

Bob Eby Part Three

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 24, 2023)

Benita Albert concludes her three-part story about Bob Eby. If you have followed the story from the beginning I am sure you agree that Bob is someone we in Oak Ridge can be proud to know. His contributions to education locally and now at the state level have been extraordinary. Benita delves deeply into Bob's experiences in education. Enjoy the conclusion of this marvelous story of one of our own!

It is Bob's activism for education, his deep appreciation for his schooling, and his problem-solving approach to the teaching and learning challenges in the K-12 classroom that is most inspiring to me, his former teacher. He has a long vita of service including a total of sixteen years on the Oak Ridge Schools Board of Education, four years as Chairman and nine years as Vice-Chairman. In March 2018 Governor Haslam appointed him to the State Board of Education for a five-year term now followed by a new 2023 five-year term where he will serve as Chairman for the next two years.

I asked Bob to consider two or three of the most important issues he addressed during his tenure on the Oak Ridge School Board. His three examples follow:

"When I was first elected in 1985, I got to serve as the Board representative to developing a strategic plan for the Oak Ridge Schools (ORS) which was led by Bill Wilcox." Bob said this planning experience has served him well in local Board leadership and now State Board matters.

"(When I was Chairman) the ORS Board considered the contested issue of prayer at graduation. The crowd was so great that we had to hold the meeting in a packed Robertsville auditorium with TV stations there and the American Civil Liberties Union for the left and the American Law and Justice for the conservative side. Each were determined to sue depending on which path we took. I had prayed a lot about how to handle the situation, and the night before it came to me. I passed the gavel to Vice-Chair Gerald Walker, and I made the motion that 'The Board of Education would not object to a volunteer, student-initiated, student-led, non-proselytizing, non-sectarian prayer at graduation.' The Board passed the motion, and no one got sued. As far as I know, the school policy has never changed."

"During my last terms on the Board, I worked with ORS Superintendent Dr. Bruce Borchers to set quantifiable strategic plan goals. It was called Oak Ridge 2020. That model is now used by the State Board in developing our five-year strategic plan."

What is the broad scope of your State Board duties?

"The State Board flies between the State Legislature and the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE). We take the laws the Legislature passes, write rules (which carry the weight of law) and policies that the TDOE and school districts then implement. One of our key responsibilities includes establishing all the academic standards of what a student should know and be able to do in each grade or course taught in K-12 public schools. The districts then develop the curriculum to execute those standards. It is a big misconception that the State Board sets the curriculum. We set graduation requirements and we approve the textbooks used to teach the standards. Districts and teachers have leeway to supplement textbooks if they meet the laws passed. We also set licensure requirements and suspend or revoke teacher licenses for misconduct. Finally, we write and publish the five-year Master Plan for the public schools."

Bob was especially proud to point out that one of the State Board members is a student. Nine other members are chosen from the nine legislative districts across the state. Tennessee is only one of four states that has a student member and is the only state where the student has voting privilege. Bob said, "I say the student member is like EF Hutton. When the student speaks, all other Board members listen. The student brings a different and very important perspective."

"The State Board has given me a broader view of the needs of students across the state. Whether it is urban Memphis, Nashville, or rural Scott, Campbell, or Lake County, the needs are vastly different. Every student deserves to have a quality education, no matter their zip code."

As technological advances accelerate, how is public education impacted?

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"Wow! Look how technology has changed since I was in high school. We can now explore innovative school models and how to reflect these models in rule/policy moving forward. We hope to provide access to a variety of courses for all students through a statewide virtual offering. We are also investigating how technology could be an aid for elementary students whose reading and math scores fall below grade level. The Covid pandemic opened doors to many new opportunities to explore."

What pressing issue does the Board need to consider in the immediate future?

Emphasizing that the following are his thoughts only and not an official Board statement, Bob answered:

"Licensure of teachers to meet the needs of the future is crucial. About 30% of our teachers will be eligible to retire by 2026. I think addressing teacher staffing needs, both through licensure and encouraging existing teachers, is the number one issue we must solve. We are working with TDOE and the Legislature to identify alternate licensure pathways without impacting the quality of the teacher."

How can the public be involved in support of Tennessee public education?

"Transparency is a key focus of the Board. Because of the Sunshine Law, all our Board and committee meetings are open to the public and/or livestreamed. (Go to tn.gov/sbe) We post our agendas online, and we value input from all interested Tennesseans. Every six years we review the standards for either English, Math, Social Studies, or Science. It is possibly the most transparent standards review process in the U. S."

"We just completed the second review period for our Social Studies Standards. During the first review cycle we received 114,000 comments, and I understand during this second review process the comments exceeded the first. The comments will be reviewed by the Social Studies Standards Recommendation Committee (appointed by the Governor and the Legislature) who will then make recommendations to the State Board for final adoption this fall. Oak Ridge's own D. Ray Smith was approved as a member of that committee. I recently wrote an Op-Ed about our standards review process including support to include the Scarboro 85, the story of the 1955-56 integration in the Oak Ridge Schools (the first in the southeastern U.S.) into the new standards. We encouraged comments by all interested citizens." Read Bob's op-ed at: <https://www.knoxnews.com/story/opinion/2023/02/24/opinion-civic-engagement-can-shape-tennessee-history-education/69925607007/>

At the end of our interview, I asked Bob if he had any other parting wisdom to share. He said, "I cannot express how much I appreciate our teachers and administrators for what they do for students every day."

I completely agree! I would add that I am grateful for those who are advocates for the best educational experience for our students, people like Bob Eby who has given Oak Ridge, and now the State Board of Education, years of innovative and dedicated leadership in educational matters.

Amazing accomplishments over the years to advance education locally and at the state level. I am proud to know Bob Eby! Thank you, Benita, for another excellent story of an Oak Ridge School's graduate.

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