Governor’s 2020-21 budget leaves Tennessee in the bottom 10

Proposal continues to build state reserves while public schools starve for resources.

While Gov. Bill Lee outlined millions in important new K-12 investment, our public schools need $1.2 billion to get to the southeast average and out of the bottom 10 in funding. Tennessee is 45th in the nation in what we invest per student. “It is something our state can afford, and it’s the best investment our state can make,” said TEA President Beth Browne. “Continuing to build the state’s reserves while our schools are starving for resources is like choosing to feed your children only two meals a day in order to save money for some undefined purpose in the future.”

A January report revealed another $1.2 billion in revenue surplus was added to state reserves, bringing the total to $6.7 billion in unrestricted cash. Included in the governor’s $600 million proposed new spending for K-12 is $117 million for teacher salaries. Legislators understand that this increase must include safeguards to ensure the raise actually shows up in teacher paychecks.

2020 budget increases cont. page 3

Lee announces literacy, mental health initiatives in State of the State

In his second State of the State address, Gov. Bill Lee spent a significant amount of time talking about education-related issues and initiatives.

In addition to putting more (but not enough) money into teacher salaries, Lee proposed $68 million for a new literacy program focused on phonics-based reading instruction, $25 million to support school improvement work, and $250 million to create a trust fund to support and grow mental health services for Tennessee’s highest-risk students.

Lee also said he plans to set aside $8.5 million to launch the Governor’s Teaching Fellowship to provide college scholarships for 1,000 of “our best and brightest [students] as they train to become teachers.” The governor also announced grants to help state’s lowest paid teachers

TEA has made strengthening the State Minimum Salary Schedule for teachers a main topic in the General Assembly. Gov. Lee has now made it a priority.

Lee proposed raising the state scale by $2,000 per year for the next two years, raising the base salary from $36,000 to $40,000 by the 2021-2022 school year.

The improvement in the schedule directly impacts all teachers paid at or near the state minimum and will have positive effects for most Tennessee teachers.

“One of the reasons increases in state salary dollars haven’t gotten into teacher paychecks is because of the damage Commissioner Huffman did to the state minimum salary schedule in 2014 and the failure of the state board to change course. Simply put, there is no money in teacher paychecks for the state’s lowest paid teachers.”

Proposed increase to State Minimum Salary Schedule would give extra boost to state’s lowest paid teachers

Salary Schedule cont. page 6

Targeted districts file lawsuit against controversial private school voucher law

Metro-Nashville and Shelby County filed a major lawsuit on the state voucher law in chancery court on February 6. The complaint names Gov. Bill Lee and his education commissioner, Penny Schwinn, and focuses on how the voucher law violates the state constitution.

The General Assembly may only pass public acts that have statewide general application. Bills with local application must have the consent of local governments or be approved by voters in a local referendum. The voucher law did neither.

“The voucher law was strongly opposed across Tennessee; nobody wanted it in their communities, including where it was finally dumped,” said TEA President Beth Brown. “We know the problems contained in the legislation. It is bad from its inception. The people voting for vouchers are not the people who would benefit from vouchers.”

Brown noted that this bad law will not stand.

The General Assembly tried and implemented the program a year earlier than anticipated and focused on how the administration’s rush to try and implement the program is motivated in whole or part over concerns the law could be overturned.

TEA has supported the work of Metro-Nashville Legal Director Bob Cooper, the state Attorney General from 2006-2014, on the complaint. Leading the legislative fight against vouchers gave TEA extensive knowledge on the law’s flaws and how legislators admitted it wasn’t general application. A key admission the law is not general application was a late-added “reverse severability clause,”

Voucher lawsuit cont. page 7
State leaders are choosing to not invest in our children

By TEA President Beth Brown

Every day, Tennessee’s educators inspire students’ creativity and foster problem-solving skills. Whether the task is analyzing a persuasive essay or identifying geometric shapes within art, teachers help their students break down complex ideas and make abstract concepts concrete. As an educator, I feel the need to do the same with the current state of Tennessee’s finances. For many Tennesseans do not understand how I can be certain that our state can afford a significant and historic investment in public education without raising taxes.

For the past six years, Tennessee has collected hundreds of millions of dollars beyond what was budgeted annually. Revenue that is collected but not budgeted is funneled into reserve accounts and labeled as non occurring, which means those collected funds cannot be used for recurring expenses. Tennessee has amassed $6.7 billion in excess revenue collection, with $1.2 billion of those funds collected in 2019 alone.

Let that sink in.

