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Testimony of Tennessee Commissioner of Education Penny Schwinn, PhD, MAT
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Good morning, Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens and Members of the Sub-Committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify at today’s hearing, “Back to School: Meeting Students’ Academic, Social and Emotional Needs.” I appreciate the opportunity to share Tennessee’s experience and the incredible work of our districts, educators, families, students, officials, and communities.

This is an important moment for our country. How we respond to difficult situations and almost impossible tasks can reflect the strength of who we are and what we believe.

The last three years have been challenging and I am exceedingly proud that Tennessee has never wavered in our steadfast commitment to the principles and ideas that have shaped and sustained our education community over the last 13 years, since it began its steady growth during Race to the Top. However, we also know the last three years are not like the others.

Despite the challenges that COVID-19 presented to educators at every level of our public education system, 100% of Tennessee public school districts were open for in-person learning by March 8, 2021, and 98% offered in-person instruction for more than 90% of the 2020-21 school year. The average absentee rate due to COVID was only 0.06%. In general, Tennessee saw more students miss school due to quarantine as a close contact than they did positive cases, with a chronic absentee rate of 15.5% that year. This required the state and local districts to urgently address severe disruptions to learning, and we have endeavored to utilize our resources as strategically as possible.

The summary of the Tennessee experience has been one of disruption and acceleration. The pandemic created significant challenges for our school systems as they worked to keep doors open and children educated. Federal relief funding has provided the state with both a historic opportunity to accelerate academic achievement and opportunities for our students, but it has also placed unnecessary burdens of bureaucracy that do not align with the current economic context or long-term strategies that may be needed to fully address the ramifications of COVID-19. Early on, Tennessee prioritized in-person learning and academic recovery efforts, and our students are now building on pre-pandemic gains. Tennessee is investing

federal relief funding strategically to address learning loss and innovate within our schools to ensure we emerge stronger than before. These efforts show promising results, even as we challenge ourselves to be bolder and push faster.

What follows are more details of Tennessee's experiences over the last three years, in the spirit of honesty, reflection, gratitude, and a shared commitment to doing what is best for our students.

States received an *extraordinary* amount of federal funding to accelerate student achievement. Tennessee received \$4.53 billion that we must obligate by 2024, which is 87% of what the state currently spends on our public education formula annually. We have a responsibility to use these resources effectively to help students recover from the effects of COVID-19.

ESSER I provided the resources necessary to address the urgent and immediate needs of reopening, which allowed for the vast majority of our state to return to in-person learning by September 2020. That was the number one factor influencing the positive academic results we now see in our state.

- During this period, the priority was opening schools for in-person instruction and addressing the health concerns schools faced on a daily basis. The state funded equipment and materials for a healthy school reopening, in addition to the equipment and materials needed to facilitate more effective remote instruction (including devices, high-speed internet, additional staffing capacity). Further, the state used funding to build an online resource for materials and virtual lessons accessed by districts in all 50 states, as well as partnerships with PBS to reach more families who may not have regular internet access. These resources have been expanded and made permanent over the last two years, reflecting opportunities to better integrate stakeholder experiences.
- In Tennessee, approximately 77% of ESSER I went towards instructional programming or supports; 6% towards food service; 5% towards health services; 3% towards facility operations; and 3% towards education technology.¹
- To date, Tennessee districts have spent 95% of ESSER I funds and 96% of districts have spent 100% of ESSER I.

ESSER II provided opportunities for Tennessee to invest in strategies to accelerate academic achievement and begin to recover pandemic-related learning loss. Shortly after ESSER II in January 2021, our Governor and General Assembly passed the earliest state education recovery legislation in the country, ensuring that the large federal infusion of funding would have lasting impact.

- By ESSER II, the planned spending in Tennessee shifted. Approximately 57% of ESSER II funding is scheduled to go towards instructional programming or supports; 25% towards capital outlay; 3% towards facility operations; and 3% towards education technology. Health services and nutrition account for less than 2%, respectively.
- It is also important to note that the state encouraged districts to design and implement responsible and strategic ESSER plans. We did not want to measure progress solely by dollars spent, but more on the impact of those dollars, while continuing to monitor against obligations (are the dollars spoken for) and rate of spending aligned to the total months available.

