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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Tennessee school boards seek funding autonomy to improve accountability and student achievement

(Nashville, Tenn.) Tennessee School Boards have taken the first step toward joining the majority of their counterparts across the nation who have the authority to manage local education funding levels as they strive to meet the needs of the students they serve.

School Board members across the state voted Nov. 17 to ask the General Assembly to take steps toward amending the Tennessee Constitution to permit fiscal independence/taxing authority for boards of education. Tennessee is one of only 11 states in which school boards have no ability to raise revenue for schools. Eighty-one percent of elected boards of education in the country have that ability. The vote to seek funding authority took place at the annual Tennessee School Boards Association (TSBA) Delegate Assembly in Nashville. The purpose of the meeting was to adopt the Association's legislative priorities for the coming year.

School boards in Tennessee are facing unprecedented accountability at the national, state and local levels for student and school performance. In fact, school board members can be removed from office and school systems can be taken over by the state if performance standards are not met; yet, boards of education are completely dependent upon other elected bodies for the fiscal resources that are often necessary to meet these very standards. This flawed and uncommon system of funding public education serves only to perpetuate unproductive funding battles and finger-pointing between boards of education and county commissions/city councils and leaves the public with no clear line of accountability or authority.

"School Boards members across Tennessee have embraced their roles as accountable stewards of taxpayer dollars," said TSBA President-elect and Shelby County School Board Member David Pickler. "Providing taxing authority to school boards will empower these elected leaders to deliver educational excellence for all our children."

As the policy-making body for public schools, school boards have a much greater understanding of the needs of the school district and the students it serves. School boards are elected for the sole purpose of overseeing public education in the community and are not distracted or diverted by other county government functions. School board members know what the loss of a reading program or teaching assistants can mean to a school or how the addition of new technology can enhance the teaching and learning process because they deal with such items every day. County commissions and city councils are detached from the educational environment and too often focus only on bottom-line numbers.

"Unlike local legislative bodies that oversee a multitude of unrelated governmental functions, school boards have the singular task of providing a quality education to our youth," said TSBA Executive Director Dr. Tammy Grissom. "The law recognizes the importance of that task by creating a separate entity to consider all educational matters except funding. TSBA believes it is in the best interest of Tennessee's children and taxpayers to place local education funding in the hands of those who best understand the needs of students."

The transfer of taxing authority from local legislative bodies to school boards is not something that will happen immediately. Under the legislative method for amending the Constitution, which was most recently used to permit a state lottery, the Tennessee General Assembly must pass a resolution calling for the amendment and must do so in three separate readings on three separate days, with an absolute majority on all readings. The

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amendment must then be published at least six months before the next legislative election, and, once the legislative election is held, the proposed amendment must go through another three-reading, three-day voting process, but this time the amendment must receive a 2/3rds approval on each vote. Finally, the amendment is then placed before the voters on the ballot as a referendum in the next gubernatorial election, and must pass by absolute majority. The earliest this initiative could appear on a ballot for voter consideration is Nov. 2014. If approved, the General Assembly would then craft the parameters under which school boards would operate.

Strengthening public schools by giving elected school boards the tools they need to meet their responsibilities is the central theme of the Tennessee School Boards Association's (TSBA) 2009 legislative agenda. Members of the General Assembly will begin their work in January facing many of the same issues related to public education that have dominated recent legislative sessions – how to adequately fund our schools and what parameters to place around such funding. Current economic conditions will make this year's session of the General Assembly especially challenging.

In addition to questions of funding, school boards in Tennessee expressed concern about attempts to reduce their authority to make decisions about educational matters, including the hiring of directors of schools. TSBA seeks legislative support for the current law that calls for appointment of directors of schools by boards of education and opposes any measure to revert to the process of electing superintendents. In order for public education to reach its potential, those held responsible for results must have the authority to make the decisions affecting those results.

Proposals to dilute school boards' authority to make some of the most crucial decisions affecting education makes it impossible for citizens to know who is accountable for school performance.

To view TSBA's 2009 Legislative Agenda, as well as answers to frequently asked questions and other data concerning taxing authority for school boards, visit the TSBA website at www.tsba.net and click on the link titled [TSBA Supports Fiscal Independence for School Boards](#).

The mission of the Tennessee School Boards Association is to assist school boards in effectively governing school districts. Through the years, TSBA has helped school boards and their members reach their highest potential through association programs, meetings and services. TSBA also provides school board members a collective voice in matters of legislation and public education concerns.

To arrange interviews with TSBA officials, contact Steve Doremus, TSBA Director of Communications.