



# TACIR

The Tennessee Advisory Commission  
on Intergovernmental Relations



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## **MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Commission Members

**FROM:** Cliff Lippard *Cliff*  
Executive Director

**DATE:** 6 September 2019

**SUBJECT:** Multiple School Systems (Senate Joint Resolution 593)—Draft Report for  
Review and Comment

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The attached Commission report is submitted for your review and comment. It was prepared in response to Senate Joint Resolution 593, which directs the Commission to study the overall effect on public K-12 education in Tennessee of the laws and regulations related to the sharing of resources among and operation of multiple school systems located in the same county. Senate Joint Resolution 593 further notes that “the creation of new school districts has in the past created conflict regarding the ownership of existing school buildings and facilities.” In response, this report also considers options for the transfer of school property to new city school systems.

Public K-12 education in Tennessee is provided through school systems that in general are operated locally, either by counties, cities, or special school districts. There are 94 county school systems, 33 city school systems, and 14 special school districts in Tennessee, and 30 of the state’s 95 counties have more than one school system (multisystem counties).

Sharing requirements for local revenue spent on public K-12 education in Tennessee vary based on the revenue’s source, how it is spent, and whether it is earmarked for specific purposes. In particular, state law requires counties with multiple school systems to share revenue from state and local sources spent on schools’ operation and maintenance with all school systems in the county. For revenue spent on capital expenditures, state law requires multisystem counties to share proceeds from countywide school bonds with all systems in the county, but counties are not required

to share revenue for capital expenditures from sources other than countywide bonds. For cities and special school districts, in contrast, there are no sharing requirements.

According to some representatives of counties, disparities that result from the state's current education revenue sharing requirements raise equity concerns. State courts, including Tennessee's highest court, have taken the position that equity for students necessitates neither equal funding nor sameness, but rather equal opportunity. Equality of opportunity has been a longstanding issue in education.

Another longstanding point of discussion in education finance is that of taxpayer equity. The challenge is devising a way to ensure that taxpayers derive similar benefit from the taxes they pay regardless of whether they live in or receive services from the taxing jurisdiction. Consequently, Tennessee has several examples of taxpayer inequities.

A county's ability to use countywide revenue in lieu of bonds to fund education capital expenditures without sharing this revenue is an example that improves spending equity at the expense of taxpayer equity. Stakeholders acknowledged that this may be unfair to taxpayers living in city school systems or special school districts, but it's one of only a few ways counties can address spending equity under current law. **Because countywide property taxes and countywide local option sales taxes apply to property and sales within cities and special school districts, the General Assembly could require that counties share this revenue when it is used for education capital expenditures just as counties already have to share it when it is used for education operations and maintenance. But if the state does so, it should consider adopting other alternatives that would improve spending equity in counties with multiple school systems while adhering to principles of taxpayer equity.**

**One alternative that could improve both student and taxpayer equity is to remove the requirement that counties share their portion of the unearmarked half of local option sales tax when it is budgeted for education operations and maintenance.** This revenue is distributed based on where the sale was made, and therefore none of it is generated within cities. **Another alternative that would decrease disparities for students as well as taxpayers would be to transition from calculating fiscal capacity at the county level to calculating it at the system level** when equalizing funding through the Basic Education Program funding formula. A system level model would take into account intra-county disparities, such as counties' relative lack of access to unshared tax bases and the concentration of commercial and industrial tax bases within cities, which leaves counties with less ability to raise local revenue for county school systems when compared with city school systems and special school districts in the same county.

Regardless of any changes that the state makes, it is important to provide local governments a degree of certainty about how local revenue for education is required to be shared. In particular, a portion of local revenue from mixed drink sales is earmarked to fund schools, but the mixed drink tax distribution statute was the subject of lawsuits filed in 2014. Although the statute was amended later that year to provide a clearer but temporary method for determining the distribution of mixed drink tax proceeds while the litigation was ongoing, it is set to expire June 30, 2020. **Because changes in the law governing the distribution of the mixed drink tax is temporary and because this method appears to adhere to principles of spending equity and taxpayer equity, the General Assembly should remove the expiration on the current method in state law for distributing mixed-drink tax proceeds.**

While forming new special school districts has been prohibited since 1982, state law allows the creation of new city school systems. But state law does not require counties to transfer school property to new school systems, and there is no process in Tennessee law for determining the disposition of school property following the creation of a new city school system. In the 110<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, Senate Bill 1755 by Senator Gardenhire, House Bill 1757 by Representative Harry Brooks, as amended, would have created “a process for determining the amount that a city must pay to fairly compensate the county for the school property the city seeks to obtain” but did not pass.

Other states’ laws provide guidance for transferring real and personal property to new school systems either explicitly or by requiring the formation of a committee to create a plan for the transfer. And although Tennessee does not prescribe a method for transferring property when a city school system is formed, it does authorize the creation of a planning commission for the consolidation of school systems and sets out considerations for those commissions. These considerations may be helpful in developing a method for transferring property to new city school systems. And by providing a method in state law, Tennessee can provide greater predictability and fairness for school systems and taxpayers and may reduce the likelihood of litigation. Because of the uncertainty surrounding this issue, **the General Assembly should provide a method in state law for transferring school property (real and personal) to new city school systems. An ad hoc committee could be created to determine what property should be transferred and what the city should pay for it. Whoever determines what the city should pay should consider past and future contributions of the city and the county to procure and maintain the property in question. Relevant unit costs in the BEP could be used to calculate the value of real and personal property subject to transfer. For instance, textbook unit costs are based on the actual cost of text books that will be purchased for the upcoming school year. Currently, city residents vote in the referendum on whether to form a new city school system**

before they know what it will cost the city, and by extension the city's taxpayers, to acquire all of the property it will need to operate a school system. To remedy this, **the General Assembly should require that the purchase price of the property be determined before the city referendum on the creation of a city school system.**