

State legislators reconvened at noon on January 8, 2013, for the first session of the 108th General Assembly. Education will once again garner a great deal of attention from legislators, and school board members must stay informed and active with their legislative advocacy efforts.

The following issues will be focal points during this legislative session. Learn the issues and arguments and discuss these items with your local board.

VOUCHERS FOR PRIVATE SCHOOLS

TSBA will oppose efforts to fund vouchers for private schools with public dollars. Like many states around the country, Tennessee is seeing a strong push to implement a system of vouchers. Several groups have poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into political and advertising campaigns. The likelihood for passage will be at an all-time high this year with Governor Haslam potentially sponsoring or supporting the movement.

According to a recent report, some of the supporting rhetoric has greatly shifted over the past decade from advocating improved student achievement to advocating parental choice. As local board members, you understand the need to increase and support parental involvement, but vouchers are not the answer.

The argument regarding parental choice is contradicted by the very language of the legislative proposals on this issue. The proposals allow private schools to have full discretion in deciding who they admit. These schools could deny students who have disabilities, need remedial assistance, or require additional services or attention. The option lies with these schools, not the parents or students.

Also, the proposals target those students attending “failing schools.” Everyone agrees that students deserve an excellent education, and there are already options for these students through other traditional public schools, magnet schools, and charter schools.

Additionally, several studies have concluded that voucher programs do not result in a significant increase in performance for recipients. The Center for Education Policy released a July 2011 report that reviewed the research and reports that have been completed on vouchers over the past decade. In looking at the data aggregately, the report states, *“Since 2000, more evidence has accumulated about the impact of vouchers on student test scores, particularly from longer-term studies of the publicly funded voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and D.C.”* and *“...these studies have generally found no clear advantage in academic achievement for students attending private schools with vouchers.”*

Lastly, we are making great strides to improve education in public schools. Tennessee is recognized nationally for its reforms to increase standards, expectations, and achievement. To divert attention and resources from these efforts is discouraging and untimely.

STATEWIDE AUTHORIZER OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

TSBA will oppose efforts to create a statewide or regional authorizer of charter schools. Nearly every charter school across the state has been authorized by an elected board of education. The members of these boards are directly accountable to the citizens for all of their decisions regarding public education.

There are two underlying principles at issue with this proposal. This new structure would enable appointed bodies to make decisions for locally elected bodies and usurp the public's direct line of accountability. This new structure would also create a system whereby bureaucrats in Nashville would make decisions over local boards that are much more in tune with the priorities and needs of local school systems.

Charter schools have been touted as another "tool in the toolbox" for school systems to use to address needs and serve students. However, this new structure would abandon this mentality and create a divide between traditional schools and charter schools working together and learning from each other.

LIFTING THE PROHIBITION ON SPECIAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

TSBA will support legislation to remove the statutory prohibition on school systems converting to special school districts. School boards are held accountable for meeting strict federal and state performance standards and requirements. In fact, school board members can be removed from office and school systems may be taken over by the state if such standards are not met. Yet most school boards are completely dependent on state and local legislative bodies for the fiscal resources needed to meet the very mandates that have been placed upon them. This accountability without authority is simply unreasonable and leads to unproductive funding battles and finger-pointing between boards of education and local funding bodies. And, in the end, the public has no way of truly knowing which entity to hold accountable when school performance is not up to community standards.

Currently, 14 of Tennessee's school districts maintain special school district status, which empowers the local board of education with the limited fiscal authority to control its finances within the tax rate established by the General Assembly. Local boards do not have taxing authority. Rather, they have the ability to control their budgets in order to meet the goals of the school district. They focus entirely on education, and those dollars may not be spent on any other measure.

In 1982, the General Assembly placed a prohibition on the creation of additional special school districts. This prohibition was a result of the proliferation of small districts all across the state, not because of concerns over taxes or budgets or accountability. Special school districts increase the chances for improved local education funding since residents are more likely to support a tax increase if they know all of the funds will be spent locally on education. Local legislative bodies often increase taxes in order to promote education. However, very often those dollars are diverted to other causes rather than education.

ENROLLMENTS AT VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

TSBA will support legislation to limit an LEA's ability to enroll out of district students in a virtual school. Currently, there is one virtual school serving students statewide. This school was recently found to be in the bottom 11% of all schools with academic performance. This school attracts students and their funding while the LEA where the child is located often bears the responsibility for addressing issues such as special education needs and truancy.

Virtual education has many advantages, and many school systems are developing virtual programs to serve their students. However, this form of instruction must be viewed in relation to all of the other options and opportunities for students and school systems. In the event an LEA develops a virtual program that may be beneficial to students in a region, this LEA should enter into agreements enabling students from other LEAs to attend the virtual program on a full-time or part-time basis.

FEES FOR INSPECTION OF RECORDS

While LEAs may charge a reasonable fee for copying records requested under the law, if someone makes a request simply to inspect records, LEAs must make these records available without charge regardless of how many records are requested. Often times, too, LEAs are required to protect identifying information in records which requires copies to be made, information to be redacted, and new copies made to comply with the request.

A reasonable fee to cover the costs of reproduction and man-hours involved in these inspections would be very helpful to LEAs. While we do not want to create a hurdle or an undue burden on citizens who wish to inspect records, reasonable fees for exceptional requests need to be permitted.

GUNS AND SCHOOL SECURITY

With the tragic events of the shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, this issue will certainly surface on Capitol Hill. Several legislators have already mentioned proposals from employing additional school resource officers to allowing all school employees to carry a firearm if they possess a carry permit. While the specifics are not yet known for these proposals, school boards must be active in reviewing safety and security procedures and stressing their positions to legislators. We all want to ensure the safety of students, but a thorough conversation is needed on all aspects of school safety and security.

Your Role is Vital

While TSBA provides a collective voice for all of Tennessee's school board members on Capitol Hill, it cannot replace the individual relationships and influences that board members can have on their local legislators. A call, letter, or email from a board member will have a major impact on what a legislator chooses to support or oppose. Form those relationships and continually communicate with your legislators, and together our advocacy efforts will enhance public education.