

### By JC BOWMAN

Educators are leaders who should be valued and respected. In an era of transformational change across Tennessee, there is a well-timed debate over how we define achievement and success both in and out of school, as well as the proper role of federal, state and local policy.

Nobody disputes that the path forward is the presence of quality teachers in Tennessee classrooms. However, quietly unnoticed is a startling fact: there are 3.2 million teachers in the United States according to the U.S. Department of Education. By 2020, it is estimated that 1.6 million will either retire or leave the profession. This pending impact will be felt across many Tennessee classrooms.

Of even more concern is that the data reveals 46 percent of public school educators leave the profession within their first five years. The attrition rate is highest among science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) teachers, who can command higher salaries in the private sector. The book (and now movie) "Teachers Have It Easy," by Dave Eggers, Nínive Clements Calegari and Daniel Moulthrop, has produced a compelling discourse that accumulates data to give readers a blunt and unforgiving portrait of American education which raises questions about the sustainability and desirability of the teaching profession in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

As an education association, Professional Educators of Tennessee understands that the debate over what essential preparation and skills individuals should possess before entering a public school classroom has largely been decided before educators join any professional organization. The additional skills that are necessary, and how they are acquired, can also be debated. Historically, the body of knowledge and skills needed to be an effective teacher has been too unstructured, unclear, and not backed up by the necessary research. That is changing across the state, as well as the nation.

That we are failing as a state and nation to encourage recruitment of the teachers we need is also concerning. For example, 90 percent of high-minority districts report difficulty attracting teachers prepared to teach math and science. Education organizations can fill a critical role in assisting school districts and teachers to come together and meet their different needs. This includes not only addressing students from assorted cultural backgrounds in the state, but also students with disabilities or with limited English proficiency. The war drums for compulsory

unionism and collective bargaining are growing silent in the face of the urgent need to recruit, retain and support effective educators who can meet these difficult challenges.

The discussion over teacher quality and preparation often neglects to address the issue of professional development. Professional Development (PD) has traditionally been connected to, and included in, the initial attainment of permanent certification; for school improvement plans, especially to low performing schools; tying specific topic-professional development to funding (often math, science, and reading); and, improving results as related to teacher evaluation.

Professional development opportunities provided on both the state and local level are where leadership begins to take root for most educators. Professional Development allows for educators to create a professional career continuum and lays a solid groundwork for the future of Tennessee classrooms.

By engaging in collaborative networks we are building the capacity for all educators to make a positive influence in the classroom, become leaders in their schools and school district. In 2012 education associations must take the lead in providing high quality, relevant professional learning for pre-service, and novice and career educators. Professional Educators of Tennessee provides Professional Development for all Tennessee educators, both members and non-members, so we can improve classroom instruction, strengthen leadership capacity, recharge our batteries and empower educators to be more effective leaders in Tennessee schools and communities.

***Editor's Note: JC Bowman is the Executive Director of Professional Educators of Tennessee, based in Franklin. For more information, visit [www.ProEdTN.org](http://www.ProEdTN.org).***