Leadership changes and legislative focus

The 113th Tennessee General Assembly began its first session on January 19th, 2023. The Senate Chamber hosted the inaugural session to select the new leadership, followed by the swearing in of the Senate and House of Representatives. Penny Schwinn, the State Commissioner of Education, addressed the legislators on the potential issues the General Assembly might discuss. Senator Randy McNally, the Speaker of the Senate, was re-elected as Speaker. Representatives Debra Moody of Memphis, starting as chair of the House Education Administration Committee, and Sen. Jon Lundberg of Bristol returned as chairman of the Senate Education Committee.

As for the House Education Administration Committee, Rep. Cameron Sexton will chair the House Education Instruction Subcommittee, and Rep. Kirk Haston will chair the House Higher Education Subcommittee. The House Education Instruction Subcommittee will focus on reviewing upcoming training for teachers, while the House Higher Education Subcommittee will oversee the development of laws and regulations that affect post-secondary education in Tennessee.

Proponents of the Senate Higher Education Subcommittee will also focus on supporting local community colleges and technical schools. Additionally, Senate Education Engagement Director John Hollinghurst is excited to announce the launch of the 2023 EmpowerED League Leader Application. The application is designed to provide opportunities for students to join the EmpowerED Network and bring their voices to the legislative process.

Several notable education bills were introduced this week, including a ban on the carry of concealed handguns on school property. Rep. Don Wright’s bill, HB0041, authorizes directors of schools to adopt policies allowing the carry of concealed weapons on school property and in school vehicles. The bill also includes a provision that students and school personnel joining law enforcement agencies must possess and carry a concealed handgun with a training certificate.

Other legislation introduced includes HB0063, which would empower the Tennessee Department of Education to pay the salary of a local education agency employee who is a law enforcement officer. HB0132 introduces a bill that would allow the state to authorize LEAs to expand the number of local education agency employees who have been trained and certified for the performance of law enforcement duties.

Several other measures aim to improve educational equity and reduce teacher shortages. HB0080 would create a school voucher program for local education agencies. HB0093 introduces a bill that would allow school districts to adopt a policy allowing their employees to carry a concealed handgun on public school premises when they are on duty.

Other bills introduced would provide training for public school employees on implicit bias and agriculture education. HB0158 introduces a bill that would authorize the board of the state board of education, the state board of higher education, and the department of agriculture to include agriculture education in the state’s educational curriculum. Sponsors of the bill believe it would be an effective and efficient way to provide agricultural education to students.

Legislators on the potential issues the General Assembly might discuss are being informed of the needs and concerns of the Tennessee education community through the Education Trust’s Legislative Newsletter, Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA) Report, and Tennessee Teacher Leadership Network (TTLN). The newsletter is available to building your advocacy in Tennessee and to inform policy makers. The newsletter features important updates, including the opening of the Senate Chamber, sworn in as the Speaker of the House, and Lt. Governor and Speaker of the House. The newsletter also features the agenda for the first session and how students can continue bridging policy and practice.

Legislative Newsletter 1_13_23

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