

February 7, 2022 Online at www.proedtn.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

AN EDUCATIONAL LOOK OF THE LAST 4 YEARS

After eight years as Governor, Bill Haslam was able to claim for Tennessee the education title of “fastest improving state in the country” in academic achievement. Tennessee also experienced its highest graduation rate, highest ACT scores, and largest increases in career and technical education enrollment in the state’s history.

We had a new high score on the ACT (20.2) coupled with a new high participation rate (97%); more students took AP exams. Haslam pointed to growth in students’ literacy skills in the early grades – with success with the *Read to Be Ready* effort. Tennessee was the first state in the nation to offer high school graduates and adults two years of community or technical college free of tuition and mandatory fees.

How have we built on that progress? To paraphrase Ronald Reagan, the question every Tennessean must answer: *Are we better off today than we were four years ago?*

Compare differences in literacy for a moment. Educators have argued about multiple approaches to reading instruction since public education began. The politics over literacy will continue to be contentious and debated. However, low literacy is strongly related to crime. Low literacy is strongly related to unemployment. Illiteracy and crime are closely related. The Department of Justice states, “The link between academic failure and delinquency, violence, and crime is welded to reading failure. Over 70% of inmates in America’s prisons cannot read above a fourth-grade level.” Reading is the key to academic success.

Governor Haslam recognized the reading issues facing the state. In 2016, he launched *Read to Be Ready* a strategy that approached literacy from multiple angles, including phonics. This included strengthening the training that our teachers receive, expanding community partnerships to provide support for students and families after school and during the summer, as well as preparing our youngest students with early literacy skills before they ever enter a classroom. It did take time for classroom teachers to find or create materials.

Governor Lee scrapped the *Read to Be Ready* program and launched his initiative *Reading 360*. To be fair, there are similarities between the two programs. Much of the criticism has focused on the increased price tag and choosing preferred vendors for state contracts. The textbook adoption process timeline, overreach of authority, and prior relationship with selected partners were denounced by many.

One vendor in particular [The New Teacher Project](#) (TNTP), with ties to Penny Schwinn, Governor Lee’s Commissioner of Education, was awarded millions of dollars. The Tennessee Department of Education had partnered with TNTP on literacy as early as 2016. One curriculum “Wit & Wisdom” created by Great Minds received condemnation from some groups. We have not been able to measure how useful expenditures for

SUMMARY

With K-12 education being the largest appropriation in the state, it is imperative that we review the spending thoughtfully.

things like materials for families, including a smartphone app, or if programming provided through [PBS when students are in school](#) benefits students.

In 2018, his final year in office, Bill Haslam proposed a \$37.5 billion budget, which he said focused on jobs, education, and “efficient and effective government.” This year Governor Lee put forth a \$52.6 billion budget proposal for the upcoming fiscal year, to be focused on “freedom, innovation, exceptionalism, and optimism.” This is an increase from the \$41.8 billion budget in 2021. Policymakers must wonder if state government spending can continue this trajectory and maintain its core responsibilities moving forward.

The largest appropriation in the state budget is K-12 education, which has comprised 27% to 30% of all state spending for the last decade. Spending lags [behind other states](#). In 2016, Haslam championed his plan to update the Basic Education Program. Governor Lee is now trying to change the 30-year state education funding formula. Policymakers are already asking questions about the \$4.3 billion federal dollars brought into the state for education, and on what and where that money was spent.

To date, the legislation required to change the formula has not been released to lawmakers; only generalities with little specifics. The time for a thorough review of this legislative session is running out. Numerous schools or districts question if they will get more funding for all students under a new formula. Governor Lee has stated that his education funding proposal is not related to school vouchers.

In 2012, Haslam openly questioned what kind of return-on-investment vouchers would yield in the way of academic results. He said, “In other words, whatever money is transferred with that child is enough to provide the education, but doesn’t wreck the existing school system. Getting that balance right I think will be the biggest challenge.” Haslam did try to tailor a statewide voucher plan - *Tennessee Choice and Opportunity Scholarship Act* - to target students in failing schools. The plan ultimately did not pass the legislature.

During his first year in office, Lee pushed through a voucher bill by a narrow margin. His educational savings accounts could be used to pay for private school tuition or other approved educational expenses that have thus far been ruled unconstitutional. The Tennessee Supreme Court is scheduled to hear an appeal on whether the law violated the home rule provision of the Tennessee Constitution since the program only applied to Shelby County and Davidson County.

Lee has also recruited Hillsdale College, a small Christian liberal arts school in Michigan, into the state to launch “classical charter schools” statewide. While Hillsdale has a solid reputation, it was renowned for not taking government funds. This seemingly blurs that line. It seems unjust to use government control and tighten regulations on public education, then recruit an out-of-state institution to compete against public schools and other charter schools already within Tennessee. There are currently heightened cynicism and trust issues around proposed changes to the school funding formula. Still, the current formula does need modernization and we support updating it. However, it has to be implemented correctly, addressing many concerns raised by stakeholders.

Education stakeholders and policymakers must ask, “Are we better today preparing students for success in and outside of the classroom than we were four years ago?” You decide.

#####

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.