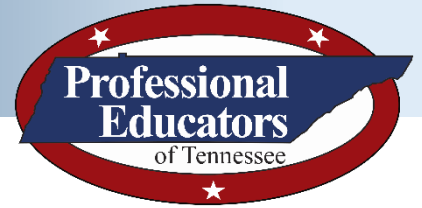


EDITORIAL

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A NEW NORMAL FOR EDUCATION

Just like many other children, I learned the game of baseball from my dad. It was a family tradition. Flyballs, grounders all had to be practiced. “Two hands for beginners on fly balls,” was a common phrase he would yell, reminding me to “watch the ball into my glove.” Then he would implore me to get “my body in front of ground balls.” Fielding was never my problem, but hitting was. Fastballs were not the issue. It was those mystifying curveballs. If pitchers would have only agreed not to throw curveballs, I could have made it to the Major Leagues.

Life is a lot like baseball. We do well with the everyday stuff. But when life throws you a curveball, our knees buckle and we flail just hoping we swing and connect. This global pandemic has thrown all of us a curveball. Many citizens are unhappy with the state government for their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. In education, it has been a little while since we have seen normal.

Next to our mortgage/rent, child care is the greatest expense for most American families. Dana Levin-Robinson points out that childcare is expensive, especially during COVID. She writes: “affordable childcare is even harder to find due to shrinking incomes and daycare closures.” Even though child care is a real issue---and it must be addressed---public education is not a glorified babysitting service. If that is how society comes to view public education, we have lost the culture war.

Even during this pandemic, education must remain a respected profession, and the work of educators and teachers considered a serious business. Society gives educators tremendous responsibility, but very little authority to perform their job. That has become more evident during the pandemic. The socio-economically disadvantaged in our society are the most vulnerable during this pandemic.

COVID-19 is a defining moment for public education. Educators and students need good public policies more than ever. This goes beyond the usual economic and resource inequalities between districts, schools, and individual students---which really should not be ignored. There is never going to be a one-size-fits-all approach to public education. The state also has to address the digital divide between students across each state, especially here in Tennessee where the divide is very pronounced.

Opening and closing schools are not sustainable long-term. Outside the structure of an in-person classroom, academic concerns are growing. This really impacts the socio-economically disadvantaged students and families. Often virtual classes do not reflect the curriculum of in-person classes. In other cases, technical failures make it difficult to complete and submit work. We must work together to address declining or

SUMMARY

Society gives educators tremendous responsibility, but very little authority to perform their job. Now is the time for educators to speak up and make their voices heard.

inconsistent attendance rates---before it impacts our dropout rates. States, school districts, and schools must develop reliable systems and processes moving forward for dealing with unexpected issues, like a pandemic.

We must have a community conversation on just how physically and emotionally draining teaching has become during this pandemic. We need to address why the state failed early in providing personal protective equipment, such as masks and hand sanitizer. Too often educators have suffered from inadequate working conditions, ill-advised school policies, and misguided attempts at reform. Just like the students we serve, schools are going to be different, across the state, across the district, and even within the same community.

To their credit, as of December 1, 2020, the state of Tennessee has started making mental health support available for educators. We need to eliminate any stigma when it comes to addressing mental health in the workplace. This is something the state should have considered years ago, even before the pandemic.

Mental and physical health issues are real, they can be treated, and the worker returned to the job as a more productive employee who feels valued. Educators are no different than any other occupation. They need transparent communication and must have confidence that the state and district are knowledgeable about any impact on physical and mental health is happening due to this pandemic, or future similar issues.

COVID-19 has thrown all of us a curveball. We have to adjust our approach. This time our knees can't buckle. We want normal, even if that means something different in 2021 than it did at the start of 2020. Our state must have a constant and clear message moving forward. We must start shaping what this new normal looks like for public education. Policymakers want to hear authentic voices from the field. If ever there was a time to speak up, that time is now.

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