

# News From The States

# EVENING WRAP

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By [Sean Scully](#)

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I was going to point out that it's Tuesday, but that seems awfully dull after all the fun of Presidents' Day yesterday. So let's celebrate today, which happens to be National Muffin Day. And National Love Your Pet Day. And National Cherry Pie Day. And a bunch of others. (Really, it's totally official: it's right there on [the National Day Calendar](#)). So celebrate Tuesday your way. Let's check out the news together.



## The Big Takeaway

**K-12 education is, in general, the second largest expense for states, behind public welfare, [according to the Urban Institute](#), averaging about 21% of the budget. Add in higher education, at almost 10%, and education becomes the single most expensive thing states do.**

That means state lawmakers need to spend a lot of time on the issue, even leaving aside trendy culture war disputes in schools.



*Rep. Bill Rhiley asks God to step in to fix our schools.  
(Sherman Smith/Kansas Reflector)*

**In Kansas, Rep. Bill Rhiley believes that God may be the answer to the shortage of counselors in schools, [the Kansas Reflector reports](#).**

“In this era of conflict, discord and loneliness, the role of chaplain has never been more critical,” said Rhiley, a Wellington Republican who has served in the House since 2019. “Chaplains will be in schools as a moral compass and a moral spiritual guide.”

Rhiley’s bill, inspired by a [similar law in Texas](#), is a little thin on specifics and requirements. In fact, [it amounts to just one page](#) . While it does ban allowing registered sex offenders into the chaplain program, it doesn’t lay out many other requirements. It doesn’t require any special training in counseling or handling confidential information; it doesn’t require parental permission for chaplains to offer spiritual guidance to students; it doesn’t limit overt proselytization and recruitment in schools; it doesn’t require chaplains to report to law enforcement when they learn about child abuse and neglect; and it doesn’t even call for statewide standards on when and how school districts can create a chaplain

program.

That has critics a little suspicious.

“Speaking as a member of a religious minority,” said Rabbi Moti Rieber, executive director of Kansas InterFaith Action, “we are concerned that this bill would serve, and perhaps is intended to serve, as an end-run around restrictions on proselytization in public schools.”

The Kansas Association of School Boards opposes the bill, saying it worries that school districts might seek to replace trained mental health counselors with unpaid volunteer chaplains. It also worries about running afoul of the ban on state-sponsored religion.

“Our system of local and state control of public education by boards of education is a cornerstone of American democracy,” said Leah Fliter, part of the Kansas Association of School Boards’ lobbying team. “Essential to that democracy and to the public nature of public education is a separation of church and state set forth in the Constitution of the United States.”

Nonsense, says the National School Chaplain Association. In fact, excluding chaplains from schools deprives educators of the spiritual guidance that so many of them crave.

“We believe our bill that Rep. Rhiley has presented gives equal opportunity for teachers that have been discriminated against,” said Jim Schmidt, a Tulsa, Oklahoma, ambassador with the association.



*Schools may close if we continue to do nothing, you say? Everything is fine.  
(Photo by James Brooks/Alaska Beacon)*

**In Alaska, time is running out for legislators to pass the annual education appropriation.** They responded by failing to do anything on Monday, which was supposed to have featured debate on dozens of amendments, [the Alaska Beacon reports](#).

The House Rules Committee failed, by a single vote, even to bring to the floor a multi-part education spending package proposed by the governor and approved by the Senate. That left the House at an impasse with no clear path to bringing the bills up for debate.

“If some version of [Senate Bill 140](#) fails to pass within days, rural schools could miss out on federal funding needed to increase Internet speeds,” the Beacon reports. “A longer delay — or failure to pass a bill altogether — could leave school districts without a funding boost that many say is necessary.

“Already, school districts in [Fairbanks](#) and [Juneau](#) are preparing to close schools, while officials in Anchorage and elsewhere [are planning to cut classes](#).”

The chaos in the House stemmed from broad disagreement on a number of issues, including how much to raise the per-pupil funding for schools, how to regulate charter schools, and funding to support homeschoolers.

Although they adjourned Monday with no clear plan, House leaders insisted everything was fine.

“I don’t think the plan went off the tracks. I think that with this kind of bill ... people are just trying to figure out where they’re at with it,” said Speaker of the House Cathy Tilton, R-Wasilla.

“I’m not disappointed in anything,” House Rules Committee chair Craig Johnson, R-Anchorage, said. “We just go on.”

**In New Jersey, lawmakers want to combat the scourge of hazing by denying financial aid to any student convicted of abusing teammates or fraternity members, [the New Jersey Monitor reports](#).**

“Assemblywoman Carol Murphy’s proposal would expand on anti-hazing protections lawmakers adopted in 2021 after the 2017 death of [Timothy Piazza](#), a 19-year-old Readington resident and Penn State student whose fraternity hazing led to his fatal fall down a staircase,” the Monitor writes.

The 2021 law, which drew national attention, required all middle and high schools and all higher education institutions to adopt specific anti-hazing rules and enforcement policies. It boosted criminal penalties for hazing, particularly if an incident results in injuries or death.

