sec. Davis-Jones said the initial review and concern of the legislation was because of DDAP having commitments with settlements. She explained the amount of funds DDAP gets and the need to plan for them. Rep. Brown asked if DDAP could look at the bill again. Sec. Davis-Jones offered the point for an opportunity to review the legislation again.

Rep. Gina Curry (D-Delaware) discussed the impact of maternal health care deserts and her efforts with [HB 432](#). She asked what DOH’s plan is to address maternal care deserts and to ensure expecting mothers receive the care they need. Sec. Bogen emphasized the need to work together to address the problem statewide, not just one agency. She pointed out the need to have staff, reduce costs and improve preparedness. Rep. Curry agreed opportunities exist and mentioned mobile care units but urged the need to discuss bigger plans to prevent deaths. Primus assured DDAP has completed environmental scans of six counties to assess their situations and ascertain intervention and solutions. Sec. Davis-Jones confirmed that such actions were taken and ideas would come in the future. Rep. Curry asked about hospital closures and the monitoring of patients choosing which hospital to go for care. Sec. Bogen explained the choice could be due to previous experience at one hospital compared to EMS, suggesting that a patient go to another hospital for their safety.

Rep. Josh Kail (R-Beaver) talked about rural health, mentioning a hospital merger in his district and expressed gratitude for a hospital not closing because of the merger. He asked about the administration’s efforts to change hospital regulations and their impacts on keeping rural hospitals open. Sec. Bogen mentioned the regulations are “very old” and were being reviewed but were stalled due to the pandemic. Sec. Bogen assured DOH is reviewing the regulations for changes and the collaboration with stakeholders and the Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania (HAP) and hopes to have the proposed regulations out by next year. Sec. Bogen provided the “flexibilities” DOH can make within their authority in the meantime and noted guidance documents that have been issued. Rep. Kail asked about a pending approval by DOH with a Bradford County hospital. Sec. Bogen said she was unfamiliar with what exactly the hospital was waiting for but was willing to discuss with Rep. Kail in greater detail later. Rep. Kail emphasized the scope of the issue with rural hospitals and asked what steps have been taken by the Shapiro administration and what the legislature can do. Sec. Bogen admitted a “bumpy road” ahead, given reliance on Medicaid and the growing number of uninsured people. Sec. Bogen reiterated DOH’s efforts on flexibility.

Rep. Kyle Mullins (D-Lackawanna) praised Sec. Bogen’s trip to hear updates on medical research. He asked about the status of the funding for neurodegenerative disease research. Sec. Bogen thanked him for his support and mentioned the budget impasse affected the timeline of the request for proposal (RFP), but said it is “in the works.” Rep. Mullins praised Gov. Josh Shapiro for putting neurodegenerative disease research as recurring funding in future budgets and asked about any increase in tobacco sales to address gaps in funding. Sec. Bogen mentioned DOH’s reliance on federal dollars and said the department is always looking for opportunities. Sec. Davis-Jones said DDAP also has collaboration opportunities.

Rep. Charity Grimm Krupa (R-Fayette) talked about her concerns with legalizing adult-use cannabis. She asked about potential public health and safety impacts and issues if adult use recreational marijuana is legalized and how DOH is prepared. Sec. Bogen pointed out DOH’s management of the medical marijuana program and learned lessons from the program regarding expertise, proper labeling and packaging. Sec. Bogen touched upon the surveillance aspect and said DOH works with poison control centers.

Rep. Krupa inquired if marijuana legalization would complicate workforce challenges and standards. Sec. Bogen deferred the question to be answered by DOH's human resources (HR) department. Rep. Krupa asked about potential increases in cases of cannabis dependency. Sec. Davis-Jones explained that DDAP's mission doesn't change and said DDAP is "always" ensuring the assessment plans are done.