¹ As a note instructional programming includes teacher compensation, substitutes, educational assistants, professional development, and academic equipment and supplies. Capital outlay includes construction, land, engineering services, and equipment.

- At the time ESSER II was signed into law on December 27, 2020, Tennessee schools were seeing the height of case counts that school year, with 0.2% of students absences that year due to a positive case of COVID.
- To date, Tennessee districts have spent 59% of ESSER II funds and 47% of districts have spent more than 75% of ESSER II.

ESSER III (ARP) has been more challenging – before states and districts had the opportunity to fully plan for and show results from the first two relief packages, we have been asked to strategize on how to spend an unprecedented amount of additional federal relief funding, within a very limited timeline that does not reflect the available supply of resources or an opportunity to comprehensively make the most effective investments for long-term results.

- At the time ESSER III was signed into law, 100% of Tennessee school districts were offering in-person instruction, with the final two districts announcing a return to in-person instruction in February 2021 and completing those transitions by early March. At the time, Tennessee schools were seeing significantly reduced case counts, with 0.05% of students absent due to a positive case of COVID.
- To date, Tennessee districts have spent 15% of ESSER III funds and 7% of districts have spent more than 50% of ESSER III, with 63% of districts having spent less than 25% of these funds. The spending plans suggest that these funds have not been needed for emergency purposes, but are more important for ongoing and longer-term recovery efforts. The statutory timeline, which requires states and districts to commit the funds by September 2024, is an impediment to long-term strategic utilization of these funds and should be extended.
- Approximately 61% of ESSER III funding is scheduled to go towards instructional programming or support; 19% towards capital outlay; 2.5% towards facility operations; and 2.5% towards education technology.
- In looking at the total of all ESSER funding over the number of months available, Tennessee estimates that 35 - 40% of total dollars (ESSER I, II and III) should be liquidated and at least 95% obligated by the statutory deadline. (We are currently at 33% liquidated and ~90% obligated).

Many public-school systems consistently make the case for additional funding to support the changing needs of their student populations. It is not just more money, however, but how strategically that money is used which makes the most difference. It would be disingenuous to ignore the challenges states and districts faced related to the timeline of these packages. I witnessed districts working to a breaking point to complete multiple, federally-required plans simultaneously, keep schools open, and address the academic and additional needs of their students. Compounding these concerns was the reality that the country faced supply-chain issues and staffing shortages that frustrated effective planning and spending. We have a number of districts who considered important structural changes to facilities such as replacing HVAC and ventilation systems, but could not receive and install the necessary materials in time.

Because education was not the only sector to receive relief funding, our public school systems were faced with a serious shortage in the labor supply, creating a seemingly impossible context where school districts were competing with the private sector and other public sectors for building projects, driving up the costs and generating timelines that did not fit within the requirements of the funding package.

As a nation, we continue to discuss the generational impact of COVID on our current students, but we have

not allowed for an investment runway to align to those needs, nor quantifiable goals and expectations at the federal level on the necessary rate of improvement. Tennessee and many other states have developed their own metrics for success and will hold ourselves accountable for our results.

I acknowledge Tennessee taxpayers contributed to the federal relief packages, and will continue to spend it as purposefully as possible in order to benefit Tennessee students. However, I also recognize the incredible pressure it puts on the state and our districts. Most of us will never see one-time funding like this again and are expected to prove what we can do when given significant, additional funding. The challenge is that this expectation is set under conditions that are substantially different than recurring increases to local budgets because the current timeline limits our ability to do long-term planning and presents us with a “funding cliff” that will challenge sustainability of investments. As state leaders, we recognize that we have one opportunity to prove that we can spend additional funding well, as we will ultimately be held accountable for the results of this work.

If our country is going to spend this much money on education, it is important to remove bureaucratic barriers to planning and implementation – especially in the current context of workforce shortages and supply chain issues – and allow states and districts to accurately show what they can, and cannot, achieve with additional funding if that funding is constrained by administrative barriers or artificial timelines. It is a different conversation about outcomes and impact when we reflect on the different decisions leaders would make with *five years to invest* funding, versus *three years to spend* it.

