

## Gov. Edwards' 2020 Regular Session Remarks

**BATON ROUGE** — Gov. Edwards' 2020 regular session remarks, as prepared for delivery, are below:

*As prepared for delivery:*

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, members of the Legislature and distinguished guests:

Today is not only the start of a new Regular Session. It's the beginning of a new chapter for Louisiana. For myself, it is the start of my second term as governor, during which time I will continue to put Louisiana first and advance priorities that are important to the people of this state.

For you, today marks the beginning of a legislature that looks much different than it did a year ago. As I look across this room, I see many familiar faces who have worked with me over the past four years to put Louisiana on the right track. But I also see many new faces. So to all the new members, I want to welcome you and your families today. My pledge to you, and to every member, is that I am ready to work with all of you, in good faith, to set aside partisan division and continue to move Louisiana forward. And I'm happy to say that Louisiana is much stronger than four years ago precisely because we were able to rise above partisanship.

There are a lot of people in this chamber today and even more watching, and I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to update you on Louisiana's response to COVID-19.

Just minutes ago, while I was on a conference call with Vice President Mike Pence about the coronavirus, I learned that we have a presumptive positive case of coronavirus in Louisiana, a Jefferson Parish resident who is hospitalized in Orleans Parish. It still must be confirmed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Understand that we are treating this as a positive case and this confirmation process will not slow us down from taking any necessary actions to continue monitoring and preventing the spread of this virus.

I have promised that we would be transparent about this and we will. Later this afternoon, I will be joined by public health officials for a news conference to answer questions.

Now together we all—as a government, as health care systems and providers, as schools, businesses and as neighbors—must take action and be vigilant to prevent the spread of this virus in our great state.

The novel coronavirus and preventing the spread of illness has been an increased focus over the past weeks and months, as we see more cases pop up all over the country.

In response, I launched a Task Force that is leading the planning effort for different scenarios involving COVID-19 and our state agencies have been coordinating with the federal government and each other to ensure that we are preparing for and responding to this public health threat properly.

As legislators, one of the most important things you can do to help is to share accurate information with your constituents about the current threat in Louisiana, which remains low, and the proper ways to avoid spreading illness, including hand washing, coughing into your elbow, avoiding unnecessary hand shaking and staying home when you are sick.

One of the biggest questions people across the country have is about testing. In Louisiana, we have completed 15 tests so far at the state's Public Health Lab, 14 are negative and one is positive as I just mentioned. We have recently received two additional test kits from the CDC and have the capacity for several hundred tests.

For our tests, we are working within the CDC's guidance to test three groups of people – those who have traveled to certain areas and have symptoms, those who have had close contact with a person confirmed to have COVID-19 and who show their own symptoms and, finally, those with an acute respiratory illness that cannot be explained.

While we, and most states, had limited testing capacity at the start of this process, we should see commercial testing go live across the country and in Louisiana this week.

Commercial testing means that more people who are sick will be able to talk to their health care providers about their risk and if they need to be tested, which is a good thing.

Our role at the state will be to take any test that is presumed positive by a commercial lab and then to verify it at the State Public Health Lab, before sending it to the CDC for confirmation. This verification will be very important as these commercial tests come online. Let me be clear – we will immediately take action on any positive test out of an abundance of caution while waiting for confirmation from the CDC.

And, yes, we will still be announcing any additional presumed positive cases to the public.

For anyone who is presumed positive, we will also be completing what epidemiologists call “contact tracing” to make sure we are assessing the risk to people who have come in contact with them and completing additional testing to prevent the spread.

We do encourage anyone who is sick to seek advice from a medical provider. We also strongly recommend people avoid going out in public if they are sick.

Regardless of if a person has the coronavirus or the flu, we must all be vigilant to prevent the spread of illness in our communities.

There are many things I love about Louisiana, but our ability to work together when times are tough is at the top of the list. I am confident in the men and women who are working each and every day to prevent the spread of this illness.

I am grateful for anyone who plays a role in this response and am praying for the health and safety of the people of Louisiana.

Back to today and the opening of the legislative session.

We have the opportunity to improve the lives of Louisiana working families like never before. At my inauguration, I talked about my overarching goals for a second term. Today, I want to talk about specific ways we can achieve those goals.

It begins where everything begins – with education. The budget that I have proposed to you makes new strategic investments in education at every level.

Now, when I talk about the following funding numbers, I am referring to the budget I proposed based on the most conservative estimate of the Revenue Estimating Conference. Until the REC adopts an official forecast, these numbers are merely a proposal. That is why I am urging the REC to adopt a forecast sooner rather than later so that we have as much time as possible this session to develop a responsible budget using real numbers based on the recommendation of our expert economists rather than on hypotheticals.

As we've seen in the last 24 hours, we know that predicting the market and state revenue is a challenge. That's why it is just as important to listen to the economic experts we have when it comes to adopting a forecast as it is to listen to our medical experts on how to prepare for and respond to the Coronavirus.

