No Senate Changes Planned Following Recent COVID Concerns

The Senate could be down two members Tuesday given recent concerns regarding the chamber's handling of a positive coronavirus diagnosis.

Senate leaders, meanwhile, are planning no changes in light of requests from minority party members for more stringent protocols, according to a GOP spokesman.

Sen. Sandra Williams (D-Cleveland) said she is considering joining her colleague, Sen. Teresa Fedor (D-Toledo), in avoiding the chamber's planned session.

Sen. Fedor last week expressed alarm when she learned she and her staff had come in contact with another staffer who tested positive for COVID-19. The senator closed her state office and said she wouldn't return to the Statehouse until majority leaders changed their protocols.

Sen. Williams said in an interview she has yet to reach a final decision on whether to attend session and that her choice will depend on the Senate calendar, which will be finalized Tuesday morning.

Senate President Larry Obhof (R-Medina) previously indicated measures on criminal sentencing (SB 3) and business immunity (HB 606) are top agenda items for Tuesday's session if they are ready to advance from committee.

Sen. Williams, who has an autoimmune disorder, said she does intend to attend Tuesday morning's Senate Energy & Public Utilities Committee where she is the panel's ranking member. The only question, she said, is whether she will remain in town after that for session.

"My goal is to limit the amount of time I'm around people, especially people who are not taking the recommendations of the governor – wearing a mask or social distancing," she said. "I need to protect myself even if they are not concerned about themselves."

John Fortney, a spokesman for Sen. Obhof, said Monday Senate leaders have no plans to change any procedures in advance of Tuesday's meetings. Safety measures already taken for committees and session, including increased cleaning and social distancing, will remain in place.

Democratic caucus spokeswoman Giulia Cambieri declined to comment on the situation other than saying: "Discussions are still ongoing between our members and our caucus and the majority."

Sen. Fedor has called for notification of any positive test results and criticized some of her Republican colleagues who have ignored recommendations to wear facial coverings. Sen. Williams said she shares those concerns.

"I think the first thing they should do is what the state should be doing and that is doing contact tracing," Sen. Williams said. "They should be following protocols that should be put in place."

She said informing members of positive tests would be a "perfect start."

"Then members can decide what they want to do," she said.
Statehouse Update

Tuesday, June 30, 2020

Virus Lawsuit Immunity Bill Heads Back To House With Changes

A controversial measure to grant temporary immunity to businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic cleared the upper chamber Tuesday.

HB 606 was approved in a 22-6 vote after picking up several changes earlier in the day in the Senate Judiciary Committee.

It now heads back to the lower chamber, potentially setting up yet another conference committee. However, Senate President Larry Obhof (R-Medina) said he believes the House will accept the Senate's changes.

"For the most part, it is the core of the bill that they sent over to us," he said after session.

Each of the amendments were offered by committee Chairman Sen. John Eklund (R-Chardon), including one to remove language Democrats were able to successfully insert on the House floor to create a rebuttable presumption that certain employees that contract COVID-19 did so in the workplace for Bureau of Workers' Compensation purposes.

Sen. Eklund said 85% of those claims are already being approved.

Sen. Hearcel Craig (D-Columbus) unsuccessfully sought to reinsert the language on the Senate floor.

Other amendments include language that changes the phrase "intentional conduct" to "intentional misconduct," specifies that for non-immunized activity a class action lawsuit cannot be brought, and includes a severability clause. Another change removed language that would have granted the state immunity in any civil case involving a governmental function.

Regarding the latter amendment, Sen. Eklund said the state is already covered by the general immunity in the measure.

The measure cleared the committee in a party-line vote. Sen. Nickie Antonio (D-Lakewood) and Sen. Vernon Sykes (D-Akron) replaced the absent Sen. Sean O'Brien (D-Bazetta) and Sen. Teresa Fedor (D-Toledo), who has closed her state office and said she wouldn't return to the Statehouse until majority leaders changed their protocols after a staffer in the chamber tested positive for COVID-19.

