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## TEACHING IS MORE THAN A JOB

I have heard that a few leaders in state government believe, “all teachers are liberal.” I interact with educators across the state daily, and their political ideology---just like most Tennesseans--- is all over the map. There is not one political box you can simply lump educators into. To insinuate otherwise is offensive and inaccurate.

By “liberal” these “leaders” may be referring to how teachers voluntarily use their own money to support their occupation. In my community that was considered compassionate and in line with conservative values and the Christian faith. Nevertheless, we found little in the literature on the subject of teachers using their own money. In 2013 we investigated the situation ourselves. We discovered that 61.4% of teachers across Tennessee spent more than \$250 out-of-pocket annually for their classrooms. That number is likely much higher now. Nowhere was political ideology addressed.

The world provides an endless variety of vocations from which to choose. Most pursue education as a career to serve a higher purpose. For most, teaching isn’t a job as much as it is a calling. Many teachers believe God has a specific calling for their individual lives, and teaching is where they believe God wants them to be. Helping students is something that brings far more rewards than just a paycheck. After parents, teachers may have the most important role in a student’s life. Most teachers want every student to feel welcomed, cared for, and loved.

Education can be very challenging, but also rewarding. Many educators are simply focused on the bigger picture of serving children and preparing them for lives as informed and engaged citizens. They are influencing the development and abilities of the next generation, so they can positively contribute in the future to our society. Katelynn Giordano wrote, “Teachers are directly responsible for igniting a flame within our students and inspiring them to rise to their potential, exceed their own expectations, and pursue their own passion.”

Teachers understand that every student who walks through their door is different. They have to ensure that every student in their class is learning and engaged. Teaching is challenging at all times, but especially during a global pandemic. Normal is long gone. However, the relationship remains for educators to demonstrate they care about their students and will help them to learn. Educators understand that critical thinking, creativity, conflict resolution, communication, and teamwork cannot get lost in our efforts.

There are obstacles, hurdles, and challenges in every occupation, and we get an occasional bad apple in our field whose actions or behaviors hurt the profession. The vast majority of our educators in Tennessee are female,

### SUMMARY

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about 82% in 2020. Most teachers are kind, compassionate, and empathetic. Our educators look to make things better and improve things in and outside of the classroom.

Unfortunately, outside influences and political donations are having a greater influence over our classrooms and fail to connect the educator with the policy. Educators deserve a greater say in policy decisions than organizations funded by out-of-state philanthropists or national groups. The smart policymakers listen to those with boots on the ground. How we deliver instruction or measure success diverges when driven by out-of-state philanthropists rather than actual local educators.

Educators recognize going in that they will face a lack of practical and emotional support, as well as the challenges of low pay, lack of resources, and long hours. Educators spend countless hours in professional development focused on pedagogy, classroom management, curriculum changes, and much more. Repeatedly, teachers face problems with very limited solutions and are left to fend for themselves. Frequently, they lack parent and community support.

Education could be made easier with proper communication tools, equal workload distribution, adequate resources, support from school administration and parents, and more help from policymakers. If parents don't like the curriculum, take it up with the state that approves it or increasingly promotes it, or the district that selects it.

Despite the intrinsic reward, challenges are driving good educators out of the field. Statistics show that over 50% of teachers will begin their first year and leave the profession before their fifth year of teaching. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the teaching profession will grow considerably in the next decade, with more than 1.5 million jobs for elementary, secondary, and special education teachers. Perhaps to improve teacher retention, increase student success rates, and quality of education in our schools, we should recognize and bring awareness to the educational environment that our teachers and students face daily.

In Tennessee some numbers say as many as one-third of our educators are eligible or will leave the field in the next five years. Over 7,000 could leave tomorrow if they desired because they are eligible to retire. This should be of great concern to all of us. We cannot continue to have policymakers say teachers are the single most important factor for student academic success, and yet treat them with a lack of respect, ignore their opinions, and still expect to attract talented people to teach in Tennessee classrooms. People will be more motivated in any job when they know their opinions matter.

Successful schools create a passion for learning and for growing creatively and collaboratively. That is critical. We must determine what is success in education. How do we measure it? While test scores are indicators of where a child may be on any given day, a child is much more than a test score. A teacher is more than a set of test scores, too.

I don't see liberals or conservatives in the classroom. I see educators trying to accomplish their profession in trying times, under sometimes impossible circumstances. Teaching is more than a job.

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