

EDITORIAL

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SCHOOL FUNDING, VOUCHERS, AND THE ASD

It is back to work for state legislators. The first week of the legislature has been very busy. While criticizing politicians is a national activity and a form of amusement for many, the truth is that most of these folks are good people, working hard, and trying to do the right thing for our state. It is always the good, bad, and ugly in any political system.

The Tennessee Constitution requires the General Assembly is required to provide for the maintenance, support, and eligibility standards of a system of free public schools. The current formula is subject to ongoing litigation, and the amount the state currently spends on public education is among the bottom in the nation. We are optimistic that we can move forward. On Tuesday, January 11th the Commissioner of Education, Penny Schwinn unveiled a potential new school funding formula she calls the "Funding for Student Success."

The process has been somewhat rushed, and they should have started much earlier. There are some concerns about use of Gates Foundation money, and involvement of national groups in this process. Many subcommittees still have not finished their work. But in general, there is a lot to like in this proposal, as it is pretty inclusive of what we are already funding now. However, the devil is always in the details. For example, the draft sent out does not include funding amounts. In fiscal 2021-2022, the state is on track to spend at least \$5.6 billion in state dollars on K-12 education, though that figure doesn't include federal and local funding toward K-12 education. A side-by-side comparison would be useful.

The new framework would include money for educator salaries, nurses, counselors, and student supports, intervention resources, and technology — along with varying district-specific needs. Some of those items need to be identified and spelled out. In addition, dollars for specific student subgroups that are sometimes harder or more expensive to educate like students who are living in poverty, English language learners and students with disabilities, or students who qualify for Section 504 dyslexia plans would get more money. Again, a little more clarity will be needed and safeguards in place to make sure those designations are not used to get more funding.

The state also plans to allocate additional funding for tutoring programs, career and technical education programs to districts considered "fast-growing." The tutoring program needs closer examination and more accountability. Likewise, we need to make sure we are indeed tracking career and technical education more carefully. We need to know the number enrolled, how many are passing recognized industry certifications, and then on how many are entering the workforce.

SUMMARY

It is back to work for state legislators and we will be watching what is going on with School Funding, Vouchers and the ASD.

Governor Bill Lee made clear in a [December press conference](#) that the funding formula was not about vouchers. "I'm a strong advocate for school choice and continue to be, but this is really not about choice issues for education," [according to Lee](#). On the same day the funding draft was released, Senator Mike Bell and Representative Michael Curcio introduced legislation that would expand the [Education Savings Accounts](#) (vouchers). Currently, the law which applies only to Nashville and Memphis was halted by courts. It is scheduled to be heard by the Tennessee Supreme Court in February.

Memphis and Nashville are the systems that stayed pretty much remote last year. Subsequently, both school systems saw a significant regression in state test scores last year. The Bell/Curcio bill would expand the law to make vouchers available to students in any Tennessee district that mandates masks or does not offer at least 180 days of in-person learning due to the coronavirus pandemic. This bill would also make the voucher program applicable statewide.

Currently, the voucher law enacted by the state in 2019 has been declared unconstitutional. There are likely not enough affordable private schools in Memphis and Nashville to meet the demand should parents take a voucher. The state has very little oversight on private schools and there are no requirements on private schools which would prohibit them from mandating masks. However, a shared consensus is emerging: remote learning did not work academically and mentally for most children. On that, we can all agree.

The Achievement School District (ASD), the state's turnaround program for low-performing schools, was created in 2010 as part of Tennessee's Race to the Top plan. Currently, Memphis and Nashville are the only cities that have schools in the ASD. The bill says vouchers also would be extended to students zoned to attend an ASD school. Both sides of the political aisle know ASD is a failed concept.

Speaker Cameron Sexton and many conservative lawmakers have discussed it as a failure. State Representative Antonio Parkinson has pointed out its failures for years. In regards to the ASD model, conservatives bemoaned the loss of local control when it was first proposed. For others, it was the lack of resources and not understanding the underpinnings of poverty that concerned policymakers. Both are still accurate today.

Tennessee has spent nearly \$1 billion on the underperforming schools' program. Data shows ASD is not working and has been less effective than district-run schools. Lack of certified teachers and continual teacher turnover are constant issues. Student absentee rate is also higher, and the program has not worked as intended for student achievement. There is no data to support that the program is, or was, or will help all students.

The Tennessee General Assembly works best when they hear from Tennesseans on issues that matter most to them. We believe issue advocacy is good, and it is a First Amendment right to express an opinion to policymakers. In education, they need to hear from parents and educators regularly. You can visit the state website at www.tn.gov to contact your legislators.

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