

RE-IMAGINING PUBLIC EDUCATION IN TENNESSEE

I strongly believe that every child should have a meaningful opportunity for educational success. After winning the federal Race to the Top competition, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to re-imagine public education in Tennessee. Indeed, our state is poised to lead the nation in education reform. But it is not going to happen without forward-thinking, engaged leaders who will work tirelessly to meet our moral obligation to put kids first and reject excuses for failure. We must cut the dropout rate in half over the next four years and double the number of students completing some form of post-secondary education over the next eight years.

Federal “Race to the Top” dollars alone won’t solve our problems. We have to change the way we do business in our public schools. The General Assembly must lead the way. In the State Senate, improving our schools will be my top priority.

Unleashing Innovation

Government in general, and public schools in particular, are still designed like a 1950s corporation with rigid hierarchies, one-size-fits-all approaches, and a bureaucratic bias in favor of the status quo. Tennesseans are tired of being included in the bottom 10 of every national education ranking, but it’s going to take openness to new ideas and dogged persistence to make the necessary changes. Recognizing that students attend schools rather than school systems, we need to be bold in creating new schools and redesigning old schools.

Together, we will:

- Allow schools the **flexibility to lengthen the school day and school year** so that students have more time on task.
- Convert a significant number of public schools to **STEM Academies**, focusing on Science, Technology, Engineering & Math, so that our future workforce is prepared to compete nationally and internationally.
- Implement **smaller learning communities** in our comprehensive high schools and middle schools, so that students and teachers can form productive relationships in a smaller, safer environment.
- Coordinate the resources of other governmental agencies to support our public schools. State and local governments work with our children through the schools, but also through health programs, the family court system, the Department of Children’s Services, and unfortunately juvenile justice. We must do a better job of **aligning resources to fully support children** and to achieve effective interventions. By increasing intradepartmental communication, we can cut down on inefficiencies and be far more responsive to the needs of students as they arise.
- Utilize the Achievement School District to **turn around persistently failing schools**. Each day in Tennessee, we knowingly send too many of our children to schools that have failed to make necessary improvements.

“For every 100 children entering 9th grade this year, more than 25 will drop out before the end of the next State Senate term. For every 100 eighteen-year-olds, fewer than 20 of them will have earned a post-secondary degree by the end of the next State Senate term. We cannot afford to wait four more years to radically improve our schools.”

—Jeff Yarbrow

Developing and Supporting First-Class Educators

Each school day, teachers take on the lion's share of our government's most important function. It is critical to provide **supportive working conditions and adequate compensation for our teachers** as we ask them to do more and more. However, the work doesn't stop there. We must also bring talented new teachers into our schools and constantly improve teaching methods and curriculum. Together, we will:

- Enhance the pipelines for teachers by **recruiting the best and brightest** into state universities' education programs and through strategic investments in teacher training.
- Initiate **student loan forgiveness** to attract educators capable of teaching hard-to-staff subjects and willing to teach in our poorest performing schools.
- Enhance non-traditional avenues to choosing education as a career or a second career. We must **support programs that bring new talent to our schools**, like Teach for America, the New Teacher Project, and develop alternative pathways for those with subject matter expertise to choose teaching as a second career.

“Education isn't just another issue for me. It's personal. I'll work every day to cut the drop-out rate in half over the next four years.”

—Jeff Yarbro

- Support new teachers with a framework of **effective coaching and mentoring** rather than throwing them into classrooms to sink or swim on their own.
- Revolutionize **continuing education for teachers** through leveraging TVAAS data and implementing team-based, data-enhanced professional development programs. Too often, professional development for our teachers consists of one-shot seminars and workshops. We learn more each day about how children learn and teaching techniques that work. Our schools must engender a culture where teachers are lifelong learners themselves.

Strong Leaders for Every School

Research increasingly shows that effective school leaders are essential **to setting and implementing a vision for educational success** in schools. We have to move past the outdated vision of principals as disciplinarians or as managers of staffs and buildings. Instead, we must have *instructional* leaders focused on results. Together, we will:

- Develop great principals through investment in **statewide leadership training** and mentorship programs for school leaders.
- Provide principals with increased flexibility to operate free of burdensome, bureaucratic requirements while holding them accountable for student achievement outcomes.