Rep. Emily Kinkead (D-Allegheny) followed up with Rep. Williams' line of questioning regarding intoxicating substances and asked what can be done for children who are denied treatment for kratom due to kratom not being a "serious enough" substance. Sec. Davis-Jones said part of the answer is education, public awareness and adequate training surrounding hemp products. She assured DDAP is developing a statewide plan. Rep. Kinkead agreed with addressing hemp and kratom but expressed concerns with catching substances that are in a "gray area," and asked what else could be done. Sec. Bogen described the challenge as "playing whack-a-mole." She emphasized that people know what they are purchasing and that DOH provides education on those kinds of products. Rep. Kinkead agreed with the description and urged the need to take action.

Rep. Jeff Olsommer (R-Wayne) asked about addressing nursing facility staffing challenges and how to address barriers. Sec. Bogen noted DOH is working on long-term care regulations and the implementation of them. She acknowledged the concerns with staffing based on their surveys. Sec. Bogen understood the importance of assuring the quality of care, but said she has not heard about staffing delays, rather insurance-related delays. Rodack emphasized that the regulations are in part to assure the quality of the workforce and the support they need when they need it. Rep. Olsommer asked if data can be provided to the committee to support the claims by DOH. Sec. Bogen said certain data is available that outlines facilities that do not meet regulations.

Rep. Abigail Salisbury (D-Allegheny) discussed the issue of "pseudoscience" at the federal level surrounding autism and vaccines. She asked about DOH's efforts in education about vaccines. Sec. Bogen said Gov. Shapiro's participation in lawsuits, executive orders and DOH education is part of the response to "misinformation or disinformation" from the federal level. Sec. Bogen provided a brief history of being a pediatrician and the scientific advancements of vaccines and the efficiency of issuing them. Sec. Bogen understood parents are "trying to do the right thing for their children," but said the information that is given to them "isn't accurate." Rep. Salisbury inquired when Gacuhher's testing at birth would be implemented. Sec. Bogen praised the passing of past legislation and highlighted the process for testing and review.

Rep. Eric Nelson (R-Westmoreland) asked about the intended purpose of unspent funds. Sec. Bogen replied that she can get back with specifics, but said RFP's funds in question have already been allocated. Rep. Nelson inquired about conflicting statistics between DOH's mortality report and a report issued by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and why DOH is not mentioning the difference. Sec. Bogen reasoned that the report explains the different standards that are used, national discussions and DOH methods that have been used. Rep. Nelson expressed his concerns with priorities and asked how funds would be equally allocated to address mortality. Sec. Bogen emphasized the importance of using collected data and the use of the Rural Health Transformation Fund (RHTF) and offered to review the report with Rep. Nelson later. Rep. Nelson pointed out the "two extremely different worlds" by mentioning the different priorities among different groups and urged bipartisan efforts to address maternal health. Sec. Bogen understood the impact of the death of a mother and assured DOH is doing all it can to prevent those deaths.

Rep. Aerion Abney (D-Allegheny) talked about his legislation [HB 1212](#), aimed to provide an education program about the role of fathers in maternal health. He provided a brief story about his experience as a father and his role in his wife's pregnancy. Rep. Abney asked for DOH's insight into a father's role. Sec. Bogen talked about her findings as a pediatrician and the mental health effects on fathers and the need to provide support for the whole family unit. Rep. Abney echoed Rep. Nelson's sentiments for bipartisanship. Rep. Abney asked DDAP about the stigma surrounding people receiving services and how to push back against it. Sec. Davis-Jones said stigma is "alive and well," and highlighted efforts of their anti-stigma campaign.

Rep. Chard Reichard (R-Franklin) asked Sec. Davis-Jones about DDAP contracts with naloxone and if they are exploring referring to a generic. Sec. Davis-Jones said DDAP is "always exploring" to find cheaper rates and mentioned their partnership with the Department of General Services (DGS). Rep. Reichard asked if the state is using a generic. Sec. Davis-Jones said she did not believe so. Primus pointed out that the price of naloxone has decreased. Rep. Reichard asked if the generic is cheaper. Primus said she did not know. Rep. Reichard believed it is and encouraged following up with him the next time the contract comes up to save money.

