



LEGISLATIVE INSIDER

SHELBY COUNTY SCHOOLS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE NEWSLETTER

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111th TN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

April marks the fourth month of the 111th TN General Assembly. During this time, legislators hammered away at bills in various committees. With only a few days remaining in the legislative session, focus has turned to those bills that passed out of committee and are calendared for the House and Senate.

While on the campaign trail, Bill Lee was never silent about his desire to provide more school options for Tennessee students, but many believed that he would wait until later in his administration before tackling contentious legislation. However, during his State of the State address, all speculation ceased when Governor Lee proposed two signature legislative initiatives that he said would provide Tennessee families with more education choices for their children.

Education Savings Account (ESA) Act

On March 19th, Gov. Lee's intent became evident when flesh was added to the bones of HB0939 in the House Curriculum, Testing, & Innovation Subcommittee. The Education Savings Account Act, referred to as a "bold program" by the Governor, would allow parents to receive tax-payer dollars (vouchers), reallocated from public school BEP funding (state and local), to pay for qualified educational services for their child (e.g., private school tuition, transportation related to education, school uniforms, and college tuition/fees). Despite the barrage of questions and concerns, the subcommittee voted in the affirmative to move the bill as amended to the full House Education Committee. Two representatives, including Tom Leatherwood (R-Arlington), requested to be recorded as voting no. Fast forward to March 27th, HB0939 passed its second hurdle when it cleared the House Education Committee by a 14-9 vote with one present not voting. Followed by passage by the Government Operations Committee with two representatives from Shelby County, Camper and Hardaway, voting against the bill. After undergoing several amendments the bill breezed through the House Finance, Ways, and Means committees and on April 23rd was presented on the House floor. With battle lines drawn, opponents of the bill, including Shelby County Delegation members, Parkinson, Camper, and Miller highlighted the negative impacts that the bill would have on Shelby County Schools. The debate in the House lasted almost two hours before a vote was taken resulting in a tie, 49-49. In a rare move the tally board was left open to allow legislators a chance to change their vote. After wrangling, Jason Zachery (R-Knoxville) flipped his no vote to yes resulting in passage of HB0939 by 50-48.

On the Senate side, SB0795 got off to a slower start, but with fewer committees to pass. The bill breezed through the Senate Education Committee with a 6-3 vote. Senators Akbari (D-Memphis) Dickerson and Hensley (both R-Nashville) voted no. Soon afterwards disagreements among Republicans became obvious and amendments began to surface. It quickly became obvious that moving SB0795 through the General Assembly would prove to be a marathon, not a sprint. To quiet concerns and rally support for the bill, Board Members and Superintendents of the five (5) school districts effected by the proposal were invited to the State Capitol by the Governor to discuss their concerns.



Board Members and Superintendent at the Capitol opposing the ESA and discussing SCS educational options

EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNT ACT BILL HIGHLIGHTS



It initially appeared as though the bill would fail in Finance, Ways, and Means. To bolster chances for passage out of the committee an amendment was added to change eligibility requirements from students zoned to attend a school district with three or more schools (same as HB0939) to ten or more schools in the bottom 10 percent - leaving only Shelby County and Metro-Nashville school districts. With a 6-5 vote, the bill passed out of committee.

The debate over SB0795 continued to the Senate floor where Raumes Akbari (D-Memphis) voiced concerns about the number of school choice options available in Shelby County Schools. She highlighted the district's successes and the number of schools removed from the Priority school list; and encouraged investment in proven programs such as the I-Zone. Joined by her colleague, freshman Senator Katrina Robinson (D-Memphis) discussed her experience with private schools and stated that a "pilot program" (term used after the eligibility scope changed to ten or more schools in the bottom 10 percent) without a "sharp end date" would be a "predatory program". After nearly two and a half hours of debate, the Senate voted 20-13 in favor of the bill.



While passing both chambers of the legislature was a major victory for Governor Lee and proponents of the bill, differences between the senate and house versions of the bill must be resolved in order to move to the Governor's desk to be signed into law.

Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act

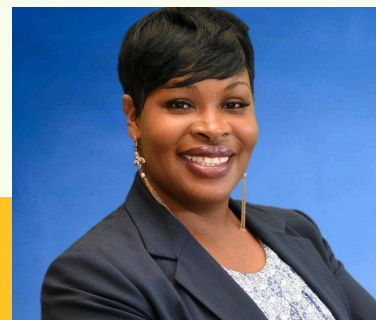
On another front, the Governor's second education initiative was spelled out in HB0940/SB0796. This legislation opened the door to an overhaul of the State's charter school law and created an independent state authorizer, referred to as the "Tennessee Public Charter School Commission". The Commission will replace the State Board of Education as one of the three authorizing agents by January 1, 2021.



As introduced, the bill would have allowed charter school applicants to bypass local school boards for approval. Faced with resistance from both sides of the aisle, the bill was scaled back to allow the Commission to serve as an appellate charter school authorizer and the local education agency (LEA) for any public charter school it authorizes.

The nine commission members will be appointed by the Governor, subject to confirmation by each house of the General Assembly. A majority of the members of the Tennessee public charter school commission must reside within the geographic boundary of an LEA in which at least one public charter school operates.

The Commission will employ a director of schools.



*Stephanie P. Love
Legislative Committee Chair*

Stay tuned for the next issue of the SCS Legislative Insider featuring an overview of important passed legislation