



BILL LEE
GOVERNOR

STATE OF TENNESSEE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NINTH FLOOR, ANDREW JOHNSON TOWER
710 JAMES ROBERTSON PARKWAY
NASHVILLE, TN 37243-0375

PENNY SCHWINN
COMMISSIONER

August 14, 2020

Members of the 111th General Assembly,

Over the course of this week, many of you have been contacted by concerned constituents and local education leaders regarding a document on "wellbeing checks" that was created by my team as a part of the ongoing conversations of the Child Wellbeing Task Force. The goal of this document was to serve as an optional resource for local leaders to guide their efforts for at-risk kids who continue to navigate prolonged time away from the classroom.

Although well-intentioned, we have missed the mark on communication and providing clarity around our role in supporting at-risk students during an unprecedented time. Governor Lee has asked our department to remove this guidance document and go back to the drawing board so we get this right.

I want to assure you that we recognize the concerns that you and your constituents share, and we realize why those concerns exist. Our goal is to provide districts with the tools needed to safely open schools, and we do not want to distract from that with any sense that we are straying from our mission to first and foremost, educate students. I also acknowledge the vast difference between providing support for vulnerable students as opposed to any potential overreach into what parents determine is best for their children.

Governor Lee has been clear that vulnerable students, especially, are counting on us to safely re-open schools and get back in the classroom. Historically, teachers, staff, and providers of school-based services have provided critical support and intervention for students because they see Tennessee children in their classrooms every day. Teachers, through investment in their students, can recognize when a student may need additional support. There are students in our state that are homeless, without parental engagement or may be living in abusive situations, and the Governor would like us to provide some information or resources to school districts to aid in their outreach specifically for these students only.

With those items in mind, we will craft an improved toolkit to provide districts with the information they need to address the needs of those at-risk students and also provide optional resources to help when needs arise.

I appreciate you reaching out to our legislative team and the Governor's team with your thoughts and concerns here. Please continue that communication. We are all invested in the successful education of Tennessee students and I look forward to continuing that work with you.

Sincerely,

Dr. Penny Schwinn
Commissioner of Education