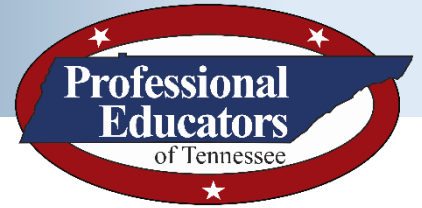


EDITORIAL

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PROTECTING OUR EDUCATION FUNDING

School Districts in Tennessee could be heading over a financial cliff if the Tennessee General Assembly does not take swift action during the Special Session called by Governor Lee. The state must address the BEP (Basic Education Program) formula, which funds our schools. Three critical events are occurring in most school districts due to the pandemic: unstable student enrollment, increased and unforeseen costs in public education, and uncertainty of local tax revenue.

According to the Pew Charitable Trusts, COVID-19 has taken a heavy toll on employment at our public schools nationally. The latest U.S. Department of Labor estimates show that state and local education employment was down 8.8% in October from the previous year. Private sector jobs, by comparison, dropped 6.2% over the same period. Many of the layoffs included bus drivers, food service personnel, support staff, and other non-instructional positions.

The urgency cannot be overstated. Tennessee must take action in the special session to stabilize our public schools. The economic health of our state is rooted in our public schools. A strong education system drives the economic health of a community and a state. We can debate priorities, and we must have a vigorous discussion on the order of priorities. However, without basic funding and fiscal stability, any academic progress we have made in our local systems across the state will suffer a significant setback, and any progress we made may be lost for another generation.

Our state must safeguard current funding levels for our K-12 public schools. In Tennessee, we have struggled in some school districts to even open for in-person instruction. Some have opened, closed, and re-opened, for various reasons. We have warned this is problematic, and we would have been better served by delaying the opening of some schools and districts. Educators are working hard statewide whether in person or online. We in the education community understand that is a challenge for some communities, and problematic for policymakers. Nobody has ever faced a pandemic of this proportion before like we have witnessed with COVID-19.

It is difficult for every district in the state to make necessary decisions when they lack healthy and experienced educators and support staff to provide high-quality instruction for our students. Educators are leaving the profession, either by retiring or resigning. Substitute teachers are needed but difficult to find. The educator's workload is increasing.

It would be helpful to the Tennessee General Assembly to take a look at the number of resignations or those eligible to resign, as well as retired and those on leave, to get a grasp of that pending challenge. Inaction by the Tennessee General Assembly during the Special Session to address the BEP will further damage the perilous financial situation created by COVID-19. Rather than dealing with the difficult challenge of retaining and hiring new personnel to fill critical roles of instructing children, districts will be faced with cutting their budgets and making unwanted personnel cuts.

We need a serious commitment by our state to overcome COVID-19, both long-term and short-term. We have to stabilize funding short-term for at least the next two or three years and consider other long-term solutions that may be needed. For example, ending social promotion and summer school for K-5 or K-8 students is very likely to be discussed by legislators.

SUMMARY

Inaction by the Tennessee General Assembly during the Special Session to address the Basic Education Program will further damage the perilous financial situation created by COVID-19.

The Tennessee General Assembly must ensure that all schools and districts have the necessary resources to keep students and staff safe, as well as healthy. In addressing BEP funding, we can stabilize school districts and make sure students have the needed educators and staff for quality education. Additionally, we should replace the words “learning loss,” which is subjective, with “lost instruction time,” which can be measured.

Our schools must have the resources to address lost instruction time. Legislators will want to ensure we are accounting for our most vulnerable students, especially those with disabilities and those who are socio-economically disadvantaged. Our schools and districts are facing challenging times. We will continue to advocate for them to ensure this generation gets the opportunity to become productive and responsible citizens. Our teachers are up for that challenge. Let’s make sure our schools are funded.

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