



BILL HASLAM
GOVERNOR
STATE OF TENNESSEE

August 14, 2014

Dear Jennifer,

I am writing at the start of the school year to thank you for your continued service to children in Tennessee. I know the summer goes by quickly and is increasingly filled for you with ongoing professional development and work to prepare for the upcoming year. Please know how grateful Crissy and I are for your commitment and dedication to our nearly one million public school students.

At the end of July, Commissioner Huffman and I had the chance to travel around the state and meet with teachers and principals in small groups to have candid discussions about the state of education in Tennessee. We had twelve small meetings, organized through the Tennessee Organization of School Superintendents. I learned a lot about what teachers are seeing that is working as well as areas of concern. No topics were off limits, and your colleagues shared openly – pride in the success of our students, belief in the potential of the work, but concern about the pace of change, questions about not having an assessment that is fully aligned to the new standards, frustration over teacher salaries, and a desire to improve teacher morale while we also improve student achievement.

We heard a number of ideas, big and small, and are currently processing many of these ideas as we think about policy proposals and ways to improve communication between the Department of Education and the field. Beyond the specific policy considerations, though, I felt inspired at the end of the listening tour to step back and write to each of you.

First, I know we cannot say this too many times: Thank you. Thank you for choosing to work in one of the toughest and most important jobs in the state. Thank you for rolling up your sleeves in the face of significant change in your profession and doing your best to serve our children. Thank you for making Tennessee the fastest improving state in the country in education. It is your work; you deserve the credit and our gratitude.

Second, I am acutely aware of the challenges you face each day. While I was aware before, the listening tour certainly crystallized my understanding. As I told many teachers on our tour, Tennessee teachers sit at a very challenging intersection between changing worlds. On the one hand, you are faced with so many challenges every day that stem from societal issues. You are on the front lines of dealing with the effects of poverty, broken homes, exposure to violence, and all the other challenges of modern society. At the same time, it is also true that the expectations for teachers and students have never been higher. We are asking more of you and your students while you grapple with so many out-of-school factors. I recognize that this is an

underappreciated burden that teachers face every day, and I admire our teachers for their willingness to push forward.

Finally, one thing I heard frequently is that teachers often are told the “what” of education reforms without being told the “why.” A major part of my job involves recruiting companies to come to or expand in Tennessee. This is, of course, critically important to ensure that as many families as possible have the chance to have a good income and pursue the American dream. Over the course of my first term, we have had a lot of success on this front, adding 170,000 net new private sector jobs and reducing unemployment by 33 percent. Although employers are attracted to many aspects of our state, they worry about whether we will have enough skilled workers and, in particular, enough workers with technology certificates and two and four year degrees to ensure the future success of their companies.

The conversations I have had with employers led me to launch the Drive to 55 and the Tennessee Promise, ensuring that all Tennessee high school graduates have the opportunity to attend a community college or college of applied technology free of charge. The conversations also shape my continued commitment to improve educational outcomes in our public K-12 schools.

Currently, most Tennessee students attending community college have to take remedial courses when they arrive, and the vast majority of students taking remedial courses do not graduate. Ultimately, if we are to continue to thrive as a state, we must get more students prepared for work and postsecondary, and we must ensure more students wind up with a certificate or degree. Tennessee is competing in a fierce environment for jobs. We compete with Texas and Florida and Virginia, but we also compete with Singapore and Germany. This fuels my commitment to ensure the success of our students.

It is precisely because this is so important, though, that we have to get it right. A big part of getting it right is ensuring that our teachers feel appreciated and have the tools and resources to succeed. I am committed to ensuring that we focus on this as we continue to move forward with our work. I know that we have not always communicated sufficiently our appreciation for your work and understanding of your challenges, and I look forward to sharing some proposals that I hope will demonstrate our commitment to supporting your work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bill Haslam". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Bill Haslam
Governor