LEGISLATIVE SESSION MARKED BY SWEEPING EDUCATION REFORM, RESPONSIBLE BUDGET

JACKSON – The 2013 legislative session brought landmark education reforms, including public charter schools and rigorous literacy standards for students, a conservative $5.7 billion budget for fiscal year 2014 and new laws aimed at strengthening and protecting families, Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves said today.

Of the new measures enacted, key items include legislation allowing a grant program to help schools hire trained law enforcement officers, increased funding for all levels of education and protection of Mississippian’s Second Amendment Rights.

“During the 2013 session, the Senate addressed issues that will have an impact on the state for many years to come, and I appreciate each member of the Senate who worked hard to ensure Mississippi stays on the road to economic recovery and continues to encourage the creation of better, higher-paying jobs,” Lt. Gov. Reeves said. “I appreciate working with Speaker Gunn to enact strong, conservative policies to push Mississippi forward.”

Key notes from the 2013 legislative session include:

*Improving public education*

The 2013 session will be remembered for the successful efforts to reform education and raise academic achievement for every student. The first steps toward school choice were made with the creation of public charter schools and legislation to end social promotion of students who cannot read at grade level.

“Mississippi students will rise up to meet these new standards for academic achievement, and parents will respond by demanding better from principals and teachers, many of whom work hard for public education every day,” Lt. Gov. Reeves said. “A quality education provides a stronger foundation for a well-trained workforce to grow Mississippi. We need graduates who are ready for highly skilled careers that pay well and will keep our children and grandchildren in Mississippi.”
The Legislature approved House Bill 369 creating public charter schools in D- and F-rated school districts with approval from a state authorizing board. School boards in districts rated as A, B or C can veto a public charter school application and deny giving parents educational choice. While Lt. Gov. Reeves pushed for a stronger public charter school law, he believes the new law will help foster demand for school choice across Mississippi.

Other measures passed include Senate Bill 2347, a “Third-Grade Gate” that measures literacy skills for students in Kindergarten through third grade, provides intervention programs for students needing assistance and requires third-grade students to meet reading standards before moving to the fourth grade. Gov. Phil Bryant’s Education Works package, Senate Bill 2658, established a $15,000 scholarship for students who score at least a 28 on the ACT and a 3.5 GPA and plan to enroll in a teacher education program. It also requires high schools with graduation rates lower than 80 percent to submit an improvement plan to the state Department of Education.

Senate Bill 2395 provides matching funds to local early childhood education programs through school districts, private and parochial schools, private childcare centers, and Head Start. Communities that have participated in programs like Excel by 5, Mississippi Building Blocks, and other proven education programs will be given special consideration to receive state funds. Individuals and companies also may donate to local programs.

Reducing debt, controlling spending
The Legislature adopted a $5.7 billion budget that prioritized public schools and higher education while keeping spending low. The budget for Fiscal Year 2014, which begins July 1, spends about 2 percent over the current fiscal year and sets aside almost $250 million in the state’s savings account.

The budget added $48.6 million to public education and a total of $53.6 million more to community colleges and universities. The Legislature will spend nearly $35 million on building repairs and technology upgrades rather than issuing debt to cover these expenses, as it has done in previous years.

The state will repeal more than $220 million in unissued bonds and is scheduled to pay off roughly $240 million worth of debt this fiscal year. The $199 million bond package includes the new medical school at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, the nursing school at the University of Southern Mississippi and economic development projects.

The budget included:

- $2.32 billion for the Department of Education, a $48 million increase over the current year. The Mississippi Adequate Education Program Formula will receive $2.06 billion.
- $246.9 million for Community and Junior Colleges, $9.5 million more than the current year.
- $713.9 million for the Institutions for Higher Learning, a $44 million increase over this year. Student Financial Aid received $36.2 million, or $6.7 million more than this year.
- $72.8 million for the Department of Public Safety, a $3.4 million increase over this year. The budget provides raises for the Highway Patrol.
- $840 million for the Division of Medicaid, an increase of $18.4 million over the current year. Legislators expect to reauthorize the agency before the fiscal year ends.
- $337 million for the Department of Corrections, which is $26 million more than this year.

**Improving safety in community, schools**
The Legislature passed several measures to improve public safety and add protection for Mississippi students. 

The legislature created the offense of attempted murder, which is a new offense in Mississippi. Under House Bill 28, those who are convicted of planning or unsuccessfully attempting to commit murder will receive a sentence of 20 years to life in prison. Current law was ambiguous and those who attempted murder often faced a wide range of charges and sentences that, many times, did not fit the crime. This new law rectifies the situation and ensures that these offenders receive the sentence they deserve.

Senate Bill 2732, known as Lenora’s Law named in honor of the late Lenora Edhegard, allows the Department of Corrections to track sex offenders who are released early using GPS monitoring devices. These devices allow the Department of Corrections to constantly monitor the offenders throughout the remainder of their sentence.

Lt. Gov. Reeves’ Mississippi Community Oriented Policing Services program will establish a $5.5 million grant program at the Mississippi Department of Education that will provide up to $10,000 to pay for a certified law enforcement officer at a public school. The local community will fund the remaining costs. Law enforcement officers will be required to train in the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training program, which is used by law enforcement nationwide to train officers on responding to shooting incidents.

Lt. Gov. Reeves’ other school safety measure became law earlier this month. Gov. Bryant signed Senate Bill 2647, which required Mississippi courts to report findings of mental incompetence to the FBI’s background check system to ensure individuals with a history of mental illness cannot purchase firearms in accordance with federal law. Sixteen states require courts to provide mental health information to the FBI’s National Instant Criminal Background Check System, including Alabama, Georgia and Texas.

**Protecting Second Amendment Rights**
The Legislature passed several bills supported by the National Rifle Association. House Bill 485 ensures information related to concealed carry permit holders is exempt from the Mississippi Public Records Act. Law enforcement will be allowed to share information regarding applicants and permit holders to determine eligibility to have a concealed carry permit. House Bill 2 clarifies state laws allowing Mississippians to carry concealed weapons. Senate Bill 2048 expands the opportunities for hunters to use crossbows in archery and primitive weapons seasons regardless of physical ability.

**Strengthening Mississippi values**
Several measures also help support Mississippi families, prayer and women’s health. For families who want to open their home to adopted children, the adoption process will be more affordable. Senate Bill 2833 allows families to claim a tax credit for adoption expenses the same year the child is claimed as an exemption.

The Mississippi Student Religious Liberties Act ensures students can express their faith in school, gives them the ability to organize faith-based activities and groups, and allows students to express religious viewpoints in their assignments.

The Women’s Health Defense Act regulates the use of abortion inducing drugs and requires that they be administered in the presence of a physician, as the Food and Drug Administration recommends. The bill also outlaws “telemed” abortions, in which abortion-inducing drugs are dispensed by a doctor who is present only through the use of technology such as video conferencing. Some could use this as a new avenue for abortions, especially now as the status of Mississippi’s only abortion clinic is in question, but this bill makes the procedure illegal.

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