Several initiatives are moving through the Tennessee General Assembly aiming to change the existing testing regime in the state. One of the key bills is HB383/SB488 filed by Rep. Terri Lynn Weaver (R-Lancaster) and Sen. Janice Bowling (R-Tullahoma), which would allow districts to administer the ACT, ACT Aspire or SAT tests as an approved testing alternative in math and English language arts for high school students.

Many legislators are more concerned than ever about the repeated TNReady failures over the years. TEA has been raising awareness of the persistent problems, loss of data and problems with credibility plaguing the TNReady test.

Governor Bill Lee announced a $40 million new investment in school safety focused on school resource officers to better protect teachers and students, and prepare against the threat of violence. Governor Lee's bill mandates that all 1,300 districts hire SROs or develop plans to hire them. TEA supports this investment due to the increased threat of violence in our schools.

Approximately 500 Tennessee schools do not currently have SROs, and changes to the law will enable them to fill these positions. The new funding plan also enables schools that currently have an SRO to pursue grants to fund other safety priorities.

“The safety of our children and teachers is a top priority for my administration, and this investment ensures that school districts will have the resources they need to better protect our schools,” said Lee.

Legislators look for solutions on the future of testing

TEA survey shows support for alternatives

Several initiatives are moving through the Tennessee General Assembly aiming to change the existing testing regime in the state. One of the key bills is HB383/SB488 filed by Rep. Terri Lynn Weaver (R-Lancaster) and Sen. Janice Bowling (R-Tullahoma), which would allow districts to administer the ACT, ACT Aspire or SAT tests as an approved testing alternative in math and English language arts for high school students.

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Context matters more than dramatic headlines

By TEA President Beth Brown

Artist Kenneth Noland said, “For me context is key—from that comes the understanding of everything.” Without seeing the complete piece of art, we cannot fully appreciate it, or its statistics. Recent headlines proclaimed “large numbers of Tennessee students not ready for college” based on the number of students needing remediation. It’s important that we look at that data in context.

Tennessee teachers are working hard to open post-secondary opportunities to more and more of our students. The Tennessee Promise provides an avenue for more graduates to begin college, and school counselors across our state are going the extra mile to make sure more and more seniors fill out federal student aid and Promise forms.

After years of work since the Hope Scholarship was enacted, Tennessee has the highest federal student aid form completion rate in the country, partly because the form is required to remain eligible for Tennessee Promise.

Tennessee’s educators are working with limited resources, and our students are demonstrating progress.

By TEA Executive Director Carolyn Crowder

The factors that influence student achievement are not confined within the walls of a school building. Having engaged parents is one of the most important factors for student learning. Improving respect for teachers and our public schools is critically important, too.

There has been a lot of talk recently about a proposed “parent dress code.” The bill, sponsored by longtime public education advocate Rep. Antonio Parkinson, is about much more than just what parents and vendors, who enters a school building conducts themselves in a manner that is respectful to students’ learning environment and the faculty.

TEA is always supportive of measures to improve respect of the teaching profession and our public schools, but I do understand why reporters and educators have questioned the portion of the bill that covers dress code.

I have seen my fair share of questionable parent attire, but the parent’s presence and attention to their child’s education is far more important to me than their wardrobe choices. Parents, like educators, have overwhelming demands on their time and attention. If they are prioritizing their child’s education at school and at home, that should always be acknowledged and encouraged.

A student can have the best and brightest educator in the state, but there is only so much that can be accomplished without the necessary support and encouragement at home. Teachers and parents need each other.

I do believe that this proposal comes from a sincere concern for improving the learning environment. I have some ideas, though, on additional ways that legislators can improve the learning environment in our public schools.

First, legislators could continue making significant investments in public education funding. The state has made historic increases in recent years, but there is still a lot of work to be done. Increased funding would allow for smaller class sizes and more one-on-one instruction. It would also provide for inviting classrooms stocked with the resources needed for a quality public education—resources that are currently being funded out of teachers’ own pockets.

Fully funding public education would also mean providing a livable and competitive wage for educators. There is no excuse for teachers and education support professionals needing second and sometimes third jobs to be able to pay their bills. Qualified and committed educators are the foundation for student success and a positive learning environment. Current state funding levels make it much more difficult for less affluent districts to recruit and retain the professionals our students deserve.

The second issue largely impacting the learning environment is toxic high-stakes testing. The state has tied too many critical decisions for students, teachers and schools to its flawed TNReady assessment that it has created an environment of drill and test-punish. This is not conducive to teaching or learning. We must rethink the way we evaluate student achievement and teacher effectiveness. The current system is only causing more harm.