For ten years, Louisiana disinvested in higher education more than anywhere else in the country, and we suffered the consequences. For the next 10 years, let's commit to reinvesting in higher education in order to strengthen our state. We already have a blueprint for this thanks to the Higher Education Master Plan, which aims to have 60% of working age adults earn an industry based credentials or degrees by 2030.

One of the ways we are going to accomplish this is through making dual enrollment accessible to all Louisiana students. I have committed more than \$30 million in my proposed budget for higher education, as well as fully funding TOPS and funding Go Grants at their highest level ever.

Additionally, the budget proposal includes \$39 million in new funding for K-12 education. I am recommending that all \$39 million be committed to an additional teacher pay raise. Let me make something very clear – before the end of my second term, we will have raised teacher pay

to at least the Southern regional average. We took the first step last year by giving educators and support workers their first raise in a decade. But we aren't done yet!

I know that it's going to take some time to fully recover from years of budget cuts and stagnant funding in education. But we need to demonstrate to students, parents and educators that we are serious when we say we aren't going back. But we must do everything possible to make certain our children are ready for school from the very beginning.

And that leads me to the number one priority of my second term - early childhood education.

At the Governor's Mansion, there is an oak tree in the back yard with a plaque presented to Governor Mike Foster by the University of Louisiana System. It says on the plaque that a college education starts in preschool, and it ends with the saying "Tall oaks from little acorns grow." In many ways, early childhood education is like the roots of that oak tree. It's the strong foundation for a lifetime of growth and opportunity and prosperity.

That has certainly been the case for 4-year-old Treasure Johnson who started her educational journey at London Bridge Early Learning Center in Baton Rouge when she was just 2 years old. With the support of her parents and teachers, she began reading, writing and spelling earlier than most toddlers her age and has tested gifted in intellectual abilities, mathematics and reading. Her parents have stated that it was a blessing to be at a center that could meet her exactly where she was developmentally. Now at the age of 4 and soon to be 5 they are confident that she has the tools she needs to excel in any school she's accepted into.

Treasure is here today with her mom, Ciera Johnson along with the owner of London Bridge Early Learning Center, Tara Emery. Would you all please stand to be recognized? Thank you all so much for being here today.

I want every child to have the same foundation for learning that Treasure has been able to experience.

I want every acorn to become a tall oak.

That is why I have proposed \$25 million in additional funding for early childhood education in the budget you will be working to pass this session.

When we talk about education, we are also talking about workforce development. In my inaugural address, I said that I wanted Louisiana to have most job-ready workforce in the country for a **diversified** 21<sup>st</sup> century economy.

One way we are doing this is through our Jobs for America's Graduates program, better known as JAG.

JAG-LA currently serves 6,000 at-risk youth across the state. Students in the JAG program have a 98% graduation rate, 80% enter full time jobs, and 90% graduate high school with either a job or a post-secondary education plan.

Sharon Lair is a JAG-LA specialist and teacher at Alexandria Middle Magnet. She's an Army veteran, a graduate of Louisiana College and Southern University, and an educator – in addition to being a dedicated volunteer in her community. Growing up, Sharon had to overcome many hardships. As a JAG specialist for the past four years, she's been able to use her own experiences to connect and engage with young people.

And it's because of dedicated teachers and specialists like Sharon that students like Skylar Delaney have found the right network they need in order to succeed.

Before entering JAG, Skylar had a difficult start in life and didn't yet realize his own potential. After three years in the JAG program, Skylar is an honor roll student and was Alexandria Middle Magnet Student of the Year. And now, as a 9<sup>th</sup> grader at Bolton High School, he serves as a National JAG speaker sharing his story with other JAG students across the country.

Sharon and Skylar, please stand. Thank you both for your contributions to JAG-LA and for being here today.

When I became governor, I made a commitment to double the number of JAG programs in the state. We've already accomplished that. Now, we have 124, and I am setting a goal to get to 200 programs by the end of my second term.

Another way we are focusing on workforce development is through the recent creation of the Governor's Advisory Council on Rural Revitalization.

As part of this council, we will be addressing everything from better broadband and infrastructure to more opportunities for apprenticeship programs and dual enrollment. And, we're going to continue to land major economic development deals - not only in bigger, urban areas, but also in more rural areas.

If you want to know just how important even a small economic development project can be in a rural community, just ask Kelvin Jackson. Kelvin was born and raised in Lake Providence, LA, served in the Navy, and is the single father of three daughters ages 8, 13, and 14. For years, Kelvin commuted over an hour each way every day. And then in August of last year, Epic Piping announced the creation of a 50-job pipe fabrication facility at the Port of Lake Providence.

When compared to larger projects in big cities, 50 jobs may not seem like a lot, but in Kelvin's own words, "This has lifted the spirits of the community." Today, Kelvin serves as the Lead CNC Operator for Epic Piping, and, above all, is now able to spend more time at home as a dad.

Kelvin, please stand. Thank you for being here today and sharing your story with us!

For our communities in the Southern region of the state, coastal restoration is on track to create thousands of new job opportunities, billions in economic impact, and with the completion of the projects we will start by the end of this term, we will be creating more land than we are losing.

These are all examples of how we are diversifying our economy, creating jobs and equipping workers with the training they need to fill those jobs.

