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Dr. Dale Lynch
TN Organization of School Superintendents
501 Union Street, Suite 300
Nashville, TN 37219

Dear Dr. Lynch,

As the Director of Cleveland City Schools, I am an unabashed supporter of public education. As you may know, many voices are being raised as to the best way to move forward with public education in our state and in our country. I firmly believe that most involved in this conversation have our students' best interest at heart.

It is my opinion that our public education system is one of the best avenues to promote democracy. Understanding the tenets of a democratic society and the roles and responsibilities of an educated citizenry is vital for our future as Tennesseans and Americans. President Franklin D. Roosevelt once stated, "Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education." Public educators are an important and indispensable linchpin of our society. Moreover, one of our most important tasks is to educate students to think for themselves and to promote the idea that all are free to share their thoughts freely and openly in an appropriate fashion. While tests and benchmarks are important and have a role to play in educating our students, the promotion of democratic principles goes far deeper into the fabric of our country and can't be easily measured.

My hope is that Governor Lee, our local legislative representatives, other elected leaders from across the state, and our new Commissioner of Education, will work together with professional educators and boards of education to better understand the real needs of local school districts. I hope we will also fully explore together the true flexibilities allowed under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

School choice is a topic of discussion that's been on the radar of legislators for a number of years in our state. This year it once again made headlines in our Governor's race. Let me state upfront my support of private schools and for parents who choose to home school their child. I am glad those options exist for parents that wish for an alternative educational experience. However, on the topic of school choice I am adamant in my belief that this concept is already in place in our current system. I understand each school system is different and operates under its own operational policies. However, Cleveland City Schools currently allows for student transfers within the district and has an open enrollment policy for students that live outside our district boundaries. We allow

for parents to choose, within certain parameters and regulations, the school they wish their child to attend. That IS school choice. Furthermore, school choice or education savings account, in my opinion, is just a friendlier way of saying the word "voucher." A voucher is the state dictating that funds dedicated by the state's funding formula would move from following a student to a public school and be diverted to a private school. While that may sound like a plan worth supporting, the public school system remains the largest provider of educational services in any city or county in our state.

The best argument I have heard against the voucher or school choice movement is as follows. If five students leave one of our public schools and take their state funds to a private school, it is doubtful those five students would be in the same classroom or grade level. Therefore, the argument that is often used about decreasing a teacher in a public education system to help defray costs is not a solid theory. When those five students take their vouchers and leave, the public schools lose those funds, but still will need the exact same number of teachers to educate the remaining students. Our expenses do not decrease since we must maintain a student-teacher ratio based on state regulations. Consequently, that means public schools may need to divert money going toward purchasing curriculum items, laptops, etc. to help pay salaries and benefits for our employees.

As a side note, private schools are not held to the same accountability or testing standards as public schools. Therefore, there is no way to accurately know that a child, using taxpayer funds to attend a private school, is obtaining a better educational experience. If state funds are to follow a child to a private school, my belief is that school must follow the same TNReady testing standards of our public schools. While I do believe competition can be good, we must be playing by the same rule book.

I appreciate our state and local elected officials and I look forward to working closely with them in the 111th General Assembly. Public education is better in Tennessee today because of many of the bills they have supported over the last few years. My hope is we stay the course and continue to support public education as we work to prepare our students to be college ready, career ready, and life ready. Together we can redefine what a ready graduate looks like in order to ensure success for all Tennesseans. As President George H.W. Bush stated, "Think about every problem, every challenge, we face. The solution to each starts with education." Working together, I believe we can find a way to improve our public schools. I simply ask our state leaders to include public educators in the discussion as we move forward with decisions that have huge implications for our students.

Respectfully,



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