As a state, we do not shy away from accountability or expectations for a return on investments made in public education. We also believe that spending is not the goal and we should instead be focused on the outcomes generated from that spending. Education is ultimately the responsibility of states and local districts, and as we recover from the pandemic, we should aim to emerge stronger than before.

My department is committed to investing COVID relief funds thoughtfully and in alignment with our strategic plan, utilizing three guiding principles:

1. Prioritize and incentivize what will benefit students.
2. Invest dollars with the mindset of sustainable impact, not one-time benefit.
3. Measure and report on the effectiveness of those funds.

Recently, the National Assessment for Educational Progress released the Long-Term Trends assessment results which showed a national deceleration in achievement before the start of the pandemic. As a result, many states needed to address not only the challenges of inconsistent learning opportunities, but also a slowing momentum in student achievement. Tennessee was the **first to publish our student achievement data** this year. That data told us two things we already knew: first, students – especially those in economically-disadvantaged communities – were negatively impacted by the pandemic and second, it was possible to show accelerated growth.

We achieved this by focusing on early literacy.

The Department launched Reading 360, a comprehensive approach to the science of reading available to

every district, school, family, and community partner in the state. The General Assembly passed the *Tennessee Literacy Success Act* in January 2021, which codified the use of phonics and high-quality instructional materials in teaching a child to read. The outcomes have been clear – Tennessee recently posted English Language Arts results that have **largely returned to pre-pandemic levels**, and in some cases, **exceeded the strongest scores the state has seen in five years**.

What is important to note here is that Tennessee is the state that has most closely aligned its state test scores to NAEP proficiency levels, maintaining “truth in advertising” for families related to student growth and performance and giving the state greater confidence that the results we saw this year reflect an apples-to-apples comparison to prior years and a standard level of rigor. Spring 2022 data for English Language Arts (ELA) in Tennessee showed a **6-point gain in elementary school proficiency, reflecting the highest grade-level performance seen in the last five-years and exceeding pre-pandemic levels; a 6-point gain in middle school, matching pre-pandemic performance; and a 7-point gain in high school, also reflecting the highest grade-level performance seen in the last five years**.

We delivered over 28,000 teachers participated in professional development on the science of reading, grounded in sounds-first, phonics-based instruction to over 28,000 teachers. These sessions served both elementary and secondary educators and resulted in a **97% overall satisfaction rate and strong implementation** data once teachers returned to the classroom the following year. At the district level, approximately 77% of districts joined early literacy networks focused on the science of reading, and a subset of 48 districts also participated in an additional leadership network focused on high-quality instructional materials.

For families and communities, the state worked to create more inclusive and aligned opportunities for parents. The Department and local districts launched a Ready4K application that provides text-based strategies for families to support their children with early reading and math. The app enrolled over 178,000 families (65% of early grades), with 99% of survey respondents stating the activities were easy to use and 91% stating the activities helped to promote learning with their children at home. Further, the Department partnered with the Governor’s Early Literacy Foundation to **deliver over 600,000 books to 57,000 K – 3rd grade students** in 75 districts (including all economically distressed counties and 82% of Appalachian Regional at-risk counties) to build at-home libraries and encourage summer reading. **Over 58,000 families also ordered free K-2 decodables** (early readers), aligned to the phonics-based skills their children were developing in classrooms.

We also prioritized accelerating academic achievement for all students.

In the Spring of 2020, the state implemented summer programming and tutoring to address the needs of those students most impacted by school disruptions. Even as the state was largely in person during the 2020-21 school year, we knew the impact of the pandemic would be severe.

As part of the *Tennessee Learning Loss and Student Acceleration Act* also in January 2021, the Department and local districts launched summer programming – providing 4-6 weeks of additional learning time. Summer learning camps serve nearly 1 out of every 4 elementary school students and nearly 1 in 5 middle school students. Over 45% of students served were economically-disadvantaged, with a significant additional

percentage attending a Title I school. Data after the first two summers shows that students who attend summer camps with strong implementation performed better than similar peers the following year. This included: high quality instructional materials, small class sizes, certified teacher with support staff, special education services, STREAM and hands-on learning throughout the day.

