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EDUCATION

A dozen lawmakers, officials on panels reviewing Tennessee education funding didn't attend meetings

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State leaders have long touted the importance of a months-long review of how Tennessee funds education, asserting that lawmakers and stakeholders on 18 subcommittees made invaluable contributions to a proposed new way to pay for schools.

But nearly a dozen lawmakers and State Board of Education members skipped these discussions, an analysis by The Tennessean found.

The subcommittees, appointed by Gov. Bill Lee and the Tennessee Department of Education, each met six times since Lee and Education Commissioner Penny Schwinn launched the funding review in October.

Tennessee funding proposal: Gov. Bill Lee to submit new education funding proposal to lawmakers by mid-February

Lee appointed parents, teachers and school leaders, advocates, community leaders and 52 lawmakers and other state officials to the panels, which were expected to review public feedback and make policy recommendations.

The Tennessean reviewed attendance sheets and video recordings of 108 subcommittee meetings, in addition to the three steering committee meetings held as of Feb. 3.

The Tennessean's review found seven lawmakers, four state board members and the state agriculture commissioner missed all of their subcommittee's six meetings. Another five lawmakers only attended one.

Here's who didn't attend:

- Sen. Paul Bailey, R-Sparta
- Sen. Mike Bell, R-Riceville
- Rep. Clark Boyd, R-Lebanon
- Rep. Michele Carringer, R-Knoxville
- Rep. Jeremy Faison, R-Cosby
- Rep. Gary Hicks, R-Rogerville
- Rep. Eddie Mannis, R-Knoxville
- Darrell Cobbins of the State Board of Education
- Gordon Ferguson of the State Board of Education
- Larry Jensen of the State Board of Education
- Nate Morrow of the State Board of Education
- Tennessee Commissioner of Agriculture Charlie Hatcher

The governor is set to propose a new funding formula for how the state spends more than $6 billion on schools to lawmakers this month and education department officials say they are "very pleased" with the engagement process so far.

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Sen. Raumesh Akbari, D-Memphis, who's a member of the Senate Education Committee, said she found the subcommittee process valuable because it was a "robust conversation."

"I don't know why some members were unable to attend." Akbari said. "I found it gave people who might not necessarily have a seat at the education table an opportunity to provide really meaningful input."

Senate Minority Leader Jeff Yarbro, D-Nashville, criticized the overall effort to create a new formula. He said no serious attempt to review such an important topic could take place through a "75-day sprint" over the holidays.

Where were the lawmakers?

Some absent lawmakers said they had scheduling conflicts. Others said they weren't initially aware they had been appointed to a committee. The Tennessee Department of Education released the names of subcommittee members over the course of several weeks in October.

Hatcher said the meetings "conflicted with professional obligations," but he viewed the recordings afterward to remain informed. He added he did attend one of the department's eight in-person town halls at UT Southern in Pulaski on Nov. 2.

Public feedback: Hundreds attended eight town halls across Tennessee. Here's what they said about how to fund schools

Faison also said the meetings conflicted with other responsibilities, and that he viewed the meetings after they were posted online.

Mannis said his absences were "simply a scheduling conflict" and doesn't reflect "his support of the Governor's approach."

"Unfortunately, there were many schedules involved and the legislature was not in session," Mannis said in an email. "I take my responsibility here in the legislature very seriously and I regret very much not being able to participate to the level that I would have expected."

Bell, who serves on the Senate Education Committee and is pushing a number of education issues including an education savings account bill this session, said in an email he had "no excuse."

"I have no excuse for missing the meetings other than the busyness of life, timing of the calls, and my general dislike for electronic meetings," Bell said.

Sarah Noel, a legislative assistant for Boyd said she was unaware that Boyd was on a committee and that's why he missed some of the early meetings. Boyd eventually attended the meetings virtually, she said in an email.

The Tennessean could not confirm whether Boyd attended the meetings, which took place via Microsoft Teams and are posted publicly on the education department's website. Department attendance records did not list Boyd as attending.

Bailey also said he didn't know he had not been appointed to a subcommittee until after it had met multiple times.

"Once I became aware of the meetings I had scheduling conflicts and was unable to attend," Bailey said in a statement.

Bailey and Boyd were both appointed to the Chambers of Commerce and Industry Subcommittee. The state board member also appointed to the committee, Jensen, did not attend the meetings.

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Gordon Ferguson, the president and CEO of Saint Thomas Rutherford Hospital, just wrapped up his five-year term on the State Board of Education. He was one of four state board members who didn't attend their respective subcommittee meetings.

Ferguson told The Tennessean he informed the subcommittee chair he wouldn't be able to make the meetings due to his work schedule.

But he said he thought the state's committee process was appropriate and did his best to watch the recordings and read the minutes of the meetings.

An assistant for Carringer said she was unavailable for comment. Hicks and three state board members — Cobbins, Jensen and Morrow — didn't respond to requests for comment.

The purpose of the subcommittees

Subcommittee participation was not compulsory for lawmakers or members of the State Board of Education, according to the Tennessee Department of Education.

The 18 subcommittees each centered around specific student subgroups or aspects of education, such as English language learners, students with disabilities, teachers, urban districts and post-secondary readiness.

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Brian Blackley, the spokesperson for the education department, said "the department is very pleased with the engagement of the 18 subcommittees and the steering committee.

"Tennessee has established a tremendous model for public engagement in a process for creating a new educational funding strategy, Blackley said in an email. "The process has been robust."

During his State of the State address this year, Lee proposed $1 billion in new, recurring spending for education, including $750 million that would eventually go toward any new funding formula. Last week, Lee said he expected to unveil his proposal to lawmakers by mid-February.

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