

Remarks: Tennessee School Boards Association (Pre-K)

11/15/2004

Thank you for that introduction Gordon, and thank you to Lana for your great work as Education Commissioner. I appreciate all that you and the rest of the TSBA leadership and membership do to improve education in Tennessee.

I often admonish young people to find ways to give back to their communities as they take their place in the adult world, and one of the things I often suggest is to be a member of a school board. It's a challenging job, but one with tremendous potential to make a difference. I admire the commitment of every person in this room to represent your communities _ to improve education _ and to prepare our children so they can be productive members of society.

Education plays a key role in the health and success of our children. It determines whether new industry chooses Tennessee or passes us by. It's the difference between a healthy, happy life for a child or a lifelong struggle to stay ahead. This group _ more than any other organization _ this group knows that. The work each of you do is honorable, vital and often difficult. That's why I'd first like to address several issues you all deal with every day before asking for your support for a key challenge _ and opportunity _ that lies ahead: A quality pre-K program for Tennessee.

First, as all of you know, we had a bit of good news last week. Our 2004 "Report Card" shows student achievement scores continue to inch forward. That's encouraging. But we still have plenty of work to do. I'm committed to working with your communities and school systems to do all we can to help raise the achievement level of all Tennessee children.

One way we can do that is by continuing to make the administrative and legislative changes that are necessary to help our schools deal with "No Child Left Behind." No Child Left Behind is a laudable idea, a wonderful goal. But I also understand the realities of day-to-day life in the classroom, and I understand that testing _ at the end of the day _ is still a snapshot in time.

Another way we're supporting education at the Capitol is by living up to our commitment to the BEP. As you may know, we began budget hearings last week to put together a spending plan for next year. And I'm proud to say this new budget will include _ just as it has for the past two years _ full funding of Tennessee's Basic Education Plan - the BEP. Furthermore, I want you to know that for as long as I'm in office, I am committed to continuing to fully fund the BEP. And I'm also committed to looking at ways to enhance it.

By now, all of you know about the changes we made in the BEP earlier this year to deal with issues related to equity in teacher pay. We had lost a court case and had an obligation to revisit the BEP formulas relating to teacher pay. We solved the problem by bringing all the stakeholders around the table to hammer out an agreement that everyone could live with. And it's already yielding results.

This year, we're hitting a milestone: Tennessee's average teacher pay is above the Southeastern average. Obviously, improving teacher pay isn't the only solution to our education challenges. But it's definitely a step in the right direction. There were two other recommendations from the task force relating to the BEP formulas that we were not able to implement last year, but which remain on the table for discussion.

The first of these recommendations is to take into account in the funding formula the

additional needs of schools with large numbers of poor students, and schools with large numbers on students for whom English is not their native language, the "English Language Learners".

The second is to calculate fiscal capacity, and therefore the local share of school funding, based on individual school districts rather than by county. This would result in substantial changes in the local match requirements, and would have to be done carefully and with a commitment to not unduly affect local government finances.

We've also got a number of other initiatives on the drawing board. For example, Teach Tennessee is a new enterprise to provide mid-career professionals with the opportunity to serve as teachers _ especially in our most underserved rural and urban schools. I've met a lot of Tennesseans who are willing to spend five or 10 years of their career working as teachers with our children and teenagers. We need to get them in the classroom.

But at the moment, there's no higher priority for me than early childhood education. We need to work hard to help our youngest children arrive on the first day of kindergarten prepared to take advantage of what lies ahead. Across our state, there's one thing educators agree on: Tennessee needs a strong pre-K program. The benefits are clear. Study after study has proven preschool to be a good "return on our investment," with each dollar spent yielding dividends many times over.

But this is about more than just dollars and cents. It's about doing the right thing for Tennessee's children. We already know it's working. At-risk students who participated in a pre-K pilot program performed better than the state average in every category of first-grade achievement tests. And educators on the front lines see it most clearly. I've spoken with kindergarten teachers who say they know on the first day of school which children have attended preschool, and which haven't.

Like them, I'm a firm believer that the foundation for building a better education system statewide begins not in elementary school, or in high school, or in college. It begins with preschool.

As you all know, the Tennessee Lottery is giving us a head start because the General Assembly wisely chose to earmark leftover lottery funds for pre-K. But we can't rely on the lottery to do it all. While we're still very much in the planning stages, my early inclination is to integrate pre-K into the BEP. We can't treat it as some kind of sidebar program; if we are truly serious about it we've got to treat it as an integral part of our education system.