The legislation, which passed the House in May, would grant civil immunity to businesses and medical providers regarding the transmission of the coronavirus.

The bill is necessary to provide certainty as the economy begins to open amid the ongoing pandemic, proponents have claimed.

The bill, Sen Eklund said, "encourages those businesses to open as rigorously as they can and as safely as they can."

Sen. Antonio raised concerns with the bill, saying she fears it will prevent those neglected or injured in nursing homes from taking their cases to court.

"It will create even more barriers to having any kind of accountability or any kind of redress should something happen," she added.

Members also approved legislation to overhaul drug sentencing laws (SB 3) and allow the Ohio Water Development Authority to provide for the refinancing of loans for certain public water and wastewater infrastructure projects (HB 264). The chamber also concurred to House amendments on another measure dealing with drug trafficking (SB 55).

Committee Testimony: Beth Lear, vice president of government affairs at the Associated Builders and Contractors of Ohio, called passage "a crucial and urgent legislative issue."

"Plumbers, electricians, HVAC technicians, masons, road constructors, general contractors and all other skilled tradesmen, tradeswomen, business owners, suppliers and trainers who have continued to work through the pandemic deserve the civil protections provided in HB606," she said.
David Owsiany, executive director of the Ohio Dental Association, said dentist across the state are taking steps to mitigate risk of exposure to the novel coronavirus.

"Nonetheless, the coronavirus is not going away altogether," he added. "Absent an effective vaccine, Ohioans will undoubtedly continue to contract COVID-19, oftentimes through unknown sources. Defending against claims related to exposure will be costly and nearly impossible to determine with certainty."

Aaron Baer, president of Citizens for Community Values, wrote the measure will provide necessary protections to religious institutions that have provided essential services during the pandemic.

"Without this important legislation, opportunist attorneys may quickly bring lawsuits claiming liability for COVID-19 exposure," he wrote. "This includes alleging exposure to COVID-19 while benefitting from an essential service. Faith leaders, staff, and congregants make up an indispensable army of essential workers, and HB606 provides important security for them to continue to bless our community."

But Jodi Hoye of Franklin County warned in written opponent testimony that the legislation will give nursing homes a free pass.

"The families of long-term care residence speak for those who cannot speak for themselves," she wrote. "We need to be heard."

Holly Holtzen of the AARP of Ohio provided written interested party testimony in which she said the House bill is a better option that a similar bill (SB 308) already passed by the upper chamber.

She cited several provisions of the bill as evidence, including those to create a clear end date and language clarifying that recklessness is not immunized.

"We believe that these provisions would help mitigate some of the most significant risks associated with this legislation," Ms. Holtzen wrote. "AARP Ohio appreciates your consideration of these views and, should the committee determine that some level of immunity must be granted, we urge you to ensure that residents and their families can still seek redress through the courts when residents have been harmed, neglected or worse."

John McNay, president of the Ohio Conference of the American Association of University Professors, also provided interested party testimony. He raised concern about language that would provide qualified immunity to public colleges and universities.

"The potential for litigation is one of the greatest incentives for administrations to ensure safety to the extent possible and to earn the buy-in of their entire campus communities for the plans to return to campuses," he said. "HB606 would remove that incentive, and we ask this committee to reconsider whether that is the appropriate policy."

The National Federation of Independent Business-Ohio lauded the passage of the bill.

"To the businesses who pivoted to manufacture personal protection equipment, this legislation is extremely important," legislative director Chris Ferruso said in a statement. "Ohio business owners who remained open or who have recently opened, have met and will continue to respond to meet the expectations of their employees and customers alike. All are striving to maintain a safe environment for everyone. The recent pandemic impacted so many areas of our economy negatively. Our recent survey of Ohio NFIB members indicates nearly 70 percent are concerned about liability claim increases, so this is a very meaningful piece of legislation."