I agree we need to look at ways to improve the learning environment, but let’s not overlook the most significant barriers to learning.

We need to address the real barriers to student success

If parents are making their child’s education a priority and showing up in the school building, they should be met with open arms.

If parents are making their child’s education a priority and showing up in the school building, they should be met with open arms.
Our collective action can change the future for our students and profession

By Lisa Jorgensen, United EA of Shelby County member

I am ALL IN for the #RedforEd #TN2020Vision goals. Tennessee students need more funding, and there are too many high stakes decisions being based upon a very dysfunctional and exceedingly expensive test. Both of these concerns must be addressed, and the answers lie in the Tennessee General Assembly. Some legislators have different ideas on how to best meet the state’s obligations to educate all children. I believe our hope lies in parents, teachers and community members raising our voices in a united effort for positive changes.

I was raised in a small bedroom community in Bergen County, NJ, in a tiny former farmhouse that my parents discovered when riding through town on the bus. My father taught in the NYC schools for a couple of years, but he became a math and reading tutor, focusing on both remedial and accelerated learning.

We didn’t have much money, but our neighbors did. Bergen County schools were considered in the top three in the country at that time. The schools were funded by property taxes.

We relocated to Nashville in the early 1970s. Hee Haw was still a television staple. The Beverly Hillbillies had just gone off the air. My northern friends made jokes about Tennesseans going barefoot.

My high school was hugely disappointing. I never wrote a paper. Spelling and vocabulary words were less rigorous than those in my fifth grade spelling book. My father continued his calling as a reading and math tutor, but we all delivered newspapers early in the morning to help make ends meet.

Fast forward to 2019. Tennessee public schools are 39th in investment per student, but the state of Tennessee has had a significant budget surplus through the 2015-2018 fiscal years. It is estimated that there will be a $200 million revenue surplus this year. Something doesn’t add up.

The TNReady (not-ready) testing contract was accepted at a cost of $30 million, although that figure doesn’t take into account local investment in testing. In April 2018, Shelby County Schools estimated that they spent $46 million in test preparations alone.

Last year, I was able to support my fellow teachers as they readied their classrooms and students to participate in the first of the pre-TNReady tests, the benchmark testing for the kindergarteners to be taken on computers beginning the third week of school.

Although most of my school’s kindergarteners had not attended preschool and many did not have computers at home, and a large percentage did not speak English, all of these children were required to begin and complete a reading assessment and then, a few days later, a math assessment on the computer.

At my school, we don’t have the desktop computers available for benchmark testing of all the students, so laptops were purchased to be available for this process. Kindergarten teachers had to set up each individual laptop with mouse and headphones, log it on, log on the testing program and student, and supervise each child as they waded through the process.

I’m so glad that I was able to help, but I estimated that with 12 similar tests each year, these kindergarteners were going to lose the equivalent of six weeks of their English/Language Arts/Reading instruction.

It is true that these tests were “District mandated tests.” My district has invested in these in part because of state requirements, and in part to try to get ahead of the testing competency required to stave off the state’s threat of school shutdowns and take-overs due to test scores. And, yes, the district estimates that it has spent more than $46 million in the process.

I can’t help but wonder what that money could have been used for instead. Educational assistants? Pencils and supplies? Toilet paper and soap? Art supplies? Musical instruments and sheet music? Actual books available for reading at the schools? Library support? Additional school counselors for behavior, academic and planning? A living wage for district employees? The lost learning time during testing is a disservice to our students and educators.

The practice needs to stop!

Every Tennessee Education Association member needs to be part of the effort to increase awareness of the need to improve state investment in public education and stop the high-stakes decisions based on testing. We need to motivate parents, grandparents, high school students and recent graduates, community volunteers and education advocates to wear #RedforEd. We need to encourage all supporters of public education to contact their state legislators to vote for these changes.

Our students’ futures and our profession are at stake.
Tennessee gets more for every public K-12 dollar.

Our state ranks 39th for investment per student. After years of increases Tennessee now ranks 39th in funding per student at $9,995, behind the Southeast average of $10,705 and the national average of $12,756 per student. Tennessee is first in the South for on-time graduation, ninth for the entire nation, and ranks fourth in on-time graduation for black students.

We can and should fund our schools at the Southeast average.

