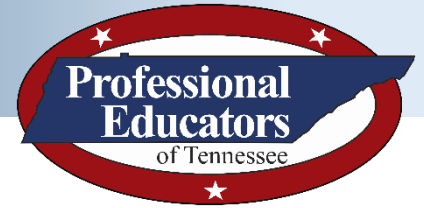


EDITORIAL

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

LET'S BE NUMBER ONE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

State Representative Scott Cepicky frequently asks a compelling question: Why can't Tennessee be the number one state in the nation for public education? Great question. Why can't we be number one in education in the nation?

So many "education reformers" cling to the industrial age model of education. We need to use our imagination and start thinking about out-of-the-box solutions. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is that the speed and urgency we have used to fight this pandemic proves we can tackle even the most challenging issues when we focus as a society. There is never an easy solution for problems in education, but we have to get the fundamentals right. Albert Einstein said, "Problems can't be solved with the same consciousness that created them."

Viable public education is critical for a strong economy. Educators are the frontline of those efforts. Educators are the ones who must enact education policies. Too many of our teachers suffer from top-down management structures and lack of reward, and many have reached an apparent career plateau and become susceptible to a loss of creativity and drive. We cannot allow that to happen.

Yet, according to most economists and policy wonks, we do not pay commensurate salaries to get and keep the best and brightest in our classrooms. Educators have to move up to administrative positions to get bigger salaries. Sometimes the skills that made them an excellent teacher fail to translate into an administrative role. So let's make Tennessee the number one state in America in which to TEACH. Governor Lee pledged to raise educator salaries. That was derailed last year due to the pandemic. We expect this year there will be at least a salary increase for all educators.

Some other ideas include investing in high-quality induction and mentoring programs for our younger teachers. We must examine this process carefully if we want to keep our new teachers. We could provide student loan reimbursements, prioritizing educators in high-poverty schools, or critical shortage areas. The state needs to better work with and leverage school districts and statewide teacher associations to develop ongoing professional learning for emerging and experienced school leaders to better support school staff and their work. If we can do those things, we can attract and retain high-quality educators. We also need to take care of our support staff and give them salary increases, opportunities, and training.

SUMMARY

Raising teacher salaries, addressing learning loss, engaging parents, and improving digital access statewide are just a few of the matters that should be considered in order to make Tennessee the number one state for education.

Educators are not the only ones stuck in a system that is slow to change; students and parents get trapped as well. We must get our parents engaged in the education of their children. It is the critical piece that is often missing. Education law and policies must be written simply, clearly, and concisely, with the required degree of precision, and as much as possible in ordinary language. We need to remove the often-incoherent education terminology. This will help policymakers and stakeholders alike as we move forward.

During the upcoming special session, the state is going to address the problem of too many kids falling through the cracks, and afterward pushed through the system, unprepared for the next grade or life. We have had a sudden awakening of “learning loss” which is not a new phenomenon. It is hard to define, and even harder to explain. Are students who are not making adequate progress losing learning? Yes indeed. Our state will take aggressive measures to stem that tide, but this is not a short-term, pandemic-driven issue---it is part of a long-term systemic problem. So, if we couch it in a vague term such as “learning loss” and provide tutoring, summer school, and other supports, then it is welcome.

It also identifies another challenge of how we engage parents. Parental involvement is not a clearly or consistently defined term. Parental engagement is a better phrase. All students need a supportive home learning environment, and we must focus on how families can build on what they are learning in the classroom. The state is going to require districts to submit a phonics-based literacy plan for students, as part of their literacy efforts. We would argue that getting the parents involved in the education of their children is critical and districts should also include how they plan to engage parents in this process. Better communication with parents is always a win-win for districts, teachers, parents, and students.

We must improve digital access statewide, in both our urban and rural communities. David Talbot writes in “The Hole in the Digital Economy,” the poorest people, who might benefit most from Internet access, are often the least likely to have it. It’s not just an economic issue, it is an access issue in Tennessee. Integrating technology benefits education. However, all citizens need digital access for personal and business purposes.

These ideas and strategies are to help strengthen our public education system. In the span of one generation, South Korea moved from a nation that educated less than a quarter of its citizens through high school to one that now ranks third in the world in college-educated adults. Why can’t Tennessee be the number one state in the nation for public education? We can! If it is important to us, we will find a way. If not, we will find an excuse.

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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.