

TENNESSEE EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

July 2, 2020

TEA Survey on Reopening Schools Released, TEA Calls for Suspension of Testing

NASHVILLE, TN | The Tennessee Education Association conducted the most far-reaching survey to date on the reopening of schools. Conducted May 29 through June 11, the survey documented the views and concerns of more than 23,000 Tennessee educators, parents and community members on a variety of topics including the emotional and physical health of students impacted by COVID-19, the effect on learning and the educational challenges caused by the pandemic moving forward, and opinions on next steps as traditional school year start dates approach.

“As front-line workers, educators have kept our students engaged during the spring months of quarantine and continue to do everything possible to care for our students. We know it will take a lot more than what was included in state and local education budgets to keep our students and educators safe in the fall,” said TEA President Beth Brown.

According to the TEA Survey on Reopening Schools in Fall 2020, an overwhelming majority of respondents stressed the need for smaller class sizes, an increased focus on safety measures such as providing face masks, expanding cleaning supplies and services, and continuous temperature monitoring of students and staff. Deep concerns on virus transmission in the normal functioning of schools was clear in the survey responses.

Another clear signal from the thousands of surveys is the state should suspend standardized testing. 61% of respondents favored scrapping the normal assessment cycle in the upcoming school year.

“It is clear the normal assessment cycle cannot and should not continue throughout the 2020-21 school year. Considering the difficult close to the last school year and the mounting uncertainties in the months ahead, we must focus on the safety and health of our students, schools and communities. That means being proactive on testing and all it requires. We call on the State Department of Education to make the decision on suspending standardized testing as soon as possible, preferably before the start of the school year,” said Brown.

Neighboring Georgia has already announced the suspension of all state testing for next year and applied for a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education. Alabama is reviewing Georgia’s action and other neighboring states are considering taking this important step.

The TEA survey highlighted the need for various approaches to address possible student learning regression, including more dedicated staff to evaluate students’ individual needs and allowing local school districts to determine what and how much benchmark testing to use to gauge student knowledge.

The survey also found more than 64% of respondents see the need for additional counseling and mental health supports for students in the upcoming school year.

Highlighting technological limitations and a growing disparity in funding between urban and rural districts, only 66% of respondents said their district offered some form of professional development for teaching in a virtual classroom.

“We’ve said for years that our schools and educators do more with so much less than most states, and the past several months proved that again,” said TEA Interim Executive Director Terrance J. Gibson. “It is important that we do everything possible to support educators in their work to continue teaching and learning.”

Gibson notes the survey showed the need to make educators’ professional development helpful to tackle new learning issues, easy to obtain, relevant to the technology and connectivity hurdles teachers face, and, most importantly, and inclusive of proven strategies to improve student participation and parental involvement if Tennessee schools must shift to distance learning should infections increase.

“Tennessee educators went above and beyond the call of duty this past spring, and the reality of returning to schools with a mandate to do even more without the needed resources and training is a clear and present concern of educators and parents,” said Gibson.

While most respondents stressed that Tennessee schools cannot afford further cuts to education budgets, the most suggested way to meet funding needs was to delay building projects and cut administrative costs.

One bright area of the survey was how schools responded to the most basic needs of Tennessee’s most vulnerable populations. 98% of respondents said their school district provided meals for students since buildings closed in March.

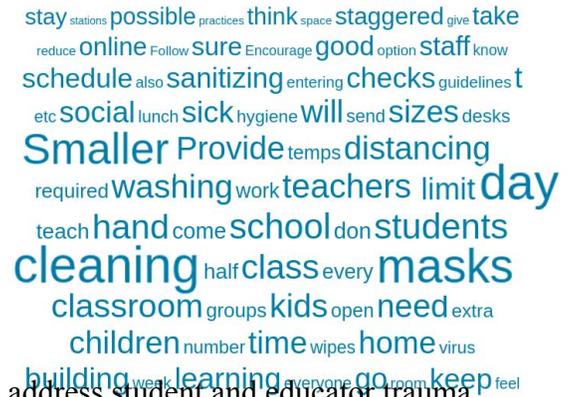
“Our latest survey underscores what we’ve been hearing from educators and parents across Tennessee: everyone is eager for our schools to open in the fall but ensuring we do it in the safest and most responsible manner possible is key. That requires proper funding,” Brown said.