State Balances FY 2020 Budget Without Using Rainy Day Fund

Despite losing a significant amount of tax revenue due to the novel coronavirus pandemic and subsequent business closures, the state will close out Fiscal Year 2020 at midnight Tuesday without dipping into rainy day funds.

Tax receipts were more than $1 billion below estimates heading into June, but a combination of budget cuts via executive order and state funds shifted from Medicaid helped balance the budget, according to the Office of Budget and Management.
OBM spokesman Pete LuPiba said the budget will be balanced at the end of the fiscal year Tuesday without tapping into the state's $2.7 billion Budget Stabilization Fund.

"The FY 2020 budget is balanced through a combination of Executive Order budget reductions made in May and ongoing reduced spending by state agencies, enhanced federal Medicaid match which alleviated those costs from the state's General Revenue Fund," he said in an email. "The Budget Stabilization Fund was not accessed during FY 2020."

Transfers from rotary funds or other plans were not expected during FY 2020, he said.

The fiscal year had been going well until the coronavirus hit. Although hampered a bit at the beginning by a budget that the General Assembly passed 17 days late, revenues were tracking at or above estimates while spending was below.

Starting in March, however, revenues started to dive as businesses were shuttered to halt the spread of COVID-19.

In April, tax receipts were below estimate by $866.5 million, or 35.3%.

With many businesses reopening in May, revenue was only off by $271.3 million.

Alongside the announcement of April's revenue hole, the state also unveiled $775 million in budget cuts across several state agencies, particularly higher education, education and Medicaid. Those cuts went a long way toward offsetting the lost revenue.

The state also froze much hiring, halted pay increases and made other adjustments for non-union personnel as part of broad efforts to minimize expenses.

Much of the rest of the budget hole was filled by the federal government providing an emergency increase in Medicaid funding. That 6.2 percentage point increase in the Federal Medical Assistance Percentage, or FMAP, meant the state was responsible for a smaller share of certain Medicaid spending.

The General Assembly authorized the reshuffling of that Medicaid money in a recent amendment to legislation (HB 11), freeing up more than $500 billion in state General Revenue Fund dollars previously allocated to Medicaid for other uses.

While the DeWine Administration didn't end up using money from the BSF, the legislature gave the executive the authority to make a withdrawal through the Controlling Board in emergency coronavirus legislation (HB 197) passed in late March.

**Administration, Treasurer Debut Unified OhioCheckbook Website**

Officials on Tuesday unveiled a revamped OhioCheckbook.gov — marking a continued contrast between current elected leaders and their predecessors who spent years feuding over the site.

The new website combines two separate transparency sites — OhioCheckbook.com, previously overseen by the treasurer's office, and Ohio's Interactive Budget site, overseen by the Office of Budget and Management.

The site, expected to save $900,000 a year, is a joint effort from those two entities. It was launched by Lt. Gov Jon Husted and Treasurer Robert Sprague months after they announced their intent to merge the websites that had been a source of contention between the Kasich Administration and former Treasurer Josh Mandel.

They billed the new site as "a single, one-stop resource for taxpayers hoping to learn more about spending at the state and local levels of government."

"By working together, we've delivered a better, more transparent service for Ohioans and the media, while also doing it at a lower cost," Lt. Gov. Husted said in a statement. "Using technology and collaboration to improve customer service has been a goal of InnovateOhio and this is another positive example of how you can achieve that success."

Mr. Sprague said the resource provides a more comprehensive look at the state's finances thanks to the partnership.
"This second generation of the Ohio Checkbook includes all state revenues instead of just expenditures, and now we can provide Ohioans with a complete fiscal picture of our state," Treasurer Sprague said. "The new and improved website shares more information at a lower cost and gives us a broader technology platform to ensure the future of the Ohio Checkbook."

Mr. Sprague said he's proud to partner with the administration on the new iteration of the website. That is a far cry from his predecessor, Mr. Mandel, who repeatedly butted heads with the Kasich administration on the subject.

