

02/06/2018

Greetings Fortieth District!

Today we begin our fifth week of the 110th General Assembly. Procedures of first and second readings are currently taking place on the house floor and soon to be heard in their respected committees. My legislative package has been collected and was filed on February 1st, to which many of you know that I consistently stay under the 15 bill limit. Speaker Harwell did well, in my humble opinion, to make that a member policy when she was elected by the House in 2010.

State of the State

On Monday, the General Assembly heard the State Of The State Address from the Governor, with that he unveils 2018 budget proposal. In his final State of the State address to the General Assembly this week, Governor Bill Haslam unveiled his budget priorities for the 2018-2019 fiscal year. Haslam addressed multiple issues during the speech and challenged all Tennesseans to lead the nation in creating high-quality jobs, improving the education of students, and working to provide the most efficient and effective state government services possible.

Throughout the address, Haslam focused on the momentum created since Republicans took control of the legislature and Governor's office in 2011. He spent time reflecting on the past seven years, working with the General Assembly to create a strong commitment to jobs, education, and conservative fiscal policies that have resulted in multiple significant accomplishments for the state, including:

The lowest unemployment rates in Tennessee's 222 year history and a job growth rate greater than 17 percent, with nearly 400,000 net new private sector jobs created;

The fastest-improving students in the nation, across math, reading and science, and the highest high school graduation rates the state has ever seen;

Nearly \$1.5 billion invested into K-12 education, with \$500 million going to teacher salaries;

Nearly \$800 million in tax cuts to Tennesseans, including a 30 percent cut on groceries;

Being named 'State of the Year' in back-to-back years, becoming the only state to ever do so;

Ranking #1 for new jobs from foreign direct investment and being named the #1 state for retirement;

A cut in year-to-year spending by more than a half billion dollars;

And a tripling of the state's Rainy Day Fund, bringing it to its highest amount in state history.

In addition to these major accomplishments, Haslam applauded the General Assembly for passing legislation to give all Tennesseans access to college free of tuition and fees through the Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect programs. To assist in ensuring those incoming students complete college and enter the workforce with degrees or certificates in a timely manner, Haslam also announced the Complete to Compete initiative during the speech. Once passed by the legislature, this new plan will restructure financial aid requirements for Promise and HOPE scholarships to keep students on track for on-time completion, and requires community colleges to implement structured, ready-made schedules for all incoming full-time students based on their academic program.

The Governor also announced plans for the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2018 — an initiative created based upon recommendations made by members of House Speaker Beth Harwell's Joint Ad-Hoc Blue Ribbon Task Force on Juvenile Justice. Research suggests that taking youths out of their homes and schools for minor offenses increases the risk of recidivism, diverts resources from youth who pose a risk to the community, and uses taxpayer dollars unnecessarily because community-based services are often more effective and cost efficient. The Juvenile Justice Reform Act will tackle these problems and help strengthen families and communities while promoting public safety and ensuring a responsible and conservative use of resources.

In addition to the Complete to Compete initiative and Juvenile Justice Reform Act, Governor Haslam also unveiled additional details of the Tennessee Together program, a multi-faceted plan comprised of legislation, \$30 million in funds

through Governor Haslam's proposed budget, and other executive actions to battle opioids through the three major components of prevention, treatment, and law enforcement. Similar to the Juvenile Justice Act, the Tennessee Together plan incorporates recommendations made by Speaker Beth Harwell's Ad Hoc Task Force on Opioid Abuse.

Other notable budget highlights investments for the year include:

More than \$200 million in new state funding for K-12 education, including additional funds for teacher compensation;

Nearly \$100 million for higher education initiatives;

\$128 million for job growth investments, including programs that target rural communities;

And investments to bring the state's Rainy Day Fund to \$850 million.

The full text of the Governor's address along with video from the speech can be found by visiting tn.gov/governor.

Education

Last week in Education Committee we heard from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) and the Tennessee State Board of Education bringing report cards on Performance of Higher Education Institutions and Teacher Preparation. The results were sobering in that 50% of Teacher Preparation is in the lowest performance category and therefore not performing at levels the DOE wants them to be. With an estimate of over 3,800 graduates in 2014-2015 that have entered the teaching profession, 90 % were trained by higher education institutions and 55% trained with a bachelor's degree here in Tennessee. Though the numbers are "troubling" in preparing these elementary teachers for the classroom one must ask, "Well then how can we do better?" I would submit less bureaucracy and government intrusion. In 2014 I sponsored the bill that would repeal Common Core and allow us to teach Tennessee values. Accountability and high standards are appropriate in all areas of life but the federal governments idea of fixing education is failing fast.

More time to teach and less time testing will certainly bring the joy of learning back to both teachers and students. Learning is a life long endeavor. It must be invigorating and interesting. Classical reading, writing, math, civics, history of our nation and the principles that founded it are important practical skills that go untaught because they are not on the test. This is what I am hearing from the remarkable teachers in district 40. They genuinely care about their students and desire to make learning fun and exciting. But when so much emphasis is on data and more paper work, teaching only to a test in order to show student gains, being held accountable for the growing absentee numbers, let alone other stress factors, who would even want to enter the profession of teaching today? Let our teachers do what they do best. TEACH!

Clearly we have misdiagnosed this behemoth called the Department of Education. Higher standards, more rigorous assessments, more funding and still we have 'troubling' results. In a recent poll taken last November of 600 voters, 86% of those voters said children in early education are being taught the wrong content. 58% believe education is on the wrong path and 67% also believe students are not being prepared for the future. Washington D.C.'s attempt to fix education ruined our local ability to teach Tennessee values by removing the moral anchor of Christian Influence in our classrooms and implementing common core. Yes that system is still alive grabbing even more data on our teachers and students so as to know what to put in tomorrows curriculum.

So, how can we do better to restore the profession of teaching and the k-12 classroom? Ridding our schools of the Federal Department of Education for starters. Then more of our tax dollars will go into the classroom providing our teachers with increased salaries and our students with classical knowledge and the tools such as music and the arts needed to bring back the joy of learning to all children.

Yes some may say dream on T. L but given the mess government has brought to our classrooms since 1963 (Engel v. Vitale) we can move the needle and do much better with less.