Rep. Tarik Khan (D-Philadelphia) echoed sentiments about having adequate hospital staffing. Sec. Bogen agreed with the importance of meeting the needs of staff and patients. Rep. Khan expressed concerns about hospital consolidations and the influence of private equities, inquiring if proposed legislation that authorizes the Attorney General to oversee potential consolidation and regulate private equity. Sec. Bogen commended Rep. Khan's summary and agreed with the challenges seen. Sec. Bogen explained DOH's role, its current authority and offered to discuss with Rep. Khan about other ideas. Rep. Khan pointed out the bipartisanship of the issue and noted U.S. Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and the White House calling out "bad actors." Sec. Bogen said it is an issue for the governor as well.

Rep. Eric Davanzo (R-Westmoreland) told a story of his daughter finding what she thought was an inhaler but was actually Narcan in a small “goody bag” at a community event. He asked Sec. Davis-Jones about the oversight they have of the opioid settlement agreement funds. Sec. Davis-Jones elaborated on what DDAP can do and asked if it is Rep. Davanzo’s view that the inhaler came from the funds. Rep. Davanzo said yes. Sec. Davis-Jones explained DDAP’s use of state response funds and the opioid trust but could not speak to the instance Rep. Davanzo’s daughter experienced at the community event. Rep. Davanzo asked for more details about the breakdown of the funds. Sec. Davis-Jones elaborated on the counties permitted use of funds as long as they align with Exhibit E. Rep. Davanzo inquired if a website is available to see a report about the opioid funds. Sec. Davis-Jones said a website exists to review.

Rep. Joe Webster (D-Montgomery) discussed his family history of nursing and a recent meeting with other state attorneys general who recommended that the Attorney General of Pennsylvania have the authority to evaluate hospital acquisitions and mergers. He asked if DOH is in support of an initiative like that. Sec. Bogen reiterated Gov. Shapiro’s position on that and the importance of putting “patients before profits.” Rep. Webster expressed concerns about private equities getting into specialty practices and asked if the department tracks those developments. Sec. Bogen explained the department oversees the licensure of facilities, not private practices or individuals. She said those licenses are under the auspices of the Department of State (DOS). She mentioned that the Pennsylvania Insurance Department (PID) Commissioner oversees the adequacy of services, but that doesn’t fall to DOH. Rodack added that DOH has oversight of operators but can look at owners and finances in that regard. Rep. Webster suggested systemic issues are at play and pointed out the different levels of authority among agencies. Sec. Bogen assured Gov. Shapiro is trying to address the issue at the state level.

Rep. Jim Rigby (R-Cambria) asked about the amount of the EMS Operating Fund (EMSOF) and if the balance is being drawn down to fund EMS regional councils. Sec. Bogen said it is and explained the EMSOF increase was due to fees and wanted to get “as much money” back out to the regional councils and agencies for recruitment and equipment. Rep. Rigby asked if the initiative would continue through 2027-2028. Sec. Bogen confirmed it was put in the budget as a three-year “spend down,” and gave examples of how regional councils use the funds. Rep. Rigby mentioned an audit done by the auditor general about issues found in DOH and asked if they have been corrected. Sec. Bogen explained the audit was about documentation issues and not money issues and said, “No money is missing.” Sec. Bogen provided an overview of her becoming aware of the audit and the steps DOH took to address the errors.

Rep. Justin Fleming (D-Dauphin) discussed reimbursements for school health services and them being “flat funded since 1991.” He asked if DOH can quantify the gap between current state reimbursement and the actual costs to school entities that provide those services. Sec. Bogen acknowledged the lack of updated reimbursements and school nurses. She provided statistics on increasing complex needs but the reimbursements are not catching up. Rep. Fleming assured future conversations would be held about school health care and said he appreciated Sec. Davis-Jones’ presence in the capital region and for providing naloxone to his district office.

Rep. Dave Madsen (D-Dauphin) followed up with Rep. Frankel’s question about high-efficiency air purifiers and inquired about the next steps to acquire them to be used throughout the districts. Sec. Bogen explained it was a multiyear process and offered to talk with Rep. Madsen about what else needed to be done.

