

2020 | Legislative Priorities

PreK for disadvantaged young learners

High quality PreK is a repeatedly proven strategy for improving student achievement, yet Tennessee hasn't expanded the program in over a decade. Currently, Tennessee's Voluntary PreK ("TN-VPK") program is only available to roughly 40% (~18,000) of disadvantaged 4-year-olds, but Tennessee voters across party lines overwhelmingly support state investment to serve more children. **TQEE recommends beginning expansion with a "Rural At-risk PreK Initiative" that invests in rural distressed/at-risk districts demonstrating both quality and need and allows these districts flexibility in defining child eligibility.** Then continue statewide expansion of quality VPK until all disadvantaged 4-year-olds have the option to attend.

Bolstering the evidence of the benefits of high quality PreK is newly released research on Tennessee's program. Vanderbilt researchers, Dale Farran and Mark Lipsey, together with others across the country, released a new working paper on the VPK program. The paper confirmed TN-VPK students who subsequently attended high performing K-3 schools and were taught by highly effective teachers significantly outpaced their peers who also attended high performing schools and had highly effective teachers but who had not attended the TN-VPK program.

Governor Lee's \$70 MM Early Literacy Proposal

It's widely acknowledged that 3rd grade is a critical K-12 benchmark; and yet only one-third of Tennessee 3rd graders are proficient in reading. If a student is not proficient by third grade, they are four times more likely to drop out of high school and 60% less likely to pursue a post-secondary degree. As Tennessee data demonstrates, once students fall behind in third grade, they tend to stay behind, or fall further, in subsequent years. Low proficiency in third grade is a clear indication that the quality of children's learning experiences leading up to 3rd grade requires significant improvements.

TQEE enthusiastically supports Governor Lee's and Commissioner Schwinn's proposed investment in early literacy. The proposal calls for evidence-based content and instruction steeped in the science of literacy and a phonics foundation. As proposed, the initiative would provide additional training and development for teachers, funding for high quality curriculum and streamlined measurement so children aren't over-tested. For future teachers, our colleges and universities would be required to provide instruction in pedagogy aligned with the science of literacy fundamentals for those students to be licensed to teach in Tennessee.

TANF Local Fair Share

The revelation by Tennessee's Beacon Center of \$732 million unspent TANF surplus, and \$190 million in annual ongoing TANF funds, offers a unique opportunity to reduce Tennessee's large (28%) child poverty rate and promote family self-sufficiency. For reasons still unclear, these funds were stockpiled while many Tennessee families needlessly suffered from the effects of poverty, which could have been mitigated by effective expenditure of TANF funds. **TQEE urges the legislative TANF working group and General Assembly to establish a reasonable reserve and allocate TANF funds based on each county's proportion of Tennessee families in poverty.**

Child Care Quality & Workforce Productivity

Underspent federal TANF funds are not the only opportunity to meet the needs of struggling families in Tennessee. The state has also forfeited to other states more than \$200 million in federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) money over recent years.

A TQEE report series: *Want to Grow Tennessee's Economy? Fix the Child Care Crisis* provides insights into a dysfunctional child care system that is not meeting the needs of Tennessee parents and children and, as a result, creating an adverse economic impact of \$1.34 billion annually in lost earnings and revenue. Tennessee working parents are hit hard – losing an estimated \$850 million in earnings each year. An overwhelming 98 percent of Tennessee parents of children under age 5 said that inadequate child care hurt their work productivity or limited career opportunities.

Given the substantial underspending of federal TANF and CCDF funds and the extent and complexity of the child care system problems, it would be prudent for the Governor and the General Assembly to take a strategic approach to setting goals for and investing in innovations to increase the number of high-quality, affordable child care slots. **TQEE recommends establishing a task force of key state commissioners, legislators, business leaders and child care providers to develop a strategic child care plan to benefit working parents, employers and taxpayers.**

Evidence-Based Home Visiting

TQEE calls for expanding Tennessee's voluntary, evidenced-based home visiting (EBHV) programs by utilizing a portion of unspent TANF funds to ensure parents of children facing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) across the state have access to parent coaching and vital health services. EBHV is well-documented for its effectiveness to improve parenting skills, reduce abuse and neglect, improve the health of parents and babies, and ready children for their school years. There is considerable evidence that home visiting generates strong ROI: \$5.70 for every \$1 invested.

School Social Workers

The Tennessee AWARE initiative found that 21% of parents reported that a doctor has told them their child has a mental health issue. Imagine how many more incidences have not been reported. And in terms of getting care, only 9.4% of children with emotional, developmental or behavioral health problems have received mental health care/counseling during the past twelve months. Young people with mental illness are frequently absent from school; only one third advance to post-secondary; and more than 60% of children in juvenile detention have a diagnosable mental illness. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people (ages 10-19) in Tennessee. Currently, the BEP formula supports school social worker positions at a ratio of 1:2000, whereas the BEP review committee recommends the best practice of 1:250 students. This would cost an estimated \$139,712 million annually.

TQEE is encouraged by the steps taken by Governor Lee to establish a \$250 million Mental Health Trust, which would be invested, and the annual dividends used to address mental health needs in our schools. The fund, depending on how it's invested, might yield \$3-\$15 million annually for the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, many young children and their teachers are struggling now and can't wait. **TQEE encourages legislators to consider how to begin to address the extensive and immediate mental health needs of our students as they discuss Governor Lee's mental health trust proposal.**

School Nurses

Chronic conditions like diabetes, asthma and seizure disorders can affect children's academic performance. TDOE reported that in the 2019 school year, 221,501 Tennessee students had a chronic health condition, an increase of 100% from 2005. School nurses can provide direct care to these students and help them learn to manage their own care and mitigate the impact of their conditions on their learning. Nurses also help students stay in school. According to the U.S. Department of Education, chronic absenteeism — which has a profoundly negative effect on student achievement — is closely correlated with ongoing and/or unmet health care needs. TDOE reported in 2019 there were more than 5 million student visits to a school nurse, and 87% of those resulted in the student returning to class instead of being sent home. At the same time, school nurses can detect illness early, prevent its spread, and identify students at risk, while also advocating for the well-being of the entire community.

According to the 2018 report of the BEP Review Committee, the current ratio of nurses to students is 1:3000 in Tennessee. The National Association of School Nurses (NASN) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommend that school districts provide full-time school nurses in every school building. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, schools should have one nurse for every 750 students. The state cost for that is estimated at \$39 million annually; but the return on investment is clear. **TQEE recommends lowering the ratio of elementary school nurses to 1:750 based on national best practice standards and Tennessee's BEP review committee recommendations.**



To learn more about TQEE contact:

Mike Carpenter
Executive Director
mike.carpenter@tqee.org
901-331-0153