Murphy didn’t respond to requests for comment, the Monitor writes, but [the legislation](#) “notes that high-profile hazing incidents, including the deaths of Piazza and students at [Louisiana State University](#) and [Florida State University](#), demonstrate that additional deterrents are needed to reduce hazing.”



*This seems kind of a no-brainer, doesn't it?*  
(Getty Images)

**In New Hampshire, family advocates have long called for the state to improve its patchy and inconsistent program to provide free and reduced price lunches for students in need.** Now lawmakers appear to be listening, [reports the New Hampshire Bulletin](#).

“A child’s brain is built from the bottom up, with strong foundations essential to later physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being,” said Bedford Republican Sen. Denise Ricciardi, co-sponsor of a bill that, among other changes, requires all schools to offer meals at both breakfast and lunch. “We must ensure that early environments are working to support strong foundations. That’s why school meals are critical to young children.”

Ricciardi’s idea is [part of a package of legislation](#), including a program to make breakfast available through part of the school day so students don’t have to arrive so early to take advantage of it, and incentives to improve the nutritional quality of meals.

Among the more significant provisions is one to streamline the application process for eligible families, those making up to 185% of the federal poverty

level. Currently, they have to fill out a cumbersome paper application, which is difficult and could create a stigma if a student is seen turning one in.

“I remember getting my first meal application and looking at it, as a person who would have qualified, and thinking, ‘No way – how embarrassing,’” Portsmouth parent Tricia LaBelle told lawmakers at a hearing last month. “I’d have to fill out this packet and send it back in with him to give to his teacher.”

The bill would streamline the application and require schools to have an online version that parents could fill out in privacy.

The price of these changes is unclear. So far, lawmakers are inserting a token \$1 appropriation, the Bulletin reports, a common placeholder that allows the governor to insert a real amount of money in future budget requests.

Parents and advocates urged lawmakers to get the various proposals to the governor’s desk this session.

Alstead parent Renee Berkley told lawmakers that she was shocked at the level of need she saw after she moved in from Utah. She pointed out that most New England states already have better school lunch programs than New Hampshire.

“So what message are you sending people who moved to New Hampshire like myself?” she said. “What is your priority? Is it ‘live free and die’? Is it ‘live free and be poor and hungry’? Or can we turn this around?”

### **All About the Kids:**

- [Oklahoma colleges still determining impact of Stitt’s diversity, inclusion order](#)
- [Superintendent supports one-time stipends for Louisiana teachers over permanent pay raises](#)
- [Effort to boost tribal early learning collapses 3 years after mandate by Oregon Legislature](#)



### **Also Trending**

**It must be something in the water, but the age-old controversy about fluoride is back in several states.**

The U.S. started adding fluoride to public drinking water back in the '40s as a way of preventing tooth decay. Almost immediately, certain conspiracy-minded people decried it as a Communist plot, or some sort of secretive mind-control project.

Since then science has shown that the [substance is safe and effective](#), with tooth decay dropping by up to 25% in some studies, according to the [American Dental Association](#).

Although the Commie mind-control business has largely faded away, a small but vocal group of critics has maintained that fluoride is harmful (it can in fact be toxic when ingested in large amounts, though studies have not found a strong correlation with cancer, reports [the American Cancer Foundation](#) ). They have unsuccessfully challenged fluoridation in courts and before federal agencies. For the most part, critics have been regarded as somewhat fringy.

But now the anti-fluoride forces are going mainstream.



*My, what beautiful teeth you have.  
(Photo by Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images)*

**In Nebraska, State Sen. Ben Hansen of Blair [wants to require](#) any effort to**



**fluoridate the water in a community to be subject to a referendum of residents,** [the Nebraska Examiner reports](#). That would overturn a 2008 law that essentially required cities to add fluoride with certain exceptions. It also runs afoul of the recommendation of the state's Department of Health and Human Services.

Hansen called on an out-of-state dentist, Dr. Dr. Griffin Cole of Austin, Texas, to support the bill. Cole pointed to an as-yet-unpublished study from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that reportedly finds a correlation between lower IQ and fluoride in certain places.

"Even if you think it causes a small, little bit of damage to a child's brain, get it out of the water," Hansen said. "There's no reason we should use water for medicine."

In-state dentists, however, dismissed the concerns about fluoride, pointing out that the study Cole and Hansen were relying on had twice failed the peer-review process, which is why it remains unpublished in a professional journal.

Critics said putting the issue to a public vote would allow misinformation to flourish.

"I don't think it does any more than it makes sense to allow communities to reaffirm the Clean Indoor Air Act or wearing seat belts," said Dr. Jessica Meeske, president-elect of the Nebraska Dental Association.

"Dentists care about the development of children's brains," Meeske added. "We would not recommend anything that we think would be harmful to the neurodevelopment of children."



*Not a Commie mind control plot. I promise.  
(Getty Images)*

**In North Carolina, commissioners in Union County went even further this week, banning the use of fluoride entirely after weeks of contentious debate, [NC Newsline reports](#).**

The board split 3-2 in banning the substance, which also occurs naturally and is included in many dental products including toothpaste.

