With dozens of freshman legislators, new House and Senate leadership, a new governor, and a new commissioner of education, it may take some time to understand the approach of the new General Assembly and the administration toward public schools, though it’s clear education will be front and center.

TEA has been successful in recent years persuading the Tennessee General Assembly to reduce the impact of state testing and include significant increases in public education funding in the state budget, but there is still much work to be done.

To continue this good work and get across the 2020 finish line, we must increase our visibility, educate allies on the issues impacting our classrooms and engage in meaningful conversations with elected officials.

Page 3 has a list of easy and fun actions you can take to join the fight to achieve our 20/20 Vision.

Arming teachers or SROs, school safety will be a key issue

Keeping students and educators safe is a priority all can agree on, but there is still a lot of debate around the best way to do so.

A proposal backed by TEA and a growing number of legislators would increase funding to provide for a school resource officer in every school. A school safety task force formed by former Gov. Bill Haslam reported in 2018 that more than half of Tennessee’s schools do not have an SRO, and some rural counties have no law enforcement coverage for any school.

TEA has maintained SROs, other law enforcement, or well-trained professional security personnel are the best solutions for school safety. TEA opposes other ideas such as arming teachers as a means to defend against school shootings.

New Governor Bill Lee has indicated during his campaign and in recent interviews that he would support

Big changes in the Capitol

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AN EVEN WORSE VOUCHER IDEA

Unaccountable “education savings accounts” is the latest twist to carve out public funding for private schools

As the 111th General Assembly gets underway, there is intense speculation about what the privatization push will look like this year. It is unclear whether or not the Lee administration will introduce its own voucher bill, as former Governor Haslam did in 2013, or whether he will leave the matter to the legislature to debate on their own.

It is clear that privatizers are favoring Education Savings Accounts as new means to try to change the conversation after five years of stinging defeats when peddling more traditional voucher legislation. While ESAs are referred to by some as “vouchers light,” nothing could be further...
Vouchers hurt our students, even in rural districts

By TEA President Beth Brown

Growing up in the mountains, I often heard the expression “You can put lipstick on a pig, but it’s still a pig.” The recent rebranding of vouchers as educational savings accounts is just that: lipstick on a pig. Polling indicates that Tennesseans oppose vouchers two-to-one, so I’m not surprised that privatizers have attempted to fool the public with a new label for their voucher schemes. The concept, however, is still the same: siphoning money from public schools to pay for private school tuition.

Here’s what vouchers would mean for a school like mine.

According to the 2017-2018 state report card, my school district spent $9,921.60 per pupil. The state contributed 69.3%, or $6,876, of that funding. Also pertinent is the fact that the average teacher salary in my district is $40,000. I’m an English teacher, not a math teacher, but according to my calculations, this means that it will take six students leaving with vouchers to cost the district funding for a teaching position.

Here’s the bottom line: vouchers hurt our kids. And there is no band-aid big enough to fix that hurt.

Let’s imagine that those six students come from different grades in my school: one ninth grader, two tenth graders, two eleventh graders, and one twelfth grader. The county has lost the funds for an entire teaching position, but there is absolutely no way that the school can operate with one less English teacher, as my typical class load is 175 students. Even if all six were in the same grade, my school couldn’t cut an English position. In fact, if the six students left from each grade leaving the school with vouchers, my school couldn’t cut an English position, though they would have lost $165,024 in funding.

So how will the district compensate for the lost funds? It probably won’t be from cutting an English position (like mine) or a math or science position. Instead, students’ access to art, drama, and music classes could be lost, as could students’ access to career and technical education. In fact, any course not designated as a graduation requirement could be eliminated. As a result, class sizes will increase as students have fewer course options. Even more frightening to consider are the non-teaching positions that could be lost. Can you imagine sending your child to a school without a school nurse or a school counselor? Can you imagine how our struggling students will fare when the educational assistants that provide much-needed one-on-one instruction are no longer available?

