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State legislators to decide whether part-time school employees keep health insurance

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Gov. Nathan Deal's recommended budget for the 2016 fiscal year included a proposal to eliminate state-funded health care for part-time bus drivers and cafeteria workers in schools.

State legislators will soon decide whether or not to approve the proposal, which would affect 10,500 employees and their family members statewide. The state would reportedly save \$81 million per year if it is approved. In his State of the State address last month, Gov. Deal assured the public that education was of great importance to him, saying that it "still remains a top priority in our budgets."

The current State Benefit Health Plan is available to state employees, teachers, school system employees and retirees who continued

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SKIP BUTLER/The Daily Tribune News Bartow County bus driver Michelle Dover says if the governor's plan goes through to eliminate health insurance for bus drivers it will be devastating because many drivers depend on it to survive.

coverage and covered dependents.

Michelle Dover, who has worked as a bus driver with the Bartow County School System for 20 years, said she and her family have been enrolled in the plan from the beginning of her employment. She is one of many who hope that no changes are made to the current system.

"As a matter of fact, until this year I have covered my entire family, including my husband and two children," she said. "If the governor goes through with eliminating insurance coverage for bus driver's it will be devastating, not only to myself but to so many who depend on this coverage to survive."

Jody Elrod, director of transportation for Bartow County Schools, said the part-time employees should receive the same benefits that any other essential school employees receive.

"I certainly hope this portion of the governor's legislation does not pass as it would have a profound impact on vital members of our school system," noted Elrod, who also said that Bartow County bus drivers currently have access to the same benefits as all other school employees. "Our bus drivers play an indispensable role in the

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business of educating our children and I am deeply concerned about any notion that would negatively impact them.”

According to reports, legislative leaders have expressed support for continued health coverage in opposition to the governor’s proposal.

A decision to eliminate the coverage could cause some part-time school system employees to seek opportunities elsewhere.

“Don’t get me wrong, I love my job. Otherwise I could and would easily move on to something else,” Dover said. “I can’t speak for everyone, but I will say that the general consensus among drivers who will be affected is that they will be changing jobs.”

A decision is expected to be reached by legislators in the coming weeks. To view the governor’s recommended budget in full, visit opb.georgia.gov.

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