Mr. Mandel sought to codify his office's oversight of the program against the wishes of the administration. Executive branch officials at that time contended the treasurer's efforts were redundant and pushed for oversight from OBM because the agency runs the accounting system from which the data are derived.

A measure to codify the treasurer's oversight of the site cleared the House before stalling in the Senate in each of the last three legislative sessions.

OBM Director Kimberly Murnieks said her agency is "proud to collaborate with Treasurer Sprague, Lt. Gov. Husted and InnovateOhio to provide a single, comprehensive data source that is easy to use – and that is more effective and saves real taxpayer dollars."

**Wednesday, July 1, 2020**

**Front License Plate Repeal Among Several July 1 Law Changes**

Ohio's front license plate requirement is officially no more, but that is just one of a host of law changes that took effect Wednesday.

Among other changes effective at the start of the new fiscal year is a statutory deadline by which the Department of Medicaid was to have selected a provisional state pharmacy benefit manager.

It is the license plate repeal, however, that will likely get the most attention by the general public. That House language in last year's transportation budget (HB 62) was a source of contention between the two chambers, although it was overshadowed by the larger question of proposed gas tax increases.

The repeal, which is expected to save about $1.5 million a year, faced pushback from law enforcement groups arguing dual plates make it easier to identify vehicles used in crimes. A Senate plan (SB 179) to restore the front plate requirement has received one hearing in committee.

The transportation budget also included phased-in increases of taxes on compressed natural gas. That tax continued to increase Wednesday, doubling to 20 cents per gallon until July 1, 2021, when it will increase another 10 cents.

An array of Medicaid-related changes also took effect, the most notable of which is an operating budget (HB 166) deadline for the Department of Medicaid to have selected a provisional state PBM. That requirement stemmed from concerns among legislators, pharmacies and others about the business practices and costs of PBMs, which are currently contracted by Medicaid's managed care plans.

ODM has issued requests for information and received it from PBMs but has not yet announced a contract for a single state PBM.

Lawmakers had considered extending the July 1 deadline, with Rep. Mark Romanchuk (R-Mansfield), who chaired the Joint Medicaid Oversight Committee at the time, saying in November he hoped the contract would be in place by the deadline because the state was "hemorrhaging money."

Asked about the deadline Wednesday, Rep. Romanchuk expressed frustration with the fact that a contract is not in place.

"This is common for the executive branch to either ignore or completely work to their own timeline," he said in an interview. "That's a real problem in my view."

The Medicaid director was also required to establish an annual benchmark for prescribed drug spending growth by July 1.
Among other statutory changes, two requirements of the Joint Medicaid Oversight Committee are repealed. Those provisions required the panel to periodically monitor the department's inclusion of both behavioral health services and alcohol, drug addiction and mental health services in the Medicaid managed care system.

One budget provision that didn't survive the governor's veto pen would have required the department to complete a procurement process for Medicaid Managed Care Organizations by Wednesday.

Prior statutory language no longer in effect would have required providers of publicly funded child care to be rated through the Step Up to Quality Program by the first of the month. That deadline was delayed to Sept. 1 under an emergency bill (HB 197) passed this spring in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Other statutory provisions taking effect include language prohibiting the depositing dredged material into the state's portion of Lake Erie or its tributaries without the authorization of the Environmental Protection Agency director or a 401 water quality certification.

The first of the month also marks the deadline by which boards of education must update standards-based teacher evaluation policies to confirm with a new framework passed last session (SB216, 132nd General Assembly).

**Doctors, Democratic Leaders Renew Calls For Face Coverings**

Democrats and medical professionals continue to push for Ohio to make it mandatory to wear masks in public.

On a Wednesday media call hosted by the Ohio Democratic Party, a trio of doctors – one of whom is running for the House – and Rep. Allison Russo (D-Upper Arlington) said the use of masks will help slow the spread of the novel coronavirus and help the state's economy recover.

"It makes such a difference. The data is showing that you can reduce your risk, not to yourself, but to others around you," said Dr. Anita Somani, a Columbus OB/GYN. "Even though there's these questions of freedom, of choice, this that and the other, it's the same as wearing a seatbelt. It's the same as going into a store with your shirt and shoes on."

