The elimination of what we call the “textbook tax” here in Indiana was something our caucus has been talking about for years, and it was put forth this session in the governor’s budget proposal. Thankfully, we were able to get that language successfully included in HB 1001. Unfortunately, those textbook fees are not fully covered in the House-proposed budget, instead passing the costs off to schools. My caucus will be pushing for an actual elimination of the full cost of book fees for Hoosiers and schools in the Senate budget.

We’re also still in the midst of trying to get proportionality when it comes to the allocation of new dollars for education. We’ve always been very proud about the fact that we spend over 60 percent of our budget on K-12 education. Unfortunately, this year, we’re going to see our voucher system get an increase of approximately 30 percent in funding while total base student funding for traditional public schools, where 90 percent of students are educated, receive a 3.3 percent increase in FY 2024 and even less in FY 2025.

We’re advocating to fully fund recommendations of the Public Health Commission. Right now, we rank 49th compared to the rest of the country when it comes to public health, and we feel we’ve got some momentum moving for an increase in the funding for public health (from approximately $7.5 million to $240 million). Then, from what we put under our health initiative, we want to eliminate the “pink tax” — taxes on menstrual products that we see as a tax on women.

In the area of criminal justice, you are the co-author of a bipartisan bill this year [SB 136] to establish a database with the names of people who are prohibited from carrying firearms. Why is this needed?

We knew that when we passed our permitless-carry law in 2022, law enforcement officers would not have the information readily available to determine whether or not a person was eligible [to carry a firearm]. Now that we have that permitless-carry law in place, it’s only smart for us to be able to allow law enforcement officers to have these tools readily accessible. It’s going to be used with discretion, so there’s some guardrails we need to put on it, but it’s definitely something that we need from a public safety standpoint.

On another measure, you have been vocal in your opposition to a proposed constitutional amendment eliminating access to bail to individuals deemed a “substantial risk to the public.” What are your concerns about a change like this?

Bail was created to allow people to access freedom before they were convicted of a crime, and was available for everyone except those suspected of murder or treason. What we do with SJR 1 is say, it doesn’t matter if you are charged with misdemeanor battery or murder, the court or the prosecutor can determine that you’re a threat to society, the public at large, and deny you bail.

Bail shouldn’t be a way to discriminate against poor people and people of color. To know that we already have these disparities that exist, and then to further restrict bail, is just exacerbating that issue.