



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on October 17, 2023

Tennessee Legislature Convenes Panel to Wean State Off Federal Education Funds

Tennessee lawmakers are considering a bold move: forgoing federal education funding in return for regaining control of their state's public-education system.

Last month, Tennessee House Speaker Cameron Sexton and Lieutenant Governor Randy McNally, both Republicans, appointed a 10-member, bipartisan (albeit heavily Republican) panel called the Joint Working Group on Federal Education Funding. According to [The Tennessean](#), the committee "will review what funding state and local governments in Tennessee receive from the federal government, how the funding is used, whether the state could provide the same services, and whether it would be feasible to reject the funds."



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"The education of our youth is one of the essential responsibilities of our government," McNally said. "Federal dollars and the various mandates and restrictions that come with those dollars affect the way Tennessee's children are educated. Due to our state's excellent financial position, this is a worthy subject of examination and study."

Indeed it is, for a variety of reasons. First, the federal government has absolutely no constitutional authority to be involved in education. Second, federal funding of education transfers control of schooling from state and local governments, parents, and private institutions to Washington. Third, federal funds have been used to enforce nationwide ideological conformity such as allowing gender-confused students to use the wrong restrooms — a policy that, even when enacted voluntarily by local school boards hiding behind federal guidance, has produced [disastrous results](#).

Sexton, who has led the charge for getting his state out from under Uncle Sam's thumb in educational matters, explained his rationale to [The Tennessean](#): "It's a philosophy thing. Does the federal government provide everything for us? Or was the federal government set up by the states? The federal government was set up by the states. We should do everything that we can to be whole and autonomous and independent from the federal government."

Plus, he added, "We were doing fine in education until the 70s," when the U.S. Department of Education was established. "It's not like they've increased the attainment level for us."

The Biden Education Department, naturally, is aghast that anyone would dare reject its largesse.

"Our students need more — not less — to support their academic recovery and address the youth mental health crisis," a department spokesperson told [The Hill](#).

Calling Tennessee's move "political posturing," the spokesperson said, "Any elected leader in any state



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threatening to reject federal public education funds should have to answer to their local educators and parents in their community about the detrimental impact it would have on their community's education system and their students' futures."

Tennessee Democrats are also up in arms about the working group. Senate Minority Leader Raumesh Akbari, one of two Democrats on the panel, warned of the "harsh consequences" of rejecting federal funds and said that she would use her position on the committee to "advocate that Tennessee keep accepting these necessary funds."

Sexton has said that the state will make up the funding difference if it stops accepting Washington's dollars. Democrats have charged that this forces Tennessee taxpayers to pay twice for the same services.

"I don't think they're paying twice," Sexton told *The Tennessean*. "If the federal government truly wanted the states to be successful, then they should release the restrictions and regulations to the states, return Tennessee taxpayers' money back to the state, and get back to the basics of the border, military and other things."

Most news reports on the panel refer to Tennessee's \$1.8 billion in annual federal education funding, but Washington sends the Volunteer State far more than that, noted *The Hill*:

"When they're talking about turning down federal funding, I think they may be thinking only about Department of Education dollars, but that's actually a fraction of what we're really talking about," said Zahava Stadler, project director of the Education Funding Equity Initiative for New America. Out of the top five federal funding streams for schools, Stadler notes only two of them come from the Department of Education.

"The second biggest funding stream for K-12 public schools from the federal government is school lunch money, money to provide students with school lunches, and that money doesn't come from the Department of Education. It comes from the Department of Agriculture," she said.

The other two sources include Medicaid, which is used largely for students with disabilities, and the E-Rate program, supported by the Federal Communications Commission, which provides internet connectivity for libraries and schools.

Still, giving up all that moolah may well be worth it. Besides regaining control over its education system, Tennessee can probably accomplish the same things as those federal programs at considerably lower cost. As the Heritage Foundation's Jonathan Butcher told *The Hill*, a "nontrivial portion [of federal funding] goes to" administrative work necessary to "comply with federal mandates."

The Joint Working Group has until January 9, the start of the Legislature's next session, to craft a plan for rejecting some or all federal education funds. That plan, of course, would still have to pass the Legislature and be signed by Governor Bill Lee. Lee, also a Republican, said in September he'll "be very interested in whatever options they come up with."

"The federal government," he maintained, "has had excessive overreach time and time again in the last few years, and that's what prompts states like ours to look at any number of ways that we can more effectively make decisions for Tennesseans — out of the control of the federal government."





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