

STUDENTS LOSE HOPE

Georgia lawmakers, in order to save the financially stressed, lottery-funded HOPE Scholarship program, made deep cuts in who and what the scholarships will cover. Stagnant lottery sales were not keeping pace with increasing student enrollments and tuition costs. To obtain full coverage, high school students will now have to earn at least a 3.7 (up from the previous 3.0) grade point average and score at least 1200 on the SAT or 26 on the ACT tests or be the valedictorian or salutatorian. Students with a 3.0 to 3.69 GPA will receive a percentage of tuition based on lottery revenue.

Book costs and student fees also are gone. A new low-interest loan has been added, however.

DRINKS ON SUNDAY

To bring in more tax revenue without increasing taxes, some lawmakers in the 14 states that prohibit alcohol sales on Sunday think these “blue laws” should be repealed. Generally, opposition comes from the liquor store industry and labor unions. They argue Sunday sales are unfair to small liquor stores that have to hire more employees to compete. Others reject changing the bans for religious reasons and argue that having one day off a week is beneficial to families and the community. A measure in Georgia would allow local governments to place a referendum on the ballot on Sunday alcohol sales at grocery, convenience and liquor stores. Connecticut, Indiana, Minnesota and North Carolina, along with some cities, also considered easing the bans this year.



LOOKING AHEAD

Baby boomers are starting to retire, and they’re looking for the best place to spend their golden years. Based on taxes, fiscal health, climate, crime, recreation, health care, natural disasters and other factors, TopRetirements.com has ranked the states. The Top 10, in order, are Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, California, Arizona, Texas, Colorado, Oregon, Delaware, and, of course, the state you live in before you retire. Which make the bottom of their list? Illinois, California, New York, Rhode Island, New Jersey, Ohio, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Nevada, mostly because of high taxes, poor fiscal health or cost of living. The Golden State makes both lists because, “it is expensive and its finances are in serious disarray.” Nonetheless, it gets lots of hits on the organization’s webpage for that state.

REALLY? THAT GOOD?

Student test scores rose so much in six states that a group of newspapers is calling for an investigation. The Detroit Free Press, USA Today, the Arizona Republic and other publications compared millions of test scores. Looking at year-to-year changes in certain grades within specific schools, the group questioned certain gains in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Ohio and the District of Columbia. The schools, of various types from various districts, serve mainly poor families, reported Education Week. The Michigan Department of Education said it would look into the findings. “The state is committed to high-quality assessments and accountability,” a department spokesman told Education Week.

SHINE ON ME

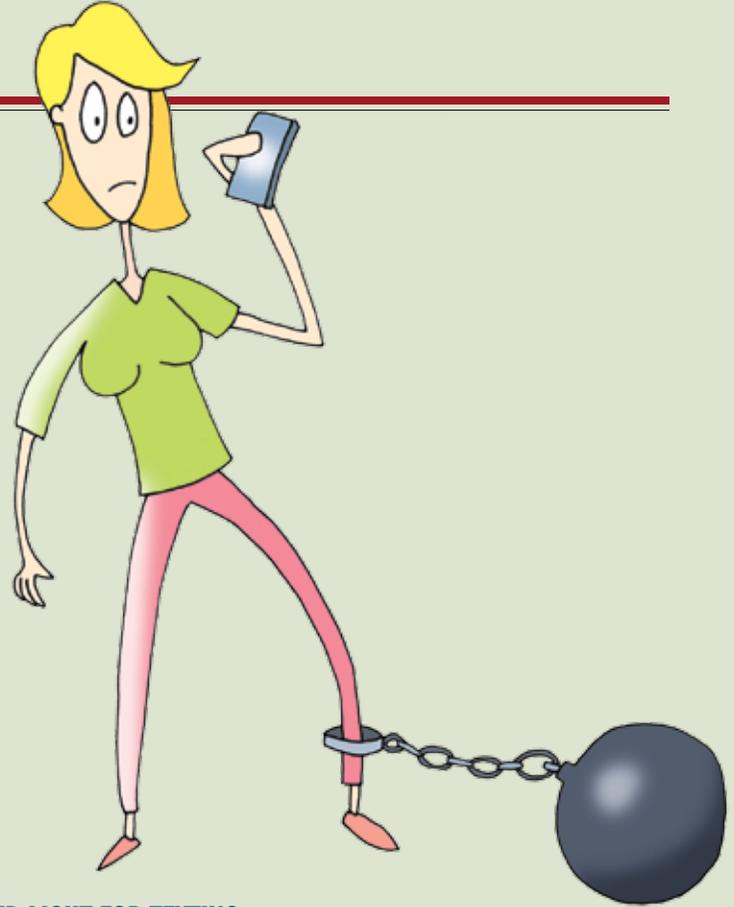
Sunshine Review, a nonprofit that promotes state and local government transparency, recently announced the 112 winners of its annual “Sunny Awards.” The awards recognize state and local government websites that promote an open and accessible government. The group analyzed websites of all 50 states and 6,000 local governments. This year, 11 state websites were among the winners: California, Colorado, Indiana, Maine, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Washington and Wisconsin.

