

Wilson districts sue Mt. Juliet

School systems seek liquor tax payment

By Andy Humbles
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Wilson County's two public school systems have filed a lawsuit against the city of Mt. Juliet, seeking payment for liquor-by-the-drink taxes the city owes.

Wilson County Schools and the Lebanon Special School District are among multiple districts in Tennessee that discovered last year they are owed money because of a state law that had gone unnoticed. It requires cities to pay a portion of liquor-by-

the-drink proceeds to local school systems.

Mt. Juliet owes about \$450,000 but wants to negotiate credit for building fees the city has waived for construction projects done by Wilson County Schools.

Wilson County Attorney Mike Jennings described the lawsuit as a means to "protect our rights," when he addressed the Wilson County School Board on Friday, adding it was "not out of animosity."

The lawsuit was filed Thursday in Wilson County and seeks the money owed, plus interest and court costs if the case goes to trial.

"I understand their position," Mt. Juliet Mayor

Ed Hagerty said. "I don't know we needed to go there, but we'll do the best we can with it."

A state attorney general opinion stated that past, present or future appropriations, such as the building fees waived by Mt. Juliet for Wilson County Schools, can count toward the liquor tax debt.

The liquor tax is distributed to the two school systems based on average daily attendance, and Lebanon's district would get about 17 percent of the back taxes. The Lebanon district did not benefit from any building fee waivers in Mt. Juliet.

"Mt. Juliet has supported the school system over the years in a lot of

ways," Wilson County school board Chairman Don Weathers said. "We're going to work to try and find something that works for them and works for us."

Lebanon owes just over \$811,000 from 1999 to September 2013. Last week, the Lebanon City Council approved a pay-back plan of 10 annual installments of about \$81,000.

Mt. Juliet's debt goes back to 2001, when it began collecting liquor-by-the-drink taxes. Both cities have been paying the taxes collected since last October.

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Nashville disputes teacher absences rank

By Joey Garrison
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A new study says Metro Nashville Public Schools rank third nationally in classroom absences accumulated by teachers, but MNPS officials are questioning its methods and rejecting the findings.

The study "Roll Call: The Importance of Teacher Attendance," released Tuesday by the National Council on Teacher Quality, found that teachers in Metro during the 2012-13 year missed an average of 14.2 days a year, fewer than only the districts of Columbus, Ohio, and Cleveland, Ohio.

MNPS offers 10 absences to teachers for sick days and two for per-

sonal time. It also allocates five days for professional development.

But the study, Metro school officials stressed, counted days that teachers use for professional development — which includes training and other support — as absences.

As a result, it found MNPS' attendance rate to be 92.35 percent. The district counts it as 95.8 percent.

"They may not be in their classroom, but they are not absent from work," MNPS spokesman Joe Bass said. "They're at work improving their instruction and learning new technology. That's definitely beneficial for students."

While Bass acknowledged that teachers aren't

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JOE BASS, MNPS spokesman

required to use all five days for professional development, he said many schools require them. Some sessions are in classrooms; others occur at the Martin Professional Development Center.

The report — which comes from a group aided by private foundations, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation — contends districts could reduce absences by scheduling professional

development when school is not in session.

Overall, the study found that public school teachers nationwide miss nearly 11 days out of a 186-day school year. It classified 16 percent of teachers as "chronically absent" for missing 18 days or more during the year. The study did not find a link between absences and the poverty levels of children in the building.

Data requests were sent to 51 school districts, and 40 districts provided data sufficient for analysis. It found the combined 40 districts spent a total of \$424 million on substitute teachers in 2012-13.

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