That’s certainly not the educational environment I want for my students. Even if vouchers (under the lipidsticked guise of education savings accounts) are available, the majority of the students currently enrolled in Tennessean public schools will remain in our public schools. Also, $6,876 will not cover private school tuition, and students who attend public schools in more affluent districts will be eligible for even less in vouchers, because the state portion of their funding is less. The result is obvious: students who can already afford to attend private school will have their education subsidised by students and families who cannot afford private school tuition. Moreover, critical funding will have been diverted from public schools, leaving our most vulnerable students with fewer resources.

Here’s the bottom line: vouchers hurt our kids. And there is no band-aid big enough to fix that hurt. Instead of taking valuable resources away from our students, we should be investing more so that all students can have a great public education regardless of where they live.
There are lots of ways to participate in the 20/20 Vision campaign. Pick at least one below and get started today!

Wear RED every Wednesday and on TEA's #RedforEd challenge days (Next one: Monday, March 4). Take a selfie or group picture with colleagues, and post it to your social media profiles with the hashtags #RedforEd, #TN2020Vision and your local's hashtag.

Make plans now to attend TEA Civication on the Tuesday of your Spring Break. TEA will reimburse you for mileage and provide a hotel room for those traveling more than 50 miles from Nashville. Civication is the perfect opportunity for face-to-face time with the elected leaders who make decisions that directly impact your classroom.

Complete the “I’m in!” form online to let TEA you are all in and indicate the actions you are willing to participate in. Click the “Take action” link located at TEAteachers.org/2020Vision to complete the form. Be sure to share the form with your colleagues, friends, family and other supporters of public education. This is not just for members of TEA!

Make regular contact with your legislators a priority. Phone calls and emails from educators back home can make the difference in how legislators vote on crucial issues like private school vouchers, testing, association services, verify that the activity is permitted by your employer.

Q: I heard a teacher colleague call a student a “complete moron” in your job or your teaching license. Recent revisions to the Tennessee Teacher Code of Ethics caution educators to ensure interactions with students occur in transparent and appropriate settings, and state board rules similarly caution against engaging in “non-explicit” inappropriate communications with students, which is defined as “[a]ny communication . . . that is beyond the scope of the educator’s professional responsibilities,” and includes topics like romantic relationships and profane language. In light of the code and rule, it would seem imprudent to continue engaging with this student, or any other, in a manner beyond your professional responsibilities.

Q: I want to tutor students after school, and plan to charge parents $20 an hour for my tutoring services. Is that OK?

A: It depends. Asking parents to pay for additional services for students attending school in the district where you work is arguably a violation of the Teacher Code of Ethics because the code provides that educators cannot use their professional relationships with students for private advantage. Because you are employed as a teacher by the district, it’s impossible to say how your status as a teacher influences the decision of a parent to engage you for tutoring services instead of another individual not affiliated with the district. As such, arguably, you would gain a private advantage as a result of that presumed influence were you to receive pay from both your employer and district parents to perform essentially the same service for the same group of students. It is possible that your school district has a board policy that allows teachers to receive private pay for tutoring, but in the absence of such a policy, charging parents for those activities could be construed as a breach of the code of ethics. So, before you charge for any additional services, verify that the activity is permitted by your employer.

Q: As a band director, I have gotten to know a student very well this year as she frequently hangs out in my room during lunch and even calls me her “School Dad.” I really don’t mind the company, but I do worry what others might think. What should I do?

A: Interactions of that nature simply are not worth the risk to your job or your teaching license. Recent revisions to the Tennessee Teacher Code of Ethics caution educators to ensure interactions with students occur in transparent and appropriate settings, and state board rules similarly caution against engaging in “non-explicit” inappropriate communications with students, which is defined as “[a]ny communication . . . that is beyond the scope of the educator’s professional responsibilities,” and includes topics like romantic relationships and profane language. In light of the code and rule, it would seem imprudent to continue engaging with this student, or any other, in a manner beyond your professional responsibilities.

To avoid the appearance of impropriety, the safest course would be to prohibit any student from loitering in isolated areas where you typically work alone. Even if you keep the doors open and know others are nearby, it’s not worth the risk! If a student loiters over your objection, consider relocating yourself to a more populated area before further addressing the student's insubordination. And, finally, if a student seeks advice about a personal matter, simply refer the student to the guidance counselor as such personal matters are within the scope of professional responsibilities for a school counselor.