She encouraged Gov. Mike DeWine to mandate that all Ohioans wear masks when in public. Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf took that step Wednesday with an executive order.

"That with social distancing and washing your hands is the best way we're going to open up the economy," Dr. Somani said.

Rep. Russo, whose professional background is in public health, said the state needs strong leadership encouraging Ohioans to wear masks and take the virus seriously.

"People look to leadership to know what is the right thing to do," she said. "This is not a political issue. Masks are not political. This is about being kind to our fellow Ohioans and it is about saving lives."

Dr. Ean Bett, a Columbus doctor, said he is worried the state is "heading in the wrong direction" in terms of virus cases in part because of a reluctance in some communities to wear masks. He also said public education about masks and support for those who might not have them are needed.

"I think we need to be thoughtful about community members who maybe don't have access to them or maybe feel like they don't have to wear a mask," he said.

Gov. DeWine has encouraged Ohioans to wear masks but has demurred on making it mandatory. The Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce on Wednesday urged businesses and patrons to wear masks indoors.

"My persuasion isn't good enough or I'm not doing a good job persuading," he said when asked about doing so during his briefing Monday. "I continue to work on it, and I'm going to continue to work on trying to persuade all Ohioans that this really is the way to exercise our freedom."

"The consequence of not doing these things is a lot worse than the small inconvenience of wearing a mask and the small inconvenience of staying back."
Other doctors on the ODP call said paid sick leave and increased testing are vital to addressing the virus. Dr. Rachael Morocco, a Lewis Center pediatrician and candidate for the House, said she has seen an increase in the number of cases among children and pregnant women, and that parents are often forced to go back to work while sick.

"I have seen many parents of my patients who have told me they have gone back to work," she said.

Rep. Russo also raised concerns about efforts by the Trump Administration to challenge the Affordable Care Act in court, saying Medicaid expansion and the ACA health care exchanges ensure access to health care at a time when it is critical.

"There are the health care implications (of ACA repeal), which are frankly unconscionable and cruel, but also there are very real economic consequences for our hospitals, particularly in areas where we already have a lack of access to health care," she said.

Gov. DeWine is expected to announce the latest phase of Ohio's response to the outbreak on Thursday.

**State Report, PUCO Findings Tee Up Path Forward For Vehicle Charging**

State agencies must increase their collaboration on electric vehicles while installing charging stations every 50 miles along key sections of major highways, according to a new study.

The Electric Vehicle Charging Study, issued by Department of Transportation offshoot DriveOhio, outlines the broad vision for how the state might best support electric vehicle adoption and will serve as fodder for ongoing discussions among Ohio agencies seeking to coordinate future efforts.

The Public Utilities Commission of Ohio, meanwhile, officially wrapped its investigation into EV charging on Wednesday, determining that it does not have jurisdiction over charging companies because they do not meet the statutory definition of an "electric light company" or public utility.

In issuing their findings, commissioners accepted the opinion of PUCO staff, which had reported those charges lie outside the panel's purview.

"This is a logical conclusion in my view given the nature of what is actually being done in the process of charging batteries and it's a step that's been taken in several other states," PUCO Chair Sam Randazzo said.

The commission will host an Aug. 6 virtual stakeholder meeting to further discuss the report and "the utility infrastructure needed to support Ohio's mission to make Ohio EV ready."

"We look forward to a productive discussion that will identify possible next steps for strategic planning of EV charging stations across Ohio," Mr. Randazzo said.

The end of the commission's investigation comes during what Mr. Randazzo deemed a "busy week" given the release of the ODOT study.

That report identifies existing gaps in interstates, highways and state routes and outlines methods to fill them. That will likely be done mostly by private commercial companies, although ODOT should be prepared to supplement that eventual network through chargers at rest stops and service plazas, the report reads.

