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LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

By State Representative Brad Montell

FRANKFORT – The 2010 Kentucky General Assembly convened three and a half weeks ago, and I continue to be amazed at the slow pace of this session. The only exception being the rush during the first five days in order to get HB 176, a bill relating to persistently low-achieving schools, passed and signed by the governor. Several low-profile bills have moved through the House, but by and large, the halls in Frankfort are uncharacteristically quiet.

During that first week, Kentucky had an opportunity to compete for federal “Race to the Top” money in the amount of \$200 million. The Obama administration was calling for bold and innovative reform in addressing public schools that were failing. In Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan’s explanation of the competition, he specifically said that states who limited the growth of charter schools would find themselves at a “competitive disadvantage.”

I argued on the House floor that since Kentucky is one of only 10 states that prohibit public charter schools, we were certainly at a competitive disadvantage and that charter schools should be a part of this bill. I further pointed out that there are now more than 5,000 public charter schools across the country, and the research is overwhelming in favor of public charters. In the end, HB 176 passed both the House and Senate without charter schools as a part of the solution to address failing schools. The bill was signed into law and sent to Washington D.C. We are waiting to see if HB 176 will qualify for the much-needed federal dollars.

It is no longer a question of if, but when, Kentucky will throw off the grip of the education establishment and allow true reform into our public schools. It is important to emphasize here that charter schools are public schools and will not take away from public school funding. In the meantime, we continue to partner with perennial education “giants” such as West Virginia and Alabama in pushing away charter schools. If you want to learn more about charter schools in Kentucky, please visit: putkidsfirstky.org.

After the debate of HB 176 ended, all attention was turned to the budget. Gov. Beshear rolled out his budget to the General Assembly on Jan. 19. In a stunning move, the governor prepared a budget based on some \$800 million in gambling proceeds, even though Speaker Stumbo and President Williams both agreed before the speech that no such bill would be considered this session. Equally frustrating, instead of using the gambling money to shore up the structural imbalance of our budget, he proposed further leveraging our future by bonding billions of dollars in new projects. The governor’s budget was DOA in the House.

Budget hearings are taking place in the House Appropriations and Revenue and the Health and Welfare committees. Meanwhile, you can count on the fact that strategies are being discussed by legislators from both parties, including me, as to how we best go forward in these difficult times. I have some strong feelings about this that I will be sharing with you in future columns, but please know that the last thing I will agree to do is raise your taxes in this challenging economic period.

You may stay informed of legislative action on bills by visiting the Legislative Research Commission website at www.lrc.ky.gov or by calling the LRC toll-free Bill Status Line at 866-840-2835. To find out when a committee meeting is scheduled, you may call the LRC toll-free Meeting Information Line at 800-633-9650. If you would like to share your comments or concerns with me or another legislator about a particular bill under consideration, you may call the toll-free Legislative Message Line at 800-372-7181.

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