“There are a number of chemicals that get added to the water, but those chemicals are added to treat the water itself to make it safe to drink in some cases, to remove or address odor concerns or drinkability,” Commissioner David Williams told his colleagues. “You know none of those other chemicals are added to the water to treat us. Fluoride is the one exception. Fluoride is added to the water to treat us, and I think that should give us pause.”

The local chapter of Moms for Liberty, best known for crusading against library books they find objectionable, jumped into the debate opposing fluoride.

“Millions of pregnant women are currently being exposed to levels of fluoride that have the potential to lower their children’s IQ by at least four to six points,”

Abigail Prado, who leads the Union County Chapter of Moms for Liberty.

As evidence she [pointed to a study](#) that has been widely criticized by experts showing adverse effects of excessive fluoride in pregnant women.

Dentists, on the other side, said the substance is safe and including it in public water is crucial to combatting tooth decay, particularly among people too poor to afford other dental products that contain fluoride.

“I take care of a lot of people who have terrible, terrible dental health. If you had to sit in my office every day and see screaming 4-year-olds getting teeth extracted, it would be a very personal situation for you too,” Dr. Meg Lochary, a Union County board-certified pediatric dentist, told commissioners.

Commissioner Richard Helms said he was convinced by the medical experts and by his own experience with his children growing up with fluoride in their water.

“I think the history in the United States of putting fluoride in at a minimum has made our young people’s life healthier and more pleasant. I can tell you that I grew up on a well and my dental problems kind of stopped once I got living on the water that was fluoride,” Helms said. “I will not be supporting a resolution to remove the fluoride and I’d ask my peers to do the same.”

**The moves in Nebraska and North Carolina come just weeks after Kentucky legislators introduced a bill to allow water utilities to opt out of the state mandate to include fluoride, as reported [by the Kentucky Lantern](#).**

“Honestly, it is forced medication,” said Rep. William Lawrence, R-Maysville, [a co-sponsor of HB 141](#). “Whether you’re for or against fluoride, this bill has nothing to do with that. This is a local control — let the local water districts decide what’s best for their district.”

As in the other states, medical professionals dismissed the fears of fluoride, calling it safe and effective. They noted that “Kentucky already [ranks among the highest](#) for the number of adults with no teeth, a condition called [edentulism](#).” the Lantern writes.

“We have reached the point where it’s not about the science, it’s about the emotion,” said Stephen Robertson, the executive director of the Kentucky Dental Association. “No matter what your position is, you can find something out there that’s going to validate your position.”

## Better Living Through Chemistry:

- [Indiana environmentalists, manufacturers at odds over bill to protect toxic PFAS chemicals](#)
- [Missouri House bill would allow further testing for St. Louis radioactive waste](#)
- [Iowa school district allowed employees to work amid asbestos contamination](#)



## From The Newsrooms

### Politics and government

- [Kansas House Republicans fail to override governor's veto on massive tax reform bill](#)
- [Negligence claims against Florida government could get easier, but not as much as in many other states](#)
- [\(Michigan\) Indiana man who freelanced for Dearborn publication charged with making violent online threats](#)
- [Arizona lawmakers move to ban 'reunification' treatment in child custody cases](#)

### Election 2024

- [Early voting in Arkansas begins today. Here's what you need to know](#)
- [\(Utah\) Cache County employee charged with altering election document; report finds 'widespread' violations](#)
- [\(South Carolina\) Haley: 'I'm not going anywhere'](#)
- ['Kill an ant with an atom bomb': Kansas Supreme Court talks election case](#)

### Economy

- [\(North Carolina\) A move to provide renters facing eviction with free legal counsel gains support in Winston-Salem](#)
- [\(Indiana\) Dog breeders, pet stores bill clears Senate](#)
- [More taxpayer money benefits pro sports owners amid 'stadium](#)

- [Lawmakers want to increase construction wave' density across Minnesota to boost housing affordability](#)



## One Last Thing



*This looks pretty official to me, but what do I know?  
(Getty Images)*

**This one unjustly escaped our attention late last week, so let's catch up.**

For more than a century, the state of Washington has been known as the “Evergreen State.” It adorns road signs and marketing material and appears in all sorts of places.

“[Charles Conover](#) of Seattle is credited with coining the phrase roughly 130 years ago, even putting it on the cover of a brochure promoting Washington at the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago,” [the Washington State Standard reports](#).

But it turns out, the legislature has neglected to make the popular nickname official. Last week the state Senate approved a plan to enshrine the name in law,

alongside the [official state song, state dance and state dinosaur](#).

“I think it’s well past time to make it official,” said Sen. Jeff Wilson, R-Longview, sponsor of [a bill that passed the Senate last week](#) to correct the oversight.

Not every senator was so pleased. The same day the Senate was advancing the nickname bill by a 72-2 vote, it was rejecting [a bill to lower the state’s threshold from drunken driving](#) from a blood alcohol level of 0.08% to 0.05%.

“It’s a waste of time. We should have been talking about .05,” grumbled Democratic Sen. Marko Liias of Edmonds, sponsor of the DUI bill and one of the senators voting no on the nickname.

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