

Commentary: Gov. Lee should seek better school advice



By **Mark Harmon** - November 12, 2020



Gov. Bill Lee gives his bi-weekly media briefing Aug. 18. (Photo: Tn.gov)

The East Tennessee Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists for many years has sponsored a Legislative Luncheon in January. State legislators typically are lined up on a dais while audience members, many still digesting the Buddy's Barbeque from the buffet line, write out questions on cards. A journalist moderator sorts through questions and poses them to the lawmakers.

For two or three years running, this also meant a clash between public school nemesis State Rep. Bill Dunn and me on the subject of Pre-K programs. Dunn refers to the value of research on these programs, but then cherry picks quotes or partial data to bash Pre-K. I quote a broader array of research and insist on the value of Pre-K—even if all programs are not created equal, and many have to be supplemented with further work to retain initial student gains. These clashes typically ended with Dunn reverting to a broadside against “government schools,” his way of trying to corral public distrust of government against long-popular public education.



Former Rep. Bill Dunn (Photo: Tennessee General Assembly)

Dunn, after 26 years in the Tennessee House carrying water for voucher programs that would strip money out of our public schools, now has a new job. Gov. Bill Lee has appointed him to be a senior adviser, annual salary of \$98,000, to Education Commissioner Penny Schwinn.

Incidentally, the pilot voucher program the Lee and Dunn jammed through the legislature twice has lost in court as unconstitutional. A Nashville judge and later the state Court of Appeals ruled the legislature cannot push these new methods on selected counties without their consent.

Our governor has pledged to take the matter to Tennessee's Supreme Court, and now he has appointed an adviser with a track record of hard-headed devotion to the slow dissolution of our public schools.

At the start of this gubernatorial term, I suggested that the residents of our state would benefit from another Bill Lee as governor. Specifically, I recommended the former major league baseball pitcher Bill "Spaceman" Lee. Now, I'd like to modify that, suggesting Gov. Lee should have Spaceman as a counterbalancing adviser to Dunn.

The former pitcher has a political resume that includes being the 1988 presidential nominee of the American Rhinoceros Party. His platform included "a ban on guns and butter, since they both killed" and "painting the White House pink and turn it into a Mexican restaurant."

Spaceman's book *The Wrong Stuff* mentioned his political philosophy. The California-born hurler declared, "I believe in the corporal acts of mercy, in giving to people who don't have anything. If you take care of those around you, you end up taking care of yourself, because you establish a good pattern of karma." It would be startling to see Spaceman's karma run over Dunn's dogma.

Gov. Lee should learn from the serious academic research that challenges his voucher notions. If he's not comfortable sorting through all the studies to be found via Google Scholar, he could start at <https://dianeravitch.net/>. That's the blog of Diane Ravitch, the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education. She keeps good tabs on these matters.

The Tennessee governor also should check out the phenomenal work of the University of Tennessee's Bob Kronick, a professor of educational psychology. He demonstrated the value of innovative public community schools—one's with expanded hours and special programs for both adults and kids.

The pandemic challenges all our school plans and assumptions, but neither the governor nor the people are served well by Bill Dunn flogging stale, failed voucher schemes, or by Gov. Bill Lee getting only the advice he wants to hear.



Accessibility



Mark Harmon

Mark D. Harmon is a professor of journalism and electronic media at the University of Tennessee, an award-winning freelance columnist, and a regional vice chair for the Tennessee Democratic Party.