Sec. Davis-Jones thanked Rep. Fleming for “the kind words,” which he said earlier.

Chair Struzzi thanked DOH and DDAP for attending the hearing and noted “a lot” was covered in the hearings and said he was looking forward to finding solutions. He expressed his appreciation for officials visiting rural areas and not “pointing fingers,” but rather working together to find solutions. He voiced his appreciation for Chair Harris’s “flexibility” with the speakers throughout the hearings and understood it is part of the next steps in the budgetary process.

Chair Harris thanked DOH and DDAP for their work for the commonwealth. He echoed Chair Struzzi’s sentiments and understood the differing ideology and policy disagreements. Chair Harris believes a “healthy” government is one with political discourse and the ability to “disagree without being disagreeable.” He encouraged people to watch the budget hearings because “you learn a lot.” He again thanked committee members and staff, concluding the budget hearings for 2026.



Bullet.in.Points

[GENERAL ASSEMBLY: RECENT ACTIONS DURING THE 2026 REGULAR SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY](#)

The General Assembly released a summary of recent actions taken during the 2026 Regular Session. Additional information is available on the *Pennsylvania Bulletin*.

Cosponsor Memos

[HCO3227 - Supporting Military Reservists Through Higher Education](#)

Sponsor

Rep. Jim Prokopiak (D)

Summary

Aims to extend the state educational assistance program to members of reserve components of the United States Armed Forces.

Intro Date

03/09/2026

Last Action

03/09/2026 H - Cosponsor memo filed

[HCO3230 - Keeping Vape Shops Away from Schools](#)

Sponsor

Rep. Chris Pielli (D)

Summary

Aims to keep newly licensed vape shops at least 1,000 feet away from our K-12 schools.

Intro Date

03/09/2026

Last Action

03/09/2026 H - Cosponsor memo filed

[HCO3234 - Recognizing the 25th Anniversary of Pennsylvania's Educational Improvement Tax Credit \(EITC\) Program](#)

Sponsor

Rep. Martina A. White (R)

Summary

Resolution recognizing the 25th anniversary of Pennsylvania's Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) Program.

Intro Date

03/10/2026

Last Action

03/10/2026 H - Cosponsor memo filed

HCO3235 - Designating March 16-20, 2026 as "Pennsylvania Ag Literacy Week"**Sponsor**

Rep. Chad G. Reichard (R)

Summary

Resolution designating the week of March 16-20, 2026, as "Pennsylvania Ag Literacy Week" and congratulating Pennsylvania Friends of Agriculture Foundation and the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau.

Intro Date

03/10/2026

Last Action

03/10/2026 H - Cosponsor memo filed

HCO3242 - Special Education Contingency Fund Reform**Sponsor**

Rep. Emily Kinhead (D)

Summary

Aims to implement several reforms recommended by the Special Education Funding Commission to improve the Contingency Fund.

Intro Date

03/11/2026

Last Action

03/11/2026 H - Cosponsor memo filed

SCO1622 - Tax Deduction for Qualified Homeschool Educational Expenses**Sponsor**

Sen. Chris Gebhard (R)

Summary

Provides a personal income tax deduction up to \$5,000 per eligible child for any qualified educational expenses incurred by parents or legal guardians if their children are homeschooled, following Pennsylvania law.

Intro Date

03/09/2026

Last Action

03/09/2026 S - Cosponsor memo filed

SCO1631 - Enhancing School Bus Safety**Sponsor**

Sen. Tracy Pennycuick (R)

Summary

Increase penalties for school bus drivers who drive while under the influence of alcohol, a controlled substance, or both.

Intro Date

03/10/2026

Last Action

03/10/2026 S - Cosponsor memo filed

Basic Ed Bill Actions

HB2267 - An Act amending the act of March 10, 1949 (P.L.30, No.14), known as the Public School Code of 1949, in school health services, providing for possession and use of prescribed pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy.