Tennessee has $6.7 billion in cash that our legislators have chosen not to invest in our schools. It’s a choice to disinvest in our students, our schools, and our communities.

Imagine it this way. I base my household budget on a $45,000 salary. Balancing my income with my expenses is difficult, and I must make sacrifices. After paying my mortgage, utilities, and insurance bills, I only have enough money left to feed my children two meals a day. It’s a hard life, and I wish I could do more for my kids.

Then, to my pleasant surprise, I begin earning $55,000 a year… but I never adjust my household budget. I simply budget the extra earnings and put them in a saving account. This sounds like a smart financial decision, but my kids are still only getting two meals a day. It’s great to have a big savings account, but when my children are starving, there’s nothing to brag about.

This is what is happening in Tennessee. As a state, we’ve got a raise in revenue, but we’re not reflecting that pay raise in our budget. We’re starving our schools when we don’t have to.

Think about what we could do if we budgeted properly. We could raise teacher salaries so that educators earn a competitive wage and can afford to stay in the profession. We could increase the number of counselors, nurses, reading and math specialists, librarians, and art and music teachers. We could ensure that educators have adequate resources to meet their students’ needs.

Without raising taxes, the state collects enough revenue to get Tennessee out of the bottom 10 in education funding in the nation, and the state’s financial experts tell us that our revenue stream will remain strong. It’s affordable, it’s right, and it’s time for the Tennessee General Assembly to invest in our public schools. We have the money; the question remains whether the Tennessee General Assembly has the will.

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The respect and funding our profession deserves

By TEA Executive Director Carolyn Crowder

When I was growing up, I remember the way teachers, parents and other adults would encourage me when I spoke of wanting to become a teacher. Teaching was a respected profession. It was common to see generations of teachers within one family.

Fast forward to today: A recent Tennessee survey of educators revealed that most teachers would now discourage their children or grandchildren from becoming teachers themselves. It is heartbreaking to see how the bureaucrats and “reformers” have done so much to demoralize teachers that we no longer want our younger generations to follow in our footsteps.

This mentality shift, combined with the low, stagnant wages of teachers is manifesting itself in a looming teacher shortage crisis. The annual slate of back-to-school media stories now routinely includes stories about how many teaching vacancies remain in a district. Teacher prep programs at colleges across the state are seeing fewer and fewer students choose education as a major.

TEA staff and leaders have been surveying members across the state to see what their priorities are in order to improve the schools they work in and the profession they have chosen. Those surveyed have had the opportunity to identify priorities that, if implemented, could reverse the teacher shortage and give qualified professionals the resources needed to meet the growing needs of our students. Survey results thus far identify the following top priorities:

• Lower class size,
• A professional wage comparable to other professions with similar education and certification requirements,
• Increased parental and community support, and
• Time to teach away from preparing for high-stakes, standardized tests.

The first three priorities can be accomplished with an increase in school funding. It takes money to hire the additional teachers needed to lower class sizes. It would take money to raise Tennessee teacher salaries to be comparable with other professions. It takes money to invest in parental and community involvement programs.

The last priority could actually save money. The millions our state spends on standardized tests that cannot be used for diagnostic purposes could be used to invest in the other priorities. The time saved from all the test preparation would be even more valuable to students and teachers as they once again have the opportunity to discover the joy of teaching and learning.

The savings from reduced testing would not cover all of the other priorities. But, as President Brown’s column indicates, Tennessee has more than enough money to make a real difference. The kind of difference that could be a game changer for teachers, schools and students.

We have a chance to make this “game changer” happen. Text rally to 84693 and sign up to attend the Rally for our Schools on March 16. Let’s bring back the respect and the funding our profession deserves!
Proposed K-12 Funding Increases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Proposed Increase</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Mental Health Endowment</td>
<td>$250M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher Salaries</td>
<td>$117M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Literacy Initiative</td>
<td>$68M</td>
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<tr>
<td>BEP Inflation</td>
<td>$65M</td>
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<td>Achievement School District</td>
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<td>Teacher Leadership Institute</td>
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<td>School Improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charter School Facilities</td>
<td>$24M</td>
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*Note: Increases of $24 million or more are included above. The total proposed increase in the FY2020-21 budget totals $600 million, with just over $200 million of that total being recurring funds.

**2020 budget increases from page 7**

up in paychecks.

“The proposed $117 million for teacher salaries breaks down to about $1,450 per teacher, or approximately $28 a week,” Brown said. “The governor said he wants Tennessee to be the best state in the nation to teach, and we agree. The governor and General Assembly can and should do more to make teaching a professionally paid career.”