General Fund revenue not budgeted FY15-FY18: $2.4 billion

$700 million needed over two years to meet Southeast K-12 funding average

K-12 potential FY15-18 non-budgeted revenue: $816 million

Projected Internet sales tax and revenue growth for FY20: $500 million

ESAs are plagued with fraud and abuse:

Arizona was the first state with ESAs. An October 2018 Arizona Auditor General report found more than $700,000 in fraudulent purchases using public money. Arizona ESAs have been plagued with fraud and abuse for years. Some parents transfer all scholarship money into a 529 college-savings account and then leave the program — preventing the state from recouping funds. Other parents pocket taxpayer dollars, then send kids back to public schools. The state Attorney General launched a criminal investigation into ESA funds that were used to pay for an abortion.
Polling shows Tennesseans strongly opposed to vouchers

Question: Do you support the use of taxpayer dollars to fund attendance to private schools?

- **STATEWIDE** (6,510 respondents)
  - NO 59.5%  YES 29%

- **RURAL** (2,995 respondents)
  - NO 64%  YES 24.5%

- **URBAN - SUBURBAN** (3,515 respondents)
  - NO 54%  YES 34.5%

6,510 highly likely voters, with a GOP oversample
Polling of 6,510 likely voters completed by Revily-Spy, a GOP survey firm. Polling occurred from May-October, 2016. Polling includes oversample of Republican primary voters. Polling margin of error ±4.4 percent. Polling was conducted in legislative districts across Tennessee during primary and general elections.

Vouchers damage student achievement

Studies show that vouchers lower student test scores, especially in math.

Major academic studies of voucher programs in Indiana, Ohio and Louisiana all showed students who took taxpayer funding to attend private schools had significant drop-off in academic achievement compared to public school students.

The Ohio study, sponsored by the pro-voucher Walton Family Foundation and conducted by the Fordham Institute, showed negative impacts of using a private school vouchers persisted three years into the program.

Academic progress of TN compared to voucher states

In November 2018, Arizona voters rejected ESAs 2-to-1

Arizona was the first state to pass ESAs in 2014.

ESAs are plagued with fraud and abuse

Arizona was the first state with ESAs. An October 2018 Arizona Auditor General report found more than $700,000 in fraudulent purchases using public money in school-voucher program. State officials have recouped almost none of that money.

Arizona ESAs have been plagued with fraud and abuse for years. Some parents have transferred all scholarship money into a 529 college-savings account and then left the program — preventing the state from recouping funds. Other parents pocketed taxpayer dollars, then sent kids back to public schools. The state Attorney General launched a criminal investigation into ESA funds that were used to pay for an abortion.
Join educators from 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

Contact TEA
Tennessee Education Association
801 Second Avenue N., Nashville, TN 37201-1099
(615) 242-8367, 2000-242-8262
Fax: (615) 259-4581

Unions/Coordinators

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TeaCivication Stand up for public education!

Save the Date
Lee’s early initiatives demonstrate emphasis on CTE and STEM

Lawmakers to take up community schools proposal this week

Nearly one hundred parents, teachers, administrators, and other advocates for community schools participated in the Tennessee Community Schools State Network Day on the Hill last week. TEA is a founding member of the coalition, whose goal is to raise awareness about community schools work happening in the state and to promote policies that support it.

“TEA knows that community schools are an evidence-based approach to school improvement that is not top-down or punitive, and that meet kids where they are and removes barriers to learning,” said TEA President Beth Brown. “We are proud to be part of the coalition and will continue to advocate for support of this important work.”

The coalition is supporting HB1330/SB1058 (Haston/Dickerson), which was introduced in response to a report about community schools released last fall by the Comptroller’s education research office. The report cited national research showing the method had promise, but that Tennessee state law needed to more specifically define success to determine whether or not initiatives are achieving their goals.

“We know that you have to prove the model before asking for money from the state, and this bill is a step toward doing just that,” Brown said. “We know there is great work happening in Tennessee that’s making a real difference in the lives of our students, and hope the legislature can help lift it up.”

CTE program

GIVE initiative is a two-pronged approach that utilizes regional partnerships to develop work-based learning and apprenticeship opportunities. The program will give communities the funding and flexibility to build programs that best reflect local needs and work directly with private industry to structure programming.

“As a high school teacher in a rural county, I’ve seen for myself how important it is for students to have access to a strong CTE program,” said TEA President Beth Brown. “We have strong, vibrant communities all across this state that depend on skilled workers. Gov. Lee’s initiative will show across this state that there are good paying jobs right there in their communities that do not require going into debt for a college degree or moving to a metro area.”

In addition to the GIVE initiative, Gov. Lee also recently announced the Future Workforce Initiative targeting STEM programs statewide.