Sponsor

Rep. Tarik Khan (D)

Summary

(PN 2966) Amends the Public School Code, in school health services, providing for possession and use of prescribed pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy. Outlines what a school entity shall require the parent or guardian of a secondary school student who has pancreatic insufficiency or cystic fibrosis, who has been prescribed PERT and who requests that the student possess and self-administer PERT in a school setting to provide. Permits a school entity to revoke or restrict a student's privilege to possess and self-administer PERT if the student fails to comply with school rules and the provisions of the student's service agreement or individual education program or demonstrates an unwillingness or inability to safeguard PERT from access by other students. Provides for if a school entity prohibits a student from possessing and self-administering PERT. Requires a school entity to adopt a written policy that allows possession and self-administration of PERT by described students in a school setting, detailing what the policy shall do at a minimum. Specifies that this only applies to students with cystic fibrosis or pancreatic insufficiency who require PERT that has been prescribed by a health care practitioner. Asserts that nothing in this section shall be construed to prevent the development or implementation of a service agreement or individualized education program that addresses the possession and self-administration of PERT by a student. Provides definitions. Effective in 60 days.

Intro Date

03/05/2026

Actions

03/05/2026 H - Introduced

03/09/2026 H - Referred to House Education

HB2269 - An Act amending the act of March 10, 1949 (P.L.30, No.14), known as the Public School Code of 1949, repealing provisions relating to medical education loan assistance.

Sponsor

Rep. Jennifer O'Mara (D)

Summary

(PN 2968) Amends the Public School Code, repealing provisions relating to medical education loan assistance. Effective immediately.

Intro Date

03/06/2026

Actions

03/06/2026 H - Introduced

03/09/2026 H - Referred to House Education

HB2275 - An Act amending the act of March 10, 1949 (P.L.30, No.14), known as the Public School Code of 1949, in pupils and attendance, further providing for exceptional children, education and training.

Sponsor

Rep. Tarah Probst (D)

Summary

(PN 2975) Amends the Public School Code, in pupils and attendance, further providing for exceptional children, education and training. Adds that an initial evaluation by a school entity to determine whether a child is a child with a disability under Federal law shall be completed and a copy of the evaluation shall be presented to the parents of the child not later than 60 consecutive school days after the school entity receives parental consent for the evaluation. Defines "school entity." Effective in 60 days.

Intro Date

03/09/2026

Actions

03/09/2026 H - Introduced

03/10/2026 H - Referred to House Education

HB2285 - An Act amending the act of March 10, 1949 (P.L.30, No.14), known as the Public School Code of 1949, in school health services, further providing for health services; and, in reimbursements by Commonwealth and between school districts, further providing for State reimbursement for health services.

Sponsor

Rep. Lisa A. Borowski (D)

Summary

(PN 2992) Amends the Public School Code, in school health services, further providing for health services; and, in reimbursements by commonwealth and between school districts, further providing for state reimbursement for health services. Establishes a staffing ratio of one certified school nurse for every 750 students. Increases the non-categorical reimbursement rate to \$12.61 multiplied by the average daily membership (ADM) of each school district. Specifies that reimbursement may not exceed the actual cost to the school district for health services in the school year. Requires the Department of Health, in consultation with the Department of Education, to use up to \$3,000,000 to award grants for feminine hygiene products to school entities to be provided to students at no expense. Effective in 60 days.

Intro Date

03/12/2026

Actions

03/12/2026 H - Introduced

03/12/2026 H - Referred to House Education

HB2286 - An Act amending the act of March 10, 1949 (P.L.30, No.14), known as the Public School Code of 1949, in Grow Pennsylvania Scholarship Grant Program, further providing for definitions.

Sponsor

Rep. Jim Rigby (R)

Summary

(PN 2994) Amends the Public School Code, in Grow Pennsylvania Scholarship Grant Program, further providing for definitions. Adds sign language interpretation and translation to the definition of "approved course of study." Includes a job related to sign language interpretation and translation in the definition of "in-demand occupation." Effective in 60 days.