Tennessee teachers on average spend $500 out of their own pockets for necessary classroom supplies, and teachers make 22% less on average than other Tennesseans with a similar college degree.

The budget also includes increased funding for new mental health and literacy initiatives (see article on pages 1 and 6), and leadership and professional development programs.

“In addition to falling short of the investment public education needs and the state can afford, we also have concerns about other priorities highlighted in the governor’s budget,” Brown said. “Increased line items for the failing Achievement School District, charter school facilities and private school vouchers all take money away from the public schools our state is constitutionally required to adequately fund.”

In total, the proposed budget includes more than $64 million in new spending for privately run charter schools and other privatization schemes.

“Educators are not ungrateful for the increased investment the governor has proposed. Every dollar counts,” Brown said. “However, when you read about billion-dollar surpluses, proposed tax cuts and increased spending for initiatives that weaken public schools, it can be difficult to buy into the administration’s proclaimed commitment to make Tennessee’s schools the best in the country for both students and educators.”

Educators, parents and all public education advocates are encouraged to join TEA members on Monday, March 16, in Nashville for the Rally for Our Schools to fight for the funding our students deserve. Details can be found on the TEA website, TEATeachers.org/Rally.

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**SAVE THE DATE: June 11-13**

**WHAT:** Summer Leadership Academy & Emerging Leaders School

**WHERE:** Embassy Suites Cool Springs

**DETAILS:** TEAteachers.org/SLA  TEAteachers.org/ELS

Honor the Past, Own the Present, Shape the Future!
Why TN Is So Low: State Government Less K-12 Funding Than Neighboring

State dollars as a percentage of all K-12 funding

- TENNESSEE: 54.7%
- GEORGIA: 56.4%
- ALABAMA: 48.7%
- FLORIDA: 56.7%
- VIRGINIA: 51.3%
- NORTH CAROLINA: 46.9%

SOURCE: NEA Rankings of the States 2021
State of the State

During his speech, Lee also touted his initiatives helping young million to make sure teachers have what they need to accomplish moving the needle on early childhood literacy requires more than Recommending a “new comprehensive approach to literacy, “ Lee would work in our public schools, “ said TEA President Beth

While it’s a good initiative, the best way to address mental health behavioral health liaisons available to all 95 counties instead of 36. The administration plans to create a mental health fund with $250 statistics, Lee announced plans to expand the outreach capacity of said. opportunies for school leaders and innovative career competition to develop a teacher training program in Tennessee districts create their own teacher recruitment programs, and a

Mental Health

Pointing out that 60% of children who receive mental health services do so in schools and citing alarming youth suicide statistics, Lee announced plans to expand the outreach capacity of the state’s Department of Mental Health, and to increase the state’s behavioral health liaisons available to all 95 counties nationwide. The administration plans to create a mental health fund with $250 million in one-time monies to support mental health support services in the state’s most at-risk schools.

“While it’s a good initiative, the best way to address mental health needs would be to fund full-time positions for counselors who would work in our public schools,” said TEA President Beth Brown. “But the endowment would generate $7.5 to $15 million annually, which would translate roughly to $80 per each of the estimated 190,000 students in need of mental health support.”

LITERACY

Recommending a “new comprehensive approach to literacy,” Lee announced legislation for training teachers based on phonics-based instruction. “We will ensure adequate supports and interventions for students before they reach the critical third grade milestone,” Lee said. “But moving the needle on early childhood literacy requires more than talk – that’s why I’m also proposing an additional investment of $70 million to make sure teachers have what they need to accomplish the task at hand.”

During his speech, Lee also touted his initiatives helping young adults earn industry certifications, launching new work-based learning programs, and promoting STEM education across the state.

TEA-backed legislation puts teachers in control of TVAAS in evaluations

For years, TVAAS has been taking the joy out of teaching and stalling education progress in Tennessee, and now a bill has been filed that would make it optional in the state’s teacher evaluations. Starting in the 2020-21 school year and every school year thereafter, student growth evaluation composites generated by assessment scores could be excluded from the student growth measure “if increasing the student achievement measure…results in a higher evaluation for the teacher.”

The administration introduced Senate Bill 2425, filed by Rep. Jim Coley (R-Bartlett), a retired teacher. Sponsoring in the Senate by Sen. Janice Bowling (R-Tullahoma), a former special education teacher, SB 2214 also calls for the student achievement measure to comprise 50% of the evaluation criteria “if the exclusion of student growth evaluation composite results in a higher evaluation score for the teacher.”

