



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BELIEVE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

I believe in public education. I also know that there is no one size fits all strategy that will work in every school or district. This is a recurring premise among those of us who believe in local control of public education. A one size fits all solution is in effect no solution.

Public Education is the only hope for many children across Tennessee. Too many politicians give the impression that our schools are failing. They are not. However, we must acknowledge that there are pockets in our state that are not doing as well as others. An end to “social promotion” and being focused on improved literacy, particularly by grade 3, would undeniably help. The vast majority of our schools are incredibly successful, as are the teachers who serve and students who attend them.

Legislators have put forth many policy ideas this legislative session: some good, some necessary, and some harmful to public education. The policy debate will occur among stakeholders and policymakers. Proposals regarding parent codes of conduct, limitations on school suspensions, union-controlled community schools, and education savings accounts are still being debated. There have been several attempts to address testing, but none have gained necessary lawmaker support - yet.

The high-stakes testing culture has killed the passion of many educators. Although we need testing to measure the progress of our students, we should recognize that these tests are often unreliable in evaluating teachers and schools. We should pursue reliable standardized tests that provide accurate feedback for educators, parents, and students. No single test should be a determinant of a student’s, teacher’s, or school’s success. A true measurement of progress should instead consist of several benchmarks, not just testing.

In education debates, we need to keep the focus on what is important: everyone working together to improve public schools for the benefit of all children. And we must work with all stakeholders in public education, regardless of political party or perceived agenda. No person or group has all the answers. We should all roll up our sleeves as stakeholders and policymakers to work and make public education succeed for all of our children. Our shared future depends on it.

The late Justice Antonin Scalia, discussing his friendship with Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg: "I attack ideas. I don't attack people. And some very good people have some very bad ideas. And if you can't separate the two, you gotta get another day job." We should heed that guidance in education debates as well.

SUMMARY

We need to keep the focus on what is important: everyone working together to improve public schools for the benefit of all children.

Educators in the trenches are doing incredible work. Never before in history has more been demanded of our educators. Kay McSpadden, a high school English teacher, points out, “Our middle-class and wealthy public-school children are thriving. Poor children are struggling, not because their schools are failing but because they come to school with all the well-documented handicaps that poverty imposes – poor prenatal care, developmental delays, hunger, illness, homelessness, emotional and mental illnesses, and so on.”

Future legislative efforts must focus on breaking down the bureaucratic barriers that have kept educators and school districts from pursuing solutions to the unique challenges of their communities. As a candidate, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee promised to “pilot innovative approaches that encourage our schools and their communities to work together and design solutions without bureaucratic hurdles.” We fully embrace that strategy and will continue to support that approach at the Tennessee General Assembly.

We believe most public schools need fewer regulations and more freedom and flexibility - especially our higher achieving districts. By giving districts greater autonomy they could redirect time away from burdensome paperwork and focus more on students. Robin Lake, of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, points out, “Schools must be nimble, responsive, equitable and innovative.”

Education can open doors to incredible opportunities that would have never been possible were it not for the education that one received while in school. With inconsistent and changing economic times, it is more important than ever for our state’s children to receive high-quality education and training. Malala Yousafzai reminds us, "One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world."

Education policy must support children in developing the skills, the knowledge, and the integrity that will allow them to be responsible, contributing members of their community and ultimately gain employment with a sustainable living wage. Public education provides the best opportunity for most children to obtain success. We must all believe in public education.

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