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The League of Women Voters of Tennessee (LWVTN) Calls on the General Assembly and Gov. Lee to Take Bold Steps Necessary to Adequately Fund Public Education in All 95 Counties of Tennessee

Nashville, Tenn.- March 15, 2021 - Chronically underfunded school districts throughout the state have been especially challenged during the pandemic. However, the inadequacies and the gross underfunding predate this stressful year. Tennessee currently funds its public school system at a level that consistently places it in the bottom five most poorly funded states in the United States, per the National Education Association.

During the current legislative session of the General Assembly, numerous bills have been introduced by members from both sides of the aisle to provide patches to shore up some of the urgent needs that school districts are facing, such as properly funding critical support staff including school counselors, social workers and school nurses and closer-to-the-classroom needs like sufficient numbers of interventionists to support state-mandated programming and ongoing technology needs. However, a patchwork of funding solutions does not adequately address the bigger issue of properly funding all schools.

“This goes beyond how you slice the pie to provide varying amounts of funding to the diverse counties of our state – the pie itself is simply not big enough,” said Debby Gould, president-elect of LWVTN. “The League’s position on education is that the state’s coverage, implementation, and funding of the Basic Education Program should be adequate to assure a high standard of public education.”

It is time to fix the flaws in the BEP formula that has resulted in the chronic underfunding of our schools. Under the current formulation, the BEP allows for a per-student budgeted amount that is \$3,655 lower than the nationwide average, and lower than most southeastern states. Because the BEP formula underfunds our public schools, it puts a heavy burden on communities to supply the local funds necessary to provide an acceptable standard of public education for students.

In addition, the funds provided simply don’t match up with the necessary cost of operating a school. One example of how the BEP drives a mismatch of funds provided and funds needed is in the way the teacher-to-student ratio is factored. The BEP mandates an average student-to-teacher ratio of 20:1 in the elementary grades. Therefore, a school with 100 students would be



allocated salaries for five teachers. The BEP-allocated instructional salary is about \$7,300 less than the actual average instructional salaries across the state, already creating a gap. Then, the challenge of dividing up students presents another gap. With those 100 students, if 33 are 1st graders, 33 are 2nd graders and 34 are 3rd graders, the school will need two classes in each grade to reach appropriate class sizes. That means six classes and six teachers, thus further widening the gap between what the formula provides and the reality of the public education system. Because the BEP formula systematically underestimates the actual need, local districts statewide have to fund about 7,000 teaching positions beyond what the BEP formula calculates—positions that must be funded entirely by local communities.

Each year, a BEP Review Committee analyzes the formula and its results for the preceding year, making official recommendations to the state for improvement. The committee's latest report recommends increasing the BEP teacher salary component to match what districts actually have to spend. It also recommends increasing the numbers of school nurses and counselors to meet nationally-recognized standards and increasing the number of interventionists to fulfill requirements of a state-mandated program designed to keep students from falling behind, or catch them up more quickly when they do. At the very minimum, Governor Lee and the General Assembly should incorporate all BEP Review Committee recommendations and provide recurring funding for them. This action would be a significant step toward adequately funded public schools for all Tennessee children.

"Investing in our students' success is imperative," said Gould. "There is an urgent need to increase the priority we put on public education in Tennessee."

The League of Women Voters of Tennessee is a nonpartisan, grassroots civic organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy. It does not support or oppose any political candidate or party.

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