

Billions towards education reform and remote learning!

Tennessee teachers cannot trust Governor Lee with the \$4 billion in COVID-19 relief funds!

Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
29 March 2021

As part of the American Rescue Plan by Congress in March, the Tennessee education system will receive an unprecedented \$2.2 billion in additional funding. A recent report from *WZTV Nashville Fox17* has calculated that the state could receive a total of \$4 billion through three COVID-19 relief bills passed by Congress, including the American Rescue Plan.

The recent plan will allocate more resources to districts with a greater percentage of students from low-income families. As a result, Shelby County Schools (SCS) will receive over \$503 million, Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) will be given \$277 million and Knox County Schools (KCS) will receive \$114 million. The average school district in the state will receive just over \$15 million.

While Tennessee is ranked 46th in terms of education funding compared to other states, the crisis of public education in the United States is not the product of a lack of resources in the wealthiest country on earth but rather the allocation of those resources.

As the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has pointed out since our founding, the administration of Republican Governor Bill Lee has prioritized a rapid reopening of schools in order to get parents back to work over providing safe, quality education for students or adequate teaching resources for teachers.

In fact, as early as June, Lee began slashing the salary pool for K-12 and higher education employees. The immediate impact was the elimination of the long-awaited four percent raise for teachers, many of whom would need to take on additional costs of purchasing their own cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment as classrooms reopened amid a pandemic. On the other hand, Lee and other officials received salary increases totaling \$794,900. He also padded his cabinet with an avid school choice proponent, John DeBerry, to be special advisor on education, granting him a salary of \$165,000.

Despite the claims that teachers' raises needed to be delayed for budgetary reasons, hundreds of millions of dollars have sat in state coffers, including the state's "rainy day" fund, for no justifiable reason. Tax revenues have increased amid the pandemic, and the state had an estimated \$3 billion budgetary surplus at the start of the year.

Last May, \$596 million had been allocated to the state by the Education Stabilization Fund, but by December the state had only used \$229 million. If the Department of Education had immediately used these funds appropriately, the state could have helped provide high tech remote learning across the state at the start of the pandemic.

Instead, Lee and Education Commissioner Penny Schwinn shed crocodile tears for the crisis in education and decried the horrible "learning loss" that they claimed students experienced from remote learning. In January, Lee opened a special session of the Tennessee General Assembly, doubling down on his position that schools should open for in-person learning in the pandemic and pushing for programs to combat "learning loss," such as summer and after-school tutoring programs. He later specified that funds for new programs would only be provided to schools that resume in-person learning.

Later, the governor continued his thuggish tactics against districts teaching virtually by threatening to withhold funds from MNPS and SCS unless they began offering in-person classes. The governor's ability to force districts into in-person learning was later solidified with the state senate passing a bill that gives him and the boards of education the power to open schools regardless of the health risks.

His administration further allocated \$10 million out of the \$63.6 million Emergency Education Relief funds to charter schools. In effect, the plan is transferring millions nominally provided to help schools struggling from the COVID-19 pandemic to support his "school choice" project, which pours taxpayer dollars into private pockets.

The decision by Congress and the Biden administration to

provide massive resources to Lee and other corrupt state politicians affirms the bipartisan support for the unsafe reopening of schools. Biden has made clear that he wanted all schools to hold face-to-face learning within his first 100 days in office, a demand that has gone unchanged despite the spread of more infectious and lethal COVID-19 variants across the country.

The federal government's only stipulation is that a fifth of the funds be used to help students that had fallen behind due to the pandemic, a demand that echoes Lee's and Schwinn's claims of "learning loss." Schwinn, in a statement to *Chalkbeat*, said about the recent funds, "We've never had anything like this amount of relief funding in such a short period of time. It is our moment in time to really invest wisely."

However, she conveniently forgot to mention that the state does not intend to use these funds for meaningful long-term changes to public education. Superintendents have been told not to add any recurring expenses, such as giving teachers raises or shrinking classroom sizes.

The experience of educators in Tennessee and across the US has exposed that not even the most minuscule reform will be achieved without teachers entering into struggle and putting forward their own demands. The unions—including in the recent strikes of graduate students at Columbia University and New York University—have sought to pacify their membership by praising concession contracts. In opposition to this, the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee demands the following:

- **Smaller class sizes!** Research has supported the benefits of smaller class sizes to student achievement for years. We are demanding that class sizes be limited to a ratio of 15:1 or less than the current 20:1 ratio in Grades K-3; 18:1 or less in Grades 4-6, currently 25:1; and 18:1 or less in Grades 7-12, currently 35:1.

- **Fully fund student supports!** Hire more psychologists, social workers and behavior specialists to support the social and emotional needs of students, and fully fund and staff restorative justice programs in schools.

- **Invest in remote options!** While many parents and teachers have raised issues with remote learning, the reality is that remote learning was designed to fail. The implementation of the countless varieties of models for remote and in-person instruction across the state and within each district caused confusion and miscommunication of expectations for students and teachers in regard to learning. Most teachers learned to design virtual instruction on the fly with minimal guidance and training on the particular demands of online teaching. Teachers have had to pay out of pocket for educational software to engage students and provide interactive learning opportunities as the teacher

evaluation rubric mandates. Additionally, internet access in remote and low-income areas of the state must be upgraded and subsidized in order to remove inequities of access to virtual instruction. As the pandemic continues to spread and with many districts offering remote learning in the fall, we demand adequate resources and training for teachers to provide a high quality education to remote students.

- **Increase teacher pay!** As soon as Tennessee teachers received a two percent raise in 2020-21, health insurance premiums increased. No educator should need a second job! The pandemic has exposed the crisis in teacher compensation. According to a Pew Research poll in 2019, one in six teachers works a second job, including during the school year. Many of these teachers have been doubly impacted by the pandemic as they may have lost their second jobs working in restaurants or other workplaces. Teachers must have a salary commensurate with similarly credentialed professionals in order to be recognized and remunerated appropriately for their expertise and dedication.

- **Tax Tennessee's billionaires!** Funding for Tennessee public education can only be solidified through a tax on the superrich, including those that have witnessed their wealth surge amid the pandemic. These demands should be paid for through a massive surcharge on Martha Rivers Ingram, Frederick Smith, Brad Kelley, Mason Hawkins and more. Thomas Frist Jr., co-founder of HCA Healthcare and one of the wealthiest men in Tennessee, has seen his wealth increase by roughly \$2.5 billion during the pandemic. These funds should be used to help the failing education system and the numerous families that have been impacted by the pandemic.

We urge all educators, parents, students and other workers in Tennessee who agree with these demands to join and help build our committee today!



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