It would certainly have to be in its initial years an "opt in" program, where school districts who wanted to incorporate Pre-K into their systems could do so, but would not be forced into it. We will certainly have to provide that school districts that decide to opt in can do so over a number of years: There are few districts in our state with the facilities to launch a system-wide pre-K program all at once, and few with the financial resources to fund the local match all at once.

Some educators and school board members feel that an initial concentration on lower-income students is warranted. And of course for the state's part, we can't afford to do it all at once either. There are many details to be worked out, and lots of further input needed from educators and local officials around the state. But this is something we need to get started on. The research is there to show early childhood education works, teachers constantly rank it as the highest priority, and for my part I consider it a moral imperative to do everything we can to offer our children the best chance at a successful, productive life.

Most of you are well aware that we have a huge issue on the table right now that fundamentally affects our ability to do this - TennCare. Continuing the program as it is now is not an option. TennCare without significant, structural reform is projected to require \$650 million in new state dollars next year; that is vastly more than all the new funds available, and would beyond any doubt require substantial cuts in education funding.

Over the past year, we developed a plan to reform TennCare. I believe it was a common sense and humane plan; ask everyone to give up some of their benefits so that everyone could remain on the rolls; could keep their health insurance. The plan is supported by a great many health care professionals with an enormous commitment to good care - the Tennessee Hospital Association, the Tennessee Hospital Alliance, the Tennessee Medical Association, the Tennessee Pharmacy Association, the Children's Hospital Alliance of Tennessee. I believe such a plan also has overwhelming support among those most affected; the TennCare enrollees themselves.

To implement the plan, we need the cooperation of the plaintiffs in a variety of lawsuits: what we need from them is very simple and common sense: we need them to agree that if the federal government approves the plan they will not block its implementation.

Over the past six months, and most recently last week, we have been told "no," they will not cooperate. Because of that, last week I announced with great sadness plans to dissolve TennCare and return Tennessee to a traditional Medicaid program. It was an extraordinarily difficult step, but we are left in the end with no other alternative.

At the eleventh hour, we were asked by the plaintiffs in the lawsuits for an additional seven days to consider our request to relieve some of the more costly requirements of the consent decrees; they also wanted us to consider alternative ways of achieving the required savings. **I want to leave no stone unturned in seeking a way to maintain 400,000 people with their health insurance, believe me.** I continue to hope that they will come to believe that half a loaf for their clients is better than no loaf, and let me say right now that if they can present or we can together develop a credible alternative way to save the \$500 million necessary, I will embrace it wholeheartedly and without reservation.

I know that TennCare and its problems are a confusing issue, and the press accounts of it have reflected that confusion. But the problems with TennCare are a real and present issue of enormous importance, and the people in this room and the children you represent have an enormous stake in its solution. A bit of perspective: right now we spend about \$40 million a year on a single cholesterol drug - Zocor - a drug with vastly less expensive alternatives that have been proven to work on many people. That's not a bookkeeping number, that is 40 million real dollars that we can use for other important priorities.

Forty million dollars can buy Tennessee schoolchildren 40,000 new computers this year. And 40,000 new computers next year. And 40,000 new computers the year after and each and every year after that. Pertinent to today's discussion, \$40 million will provide a high-quality certified pre-school program for 10,000 Tennessee children; 500 classrooms for these children.

In the end it is about balance. Health care is important - vitally important - but so is education. It makes no sense for one facet of our responsibilities - health care - to be able to come to the table first and eat and drink all it wants, and then if there is anything left over, we then consider our other responsibilities. People are saying that having everything you want in health care is an entitlement; shouldn't having what you need in education be an entitlement

too?

Returning to traditional Medicaid _ lowering our health care costs _preserving our investments in education _ appears tragically to be the only responsible path remaining. I believe in pre-K. Imagine a Tennessee where more children begin kindergarten already armed with the math and reading basics necessary for success. _ A Tennessee where those same children excel in elementary school and graduate from high school prepared for the rigors of college. Imagine a Tennessee where fewer of our young people end up behind bars before they turn 18. _Where fewer are on welfare because citizens have the skills to find goodpaying jobs.

You've seen it firsthand _ Children who participate in quality preschool programs go on to greater success in school, and in life. Working together, we have an opportunity to change the face of our state for generations to come. I deeply appreciate the opportunity to be here today. Enjoy the rest of your time. And please know that I'm looking forward to working with each and every one of you as we make this great state even greater. Thank you.