But there is only so much progress we can make if we aren't paying our workers enough to be competitive with other states.

Louisiana is one of only five states to not have adopted a state minimum wage. Congress, as you know, is out of the business. They have made that very clear. It's on us now. It's on all of you in this room.

We know what needs to be done and the people of Louisiana overwhelmingly want it to be done.

Let's make this the year we decide not to fall further behind. I am recommending a gradual increase that will begin with \$9 per hour on January 1, 2021 and will move up to \$10 an hour six months later in July.

I am also supporting a measure to prohibit employers from retaliating against employees who discuss or disclose their salary, and bar employers from asking an applicant's salary history as a condition of employment.

It is simply unacceptable that Louisiana continues to have the largest gender pay gap in the country.

Quite frankly, I am ashamed. All of us should be ashamed.

Louisianans want and deserve better.

Pay transparency is about preventing anyone, man or woman, from losing their job for simply discussing their salaries. No one should be fired for that. Together, we can change this. Studies show that when there is transparency, there is also more equity.

And when it comes to salary history, what a person currently earns or has earned in the past should neither limit nor dictate their future earning potential. Employers can still ask about salary requirements or expectations. That's fair, but what isn't fair is using a person's salary history as an excuse to not compensate them according to their experience and education. For

women, who are often already paid less than their male counterparts, it makes it that much more difficult to bridge the divide.

Another way in which we can support both the health and financial stability of families is by improving workplace accommodations for pregnant women. Often times, women who are pregnant will get reassigned to desk duty or, if that's not available, may lose their jobs altogether. But the reality is that pregnant employees can often continue to do their current duties with small accommodations like providing a stool to sit on or more frequent breaks. This will not only help support women in the workplace, it will also promote the health of both mom and baby.

Which leads me to my next priority this session, the implementation of a Maternal Mortality Review. This will ensure that any hospital or birthing center has written policies and procedures to investigate any maternal death and to do so in a timely manner.

Louisiana maternal mortality rates exceed the national average, and black women are four times more likely to experience a pregnancy-related death.

This is unacceptable, especially when so many of these deaths are preventable.

To that end, the state has already taken steps that have reduced severe blood loss by 30% and high blood pressure by nearly 40% at the time of birth. Importantly, we have made great strides to make sure those gains are shared more equally, reducing the racial gap in those measures by more than 80%.

I know that this is an issue we can all agree needs to be addressed, so I am asking you to join me.

In keeping with the theme of putting children and families first, I am honored to be serving as co-chair this year for the Administration for Children and Families 2020 Adoption Challenge. This is a national initiative to reduce the number of children in foster care who are waiting for a forever home. In Louisiana, there are currently more than 400 foster children who have been freed for adoption but still need a permanent home. In the past few years, we have made huge strides in increasing the number of adoptions from foster care. Let's make Louisiana an example for the rest of the country by finding a loving home for all children in need.

Finally, I want to spend some time talking about something I know is going to be a hot topic this session – the high cost of auto insurance.

Let's be clear – auto insurance costs too much in Louisiana. Period.

That is why I am supporting a series of bills, all being carried by Sen. Jay Luneau, that will actually help to lower auto insurance rates for people in Louisiana and prohibit certain arbitrary penalties.

Here's a list of factors that auto insurance companies can currently use to legally increase your rates:

Your gender

Your credit score

Losing your spouse

Being deployed in the military

I think we can all agree that our auto insurance rates should be based on our driving records. Not on if you're female, or poor, or widowed, or putting your life on the line for our country. These bills would prohibit penalties based on those factors.

We have 130 guardsmen currently mobilized, and we are about to have nearly 2,000 more deployed at the end of the year. And we should do everything in our power to make sure they are not penalized when they return.

Making these changes to avoid discrimination in the setting of insurance rates is the common sense thing to do, but more importantly, it's the right thing to do.

If in addition to real insurance reform you want to pursue other efforts, I am willing to sit down with you and discuss with a goal of finding common ground.

Something else I am hopeful that we can all find common ground on is encouraging all residents to participate in the 2020 Census.

Starting this week, information will begin going out to homes on how to participate. We all know that it is vital for everyone to be counted because of the direct impact it has on their lives and our ability to serve them in the best possible way.

Earlier in my remarks, I mentioned the oak tree at the Governor's Mansion that bears the phrase, "Tall oaks from little acorns grow." It's a powerful, and accurate, way to describe the importance of education. But it also holds true to the work we do in this building. Progress doesn't happen overnight. It starts with a vision, a dream, or an idea. Sometimes, it starts with a single bill. And then over time what began as a seed of faith will grow as tall and strong as an oak tree, outlasting all of us here today.



The people of Louisiana elected us to create positive change that will benefit generations to come. And together, there is no seed we can't sow, especially if we continue to build on the bipartisanship that has served us so well.

Despite the obvious challenges that we face, I am as optimistic as ever about the future of this great state. And I look forward to forging new partnerships this session as we enter a new year, a new term, and a new chapter for Louisiana.

God bless you all, God bless the United States of America, and God bless the great state of Louisiana.