

## Open advisory committees

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### The Gazette Editorial Board

This week, a subcommittee created by the Iowa Board of Regents with the words “transparent” and “inclusive” in its title met behind closed doors.

Welcome to the odd and legally ambiguous world of advisory committees, panels created by governmental bodies to make policy recommendation or gather information to inform future policies. Some of these extra committees exist in a gray area of Iowa’s otherwise strong open meetings law.

In this case, the Board of Regents believes that Iowa law does not require the “Transparent, Inclusive, Efficiency Review,” or TIER subcommittee to meet in public. Nor does the committee need to inform the public of when and where it meets. We know the subcommittee — which is overseeing a major effort to find efficiencies at the state’s public universities — was scheduled to meet Tuesday, thanks to reporting over the weekend by The Gazette’s Vanessa Miller.

The committee’s work could have big implications for the schools and taxpayers. But those clear public policy effects aren’t compelling enough for the board to let the public watch.

That’s a bad decision. But the Iowa Legislature can keep it from happening again by tightening the open meetings law. The Iowa Public Information Board is proposing changes that would require more advisory panels to meet in the open.

Under the proposal, advisory boards, commissions, task forces, etc., created for the purpose of deliberating or acting on recommendations relating to public policy issues would be subject to open meetings requirements.

Whether the TIER subcommittee, specifically, would fall under that language is unclear. But we think the intent is anything but unclear. Such a change would send a strong signal that appointing special committees isn’t a shortcut around open meetings and full public scrutiny. It’s a message the Legislature should send.

We’d also like to see the proposed definition include panels appointed by school superintendents. A 20-year-old attorney general’s opinion argued that only panels appointed by school boards must be open. But in recent years, we’ve seen that gap exploited to allow superintendent-picked panels to explore major issues, such as school closures, behind closed doors. Because superintendents have vast influence over the decisions made by school boards, their advisory groups should also meet in the open.

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