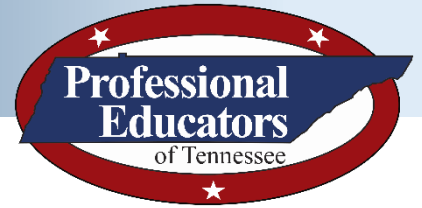


EDITORIAL

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FUNDING PUBLIC EDUCATION IS CRITICAL TO OUR FUTURE

Tennessee, like most states, has wrestled with how to fund public education, especially in a quickly shifting education landscape. The Tennessee Constitution recognizes “the inherent value of education,” and the General Assembly is required to provide for “the maintenance, support, and eligibility standards of a system of free public schools.”

We have needed to revise our K12 funding formula, known as the Basic Education Program (BEP), to reflect changing 21st century needs for at least a decade.

Our current formula lacks key modernizations, including examining the real cost of educating students, funding low socio-economic students, and a factor for escalating pupil transportation costs. State funding currently has four major categories: instruction, benefits, classroom, and non-classroom. While those categories are further divided, the result is still many broadly defined groupings that hurt honest legislative attempts to inject money into specific areas.

Student enrollment (calculated by average daily membership) is the primary driver of funds generated by the BEP. The funds generated by the BEP are what the state has defined as sufficient to provide a “basic level of education” for Tennessee students. The meaning of “basic level of education” is one that we must better define.

Currently, funding includes a state share of the BEP and a local share of the BEP. This includes a complex equalization formula as the primary factor in determining how much of the BEP is supported by the state versus the local district. So, just like there are winners and losers under the current formula, there will be winners and losers under any new funding mechanism.

The last attempt to update the formula resulted in a few tweaks and the dubbing of it as BEP 2.0, but no significant overhaul was accomplished. A new funding plan and formula that reflects our modern educational mission, priorities, and strategies have long been discussed. It was included in Governor Lee’s platform when he was a candidate for office.

This process should be transparent. It must make every effort to include all stakeholders, as well as city and county funding bodies. Such an ambitious undertaking should address not only the desired results but also the details and machinations of getting there, which would be best informed by those tasked with implementation.

We should also strive to provide greater local control by giving school districts increased flexibility over their operations. A 2019 Comptroller’s Report includes policy considerations and identifies the need by the state to

SUMMARY

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develop a more complete overview and understanding of salary trends by local districts, with a teacher shortage looming this is critical.

When it comes to public policy, it is important to get it right. The inclusion of others in the discussion can help address unanticipated issues. Whether they know it or not, every person in this state has an interest in the policies enacted at the federal, state, and local levels.

Politicians and political parties rise and fall. Political positions on policy issues change, and politicians can be voted out of the political office or redistricted out of office in some cases. Highly partisan initiatives put in place by one administration are quickly discarded and replaced by the next.

For once, let's set aside our political differences to create great policy and develop a funding system that will work for all of our students, parents, educators, and taxpayers. When you are surrounded by people who share a passionate commitment to a shared purpose, anything is possible and trust in government restored.

Taxpayers must understand that education is an investment for our state's future, not merely an expense to bear. It is also a constitutional requirement in our state.

We look forward to the debate, but we expect transparency in the process and consider it the highest priority to establish a funding formula that ensures it reflects the true cost of educating the children of Tennessee.

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JC Bowman is the Executive Director of Professional Educators of Tennessee, a non-partisan teacher association headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that the author and the association are properly cited. For more information on this subject or any education issue please contact Professional Educators of Tennessee. To schedule an interview please contact communications@proedtn.org or 1-800-471-4867.