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Education: Tennessee children still lagging

BY FRANK DANIELS III

During the past five months the major candidates for governor of Tennessee and U.S. Senator have shared their ideas on several crucial issues facing Tennessee. This month, in the final installment of the series, candidates address education. Early voting for the August 2 primaries and county general elections begin July 13.

"An educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people."

No, Thomas Jefferson did not write that, and no records exist that he said it, yet the quote has been attributed to him in thousands of arguments on the importance of education because it is apt.

While the wording is not Jefferson's, the quote does embody the Founding Father's philosophy and sentiment.

As a member of the Virginia House of Delegates Thomas Jefferson first advocated for a tax-funded system of public education in 1779. He could not get

his bill passed as a member of the House, nor during his two terms as governor. It was not until after the Civil War that Virginia established a system of tax-funded public schools.

The gulf between talking about the importance of education and making the words have meaning through action was not then, nor is it now, easy.

Innovative leadership

In recent years, Tennessee has had innovative governors, particularly on education.

Bill Haslam has been determined that he would leave office with a legacy as an "education" governor. His work on the Tennessee Promise scholarship and mentoring program is a good example of that desire. Promise ensures Tennesseans who want to get higher education have that opportunity without paying for tuition.

The Promise program is part of broad plan that includes his "Drive to 55" plan to increase the number of Tennesseans with education beyond high school

to 55 percent of the adult population to meet the requirements of a changing work environment.

Haslam, a Republican, succeeded another innovative education-oriented governor, Democrat Phil Bredesen, who launched a massive effort to reform schools after the state received an "F" from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in 2007 on student proficiency. The state, the chamber said, was falsely claiming that its schools were graduating students ready to work and/or attend college. The state's testing and graduation standards were too easy, and an A in Tennessee did not equal A in other states.

The Bredesen administration authored a reform plan that won a \$500 million federal grant—Race to the Top—that included formation of the Achievement School District to improve the lowest performing schools, new testing standards, and incentives for teachers.

Bredesen's reforms and Haslam's commitment to implementation of his predecessor's

plan, in addition to his own initiatives, led to significant progress in student achievement, but the path has been bumpy and controversial.

As higher standards were kicking in, and as a new evaluation system on teacher performance was being implemented, the General Assembly ordered new standards, a new testing system that were more "Tennessee" and less "national". The changes have led to delay after delay in implementing new tests and the teacher evaluation system.

Reform is not easy, requiring patience and resolve from a diverse number of stakeholders.

Does Tennessee have the resolve?

Tennessee has made significant strides since earning its "F" in 2007. High school graduation rates are strong, eighth best in the nation, but student proficiency in core subjects and on college entrance exams remains elusive.

Funding is a challenge.

Tennessee's constitution requires that the state fund schools, but the Basic Education Plan that outlines what funding is required is not fully funded and the formula that allocates money to school districts is being challenged in lawsuits.

Student performance is inextricably linked to teaching, but Tennessee ranks 39th in teacher salaries, including paying teachers lower than the states surrounding us. And teachers are skeptical of the evaluation systems that have been installed.

The next governor will follow two men who have done much to improve education. But the next governor's task will not be easier because of them. He or she will have to do more to make Tennesseans the "educated citizenry" that is vital to our survival as a free people.

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Candidates have their say on education

Gov. Haslam and the General Assembly have invested in education during the last eight years, has that been a good investment and should it continue? What do the candidates propose for the next four to eight years?

Each of the major candidates for governor and U.S. Senate were asked to tell our readers about their views on education.

GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATES

REPUBLICANS

Diane Black

We have the opportunity to strengthen education, build a strong workforce and keep our rural communities intact.

Educational success in K-12 can be going to college or getting a job to start your career. One of my goals is to ensure that our kids don't have to leave their small town to earn a living. If students are credentialed when they graduate from high school, we can keep our rural communities intact and maintain our Tennessee culture.

In short, we can't let our kids graduate without a skill or a pathway.

My plan is a bottom up approach. As Governor, I want to incorporate an aptitude inventory in the middle school years to help children think about their career paths. We should adopt a dual track diploma system to provide students with more options and make it easier for students to get a license to practice a trade the day they graduate from high school. I know that our state is stronger than the challenges we face, and as governor, I will ensure a pathway to success for Tennessee students.