A RACIST HISTORY

Alabama senators have approved a bill to let voters decide next year whether to remove racist parts of the state constitution, written in 1901. Senator Arthur Orr, who sponsored the bill, said it’s a way to signal to the rest of the world that Alabama’s racist history is just that—history, reported the Times Daily. The targeted sections include references to separate but equal schools for white and black children and a poll tax requirement for voters.

DEATH PENALTY ON TRIAL

The Illinois General Assembly passed a ban on the death penalty in January, and the governor signed the bill in March, making Illinois the 16th state without the death penalty. Connecticut, Maryland and Montana may do likewise before their sessions end. Lawmakers in Florida, Kansas and Ohio also are looking at repealing it, although success is less likely in these states, Richard Dieter, executive director for the Death Penalty Information Center, told Reuters News. “Innocence is the biggest issue, but what’s getting these bills heard is the cost of the death penalty,” he said. The information center reports that in Kansas, for example, the costs of capital cases are 70 percent higher than comparable non-capital cases, including the costs of incarceration, according to a 2003 Kansas performance audit. Meanwhile, in March, federal drug agents seized Georgia’s supply of sodium thiopental used in lethal injections. Use of the drug has been challenged by capital punishment critics and death-row inmates. The sedative came from a British supplier. No more executions will be scheduled in Georgia until the issue is resolved. According to the Associated Press, the shortage has delayed executions in several states. At least five—Arizona, Arkansas, California, Georgia and Tennessee—have received supplies from England, while Nebraska purchased a stockpile from an Indian firm.



RED LIGHT FOR TEXTING

Maryland is looking at toughening its ban on texting while driving to close two loopholes. The current law does not address drivers stopped at a traffic signal, nor does it explicitly ban reading text messages. Both would be prohibited under the new law. Violators would be charged with a misdemeanor and \$500 fine. “Texting and driving just don’t mix,” Senator James Brochin, sponsor of the bill, told the Washington Examiner. Opponents disagree. “This law goes to the core of the state invading the car,” said Senate Minority Leader E.J. Pipkin.

A PUBLIC BIRTH

A bill introduced in the Hawaii Legislature to sell copies of President Barack Obama’s birth records for \$100 died after failing to get a hearing. Representative Ryan Yamane, chairman of the Health Committee, told the Associated Press he thinks it is inappropriate to sell private information to the public. “We shouldn’t take knee-jerk reactions. Just because there are these people who want this information, that doesn’t mean we should change our state statute so a private, personal record could be accessible for \$100,” he said. Representative Rida Cabanilla, sponsor of the bill, said she will drop the issue since demand for Obama’s birth documents have significantly declined. Skeptics argue there is no proof Obama was born in the United States, making him ineligible to be president. They claim a certification of live birth that the Obama campaign made public in 2008 is a forgery. It shows the president’s birth date as Aug. 4, 1961, his birth city as Honolulu, and his parents’ names and races. Also, both of Honolulu’s major newspapers listed Obama’s birth in their standard announcements. At least 11 state legislatures—Arizona, Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oklahoma and Texas—have considered legislation that would require candidates for president, before being included on ballots, to provide legal proof of their constitutional qualifications.

HOPE FOR HEMP

Minnesota lawmakers are looking at a bill to allow farmers to grow hemp for industrial purposes. Since the federal government banned hemp production in 1939, the bill requires federal authorities to change their rules before the law could go into effect. At least 16 states have passed pro-hemp legislation. “Industrial hemp grows so quickly and so tall. It can be a very highly valued cash crop,” Minnesota Representative Greg Davids told the La Crosse Tribune. Hemp is related to marijuana, but is used to make fuel, paper, clothing, rope, biodegradable plastics, construction materials and other products.