"There is a paradigm shift underway in the transportation industry," ODOT Director Jack Marchbanks said in a statement. "Legacy companies are pivoting to new ways of doing business and startups are entering the market. By working towards EV-friendly corridors, Ohio will continue leading the way in the changing landscape of transportation."

The study recommended:

- 24 "Direct Current Fast Charging" or DCFC locations along interstates, U.S. highways and state route corridors to realize charging opportunities every 50 miles.
- 10 DCFCs at Ohio Turnpike plazas.
• 19 Level 2 charging locations at attractions, including 11 state parks.
• 17 Level 2 charging locations at ODOT, Department of Public Safety and Ohio Turnpike Infrastructure Commission facilities to "assist the public and agency awareness and understanding."

The total cost of installing chargers at locations recommended in the report ranges between $2.3 million and $4.4 million, according to the study. But that cost could decrease to between $1.1 million and $2 million if Volkswagen Settlement Grant Program funding through the Environmental Protection Agency was used to mitigate upfront costs in eligible counties.

Coupled with the report's release, the Environmental Protection Agency on Wednesday opened the application window for $3.5 million in grants to fund public "Level 2" chargers in eligible counties.

OEPA Director Laurie Stevenson called the "data-driven" study a "great tool for us."

"As we receive applications, we can use it as a road map to prioritize locations and ensure new chargers are installed strategically to fill the gaps," she said.

Another $5 million in grants for DCFCs is expected to be released in early 2021, the agency said.

The report’s release was accompanied by supportive statements from an array of DeWine Administration officials, including Department of Natural Resources Director Mary Mertz, who said she hopes the installation of chargers at state parks "will allow electric vehicle drivers to travel further and explore more of Ohio’s natural wonders."

Electric vehicles have continued to be a discussion point around the Statehouse, after lawmakers in the transportation budget (HB 62) increased the registration fee for plug-in EVs to $200. Democrats have offered a plan (HB 546) to reverse that increase, while a bipartisan pair of senators are pushing (SB 257) for new sales tax breaks for e-vehicle purchases.

Brown Touts Broadband Bill Amid COVID-19 Pandemic
The state’s senior senator on Wednesday said the coronavirus pandemic that has forced more people to work and learn from home has laid bare the need for more access to broadband internet.

U.S. Sherrod Sen. Brown (D-Cleveland) said the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the need for passing the "Emergency Broadband Connections Act" he is sponsoring. Among other things it would provide laid off and furloughed workers with $50 per month to apply toward the price of internet service and provide devices to eligible households.

"The digital divide is real," he said during his weekly conference call with reporters. "The pandemic has shown that in very stark terms."

But Sen. Brown also continued to push for other means of aid to allow Americans to weather the pandemic and its economic fallout, including the extension of an extra $600 per week in unemployment benefits.

Republicans have criticized those added benefits, which are set to expire at the end of the month, saying they serve as a deterrent to people returning to work. The Trump Administration opposes the extension.

U.S. Sen. Rob Portman (R-Terrace Park) has proposed instead incentivizing people to go back to work with cash payments.

However, Sen. Brown said that will do no good for those whose jobs no longer exist. He also warned that cutting off the added benefits will lead to a rash of evictions and foreclosures, further fueling the spread of the novel coronavirus.

"It's absolutely stupid public policy that we would do something to increase evictions and foreclosures in the middle of the pandemic," he added.

Amid reports that Russian President Vladimir Putin placed bounties on the heads of American soldiers, Sen. Brown suggested the leader may be holding something over President Donald Trump.
"It's clear that Putin either has something on the president or for whatever weird reason, the president just never seems to want to criticize one of the most despicable leaders in the world," U.S. Sen Sherrod Brown (D-Cleveland) said Wednesday during his weekly conference call with reporters.

The Trump administration has denied reports that the president was briefed on the matter.

Sen. Brown speculated that he could have been in the dark about the alleged bounties.

