

Legislative Update From Senator Joey Hensley, MD

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Date: Thursday, July 23, 2020, 04:33 PM CDT

Senate

State of Tennessee

Legislative Update from *Senator Joey Hensley, MD*

111th General Assembly - 2020 Session Education related Legislation

The 2020-2021 budget continues Tennessee's efforts to prioritize education and boost student achievement. The budget invests \$50.3 million to fully fund growth and inflation in the state's Basic Education Program (BEP). It also fully funds the growth in the Department of Children's Services to take care of children who are in state custody. Education is of the utmost importance and is something that we should continue to improve each year. The legislation below was passed this session to enhance education in Tennessee and provide more opportunities to young Tennesseans across the state.

Legislation ensures students, teachers, and schools are not penalized due to state of emergency – A new law passed this year ensures that students, teachers, principals and school districts are not adversely affected by closures or other school-related hardships due to COVID-19 and the March 3 tornadoes. The legislation, which I was a co-sponsor of, waives certain K-12 education rules and requirements to help those impacted by Tennessee's state of emergency. It requires the State Board of Education to revise high school graduation requirements to ensure that no high school seniors affected by the school closures fail to receive a high school diploma for which the student was on track and otherwise eligible to receive.

Due to school closures, the new statute waived the requirement for TNReady and end of course assessments that were scheduled for the 2019-2020 school year, unless school districts administered them voluntarily. If such voluntary tests were administered, scores for students, teachers and school districts can only be used if it reflects positive growth or a higher grade.

In addition, the legislation waived the requirement for 180 days of classroom instruction and BEP-related requirements to ensure that school districts and employees continue to receive full state funding despite any lengthy school closures. It also waived the 11th grade post-secondary readiness assessment for the 2019-2020 school year. Finally, the bill authorized the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation to create emergency rules to protect financial aid and credit opportunities, including dual enrollment courses, for high school students.

Deadlines for higher education financial aid programs waived due to COVID-19 delays –Legislation was approved to ensure students affected by Tennessee’s state of emergency are not denied access to higher education financial aid programs and scholarships due to specific calendar deadlines required under state law. The measure authorized the executive director for the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC) to temporarily suspend, modify, or waive deadlines or other non-academic eligibility requirements in law rule or policy for any of Tennessee’s financial aid programs when an emergency declaration is issued by the governor.

Some of the state’s financial aid programs rely heavily on statutorily fixed dates in the calendar for students to meet certain deadlines. Previously, there was no latitude either in the statutes or in rule to provide the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation the ability to waive or suspend those fixed deadlines. The legislation provides for such latitude due to COVID-related school closures and the changing circumstances for high school attendance across the state. For example, graduating seniors in high school who are seeking to use the Tennessee Promise scholarship are required to attend certain meetings, submit proof of community service, and meet with their mentors by certain dates set by law. If a student does not do so, they cease to be eligible for the scholarship permanently. This new law protects the tens of thousands of eligible high school graduates by giving necessary but temporary authority to state officials to make those deadline decisions as they arise due to COVID-19. It will be repealed on June 30, 2021.

Legislation encourages school districts to provide students with a wide variety of career-based experiences -- State lawmakers approved a new law this year encouraging Tennessee school districts to provide their students with a wide variety of career-based experiences to help them make informed decisions about future careers. The measure calls for more on-the-job training for students, as well as opportunities to build professional relationships and learn about workplace expectations. Examples are job shadowing, internships, and field trips to businesses. It also encourages school districts to work with local industry to help facilitate these opportunities.

Creation of a bank of possible TCAP questions is approved to help teachers prepare their students — Legislation giving teachers more tools to help them prepare their students for end-of-year assessments was approved during the 2020 session. This legislation, which I sponsored, requires the Department of Education (DOE) to release a bank of possible Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) questions to local education agencies (LEAs) that are aligned to the current assessments. The measure requires the DOE commissioner to begin developing the question bank no later than July 1, 2020 so teachers will know what to expect on the TCAPs going forward.

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