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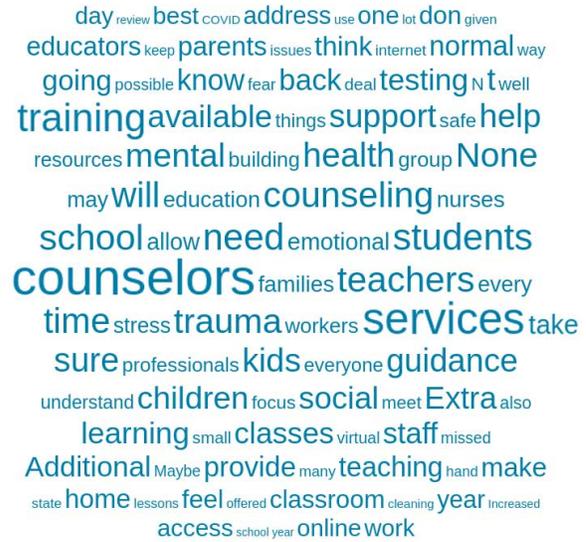
SURVEY FACTS:

- The survey was conducted May 29-June 11.
- 23,224 Tennesseans participated in the survey. 49% self-identified as public school educators, 41% as parents and 10% as members of the community.
- The survey consisted of ten questions. Four were multiple choice, six were open ended.
- The four multiple choice questions were:
 - Which description best fits your current role/occupation?
 - Public School Educator, 49.35%
 - Parent, 40.92%
 - Community Member, 9.74%
 - Has your school district provided meals for students since buildings closed in March?
 - Yes, 97.49%
 - No, 2.51%
 - Has your district offered any professional development for teaching and learning in a virtual classroom?
 - Yes, 66.01%
 - No, 33.99%
 - Considering the ongoing effects of COVID-19, should Tennessee resume its normal assessment cycle in 2020-2021?
 - Yes, 39.12%
 - No, 60.88%
- The six open ended questions provided respondents with a broader opportunity to state opinions and ideas:

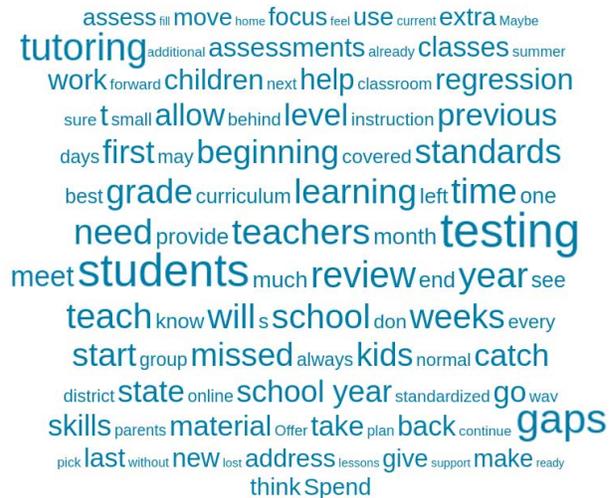
- How can school districts protect students and educators when school buildings reopen?



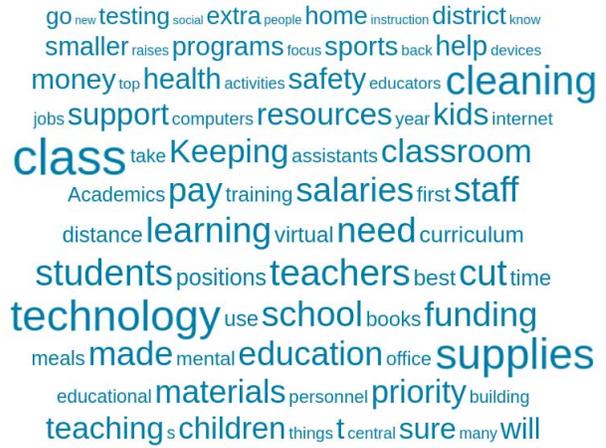
- What supplemental services are needed to address student and educator trauma when the 2020-2021 school year begins?



- How should districts address learning regression when the 2020-2021 school year begins?



- If funding cuts are made, what should be districts' spending priorities?



- What are the non-personnel funding cuts that districts should explore (i.e. textbook adoption, bus replacement, building project delays, etc.)?