The Department also launched the **largest state tutoring corps in the country** (TN ALL Corps), which funds and supports high-dosage, low-ratio tutoring for over 200,000 students through district and community grants, family micro-grants, and on-demand, online tutoring. This includes \$150M in LEA grants for 150,000 1st – 8th grade students, Community Partner Grants for 20,000 students, Connected Literacy micro-grants for economically-disadvantaged families serving 14,000 students, and free online tutoring for any high school student in the state.

To incentivize investments in student achievement, the Department introduced Best For All Districts, and provided additional resources and funding for those districts who both participated in tutoring and invested at least half of their ESSER funds towards academic achievement and acceleration.

We believe that expanding opportunity for middle and high school students increases student engagement and post-secondary success.

Tennessee has continued its push to expand quality opportunities for students, even during the pandemic. Using ESSER II state reserve funding, the state provided 21 grants to develop **innovative programs to redesign the high school experience** for students. This included reimagining time, space and modality of the student experience, and ensured participants would earn more college or post-secondary credits before graduating high school. In the last legislative session, Governor Lee proposed and the General Assembly approved \$500M for innovative high school programs, ensuring every high school and every middle school in the state could make investments in CTE programs of study and reimagined experiences.

Tennessee continues to invest in innovative school models, particularly in STEM/STEAM education. The state has doubled the number of applications for STEM designation since 2018. Governor Lee and the Tennessee General Assembly also passed **landmark computer science legislation that requires all students to have access to computer science coursework**, materials, and resources. Further, this work in partnership with TSIN expanded the number of computer science course offerings by 20%, increased female participation by 3 percentage points, and closed the gap for participation between white and black students.

To continue to expand access and opportunity, Tennessee partnered with the Niswonger Foundation to launch **AP Access for ALL, an initiative to ensure all students, regardless of where they lived in the state, have access to college-preparatory Advanced Placement coursework**. With 90% of districts participating, **Tennessee leads the southeast in AP exam enrollment** for the 2021-22 school year and saw up to a 142% increase in AP participation in various regions in the state. This work only matters if it leads to outcomes for students, and the inaugural year saw an estimated \$454,000 in college fees saved and over 80% of participating students earning credit.

The state also increased opportunities related to work-based learning and industry credentials. **Work-based learning enrollment is higher than pre-pandemic levels** and the state expanded the number of

apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs for high school students. Additionally, Tennessee was one of only six states with **nearly 100% of graduating students participating in the ACT assessment** (along with Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nevada, and North Dakota) and offers free ACT support for students to address any negative impacts as a result of the disruptions experienced over the last two years.

We are expanding the educator pipeline.

Teachers change lives and open doors, and the way that we prepare and support them can have a lasting impact on our students. Tennessee's Grow Your Own strategy provides a strong and sustainable teacher pipeline. For the first time in over a decade, our enrollment in educator preparation programs is increasing and **Tennessee became the first state in the country to make teaching an apprenticeable profession**, so that aspiring educators can now become a teacher for free as they are paid to do so. The initial Grow Your Own grants through ESSER I and ESSER II funded 650 aspiring teachers (seats), which is helping to fill a large part of the existing 1,000 vacancies in the state (plus the 1,000 educators currently on permits, waivers, etc.).

The state launched a **Grow Your Own Center in partnership with the University of Tennessee system**, our land-grant institution that has a presence in every county in the state and is structured to help any district or peer state agency develop and launch Grow Your Own programs.

This work complements year-over-year increases to teacher salaries in the state, with a **17.6% increase in the minimum teacher salary in just the last three years** and a significant increase in public school funding to support the change in conditions necessary for teachers in classrooms.

