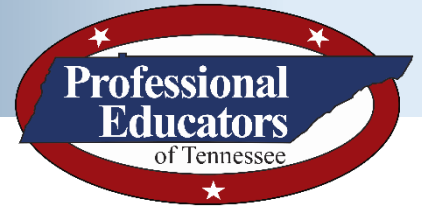


EDITORIAL

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

GLOBAL PANDEMICS AND PUBLIC EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

We are all learning when it comes to COVID-19. We have no idea which direction the pandemic may go, where there will be more outbreaks, or how bad it could become. The good news is our medical community has been incredible throughout the pandemic. Their response has saved untold lives here in America, and across the globe. When I look at the world, the likelihood of a vaccine is welcome and also scary for many. We all want to see the data to make sure that it works safely on patients before we risk our health.

Public education is much the same way. Unquestionably, heroes abound in our profession as well. Uncertainty seems to be the only thing we can be certain of today. The education landscape has changed, just as society has changed. As we face an unknown future, we reflect more critically about how to succeed in life and public education during changing and challenging times, through a global pandemic that came without warning.

We believe that most local school districts have done incredible work across the state. However, we have serious questions about state leadership, particularly from the executive branch---and the Tennessee Department of Education. We have raised these questions since March. Others are taking notice and are beginning to see the same problems. What has puzzled many lawmakers, parents, and educators is the fact that while schools were pressured to open their doors, the Tennessee Department of Education remained closed, and employees were allowed to work virtually. The turnover rate at the Department is exceedingly high.

Reports of unreturned emails, phone calls, and guidance are commonplace. The Department touts its scaled back office space need because of a rotating schedule of in-office work. Many insiders point to poor structure, leadership, and culture within the agency. Information flow is uneven both internally and externally. Unqualified leaders make poor decisions often leaving employees unsupervised. Transparency is lacking and there is an ambiguous culture that does not communicate its mission effectively. The use of out-of-state vendors to replace in-state workers neither instills confidence in current employees or those being served. You can reduce office space, but if the work is outsourced it is not a reduction in government, it is only a decrease in government services.

Any vendor that any agency in state government uses must be subjected to open records law in the state and follow Tennessee laws. One concerning area is the sudden changes in technology and other critical public education infrastructures without going through the normal vetting process. Challenges have brought risks---some of them yet to be discovered.

SUMMARY

Despite an apparent lack of leadership at the state level, Tennessee teachers are rising to the challenge of educating children all while public schools are being reinvented in real-time.

Opening, closing, reopening schools has made health concerns a priority over academic responsibilities. Our educators have been doing everything possible to meet student needs. Even with issues of student poverty, limited technology resources, and no prior preparation for distance learning, our educators are rising to the challenge of educating children while reinventing public education in real-time.

Student assessment and teacher evaluation is useless this year in many regards. We need to consider what we are assessing or even measuring. The data will tell us what exactly? Are we doing it just for the sake of assessment? No educator has ever gone through a global pandemic like this before. We must acknowledge that we do not have all the answers. The vast number of students online in our state has changed priorities. Whether you are in-person or online, synchronously or asynchronously, utilizing video, audio, chat, and/or using other web-based platforms, you have to become more adaptable as an educator. Are we looking at a deeper conversation about how effective synchronous learning is versus asynchronous learning at this point? Standard teacher evaluation is impractical this year.

For better or worse, according to your political perspective, Tennessee is firmly a Red State, with an incoming President from a different political party. Our nation is deeply divided, but our state not as much. The pending transition at the federal level, likely means more changes are forthcoming. It is expected that the Biden Administration will likely take a completely different approach on COVID-19, which will impact federal education. While the federal deficit is growing, long-term sustainability has to be questioned.

For Tennessee, we have to begin in earnest discussing how to reduce the federal footprint in education in our state. Federal money has dictated the education priorities of our state and many policymakers for far too long. The state needs a populist uprising, energized with a return to local control of public education, with engaged parents and stakeholders.

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