

# TENNESSEE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



by Commissioner Lana Seivers

**R**emember that first day of school? The air was crisp, your crayons were sharp, and your clothes and shoes were brand new. You knew there was a lot of work to be done, but it was exciting. You were going to meet new people and learn new things. You were going to become a better person.

That's sort of how I feel every day as commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Education. I can honestly say there's never been a better time to be an educator. We're facing new challenges, but just like tackling a new school year, it is motivating and inspiring to know what we will achieve together with teachers, administrators, parents, and communities.

The mission of our department is to help teachers teach and children learn. It may sound simplistic, but ask any teacher and you will hear that the profession has been burdened with red tape and bureaucratic processes that have little to do with educating a child. Teachers aren't here to support what we do in a Nashville office. Instead, the Department of Education is here to enhance what they do in the classroom.

## Our Structure

When Governor Bredesen asked me to fill this role in January of 2003, I knew I had the opportunity to work for a governor who believes a quality education is the fundamental right of every child in Tennessee. I didn't know, however, how many services this department provides, and the first challenge was to organize the office in a way that makes sense for the local school districts and individual schools.

We have emerged with four primary divisions: Special Education, Vocational-Technical Education, Resources and Support Services, and Teaching and Learning. Remembering our priority of putting teachers and students first drives the department's daily operations.

- **Service.** We are here to support school districts and schools and to help them in their

daily efforts to educate our children. When making inquiries to our department, you should expect prompt, thoughtful, and courteous responses.

- **Accountability.** The department fills a role as a keeper and distributor of pertinent education data, used to demonstrate academic performance, reward schools performing well, and provide resources and assistance to schools in need of improvement.
- **Partnership.** We believe that more can be accomplished when we all work together rather than separately. By partnering with local schools, parents, businesses, and organizations, we can provide more books, awards, grants, and expertise. This means more and better educational opportunities for our students.
- **Innovation.** The way children learn is changing every day. We are committed to utilizing technology in the classroom. We are also working to involve parents and community leaders to ensure that students are equipped with the skills necessary for higher levels of education, the world of work, and lifelong learning.

## Education Budget

The base budget for 2003–2004 was \$2,797,954,200 state, \$712,425,700 federal, \$8,155,900 other, and \$3,518,535,800 total.

Tennessee's budget has required careful scrutiny and prioritization from all departments for the past 15 months, but Governor Bredesen's commitment to K–12 education has been extraordinary. While the department's administrative costs have been reduced at the same level as other departments, funding for K–12 education administered through the Basic Education Program, the state's funding formula for local school districts, has remained intact.

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The Tennessee Department of Education currently has 1,074 positions (843 state-funded and 231 federally funded). Of the state-funded positions, 568 are at the state special schools: York Institute, Tennessee School for the Blind, Tennessee School for the Deaf, and West Tennessee School for the Deaf. About 97 percent of the overall budget for the department is distributed directly to the 136 local school systems, which serve more than 1,600 individual schools.

### Emerging Issues

**Teacher Recruiting and Retention.** About 40 percent of those who begin teaching leave the profession within the first five years. Coupled with the fact that Tennessee colleges are not graduating enough licensed teachers to meet our hiring needs, we have a startling teacher shortage in our state, much like the rest of the nation.

Governor Bredesen is leading the charge to change this trend. This year, he approved a budget that raises Tennessee's average instructional salary above the Southeastern average to \$43,000. He also approved a plan to address the Tennessee Supreme Court ruling for salary equity. This plan better equalizes teacher salaries throughout the state to ensure equal access to quality teachers for all students.

Governor Bredesen recognized that there are many mid-career, qualified professionals with expertise to share who, with some assistance, training, and incentive, would make excellent educators. He's authorized *Teach Tennessee*, a program to assist professionals through the certification process and to match a professional's skills with classroom needs across the state. These potential educators are most needed in the hardest-to-staff districts and in high-need subject areas such as math, science, special education, and foreign languages.

**Reading.** At a recent statewide teachers' roundtable, teachers were asked about their biggest needs. Whether it was a preschool coordinator or a high school math teacher, the answer was the same: reading programs. Reading is the foundation for all other learning.

The governor this year allowed \$2 million to establish the seed money for Imagination Library, launched in 1996 by the nonprofit Dollywood Foundation. The program mails books to preschool children from the time they're born until their fifth birthday. The program increases the number of books in the home of every preschool child in the state, in turn providing more opportunities for someone to read to that child. The state will provide the seed money; local champions are needed to help finance the books and the mailing expenses.

Preschool and early childhood education programs are critical to reading development. Up to \$8 million of excess lottery funds after scholarships are paid will be used to build the state's pre-kindergarten programs for at-risk students. The state currently estimates there are 38,000 at-risk preschool children. About 18,000 of those are served by Head Start or the state's pilot preschool program, leaving some 20,000 children without any preschool opportunities.

The department also is distributing \$111 million of *Reading First* grants issued by the federal government. The target population for *Reading First* is kindergarten through grade three. Districts receiving the grants are mandated to provide to all students a core, comprehensive reading program based on scientifically based reading research. Professional development in the five essential elements of reading and how it affects classroom practice is a key feature of the grants. Additionally, teachers must use assessment results to drive classroom instruction.

**Technology.** Every aspect of our lives, from business to communications to culture, has been changed by technology. However, schools have fallen behind in incorporating modern computer and communications technology in ways that other sectors of society have.

An additional \$2 million is being allocated this year to expand opportunities for acquiring equipment and to provide the necessary training on how to best use it for educating. Imagine teaching a French lesson, then making the words come to life with a virtual tour of Paris. It is a real option for students today if we commit to changing the culture of our classroom.

**No Child Left Behind (NCLB).** You've likely heard much about the federal NCLB Act, an ambitious federal plan to improve student achievement and further detail school accountability. We at the state embrace the concept and spirit of the act and are working for the flexibility needed to best serve Tennessee's students.

We have recently updated our implementation plan for the NCLB Act. The amendments allow more appropriate standards for Tennessee's students with disabilities and extra time for students still learning the English language. The state is seeking this flexibility to avoid punishing schools that may not yet meet achievement standards but are showing continued improvement in each category. The state will continue to seek additional funds in keeping with the additional standards.

It is a challenging but exciting time as we work toward educational improvements in Tennessee. For more information, visit [www.state.tn.us/education](http://www.state.tn.us/education) or call (615) 741-2731. ■

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