

Governor wants more for education

Budget increases school funds by \$232M

By DUNCAN MANSFIELD
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KNOXVILLE — Saying there is "no better investment that can reap as many benefits," Gov. Phil Bredesen on Friday outlined \$232 million in proposed education improvements for Tennessee in his new budget.

That includes \$90 million to fully fund basic education needs, \$20 million to expand pre-kindergarten programs, \$20 million for at-risk and English-as-second-language populations and \$42 million for teacher salaries.

"It's my strong belief that the role of public servants is to make the world a little better for the next generation that comes along," Bredesen said in a well-received address to about 500 people attending a Knoxville Chamber Partnership meeting.

"And there's no better investment we could make, no better investment that can reap as many benefits, than an investment in Tennessee brainpower," he said.

Bredesen said the \$232 million increase for pre-K-12 and higher education represents more than a third of the new money available in the fiscal 2006-2007 budget.

The governor will unveil his full spending plan before delivering his State of the State message, tentatively set for Tuesday.

This would represent about a 5% increase in state spending on education, which accounts for about four of every 10 cents in state tax dollars. The state spends \$3.2 billion on K-12 and \$1.4 billion on higher education.

The governor noted that despite lean finances, the state has added about \$500 million new dollars to education in the past three years.

"The foundation of any K-12 budget is made up of the money we put toward fully funding the basic education program," Bredesen said.

The governor said he would propose \$90 million more to meet that formula next year.

While he has told mayors from the state's largest counties that he won't recommend readjusting the state's education formula to give them more funding, he said \$20 million would be given for at-risk and English-as-second-language students predominantly in their communities.

Bredesen said adjusting the formula would require about \$150 million in new money to ensure that no school districts are harmed, and the state simply can't afford it.

The \$42 million increase for teachers salaries would equal about a 2% pay raise.

The governor also proposes to nearly double the \$25 million spent this year to create and support 300 pre-kindergarten programs around the state. "The only difference is that this time the money will come from our general fund" instead of the lottery, he said.

In addition, Bredesen would spend \$12 million more on higher education initiatives, including \$4 million to the University of Tennessee system to recruit national academy-level faculty in science and engineering.

Bredesen also will recommend \$200 million more for capital maintenance and building projects on Tennessee's college campuses, including a new law school for the University of Memphis, a new science building at Middle Tennessee State and renovation of UT-Knoxville's landmark Ayers Hall. •