It is time for the legislature to acknowledge what we have been saying for years – that TVAAS is not a valid measure of teacher effectiveness – and take one step further to end high-stakes decisions tied to a single state test,” said TEA President Beth Brown. TEA has led the fight to end the deeply flawed system of using test scores in high-stakes decisions, as study after study has shown that state standardized test scores are not an effective measure of student achievement, teacher effectiveness or school performance.
TEA legislative strategy sets up legal battle over private school vouchers

**Voucher lawsuit from page 1**

a provision canceling the whole program if the limiting mechanism is struck down.

“We warned legislators who never want this for their own districts but were pressured to pass something—vouchers would be in their communities when the courts struck down how it targets Nashville and Memphis,” said TEA chief lobbyist Jim Wrye. “Adding the provision to nullify the program rather than let it go statewide admitted the law is not general application.”

Cooper, in a statement announcing the lawsuit, said limiting the program to two counties is “based on politics, not policy.”

“We believe a complete vetting in chancery court will demonstrate that the law violates our state constitution and undermines our local government’s ability to deliver adequately funded public education;” he said in a statement. “If the legislature believes that education savings accounts are good policy, it may pass a bill of general application so that all counties share the purported benefits of the program. If the legislature prefers to limit the bill’s application to two counties, it must include a local-approval option and hope the program’s merits will convince the affected counties to choose to participate.”

There is recent precedent of major state education law being invalidated on general application grounds. A 2011 municipal school district law that focused on Shelby County was struck down because it was not general application. The General Assembly then passed a statewide municipal school district law two years later.

The attorney who defended the state in that 2011 lawsuit loss? Bob Cooper.

“If there’s anyone with specific knowledge about this issue, it’s Bob Cooper,” said Wrye.

**Face-to-face advocacy makes a difference**

It is not a coincidence that private school vouchers have been defeated for as many years as TEA has been hosting Civication. Meeting face-to-face with elected officials works. Legislators seeing committee rooms packed with TEA teachers giving up a day of their Spring Break is powerful.

Educators who are working with students every day are the people legislators need to hear from. Your perspective on how the votes taken in Nashville directly contribute to, or impede, student learning is the most valuable form of advocacy.

**Advocate from your couch**

Being a strong and effective advocate for your students and your profession does not require a drive to Nashville. There are plenty of important actions you can take right from your own couch.

Make sure you are plugged in with TEA on social media and that you are receiving emails from TEA with legislative updates. Email asmirnov@tnea.org if you are not receiving TEA emails.

Participate in #RedforEd days and share with your friends and family why they should join you in our 20/20 Vision campaign.

Send emails and make phone calls to your legislators regularly. Haring from their educators back home is the best way to earn legislators’ support on the issues that impact our classrooms.

You are the expert on what our students need to succeed!

**Ethnic Minority Affairs Conference**

March 27–28, 2020
Memphis
Register online: teateachers.org/MAC

**20/20 VISION**

Use your educator voice to fight for public education!

**The Good:**

HB2425/SB2214 (Coley/Bowling) Permits teacher to use other measure rather than TVAAS in their teacher evaluations.

HB1833/SB185 (Cepicky/Hensley) Limits the number of TCAP tests administered.

HB2300/SB2512 (Haston/Dickerson) Eliminates the A-F school grading requirement.

**The Bad:**

HB1894/SB2349 (DeBerry/Gresham) Removes the eligibility restrictions on the IEA special education voucher program, such that a student does not have to attend a public school in order to qualify for the voucher.

HB1572/SB2077 (Griffey/Pody) Requires public school athletes to participate in school sports based on the gender indicated on the child’s birth certificate.

HB1934/SB2337 (Dunn/Gresham) Requires the commissioner to obtain approval from the state board of education for any changes to performance goals and measures for schools and districts.

**A note about caption bills:**

This early in the session, there are a number of bills that are essentially placeholders or “caption bills.” These bills are amended in committee to replace the placeholder language with the bill’s actual intent. As the session moves forward, watch this space for updates on new legislation that has popped up from caption bills.

**More updates:**

If you are interested in receiving more frequent updates via email about action taken in the General Assembly, please email asmirnov@tnea.org. The frequency of the email updates varies depending on actions taken by the legislature.

Be sure to check back in future issues for updates on important legislation to watch in 2020.
Join educators from across the state in participating in TEA’s Civication on the Tuesday of your Spring Break.

Hearing directly from educators in their districts can make the difference in how legislators vote on important issues impacting our classrooms and our profession.

TEA will pay mileage, and if you live more than 50 miles from Nashville, we’ll take care of your hotel room.

Register now: TEAteachers.org/Civication