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Beshear tours WKU Innovation Campus

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Gov. Andy Beshear speaks after going on a tour of the WKU Innovation C

PHOTOS BY Grace Ramey / grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com

Gov. Andy Beshear visited Western Kentucky University's Innovation Campus on Thursday after a stop at Tyson Food's bacon facility opening earlier that day.

Beshear briefly toured the facility, home to dozens of emerging technology companies, communication firms, researchers and more, and spoke of the need to fund higher education on the back of Kentucky's ongoing economic success.

“What you're seeing right here wouldn't happen without real investment in higher education,” Beshear said. “For years, our economy caused us, forced us, to cut higher education in Kentucky – that should no longer be the case.”

Beshear said funding is critical to encouraging businesses to settle down in the commonwealth and keeping specialized and educated workers within the state with good-paying jobs.

“I was proud of our last budget – (it) was the largest increase in higher ed funding in over a decade,” Beshear said. “This next budget needs to end with being just as good.”

The House Republicans' operating budget presented last week features a \$99.8 billion operating budget, using \$22.5 billion in General Fund dollars, \$42.76 billion in federal funds, \$28.1 billion in restricted funds and \$112 million in road funds.

The largest appropriation is made for health and family services with nearly \$40 billion for Medicaid. The next highest goes toward public colleges and universities

through KEES money, tuition, grant and research programs and other means.

In a press conference following the GOP proposal last week, Beshear said his budget plan would have dedicated \$1.1 billion more in SEEK funds, including a base funding raise, 11% raises for school employees, fully funded transportation and school resources like textbooks and technology.

He added that districts will be forced to prioritize paying for transportation, which is 80% funded in the GOP budget, before considering raising salaries.

“It’s time that we finally pay our educators enough to attract the teachers, the bus drivers, the custodians, everyone we need to have a world-class pre-K through 12th education that feeds people into WKU and ultimately this Innovation Center,” Beshear said Thursday at the campus.

He also spoke of the need for universal pre-K across the state to increase kindergarten readiness among rising students.

He similarly encouraged fully funding the Kentucky Product Development Initiative like in the previous budget to help attract companies to the state and improve facilities already present.

Beshear spoke out against several bills following his speech, such as Senate Bill 6, Senate Bill 93 and House Bill 6, that would largely dismantle diversity, equity and inclusion efforts across public schools and universities statewide and hinder discussions around race and social justice.

SB6 is sponsored by Sen. Mike Wilson, R-Bowling Green.

“I believe that diversity is a value and an asset, never a detriment,” Beshear said. “We are better when we are welcoming of people of all backgrounds and all cultures, and when we look at wanting to attract business and be an economic powerhouse, companies require that we embrace diversity.”

Beshear added that these bills could impact accreditation and federal research grants that universities rely on.

“At the end of the day, I think we have got to put aside these attempts to rile people up for the next election, which is what this is about, and say that we are our brothers’ and sisters’ keeper,” Beshear said.

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