Intro Date

03/12/2026

Actions

03/12/2026 H - Introduced

03/12/2026 H - Referred to House Education

SB9 - An Act providing for sport activities in public institutions of higher education and public school entities to be expressly designated male, female or coed; and creating causes of action for harm suffered by designation.

Sponsor

Sen. Judy Ward (R)

Summary

(PN 177) The Fairness in Women's Sports Act provides for sport activities in public institutions of higher education and public school entities to be expressly designated male, female or coed; and creates causes of action for harm suffered by designation. Provides definitions. Prohibits athletic teams or sports designated for females, women or girls from being open to students of the male sex. Allows students to participate in an interscholastic, intercollegiate, intramural or club athletic team or sport designed for the student's sex or designated coed or mixed. Prohibits a government entity, licensing or accrediting organization or an athletic association or organization from entertaining a complaint, opening an investigation or taking any other adverse action against a school or institution of higher education for maintaining separate interscholastic, intercollegiate, intramural or club athletic teams or sports for students of the female sex. Permits a student who is deprived of an athletic opportunity or suffers direct or indirect harm as a result of a known violation to bring a cause of action for injunctive relief, damages, psychological, emotional and physical harm suffered, attorney fees and costs and any other relief available under law against the school or institution of higher education. Allows a student who is subject to retaliation or other adverse action by a school, institution of higher education or athletic association or organization as a result of reporting a violation to an employee or representative of the school, institution or athletic association or organization or to any federal or state agency with oversight of schools or institutions of higher education in Pennsylvania to bring a cause of action. Permits a school or institution of higher education that suffers direct or indirect harm as a result of a violation to bring cause of action. Prohibits a person from bringing a civil action later than two years after the day on which the harm underlying the cause of action occurs. Provides that if a part of this act is found invalid, all valid parts that are severable from the invalid part shall remain in effect. Effective in 60 days.

Intro Date

02/03/2025

Actions

10/29/2025 S - Press Conference Held - Dad Legislators Call for Action to Defend Daughters in Sports

10/29/2025 H - Reported with request to re-refer to House Judiciary Committee House Health

10/29/2025 H - Re-referred to House Judiciary

02/03/2026 H - Discussed during voting meeting House Health

03/10/2026 H - Voted favorably from committee with request to re-refer to House Children & Youth House Judiciary

Higher Ed Bill Actions

SB9 - An Act providing for sport activities in public institutions of higher education and public school entities to be expressly designated male, female or coed; and creating causes of action for harm suffered by designation.

Sponsor

Sen. Judy Ward (R)

Summary

(PN 177) The Fairness in Women's Sports Act provides for sport activities in public institutions of higher education and public school entities to be expressly designated male, female or coed; and creates causes of action for harm suffered by designation. Provides definitions. Prohibits athletic teams or sports designated for females, women or girls from being open to students of the male sex. Allows students to participate in an interscholastic, intercollegiate, intramural or club athletic team or sport designed for the student's sex or designated coed or mixed. Prohibits a government entity, licensing or accrediting organization or an athletic association or organization from entertaining a complaint, opening an investigation or taking any other adverse action against a school or institution of higher education for maintaining separate interscholastic, intercollegiate, intramural or club athletic teams or sports for students of the female sex. Permits a student who is deprived of an athletic opportunity or suffers direct or indirect harm as a result of a known violation to bring a cause of action for injunctive relief, damages, psychological, emotional and physical harm suffered, attorney fees and costs and any other relief available under law against the school or institution of higher education. Allows a student who is subject to retaliation or other adverse action by a school, institution of higher education or athletic association or organization as a result of reporting a violation to an employee or representative of the school, institution or athletic association or organization or to any federal or state agency with oversight of schools or institutions of higher education in Pennsylvania to bring a cause of action. Permits a school or institution of higher education that suffers direct or indirect harm as a result of a violation to bring cause of action. Prohibits a person from bringing a civil action later than two years after the day on which the harm underlying the cause of action occurs. Provides that if a part of this act is found invalid, all valid parts that are severable from the invalid part shall remain in effect. Effective in 60 days.