Randy Boyd

I am running for governor because I believe TN can be the Smartest State in the South by 2025.

I was fortunate to be the architect of Drive to 55—the state's goal of making sure at least 55% of Tennesseans have job-ready skills. When Governor Haslam asked me to reimagine what might be possible in higher education, we were at 32%. Now we are at 39%. We have come a long way, but we have a long way to go. I'm passionate about getting there because it will mean an additional \$9 billion in the pockets of Tennessee families. If we reach our Drive to 55, Tennessee will be the Smartest State in the South.

I helped create TN Promise and TN Reconnect to build clear pathways to a better life. As Governor, I am committed to making sure every high school student has the opportunity to graduate with a high school diploma, a job ready credential and a sense of what is possible for their future path.

To ensure students are prepared to take advantage of these opportunities, we must continue pushing forward on the fundamentals that helped us become the fastest improving state in the nation in education. Every student deserves a superstar teacher in every classroom, every year. There must be a great principal at every school creating a great teaching and learning environment. In every school, early literacy must be a priority, testing must be fair and reliable, and every child should benefit from a network of community support.

Beth Harwell

We have increased education funding more than ever before over the last eight years I've been Speaker of the House. We've invested in our students and teachers, and it has paid off, as



evidenced by the gains we've made. As governor, I would evaluate the needs in education year by year, and if additional funding is needed to achieve something, I would budget for it.

If I could wave a magic wand and do one thing, I would close achievement gaps. This is something we talk about a lot in the legislature, and I don't believe it's talked about enough in the mainstream. We have made great gains in Tennessee, but we need to make sure that every child is learning and thriving. In my own family's experience, each child learns differently, so we need to work toward making sure we are meeting those needs and all students are mastering the material.

Literacy is so important, and we still are failing some students in this area. Ensuring children can read is one of the most important things that determines their future academic success. Additionally, we need to promote those areas of study that will help students get the jobs of tomorrow—we have some excellent STEM programs across the state, and we should try to replicate those in other schools.

I also think vocational and on-the-job training is important in middle and high schools. Not every student needs to go to a traditional four-year university, and the Tennessee Promise offers students a free education at our TCAs across the state. Similar programs in our middle and high schools can help steer students into the profession that is right for them.

Bill Lee

I have three major priorities in education:

- Supporting jobs by bringing back real vocational education into our schools;
- Supporting our teachers by

reducing the testing burden and improving the working environment;

- Supporting parents with meaningful school choice.

For a lot of candidates, vocational education is a talking point, but for the last 35 years it's been my life. I run a 1,200-person company that employs skilled craftsmen. Ten years ago, even though we were labeled one of the best places to work by the Tennesseean, we struggled to fill the jobs we had. To address it, we built our own trade school, helping over a 1,000 men and women advance their careers.


I believe the way forward on vocational education isn't a massive government project, it's through a more effective partnership with the hundreds of industry leaders across the state who are ready to work with the state on new goals for apprenticeships, instructor training and curriculum design. Industry should be more than a beneficiary of our education efforts, it should be a key part of the solution.

As an employer, I know that a CEO's job isn't to micromanage, but to create an environment where employees can thrive. That's the approach I'd take as chief executive of this state when it comes to our teachers. I'll lift up the teaching profession, with competitive compensation, meaningful opportunities for professional development, and reducing the testing burden to provide more freedom to exercise their craft. Our teachers are on the front lines and we need to set them up for success.

As a parent, I believe it's not the type of school or who owns the building that matters, but whether the school is providing a quality education for our kids. We have choices in every other aspect of our lives, and I think Tennessee families deserve choice in education too.




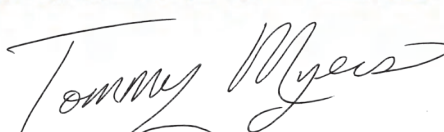
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AUGUST 2ND GENERAL ELECTION

★ Early Voting Begins July 13 - July 28 ★

Thank You!



POLITICAL AD PAID FOR AND APPROVED BY CANDIDATE TOMMY MYERS.