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A: While the Teacher Code of Ethics has long provided that educators should not intentionally expose a student to embarrassment or disparagement, a new reporting provision was recently added requiring educators with personal knowledge of such a breach of the code by another educator to report that breach to the educator’s immediate supervisor, the director of schools, or the local board of education within 30 days. Further, failure to make a timely report is itself considered a breach. As such, if you truly believe your colleague’s comment intentionally exposed a student to embarrassment or disparagement, then your failure to make a timely report could be considered a breach itself. Interactions of that nature simply are not worth the risk to your job or your teaching license. Recent revisions to the Tennessee Teacher Code of Ethics caution educators to ensure interactions with students occur in transparent and appropriate settings, and state board rules similarly caution against engaging in “non-explicit” inappropriate communications with students, which is defined as “[a]ny communication . . . that is beyond the scope of the educator’s professional responsibilities,” and includes topics like romantic relationships and profane language. In light of the code and rule, it would seem imprudent to continue engaging with this student, or any other, in a manner beyond your professional responsibilities.

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The TEA Advocacy Hotline supports local leaders and building representatives in answering member questions. If you have an employment-related question, please contact your building rep or UniServ Coordinator.
A test is not a fair measure of achievement.

Stop using state tests for punishment.

We know standardized tests are not a valid measure of student or teacher performance, yet these scores seem to be the only thing that matters. Tests should be used to diagnose and teach. Join TEA’s fight to end Tennessee’s test-and-punish system. Visit the link below to say “I’m in!”

TEAteachers.org/2020vision #TN2020Vision
As you can see, Tennessee is behind most of our neighbors in education funding, but well ahead in graduation rates and ACT scores. Join TEA’s fight to increase state K-12 funding to get to the Southeast average by 2020. We’ve shown it’s the best investment Tennessee can make. Visit the link below to say “I’m in!”

TEAteachers.org/2020vision  #TN2020Vision
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.

Watch for details on how to register soon!
General Assembly
House Speaker Glen Casada (R-Franklin) reorganized the education committees, creating four subcommittees and a giant, 23-member full committee, the House’s largest.

The chair of the full committee is Rep. Mark White (R-Memphis). White, who chaired a House education subcommittee for the past several years, is well-versed in the issues facing Tennessee public schools. Vice-chair of the full committee is public school teacher and TEA member Kirk Haston (R-Lobelville). Haston is also a former NBA player.

“It is exciting to have an active public school teacher on the education committee and serving in the Legislature,” said TEA President Beth Brown. “The last active teacher was TEA’s good friend Rep. Jim Coley (R-Bartlett), who retired from teaching several years ago. Kirk will bring a lot of school experience and common sense to the debates on education. I hope other legislators will look to him in these meetings.”

Brown notes that being a rural teacher from Perry County is also an important aspect of Haston’s background, and will be helpful when discussing issues such as funding and technology resources.

The Senate Education committee also has some significant changes. Sen. Ken Yager (R-Kingston) was elected to the third leadership post, Republican caucus chair. Yager has received TEA’s endorsement and has a strong pro-teachers and pro-public school record. The number two post, Majority Leader, went to Sen. Jack Johnson (R-Brentwood).

New Commissioner
Gov. Lee’s final cabinet appointment came just days prior to his inauguration with the announcement of Penny Schwinn as the new state commissioner of education.

“I look forward to working with Commissioner Schwinn in the best interest of Tennessee students, educators and our great public schools,” said TEA President Beth Brown in a statement to media. “As a newcomer to our state, I hope she will take time to see firsthand the meaningful work happening in classrooms all across Tennessee, and also gain an understanding of the support and resources needed to ensure student success.”

Brown, Executive Director Carolyn Crowder and Chief Lobbyist Jim Wrye had an opportunity to sit down with the commissioner prior to the announcement.

While Schwinn’s background has caused concern for many educators, TEA leaders were optimistic about the potential for a positive relationship between the new commissioner and teachers.

“Based on our first conversation, I am confident we have common ground on the importance of test transparency, including educators’ voices in policy decisions and working to ensure all students have access to a quality public education,” Brown said.

