

Tennessee General Assembly will start 2010 with Special Session on education reform

The second session of the 106th General Assembly will start differently than most years, as lawmakers will be heading into a special session on January 12th to address education issues. The governor called the special session after it was determined Tennessee has a shot at Race to the Top dollars, a federal grant program set up through the Recovery Act. The federal government has set aside approximately \$4 billion for the Race to the Top program. States have a shot at the money, provided they can come up with innovative ways to improve education in their state prior to a deadline of January 19.

The U.S. Department of Education has announced that priority will be given to those states who are already implementing a plan by that date, so Tennessee must move swiftly. Legislators have not yet seen the actual proposal and have only been given a general outline of what the plan will include. The General Assembly is expected to take up a K-12 overhaul first, followed by proposed changes to higher education.

Kindergarten - 12th Grade Plan **Low performing schools**

The governor has indicated that part of the plan will be to intervene sooner in those schools that are failing. If a school is low-performing, the state would be ready to take action. In 2008 lawmakers changed accountability measures to put Tennessee more in sync with No Child Left Behind. Several schools in the state have been dangerously close to state intervention before. The new proposal will likely include new parameters by which schools will be classified as “failing” and affix new accountability standards to the plan.

Evaluation system for K-12 schools

Another part of the proposal will aim to change the way Tennessee evaluates teachers. Tennessee already has an extensive evaluation database that measures students' achievements. Lawmakers will discuss tying those evaluations more closely to teacher pay and tenure. Former U.S. Senator Bill Frist's SCORE initiative includes some of these recommendations, such as “directly linking tenure decisions to the teacher effectiveness measure, allowing student achievement gains to be included as one component of the teacher effectiveness measure before a final tenure decision must be reached.”

Graduation rates

The last prong of the K-12 plan will include improving high school graduation rates and placing more emphasis on preparing students for post-secondary education. Lawmakers are already discussing ways to encourage high school graduates to consider community colleges and technical schools as viable options to four-year institutions. In the same vein, the General Assembly will likely consider making it easier to transfer credits between institutions to make post-secondary work flexible enough to meet the needs of more graduating seniors.

Higher Education Plan

With higher education, lawmakers will examine the governor's proposal to tie some funding to performance, which would be measured by the number of students who complete their degree. Other considerations to be discussed in the higher education overhaul would be changing the credit transferring process, eliminating remedial education in four-year institutions, and allowing students to dual-enroll in two and four-year institutions. The goal would be to direct more students to post-secondary work that fits their needs. The plan would include some streamlining details, such as simplifying the paperwork needed to transfer, enroll, or dual-enroll.

Worker's Compensation

The Governor may also include worker's compensation in the order for the Special Session. Lawmakers have been discussing the possibility of delaying the implementation of Public Chapter 1041. If the legislature is directed to take up the issue of worker's compensation during the special session, they will likely consider a delay in the implementation of the law.

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