High Expectations for Every Student

No Child Left Behind has too often resulted in a focus on reaching the bare minimum of educational success—teaching to the middle. Our children's strengths and weaknesses are not standardized, and neither can our entire approach to their education be. Our schools have to fight for **every child to reach his or her full potential**. Together, we will:

- Implement and support Governor Bredesen's decision to **raise Tennessee's educational standards** so that Tennessee graduates can compete nationally and internationally in the workforce.
- Create a culture where we understand that **each and every student is capable of educational success** and where we communicate our high expectations to children from an early age through graduation.
- Provide **meaningful and accessible post-secondary opportunities** to every student. In conjunction with the Lottery Scholarships, we must find new ways to make post-secondary education affordable for every graduate. Through partnering with local governments, foundations, and private individuals, we can remove the roadblocks to college and post-secondary success.
- Learn from successful **post-secondary education financing models** that are achieving tremendous success. Kalamazoo, Michigan initiated the “Kalamazoo Promise,” where every public high school

graduate is eligible to receive up to 100% tuition scholarships to state post-secondary institutions. Similarly, in Decatur County, the Ayers Scholars Program provides up to \$4,000 in tuition assistance to all graduates. These scholarship programs not only increase the rates of post-secondary attendance and completion, but also dramatically change the culture of the K-12 schools.

Expanding Parental & Community Involvement

While teachers and principals are incredible resources in educating our children, they cannot do it alone. If we are going to cut the dropout rate in half and double the number of students completing some form of post-secondary education over the next eight years, it will take the full resources of Tennessee's families and communities. A child's learning experience cannot stop when the afternoon bell rings. Together, we will:

- Identify and replicate **effective strategies for parental involvement** in the schools from Pre-K through graduation. Parents and teachers need to communicate more frequently about education so they can communicate less frequently about discipline.
- **Recruit and train community volunteers** to take a more active role in the day-to-day lives of our schools as tutors and mentors to our students, and as partners with our professional educators.
- Create **collaborative partnerships in our schools with local businesses**, who are ready, willing, and able to invest in their future work force.

Strengthening Special Education and Pre-K Programs

Schools should be **inclusive places of learning and personal growth**, regardless of a student's specific needs or background. We must ensure that our schools have not only a space for every student, but the ability to meet their individual needs and ensure their success. Our children deserve every advantage we can provide them. Together, we will:

- Provide all teachers and administrators with professional development on how to best work with special needs students and help each student to achieve their personal best. Special education should not be a world unto itself within each school, and educators should be trained on how best to accommodate special needs students without isolating students from the general population.
- Increase communication between parents and their students' schools to ensure parental involvement and provide teachers with more access to important information about individual students' needs.
- Develop partnerships with community businesses to provide employment opportunities and training to students with disabilities.
- **Fund existing and expand high quality pre-K programs.** High-quality pre-K programs provide our children with a great head-start on elementary school and pay lasting dividends on a student's future success.

Charter Schools

The Center for Education Reform gives Tennessee a "D" for its charter school law, which is the 13th weakest in the nation. While charter schools are not a panacea, they are a critical part of our pathway to success. I've worked with Mayor Dean to support existing charter schools and to create a **statewide Charter School Incubator** for new ones. Charter schools can show us what is possible in education by demonstrating actual results in student achievement gains. Together, we will:

- Systematically **learn from successful charter schools and implement best practices** in traditional public schools.
- Provide charter schools with the tools they need for success. Charter schools must have sufficient operational freedom and equitable funding to make necessary educational gains.
- Update our charter school law to ensure **effective evaluations**. If a charter school is failing its children, we must shut it down. We need to raise the cap and start more charter schools, but we must not accept mediocre results.
- Grant Tennessee charter schools the **authority to issue bonds** to fund state-of-the-art facilities, just like traditional public schools.