Intro Date

02/03/2025

Actions

10/29/2025 S - Press Conference Held - Dad Legislators Call for Action to Defend Daughters in Sports

10/29/2025 H - Reported with request to re-refer to House Judiciary Committee House Health

10/29/2025 H - Re-referred to House Judiciary

02/03/2026 H - Discussed during voting meeting House Health

03/10/2026 H - Voted favorably from committee with request to re-refer to House Children & Youth House Judiciary

SB1210 - An Act amending the act of May 17, 1921 (P.L.789, No.285), known as The Insurance Department Act of 1921, in insurance producers, further providing for powers and duties of department.

Sponsor

Sen. Chris Gebhard (R)

Summary

(PN 1498) Amends the Insurance Department Act, in insurance producers, further providing for powers and duties of department. Requires the Insurance Department (PID) to approve or contract to approve any program or course of study that prepares candidates for an insurance producer licensing exam. Effective immediately.

Intro Date

03/12/2026

Actions

03/12/2026 S - Introduced

03/12/2026 S - Referred to Senate Banking and Insurance

03/12/2026 S - Meeting Scheduled - 03/17/2026 - Voting Meeting (Senate Banking and Insurance), Rules Committee Conference Room

SB1214 - An Act amending the act of March 10, 1949 (P.L.30, No.14), known as the Public School Code of 1949, in institutions of higher education, abolishing the State Board of Higher Education and its powers and duties; further providing for Performance-based Funding Council and for public institution of higher education reporting; and providing for reversion of certain powers and duties of the State Board of Higher Education to the State Board of Education and Council of Higher Education.

Sponsor

Sen. Kristin Phillips-Hill (R)

Summary

(PN 1495) Amends the Public School Code, in institutions of higher education, abolishing the State Board of Higher Education and its powers and duties; further providing for Performance-based Funding Council and for public institution of higher education reporting; and providing for reversion of certain powers and duties of the State Board of Higher Education to the State Board of Education and Council of Higher Education. Repeals information related to the State Board of Higher Education. Removes language involving the board. Effective immediately.

Intro Date

03/12/2026

Actions

03/12/2026 S - Introduced

03/12/2026 S - Referred to Senate Education

Upcoming Events

MONDAY – 03/16/2026**10:30 AM, 2026 Big 33 Capitol Celebration***Press Conference, Main Capitol Rotunda***THURSDAY – 03/19/2026****10:00 AM, [Independent Regulatory Review Commission \(IRRC\)](#)***Commission Meeting, 8th Fl. Conference Room, 555 Walnut St., Harrisburg*

Public hearing on the following regulations: No. 3463 State Board of Medicine #16A-4960: Education and Volunteer Services; No. 3464 State Board of Osteopathic Medicine #16A-5337: Education and Volunteer Services; No. 3405 Department of Agriculture #2-194: Milk Sanitation; No. 3433 Unemployment Compensation Board of Review #12-120: General Requirements; No. 3476 State Board of Pharmacy #16A-5434: Immunization Updates.

MONDAY – 03/23/2026

10:30 AM, Music in the Schools Month
Press Conference, Main Capitol Rotunda

1:30 PM, Teach Plus PA
Press Conference, Main Capitol

TUESDAY – 03/24/2026

11:30 AM, Celebrating National School Choice Week
Press Conference, Main Capitol Rotunda

1:00 PM, Brown Bags and Big Voices Hearing from PAs Children
Press Conference, Main Capitol Steps

In the News

No In the News this week.

Education Recap is a comprehensive weekly report on legislative and executive actions on education related legislation in the Pennsylvania Capitol and is compiled and edited by PLS.

For subscription information, questions or more information contact PLS at mypls@mypls.com or 717-236-6984. Thank you, Deborah, Cheryl, Derek, Hattie, Sam, Grace, Aaron, Christian, Katie, Zoe, Daniel, Kyle, Nicholas, Dominic, Julia and Noah.

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