

# Your stake in Ohio's budget

## Strickland crosses out 38 items, including vouchers

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A voucher program for special-needs students and \$500,000 focused on abstinence-only education fell victim to Gov. Ted Strickland's veto pen before he signed a two-year, \$52.3 billion budget that's sure to touch the lives of all Ohioans.

The governor's signature, less than 10 hours before the start of the new fiscal year, ended what many Statehouse observers called a remarkably smooth budget process.

All but one lawmaker voted for the measure, which focuses on higher education and offers all homeowners 65 and older a property-tax cut.

In all, Strickland vetoed 38 items yesterday, including a number of earmarks and new performance audits for a pair of state agencies. The Republican-controlled legislature could attempt overrides but success would be difficult in the House, where Republicans are seven votes short of the required three-fifths majority.

Driven by horror stories about dealing with public schools, Republicans pushed to let parents send any student with an individualized-education program to a private school. The special-needs vouchers would have provided up to \$20,000 each for about 8,000 students.

But Strickland, who unsuccessfully tried to eliminate most vouchers in Ohio, said, "Funding private schools with public tax dollars deprives the state and its taxpayers of proper oversight."

House Speaker Jon A. Husted, R-Kettering, the legislature's top champion of school choice, said the veto "made this a sad day for special-needs children in Ohio" and vowed to keep fighting.

Republicans failed to avoid a veto of abstinence-only funding by combining it with adoption education.

"Utilizing an approach that includes abstinence education and vital health information will serve to better protect the health and well-being of our youth," Strickland wrote.

He also knocked out some efforts to give the legislature more spending oversight, including a requirement that he get Controlling Board approval to spend a \$325 million Medicaid reserve fund.

Here's what the new budget does:

*If you're a college student:*

- Freezes undergraduate tuition at all state colleges and universities for two years.
- Creates a \$100 million scholarship program in 2008-09 for students pursuing degrees in science, technology, engineering or mathematics.
- **Provides \$10 million for a new scholarship program for students entering two-year schools. Expected to leverage \$55 million in private funds.**
- Allows universities to compete for \$50 million to help them attract top researchers.
- Reduces Student Choice Grants, used by students to attend private institutions, from \$900 to \$600 each.

*If you're in school, or have a child in grades K-12:*

- Creates up to five science- and mathematics-focused schools serving grades 6-12. Provides \$6.6 million for existing schools to improve math and science programs in grades K-8.
- Increases base per-pupil funding by 3 percent a year, but provides no increase for more than 200 school districts.
- Increases parity aid -- designed to reduce disparities between poor and wealthy districts -- by 8 percent. Limits funding to poorest 60 percent of schools, instead of current 80 percent.
- Earmarks up to \$10 million in federal funding to help schools improve graduation rates among black students.

*If you're pregnant or have a child up to age 5:*

- Expands Medicaid eligibility for pregnant women to 200 percent of the federal poverty level (\$34,340 for a family of three).
- Provides \$29.5 million to expand early-childhood education for children ages 3 and 4.
- Makes it easier to qualify for the Early Learning Initiative, which provides preschool funding for low-income parents.
- Adds \$23 million for Help Me Grow, a health and developmental-services program for expectant parents, newborns, infants and toddlers. Will serve 6,000 more children.

- Gives a raise to those who provide publicly subsidized child care.

*If you're a senior citizen:*

- Cuts property taxes for homeowners age 65 or older by exempting the first \$25,000 of the home's value, an average annual saving of about \$400 per household. Pays for it by selling future tobacco-settlement payments for an estimated \$5 billion.
- Expands eligibility in the state-subsidized assisted-living program to current residents of assisted-living facilities who have lived there at least six months.
- Ensures no waiting for the Passport program, which serves senior citizens in their homes.
- Adds \$40 million for nursing homes.

*If your children are uninsured:*

- Expands Medicaid health insurance access to children in families earning up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level (\$51,510 for a family of three).
- Allows parents earning more than 300 percent of the poverty level to buy Medicaid if a child has a pre-existing condition or catastrophic illness that makes private insurance too expensive or impossible to obtain.
- Expands Medicaid coverage to those age 18-20 who are released from foster care.

*If you have a job:*

- Continues to phase in a 21 percent state income tax cut.

*If you own a business:*

- Continues phasing out the corporate-franchise tax and taxes on inventory and equipment, and phases in the commercial-activities tax on gross receipts.
- Provides a \$5 million kilowatt-hour tax break to large-scale employers, helping offset rising energy costs.
- Extends until 2010 the \$2.4 million Coal Tax Credit to offset utilities' pollution-control costs.
- Allows 24-hour retail pharmacies to put their logos on signs along multilane highways.

*If you're a veteran:*

- Provides \$16.6 million a year to continue the Ohio National Guard Scholarship, ensuring that those who serve six years get tuition support at any state university.
- Provides \$4.8 million in college scholarships for the children of deceased or disabled veterans.

*If you care about the environment:*

- Earmarks \$20 million in federal funds for a program that retrofits diesel engines in local government vehicles to produce cleaner emissions.
- Suspends new, tougher standards for household septic systems.
- Earmarks \$8 million to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' Division of Soil and Water Conservation and \$25 million to local county soil and water conservation offices.
- Grants the EPA and Agriculture directors new powers to modify, renew or revoke any action under appeal before the Environmental Review Appeals Commission.

*If you have a utility complaint:*

- Restores to the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel the ability to handle individual consumer complaints.

*If you don't buckle up:*

- Prohibits law enforcement from using DUI or safety checkpoints to issue seat-belt tickets, unless the driver is cited for another offense.

*If you smoke:*

- Repeals \$300-a-month cigarette-tax exemptions for tobacco products brought into Ohio for personal consumption.

*General items of interest:*

- Establishes a pilot program to train doctors and others in early detection of autism.
- Creates an income-tax deduction of up to \$10,000 for living organ-donor expenses.
- Includes natural spring water among the goods the Department of Agriculture can promote through the Ohio Proud Program.
- Gives people in subsidized housing more authority to take legal actions against landlords who do not keep up the residences.
- Provides \$14 million for the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Food Banks to buy 20 million pounds of food along with personal-care products.

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