“The Future Workforce Initiative is a direct response to the emerging technology industry and making sure our students are first in line to be qualified for technology jobs,” Lee said in a media statement.

The Future Workforce Initiative aims to put Tennessee in the top 25 states for job creation in the technology sector by 2022, according to the governor’s office.

“By introducing CTE and STEM initiatives as complimentary programs, Gov. Lee is demonstrating an understanding that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach that works for every Tennessee student,” Brown said. “Our students and communities are unique. It is important that students can explore all of the opportunities available to them for what comes next following graduation.”

TEA supports the governor’s initiatives around CTE and STEM programs, but believes there must also be a change in the way the public is made aware of this unique opportunity. TEA supports the governor’s initiatives around CTE and STEM programs, but believes there must also be a change in the way the public is made aware of this unique opportunity. TEA supports the governor’s initiatives around CTE and STEM programs, but believes there must also be a change in the way the public is made aware of this unique opportunity.

Students need time to explore and master the skills offered in these programs. Under the current system, however, valuable classroom time is lost to mastering test-taking skills instead.

Use your educator voice to fight for public education!

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 #RedforEd educators 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.

There are several big fights happening this session. We need as many educators and other public education advocates packing the halls and committee rooms of the legislature every single week of Civication.

If you have not already done so, please visit TEAteachers.org/Civication to register for the Tuesday of your Spring Break. TEA covers your mileage, and if you live more than 50 miles from Nashville, we will take care of your hotel room, too.

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.

First, make sure you are plugged in with TEA on social media (see icons below left) and that you are receiving emails from TEA with legislative updates. Social media and email alerts are the first places you will learn of important calls to action. Email ascirrinnov@tnnea.org if you are not receiving TEA emails.

Second, don’t just follow along - join in the conversation online! Participate in #RedforEd days and share with your friends and family why they should join you in our 20/20 Vision campaign.

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

Last, write a letter to the editor for your local paper and/or a Member Voices column for this publication. You are the expert on what our students need to succeed. Email achaney@tnnea.org to submit a Member Voices column and for assistance with letters to the editor.
Educators across the state overwhelmingly support dramatic changes to the testing regime. A recent TEA survey showed teachers in all grades support scrapping TNReady and replacing it with a nationally recognized assessment system. When asked if they had a choice in state testing systems for end-of-course exams in their subject area, 87 percent of high school teachers said they would choose the ACT suite of assessments. Eighty-three percent of high school teachers rejected the notion that TNReady accurately measures student knowledge and Tennessee standards. The same sentiment prevails across all grade levels, according to the survey, which went viral on social media and garnered almost 5,000 responses in five days. Ninety-eight percent of Pre-K and Kindergarten teachers want to eliminate the current portfolio system or make fundamental changes with better teacher input. Among middle school teachers, most would like to see expanded use of benchmark testing used for RTI, followed by ACT.

"We are tired of the failed test telling us we are failing. Please stop the madness!" said one of more than 1,600 teachers who chose to comment at the end of the survey.

High school teachers were asked, "If you had a choice in state testing systems for end-of-course exams in your subject area, which would you choose?

Legislators considering proposal to create adverse childhood experiences screening

Newly elected state Senator Katrina Robinson (D-Memphis) is making an effort to ensure Tennessee students are screened for adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) before they are suspended, expelled or sent to alternative school.

Co-sponsored in the House by Rep. Harold Love Jr. (D-Nashville), SB170/ HB405 would require boards of education across the state to conduct adverse childhood experience (ACE) assessments before suspending, expelling or requiring a student to attend alternative school. The policy would provide guidance on who will administer the assessment within a school, according to the bill.

"We support every effort to ensure a proper ACE assessment is considered before suspending or expelling a student," said TEA President Beth Brown. "As educators, we want to make sure our students get all the help and support they need. This legislation would certainly improve their chances of getting the best education possible."

SB170 would require the results of any ACE assessment to be included in any report made to explain the reason for a student’s suspension, expulsion, in-school suspension or transfer to alternative school. It also provides for an ACE training program within school districts, which “may include information on administering ACE assessments before certain disciplinary actions are taken.”

SB64/HB402, also filed by Robinson and co-sponsored in the House by Rep. Rick Staples (D-Knoxville), would require each local board of education to adopt a policy requiring all K-12 teachers, principals and assistant principals to participate in ACE training.

If passed, the bill would make mandatory ACE training on an annual basis, before the first day of instruction, and would require districts to use either their own training program or one developed by the state Department of Education.