"It's widely known from Gen. Mattis to so many others, this president doesn't read intelligence briefings. He may not listen to them. He also is a leader who when people bring him things he doesn't like to hear, sometimes they lose their jobs. So, the intelligence he's getting is not always as straightforward as it should be," he said.

"But there's simply no excuse for not knowing this, and if he did know it, there's no excuse for not acting. But he is so intimidated by Putin. I'm sure Putin sees Trump as a weakling."

Sen. Brown also tied what he said is the president's unwillingness to stand up to Mr. Putin to his threat to veto a defense spending bill because it would rename military bases honoring Confederate generals.

The legislation also contains a pay increase for servicemembers.

Sen. Brown deemed the veto threat amazing and expressed support for the bill and the language on renaming bases, calling Confederate generals "traitors."

"They should have their names on nothing," he added.

Thursday, July 2, 2020

Face Coverings Mandatory For Staff Under State's K-12 Reopening Guidelines

School employees would generally be required to wear masks under long-awaited K-12 safety guidelines announced by Gov. Mike DeWine on Thursday.

While the state also recommends students in grades 3-12 wear facial coverings when they return this fall to classrooms shuttered to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus, the governor said the mask mandate for staff is the lone firm requirement in the document.

Face coverings for employees will not be required when they create an unsafe situation or "significantly interfere with the learning process," the governor said. Face shields can be considered as an alternative when masks are not practical.

Gov. DeWine declined to follow the lead of other states including Pennsylvania and Oregon by announcing a broader mask mandate for the general public, although multiple cities have or are in the process of enacting them.

The state will rely on local officials to enact other safety guidelines to the best of their ability, Gov. DeWine said.

Beyond developing a masking plan, the state has asked schools to:

- Implement plans to assess symptoms among students and staff.
- Provide "ample opportunity" for handwashing and hand sanitizing stations.
- Thoroughly sanitize shared surfaces.
- Practice social distancing.

Gov. DeWine said the guidelines, which were to be posted on the state's COVID-19 website, are "backed by science" and should help protect the state's students as they return to the classroom.

"We have an obligation to educate our children and to keep them safe," he said.

The governor said he understands school districts will face additional costs in following the state's guidelines.
"That's why I intend to work with the General Assembly, with the four leaders, to come up with a plan to give schools some assistance," he said.

He said the plan to funnel more funding to schools could be announced within a week, adding that federal coronavirus relief dollars could be used for that purpose.

The guidelines were welcomed by the Buckeye Association of School Administrators, the Ohio Association of School Business Officials and the Ohio School Boards Association in a joint statement.

"We are particularly supportive of the broad flexibility and local control afforded to school district leaders through the school reopening guidance," the groups said. "This will allow for each district to make decisions that best suit its students, staff and community. There is a range of differences in how the coronavirus pandemic has affected communities and school districts; the solution to the various challenges school districts are facing cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. The governor's guidance for schools recognizes this fact."

The Ohio Education Association, the state's largest public employee union, praised the intent of the guidelines but questioned how they would be enforced, if at all.

"OEA understands and respects the long-standing adherence to local control in decision-making around public education, but the state also has a critical role to play amidst an unprecedented public health crisis and a rising number of cases of COVID-19," OEA President Scott DiMauro said in a statement. "While we appreciate the consideration given to the importance of social distancing, health checks, and sanitation protocols in the Governor's plan, it lacks a means of enforcement, even when a county is in the highest tier of the alert system."

Districts across the state had been working on their own plans for fall ahead of Gov. DeWine's announcement.

Superintendent Talisa Dixon of the Columbus City School District on Tuesday detailed a preliminary plan in which high school students would attend classes remotely for the first two quarters of the school year, while students in grades K-8 would receive two days of in-person instruction and three days of online lessons in a blended learning model.

Ms. Dixon wrote in a letter to parents that the plan's main focus is the safety of students and staff.

"I know not everyone will be happy with every aspect of our reopening plans. However, to be successful, without any doubt, all of us – students, families, teachers, staff, partners, and union leaders - must work together and collaborate with the dual focus of safety and learning for our students," she wrote.

