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THREE STEPS FOR GREATER FINANCIAL TRANSPARENCY IN EDUCATION

Walter Shaub, who served as the director of the U.S. Office of Government Ethics under former President Barack Obama wrote, “Authoritarianism and corruption go hand in hand. If we don't clean up government, we're setting the table for the next authoritarian.” Surprisingly, Mr. Shaub was not talking about the Trump Administration, but rather the Biden Administration.

We should all applaud Walter Shaub for his honesty. We need more transparency in our federal government, and we need more transparency in our state and local government as well. This is a non-partisan issue.

When it comes to funding public education, it has always been a litigious and controversial issue. Education funding in Tennessee has been subjected to countless lawsuits, which make changing the funding formula challenging and difficult. The Basic Education Program (BEP) is the funding formula through which state education dollars are generated and distributed to Tennessee schools is incredibly complex. Both sides of the political aisle have priorities they want to be funded.

Let's be honest. There is a limited amount of taxpayer dollars available in any year and the economic pie can only be sliced so far. Fiscal discipline is always tough, but necessary. Both Republicans and Democrats want to increase teacher salaries, but we have struggled with how to get those dollars into the pockets of educators and not into the pockets of bureaucrats, vendors, and other groups.

Recently McKenzie Scott, the ex-wife of Amazon billionaire Jeff Bezos, decided to start giving her astounding wealth away to charities and community organizations. Ms. Scott [wrote](#), “Putting large donors at the center of stories on social progress is a distortion of their role.”

The remarkable aspect is that Scott donated her own money without any strings attached to the gifts. The charities themselves were not made aware of the donation until the gift was made. This is in stark contrast to other venture philanthropists like the Gates Foundation, Broad Foundation, and Walton Family Foundation. Taxpayers should be aware of when private donations or grants are made and what strings are attached to those dollars if it impacts public education or any government entity.

SUMMARY

We need more accountability in government and should embrace more visibility in the budget process. It is true bi-partisanship when stakeholders and policymakers, regardless of political affiliation, incorporate greater transparency and provide better access to critical spending information.

We have heard the argument that we have just thrown money at a lot of problems in the past and that we have required very little accountability. Perhaps there is some truth to that point. However, it seems very hypocritical that government expects citizens to account for their own money and not be answerable to taxpayers. It is time to change that narrative.

Budgets are often complex and need to be adaptable. They are contingent on expected revenues and planned expenditures which may change over a fiscal year. We understand those budget decisions are also influenced by policy decisions.

We recommend three steps for greater transparency: First, all school budgets should be available online for employees, citizens, and taxpayers to review and comment on annually. Budgets should be easy to find on the website and simple to understand. Second, any revenue that comes into a school system, either through government funding, grants, or private donations---including gifts, should be immediately disclosed, including any obligations that those dollars may impose on a school or district. Third, all expenditures, including information on specific vendor payments, should be available for public review in a timely fashion through a user-friendly online platform with an easy search feature. We should enable citizens to look at expenditures just like one would their bank account.

Government should welcome transparency and accountability when it comes to spending. It will help ensure that funds are spent as wisely as possible. Greater transparency will allow us to better measure and manage the progress of our programs. Using specifics about government budgets and spending empowers all educators, taxpayers, and citizens to engage in closer scrutiny of their tax dollars. It helps build better policy initiatives in the future when we can see what works.

When taxpayers understand that schools and districts are wise stewards of their tax dollars, they are more likely to support the goals and objectives being implemented. We need more accountability in government and should embrace more visibility in the budget process. It is true bi-partisanship when stakeholders and policymakers, regardless of political affiliation, incorporate greater transparency and provide better access to critical spending information. It's simply common sense.

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