Additionally, the Department has continued significant work to support the professional continuum of work for our educator, school, and district leaders:

- Supported grants with existing educator preparation programs (EPP) to continue offering no-cost endorsements to existing teachers to fill critical vacancies in the state (Secondary Math, English as a Second Language (ESL), SPED). **Thirteen programs with spots for 2,900 candidates** were offered during the 21-22 school year.
- Launched a third round of the **Diverse Leaders Network**, which funds diverse candidates to earn their administrative credential and masters degree. This work supports state policy requiring a significant increase in the diversity of the educator workforce.
- Supported LEAs to take advantage of recent policy changes and develop local programs so the **district serves as its own EPP**. This reduces costs to the candidate, creates efficiency for the LEA as they do not have the induction expenses typically required with new teachers, and allows for a more ready-made work force. This is balanced with innovation grants to existing EPPs
- Launched a third cohort of the **Aspiring Assistant Principals Network** to provide existing educators the opportunity to earn their administrative credential and masters at no cost, providing articulated pathways for teachers in their careers.

Districts, schools, the state, and community partners collectively support the non-academic and mental health needs of Tennessee.

- Governor Lee and the General Assembly started a \$250M **Mental Health Trust Fund**, to create sustainable resources for pilot and innovative programs to support and improve mental health in Tennessee schools.
- The Department partnered with the **Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse** and University of Tennessee Knoxville to develop a **mental health landscape analysis**. The analysis will inform future grant opportunities and give the state district-level overviews to see the current services available and mental health supports needed for students, particularly those in rural areas. This informed and data-driven approach has already started with school-based mental health grants for districts to increase capacity for district and school-based mental health providers for students (i.e. counselors, school psychologists, social workers, and behavioral specialists), extend mental health initiatives, and supports within districts, and expand trauma informed schools work to a district level approach.
- The state expanded Family Resource Centers to empower families with information to support their children’s needs. Across Tennessee there are 100 Family Resource Centers, which **served 92,238 students and 60,147 families, in over 50% of schools**. With a state enrollment of approximately 965,000 students, Family Resource Centers provided over 500,000 direct services were provided through the coordination and establishment of 3,324 non-school partnerships.
- The state also started the **Resilient School Communities** grant for all Tennessee public school districts through a partnership with the Tennessee Department of Health. The grant funding will cover the cost of resources to train participating districts in trauma-informed practices while receiving regional and state-level support for full implementation to increase staff capacity for school-based support. This builds on the work of **Trauma Informed Schools**, which more than doubled in the last two years to help districts complete an action plan that includes how to engage local community resources – in partnership with families - on behalf of students and allow teachers to focus on core academic instruction.

In closing, we have the opportunity to emerge stronger and more strategic than ever before.

Over the last three years, we’ve heard talk of bold action, innovation and reimagining what could be true for our students, our teachers and our schools. We’ve read papers about what is possible and dreamed of “what could be.” The challenge I offer to all of us is that we turn the possibility into the reality. Make bold action for kids the expectation, not the exception.

For us in Tennessee, bold action means a comprehensive and effective literacy strategy and the largest tutoring program in the country. Innovation means rethinking what high school can look like to accelerate post-secondary attainment and engage students in meaningful pathways to the careers of their choice. Reimagination means overhauling and passing a new state education funding formula that codifies the investments made over the last three years which have proven to be the most impactful for students.

These are investments that can continue to provide for literacy, tutoring, innovative school models and educator salary increases. This reflects a process that showed decision-making and engagement can be inclusive and broad – only then can we reflect the best of ourselves to give the best to our children.

These investments must work in concert together. Too often, we find cases of “initiative overload,” where

organizations will try every strategy in the hopes that something works. In short, it cannot just be about money or a good idea. It must be about coordinated and comprehensive strategies, and it absolutely must be about measurable outcomes for students.

I am inspired by the work happening in Tennessee schools, encouraged by the pace of our progress, and energized by the urgency with which we move forward. Still, we must all continue to be even bolder in our approach and more innovative in our thinking. We are in a time where there is both funding and appetite for the big ideas that will fundamentally improve the trajectory of the lives of children. The pandemic was a pivotal moment in education, but what we do now has the power to define our field, and our country. Our kids deserve our best now more than ever.