In a higher education development, Ohio State University on Wednesday debuted a new website providing details on what a return to campus in the fall could look like for students and staff.

"The site includes information and details related to physical distancing, campus readiness, classrooms, workspaces, housing, dining, personal protection and hygiene, mental health and wellness resources, travel and several other areas. The university will continue to evaluate recommendations based on evolving conditions, and the site will reflect any updates," OSU Provost Bruce McPheron and Hal Paz, executive vice president and chancellor for health affairs, wrote in a message posted on the school's website.

Guidelines listed on the site include:

- Maintaining social distancing whenever possible.
- Putting on face coverings before entering enclosed spaces.
- Completing daily health checks when on campus.
- Taking a pledge "to promote a safe and healthy campus community."

The site also notes that "accountability measures" will be in place for people who fail to follow the guidelines.

**Governor Debuts Virus Alert System, Declines To Mandate Masks**

The state has a new tool for informing citizens about the severity of coronavirus outbreaks in its 88 counties.
It still does not have some form of a statewide mandate that residents wear masks in public places to prevent COVID-19 from spreading, unlike neighboring Pennsylvania and – most recently – Texas.

Gov. Mike DeWine on Thursday debuted the Ohio Public Health Advisory System – a color-coded map ranking counties in one of four alert levels.

He said the system will help local and state leaders "combat flareups as they occur in different parts of the state."

"One of the messages that I have heard from members of the General Assembly and members of the public is that we should start looking at different counties differently," he said.

Alert levels are based on seven indicators:
- New cases per capita.
- Sustained increase in new cases.
- Proportion of cases outside of congregate settings.
- Sustained increase in emergency room visits.
- Sustained increase in outpatient visits.
- Sustained increase in new coronavirus hospital admissions.
- Intensive care unit occupancy.

Gov. DeWine said counties with 0-1 indicators met representing active exposure will be in Level 1, or yellow alert, while counties with 2-3 indicators met representing increased exposure will be in Level 2, or orange alert. Counties with 4-5 indicators met representing very high exposure are on red alert, while counties with 6-7 indicators met representing severe exposure are on purple alert.

Currently, 53 of the state's counties are on the lowest level of alert based on the criteria, while 28 are on the second lowest.

Seven counties – Butler, Cuyahoga, Franklin, Hamilton, Huron, Montgomery and Trumbull – are at the second highest, while none have hit the highest level yet.

Gov. DeWine noted Franklin County is on a "watchlist" due to its potential to reach purple alert based on an "explosive" growth in cases.

"Franklin County has gone from 81 new cases a day toirst 124 a day in the last two weeks," he said.

The governor said the administration intends to update the map once per week.

Gov. DeWine said "baseline orders" on public health, such as size limits on gatherings and requirements that employees wear masks, would be extended.

He did not, however, issue a new order requiring residents statewide to wear masks when in public despite several counties seeing high growth in coronavirus cases in recent weeks.

The governor indicated he would instead continue to work with local elected and health officials to address flareups on an individual basis.

The Dayton City Commission on Wednesday approved an ordinance requiring masks in public places, while Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther signed a similar executive order Thursday. Bexley also has a mandate, and Cincinnati City Council is expected to vote on a mask requirement Friday.

Gov. DeWine offered his thanks to leaders in those cities.

"They're doing the right thing. They're reading the data and following it," he said. "That's the right thing to do."
The governor said his office’s employees would follow the city of Columbus’ order, adding that he could not speak for the legislature. While masks have been widely embraced by Democratic lawmakers, some Republicans have declined to wear them in the Statehouse thus far during the pandemic.

Gov. DeWine said he hoped everyone in Columbus would heed the executive order, which he called "very, very, very reasonable."

The state has seen 54,166 cumulative coronavirus cases and 2,903 deaths, including probable cases, the Department of Health reported Thursday afternoon. Total hospitalizations sit at 8,038, with ICU admissions at 2,035.

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