



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BEST FOR ALL?

The economic conditions of our state are certainly not where we expected when the calendar year began. Our state had the potential to do some great things this year for public education and for our students. Unfortunately, our state was hit by a global pandemic. A literacy initiative was well on its way through the legislature that could have made a difference for children. I am truly disappointed for our students.

I am also especially disappointed for our educators who were asked to do Herculean tasks of educating children across the state during this pandemic with little clarity and initial guidance from the state. Nobody could have foreseen or predicted some of the issues we faced. We were somewhat paralyzed by our fear, and in many ways, we are still unsure of what is coming next. We either live in fear, or we confront it. Those are the only options we have.

I would argue that eventually if the state truly wants what is best for all, we are going to have to address more stakeholder involvement in the process of pandemic recovery, prioritize student learning during uncertain times, and acknowledge that high stakes testing and student assessment will have little value for the immediate future. That has to be a priority for Governor Bill Lee and his administration, as well as the Tennessee General Assembly.

I watched how the state assembled its COVID 19 Task Force under our Commissioner of Education. One question that comes to mind: Where are the teachers, the principals, the school boards? We have groups that reflect some special interests, but what is absent are most of the people and groups who are the backbone of public education. The truth is that many have lost confidence in the direction of our state department of education. There are still some good people there, and it is not too late for bridges to be rebuilt. However, to restore that trust, it is now beyond the Commissioner's skill set; we need the Governor to sit down with stakeholders and hear the truth of what is going on, what students, teachers, districts, and communities need to move forward for the next academic year and beyond. Governor Bill Haslam went out on a listening tour on testing, and I think he gained valuable insight. We all have the same mutual objective: educating our children. We just need to move past the rhetoric. I believe Bill Lee is a good man, but he just needs to hear some other unfiltered voices and opinions.

The Governor must know that our local school systems are facing tremendous budget challenges. In our opinion, the state could have done more to address funding in the BEP for schools in this budget, even as they

SUMMARY

We either live in fear, or we confront it. We need Governor Lee to sit down with stakeholders and hear the truth of what is going on, what students, teachers, districts, and communities need to move forward for the next academic year and beyond.

failed to address salary issues. Infrastructure costs and transportation costs will certainly increase. The state should have considered those challenges. However, in crisis comes opportunity.

The state needs to prioritize revamping our funding formula in the next legislative session. In my opinion, it is a needed focus that the Governor accurately alluded to on the campaign trail. We welcome the opportunity to collaborate on that initiative. It cannot come through the Department of Education, but perhaps through the Board of Education or the Tennessee Comptroller. Then, the BEP must be legislatively driven, with input from stakeholders. Lt. Gov. Randy McNally and Speaker Cameron Sexton are very capable leaders. There are incredible leaders in our legislature on both sides of the political aisle. Let them and the Tennessee General Assembly do their work next session and let's bring our education budget into the modern age.

Our economy will recover, but we should have been better prepared. We are not placing blame, but it should serve as a warning for future generations. Right now, trust in government is probably at the lowest point in our lives. It is our responsibility to start speaking up and challenging policies with which we disagree in a civil, but firm manner. We have much-unfinished work left to do. However, to echo Ronald Reagan, we are the masters of our destiny, not victims of fate. Even in our disappointment, we know better days are ahead for our students and educators in Tennessee.

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