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A JOB NOBODY WANTS

“We are making progress in education in Tennessee according to every data point, but we also have challenges,” acknowledged Tennessee Commissioner of Education Candice McQueen. Dr. McQueen has been at the forefront of public education the last four years, since she replaced the unpopular and noncommunicative Kevin Huffman.

Huffman, the proverbial outsider from Washington DC, was his own worst enemy. A known Democrat, he was never embraced by the newly elected Republican majority that governed the Tennessee General Assembly. His popularity and likability never extended outside the recruits he brought into the state with him, the Governor’s Office or the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE). Huffman perfected the art of rubbing people the wrong way. After Governor Bill Haslam won a second term, he must have decided it was time for one of the most divisive figures in Tennessee politics to exit the stage. Enter McQueen.

In order to reverse public education’s disdain, Haslam needed the antithesis of Mr. Huffman, and Candice McQueen clearly provided that to the Commissioner of Education position. McQueen was a senior vice president and dean of the college of education at Lipscomb University. McQueen had an intricate task ahead of her. She inherited many personnel who were ill-fitted to the state. Many lacked requisite experience in leadership, in the state, or in the field in which they were being relied on to provide expertise. She had to restore relationships with Legislators, Superintendents, School Boards, Educators and parents. She understood the nuances of working with the scores of special interest groups that populate the K-12 landscape. She became one of the best communicators in state government. She had to do this while providing management to arguably the most important agency in state government. It was truly an example of flying the plane while they attempt to build it.

However, the Achilles heal of her term in office has been standardized test administration. This failure is well-documented. Whether or not that is a fair accusation is debatable. She inherited some of the baggage. Nonetheless, Commissioner McQueen concedes the problems with standardized testing, including online implementation and delivery challenges. She apologized, on behalf of the Tennessee Department of Education, for the challenges and frustrations of the test administration. In addition, the state has taken specific steps to address the concerns as the state moves into the 2018-19 testing cycle. Governor Haslam and Commissioner McQueen recently engaged in a statewide listening tour to get educator input. It is yet to be determined if that effort will have any bearing on the next Governor.

Here is what is certain, the next Governor of Tennessee will either be Republican Bill Lee or Democrat Karl Dean. Both men, for better or worse, will inherit the responsibility of building on Haslam’s record in public education. The choice of Commissioner of Education will assume the overwhelming burden of ensuring that every child in Tennessee graduates from high school prepared for college or the workforce. The success or failure, of the next Commissioner of Education will

SUMMARY

The choice of Commissioner of Education will assume the overwhelming burden of ensuring that every child in Tennessee graduates from high school prepared for college or the workforce. The success or failure, of the next Commissioner of Education will largely determine the success or failure of the next Governor. It will be a difficult job to fill and it may be a job that nobody wants.

largely determine the success or failure of the next Governor. It will be a difficult job to fill and it may be a job that nobody wants.

The next Governor will want to select someone who understands public education, understands the state of Tennessee, and is capable of running the most visible agency in the state. For all the local school superintendents who wake up thinking they are up to the task, they should be reminded that the lights of Nashville burn bright and they will be living in a fishbowl. The next Governor cannot afford to go outside the state to recruit a Commissioner of Education as Haslam did, after the Huffman fiasco.

The next Commissioner of Education must have a vision that aligns with the new Governor. They must understand the commitment they will be asked to make. Their evaluation will occur every single day by policymakers and stakeholders across the state, and often in the media. Their success only occurs when every person at a bureaucracy is working in the same direction, understanding and buying into the mission. The obstacles may seem insurmountable, and may keep you from reaching your objectives and not even be under your control. Items like contracts with vendors may be impediments to success, or a bureaucracy which stymies your objectives.

For a Commissioner, the risk is having a Governor who does not support your vision, which will hinder support for your management. Your resources will certainly be limited. Failure will almost certainly be associated with you personally. Financially, many school superintendents are already paid more than the Commissioner of Education, and their headaches are much smaller. Those people who have the skills to perform the task are more limited than the short list of people who think they are up to the challenge.

A disruption in January for 70,000 educators and 1,000,000 students, created by a new agenda for the state, might generate many unexpected issues and unnecessary anxiety during a transition. It is something that a candidate running for office cannot readily discuss, but something that a candidate elected to office must rapidly address. It must be someone who understands our unique language in public education, our stakeholders and policymakers in K-12, and the challenges facing our state.

The question asked by many educators, would either Bill Lee or Karl Dean consider retaining Commissioner McQueen? That has to be a consideration, if she would stay. What happens when you have a job that nobody wants and few are qualified for? We are about to find out.

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