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\$533 Million Blueprint Aims to Improve Schools, Keep Children Healthy and Safe

By Leann Holt

Journal Staff Writer

Teacher pay raises. More physical education classes. Less junk food in schools. Increased medical care for kids. Home visits to educate new parents.

These are among the dozens of proposals included in Gov. Bill Richardson's \$533 million plan to improve the lives of children in New Mexico.

The governor's ambitious "Year of the Child" agenda will be presented to the Legislature, which convenes next week. Richardson calls it an important part of his \$6.2 billion budget blueprint.

"We're trying to invest for the future at a time when our budget is strong," Richardson said in a telephone interview. "There's no better investment than making our schools work, ensuring our kids are safe, making children healthier and closing the achievement gap."

Richardson said early indications lead him to believe the Legislature will be receptive to his recommendations.

"I feel good about the financial situation because the governor left some flexibility to fund ongoing initiatives," said Rep. Luciano "Lucky" Varela, a Democrat who heads the Legislative Finance Committee. "I'm looking at an even broader definition, and calling it the Year of the Family."

But Senate Republican Leader Stuart Ingle, R-Portales, sounded a cautionary note.

"We're all interested in doing everything we can for the kids," Ingle said. "But we need to make sure we can pay for what we've started, because these programs never get any smaller."

A booming budget

High oil and gas prices have provided the state with lots of extra money for this year's legislative session.

More than \$500 million in "new money" is projected for the 2006-2007 general fund, which can be used for new programs, budget increases and tax cuts.

Up to \$1 billion could be available for capital outlay projects and one-time expenditures.

But even though money for new children's initiatives will be available, Lt. Gov. Diane Denish said finding qualified people to implement the initiatives will be a challenge.

"Lack of human capacity is an issue," she said in an interview.

Some of the "Year of the Child" proposals, including after-school programs, home visits to new moms, parent education and children's wellness programs, were recommended by Denish's Children's Cabinet.

The big-ticket items on the governor's list are new schools, teacher raises, college scholarships and Medicaid expansion.

Other initiatives in the legislative package include funding for vocational training and dropout prevention, and stiffer penalties for gang involvement, methamphetamine use and sex offenses.

Kay Monaco, executive director of the children's advocacy group **New Mexico Voices for Children**, said the proposed legislation would help the state dig out of some holes it has created for itself, especially regarding Medicaid coverage for children.

Reinsuring children

Changes in eligibility requirements last year caused almost 20,000 children to lose their insurance coverage, she said. A number of the "Year of the Child" proposals are an effort to get them back on the rolls.

Monaco and other children's advocates say they are disappointed the governor's proposal does not include more funding for child-care subsidies— something they say is the single best way to help working families lift themselves out of poverty.

The subsidies, a combination of federal and state money, currently pay for child care for working parents who are at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level, which is about \$27,000 for a family of four.

Richardson proposes to raise the eligibility to 160 percent of the federal poverty level, but advocates and child-care providers want to see it restored to 200 percent, where it was in the early 1990s. Funding to 200 percent of the poverty level— \$38,700 for a family of four— would cost the state about \$10 million, Monaco said.

Denish agreed that "in an ideal world" state officials would have liked to fund child care at the 200 percent level. "But in the real world, there's not the support yet," she said.

Monaco disagrees.

"I'm at odds with people who say it can't be done now," she said. "It's very important to people who are working hard to get out of poverty and dealing with high child care costs."

In a recent interview, Rep. Tom Swisstack, D-Rio Rancho, pointed out that the governor's legislative package does not include help for children in the juvenile justice system. Swisstack, who runs the Bernalillo County Juvenile Detention Center, said he will propose a \$2 million piece of legislation to provide community programs for kids in trouble.

"I want to work with the governor to develop community-based programs that provide alternatives to detention," Swisstack said.

Denish said investing in children in their early years, before they get into trouble, makes good economic sense.

"There is an understanding in the Legislature that you can pour all the money into problem solving (later on), but it will require more resources than you'll ever have," she said.

Year of the child agenda highlights

HEALTH CARE

- Medical and dental benefits for more children
- Prenatal care for more women Cost to state: \$24.7 million

HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

- Physical education for all elementary students
- No junk food in schools
- Immunizations Cost: \$12.5 million

EDUCATION

- Pre-kindergarten expansion Cost: \$5 million
- Home visits for new parents Cost: \$800,000

SAFETY

- Tougher penalties for methamphetamine use or production, for gang activity and for sex offenses

Year of the child agenda

Gov. Richardson's legislative package includes:

KEEPING KIDS HEALTHY

- Insuring almost 18,000 additional children, mainly through Medicaid; increasing dental benefits for children; and expanding prenatal care for women. Cost: \$24.7 million from state recurring funds; \$53.4 million in federal funds
- Physical education and healthy breakfasts for all elementary school students; anti-junk food legislation for schools; immunizing children. Cost: \$12.5 million recurring*

KEEPING KIDS SAFE

- Increased penalties for methamphetamine use or production, for gang activity and for sex offenders. Cost: 0*
- Preventing child abuse through a home visiting program for new parents, and after-school programs. Cost: \$800,000 recurring and \$2.7 million non-recurring

KEEPING KIDS LEARNING

- Pre-kindergarten second-year phase-in costs, building new pre-K classrooms and start-up funding for new pre-K programs. Cost: \$5 million recurring combined with \$5 million approved last year and \$6.5 million non-recurring
- Improvement for low-performing schools, summer teacher training, a study of Indian education, dropout prevention and expansion of Advanced Placement classes. Cost: \$4.4 million recurring and \$14.2 million non-recurring
- Nine new schools in six high-growth areas of the state. Cost: \$290 million non-recurring*
- Six percent raises for teachers and all certified educators and 4 percent raises for school staff: Cost: \$107 million recurring
- Expanding programs at career technical centers and vocational charter high schools and aligning high school testing with higher education requirements. Cost: \$11 million non-recurring*
- College affordability endowment to provide scholarships based on need. Cost: \$50 million non-recurring

PARENTS

- Increasing parents' involvement with their children, incentives for employers to give parents time off to help their children in school, parent-led efforts to tie school curriculum to job creation and assisting grandparents raising grandchildren. Cost: \$1.2 million recurring and \$750,000 non-recurring*
- Increasing eligibility level for child-care assistance from 150 percent to 160 percent of the federal poverty level. Cost: \$2.4 million recurring
 - * will require some changes in state law

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