MEMBER ADVOCACY WORKS - Members of the Williamson County and Franklin SSD Education Associations sat down with Williamson County lawmakers House Speaker Glen Casada, Senate Majority leader Jack Johnson, and Rep. Sam Whitson in Franklin on January 24. Member-Legislator meetings like this are occurring in communities across the state and are critical to making educator concerns a priority for lawmakers.
Support shifts toward SROs to keep students, educators safe

School safety from page 8

legislation allowing educators with “proper training” to carry firearms on school grounds as a safety measure. A proposal to arm teachers failed in the 2018 legislative session.

“Our students need to feel safe in the classroom in order to focus on their education,” said TEA President Beth Brown. “It is up to us as the adults to figure out how to give them that peace of mind. We are fortunate in Tennessee to be in a financial situation that allows us to invest more money in public education, including common-sense school safety measures.”

Freshman legislator Rep. Brandon Ogle (R-Franklin) is leading the push to file the SRO legislation.

Coalition strengthens push for community schools support, funding

A statewide coalition of community schools is working to file legislation in the state General Assembly to expand the reach of community schools, which have been proven to be a viable school improvement strategy:

“Transformational community schools are designed to meet the specific and unique needs of the students they serve, and no community school will look or operate exactly the same way as another because all communities are different,” said TEA President Beth Brown. “TEA is backing the bill to support community schools in Tennessee because they represent the true differentiation in education.”

Practitioners and advocates from across the state have been meeting during the past few months to work on the legislative proposal.

“Every community in Tennessee is unique,” said Lyn Hoyt, a parent and entrepreneur who leads the Tennessee Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools. “Parents, educators and community members are able to choose the resources and services needed to maximize the potential of their neighborhood schools — and it’s already working in so many communities in Tennessee. We hope to expand that to every school that needs this kind of support.”

Research shows that community schools can improve equity by improving student outcomes in both rural and urban areas.

During the last legislative session, TEA introduced legislation proposing the creation of a grant program to be overseen by the state that would provide state resources to support the establishment or expansion of community schools. With many legislators expressing support for the bill, it successfully cleared the education committees in the House and Senate, but ultimately stalled in the finance committees for lack of funding.

“TEA is proud to support educators, providers, parents, and community advocates in expanding the reach of transformational community schools,” Brown said. There are also still all the same challenges that have always plagued voucher proposals. It became clear last year that many legislators understood the need to ensure real accountability by demanding that any recipient of public money took the same test required of public school students. This would be even more challenging if the state started to subsidize home school students with public funds.

The central problem for privatization advocates also remains: vouchers don’t work. Study after study, even those commissioned by pro-privatization think tanks and foundations, come to the same conclusion when looking at voucher programs in other states. Student achievement does not improve when looking at voucher programs in other states. Student achievement does not improve when looking at voucher programs in other states. Student achievement does not improve.

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There are various ideas being floated about how a system of ESAs would be funded, but inevitably the cost will be borne by local governments. The static costs of running the public schools will remain even if enrollment declines, meaning the local taxpayers will have to foot the bill for a state-mandated voucher scheme.

“It is clear through elections and polling that Tennesseans do not want vouchers in their public schools will remain even if enrollment declines, meaning the local taxpayers will have to foot the bill for a state-mandated voucher scheme.

“There is a strong desire to keep schools in the public system, and the state Department of Education was directed to re-evaluate changes to the pilot program and determine the best way to move forward.

One proposal in the 111th General Assembly is to do away with the portfolio system and clustered standards altogether, allowing teachers to have the option of using their observation score toward their total evaluation score.

“TEA led the charge in highlighting problems with the portfolio system and helping legislators understand that it was designed to keep teachers from being forced to use schoolwide data,” said TEA President Beth Brown. “If the portfolio goes away, it needs to be replaced with something that doesn’t punish teachers based on test results of students they never taught.”

The work of improving the portfolio system is part of TEAs larger goal to eliminate high-stakes decisions based on standardized test scores in Tennessee by 2020.

Please go to TEAteachers.org/2020Vision to see how you can help.