



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

EDUCATION ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

After July 4th holiday, the election cycle begins in earnest, especially for pundits and politicians. The state primary election will be on August 4, 2022. The general election will be on November 8, 2022. Infrastructure and the economy will be a major focus, but education will get a fair amount of attention. What will be on the education agenda statewide? We have listed six areas that candidates for state office will face while campaigning.

- **School Funding.** This marks a transitional year from the Basic Education Program (BEP) to the Tennessee Investment and Student Achievement (TISA). Despite reservations most stakeholders have with a new system, we can anticipate hiccups in the implementation process. The state must have effective and transparent coordination between themselves and local school districts. Until August 2, 2022, Tennesseans can submit public comments on the proposed rules in implementation to the Tennessee Department of Education. This process should always be available on any funding mechanism. We must protect the new funding system from becoming overly complicated and bureaucratic. It should be easy to explain and understand, and candidates for state office should have knowledge about this critical area.
- **School Transportation.** America could be heading for an economic recession. Housing, food, and transportation costs are increasing. Household finances are tightening up, and consumer buying power is declining. For school systems already experiencing staffing shortages and livable wages declining, it will be hard to keep pace. Even with modest salary increases, the cost of living will outpace growth. This will impact all 146 districts across Tennessee. Now that diesel fuel has risen 50% from a year ago and it will impact schools, especially transportation and food supply. Bus routes may be cut or eliminated in their entirety. It is going to hurt the poor, the people that cannot get to school. We can debate the bad energy policies, disrupted supply, and increased fuel demand. All are genuine issues. The bottom line is that significant increases in transportation were unexpected when budgets were set at the beginning of the year. They could spiral out of control. County-owned buses do not pay the fuel taxes if they have their own tanks. Some schools and school systems use fuel cards and pay the tax and are then later reimbursed. Owner-operators pay the fuel tax. What is clear is that school transportation costs will increase. The state needs to figure that into the budget amount and adjust funding accordingly. Policymakers will cope with an immediate problem if fuel prices and food supply are further disrupted statewide.
- **Parental Rights.** A growing number of parents and activists are concerned about what students are taught or not taught in public schools. Most educators never wanted to become participants in the culture wars. They did not create the standards, choose the curriculum, or buy the textbooks. Most welcome more openness into those processes. Educators teach students how to think, not what to think. They appreciate

SUMMARY

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parent engagement in a child's education. This subject has flown under the radar and is becoming an important part of a needed conversation in the education debate. Outside influences on our public education system need more transparency.

- **School Choice.** The Tennessee Supreme Court announced its decision on the Education Savings Account program, deciding it does not violate the "Home Rule" provision in the Tennessee Constitution. It will still likely face additional legal challenges, but for now, it looks as if the program will begin to move forward. In addition, the United States Supreme Court ruled on June 21, 2022, that Maine's voucher system, prohibiting religious schools from participating in the program is unconstitutional. This will spark widespread debate on the appropriate use of public education dollars here in Tennessee, and the inclusion of religious schools in other programs.
- **Student Testing.** Tennessee should move to progress monitoring instead of end-of-year standardized testing for better school accountability and transparency. This gives teachers and parents more impactful and timely input on student performance. It allows us to better adjust to make sure children can read proficiently. Three much shorter tests in the Fall, Winter, and Spring will apprise students, teachers, and parents about students' growth, rather than a single lengthy end-of-year assessment that stops learning and leaves zero opportunity for improvement. Moving away from high-stakes testing will increase instruction time, while progress monitoring will provide timely and useful feedback for student goals, including reading proficiency.
- **Social Studies Standards.** The State Board of Education launched the initial public review period for Tennessee's Academic Standards for social studies, requesting feedback from the public through July 18, 2022. This is significant because this has been the source of contentious debate on curriculum issues statewide and nationally. [The Tennessean](#) points out that the Tennessee Department of Education, which had previously provided support for the review process, will not be involved in this year's social studies review because the department "does not have any subject matter experts on staff for social studies." This should raise questions for the public about oversight.

We understand that public education is not a perfect system. It has never been perfect. It needs continual improvement. Out of the 55.5 million K-12 students in America, 49.5 million of them are in our public schools, a little over 89 percent. Educators in classrooms across the state face challenges every day and they want stakeholder and policymaker support. Educators need to be engaged to enhance the quality of education and opportunities for Tennessee students. Policymakers should encourage educators to discuss what works and does not work in their classrooms.

The Declaration of Independence reminds us that "Governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed." Policymakers overseeing public education should answer to the citizens and taxpayers in the community they serve and disclose political donations received during a campaign cycle. These six issues will be the subjects of campaigns across the state. No matter who you vote for, please exercise your right to vote.

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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.