

# Voices from the Classroom

Results from the  
**2016 TENNESSEE EDUCATOR SURVEY**

# Executive Summary

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Every spring, the Tennessee Department of Education surveys educators across the state to gauge their perceptions of state initiatives and their own work. The department shares school and district survey results directly with local leaders to provide feedback for their own decision-making, and the department also uses the state-level information to understand more about the teacher and administrator point-of-view. The takeaways from this year's survey point in several important directions.

 Climate and Classroom 4

Most educators feel good about the climate in their schools, saying that they serve students alongside colleagues who share their goals and high expectations and school leaders who value the importance of instructional time. The combined sense of job satisfaction and mission focus provides a strong foundation for the continuous improvement that is a hallmark of Tennessee education.

 Student Discipline 6

Disparities between teacher and administrator views about the consistency and effectiveness of school discipline practices highlight a substantial area of need for the state, especially considering that disciplinary infractions often lead to missed instruction for students. Survey results show that teachers seek new strategies to address the varied needs of diverse learners, to increase student engagement, and to educate the “whole student.”

 Evaluation and Professional Learning 8

Teacher professional learning represents a third area of significant interest, and we find much both positive and negative to learn from educators' survey responses. While more teachers than ever are finding value in the statewide evaluation system, they continue to feel that they are receiving insufficient support for improvement, both in terms of the direct feedback that comes from their administrators and in terms of the time and resources for collaboration with peers.

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This report also highlights several additional findings drawn from early analyses into topics associated with the state's strategic plan, including teacher technology use and building culture in high schools focused on college and career readiness. Some of these initial findings will become topics for more extensive research briefs in the coming year.

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# About the Survey

The Tennessee Educator Survey, created in partnership with the Tennessee Education Research Alliance at Vanderbilt University (TERA), aims to take the pulse of teacher perceptions, monitor school climate and culture across the state, and include educators' voices in the policy discussion.<sup>1</sup> The survey offers a snapshot of where we are—and where we need to go—if we are to meet our collective goals around excellence and equity, ensuring that all students find success both while attending our schools and following high school graduation.

For the last six years, the survey was distributed to all educators listed in the state system with a valid email address.<sup>2</sup> This year's survey was available between April 13 and May 27, 2016. All participants completed a main survey differentiated by self-reported role (teacher, administrator, counselor, instructional coach, school support staff, etc.). Teachers and administrators additionally completed one special topic section that either covered assessment and standards, evaluation, personalized learning, or professional learning.

This year's survey represents the perceptions of more than 30,000 educators, about half of the state's teachers and administrators, and results are weighted to take into account differential response rates.<sup>3</sup> Results are released publicly for districts and schools that achieved a response rate greater than or equal to 45 percent. Half of Tennessee's 1,800 schools and 123 of 148 districts crossed this threshold. All results can be accessed via the updated survey website and in downloadable spreadsheet form.

This year's survey included responses  
from more than



which is **about half**  
of all teachers and administrators.

# Climate and Classroom

The vast majority of Tennessee teachers give high ratings to the working environment within their schools.



Nearly 8 in 10 teachers across the state reported that “the staff at this school likes being here,” that “there is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect,” and that they “feel appreciated” for the job they’re doing. These high levels of workplace satisfaction are consistent across grade levels, with pre-K teachers offering the most positive views. Overall, the vast majority of schools appear to offer constructive climates for teachers, although we still see about 10 percent of schools across the state where the majority of staff report that they are dissatisfied with their work environment.

Most teachers also view their colleagues in a positive light. More than 90 percent of teachers agree that they share fundamental values and beliefs about education with a majority of colleagues. Nine in 10 teachers said that their colleagues hold each other to high standards, with a similar number of teachers reporting the same for holding all students to high academic standards.

Teachers similarly give positive marks to school leaders’ efforts to support their practice. Eighty-six percent of teachers say school leaders protect instructional time, with almost 80 percent saying they are allowed to focus on educating students with minimal interruptions. Each of these measures have risen by at least two percentage points a year since 2014, with the trends remaining consistent even when analysis is limited to the participants who responded to the same question over consecutive years.

The positive views about the role of school leadership in protecting instructional time are particularly important for Tennessee school quality. Tennessee research has shown that the most effective teachers are significantly more likely to remain in the classroom when they feel like school leaders protect their instructional time.<sup>4</sup> Over the past several years, teacher retention numbers in Tennessee have remained steady right above 90 percent each year, mirroring the national average.<sup>5</sup> More than 80 percent of teachers also feel that school leadership is adequately visible and available to address staff and student concerns, with 77 percent saying that school leadership is proactive in seeking to understand staff and student needs.

Finally, 69 percent of teachers report that they receive sufficient individual planning time, although significant differences exist based on grade-level and tested/untested status. Seventy-seven percent of high school teachers report sufficient planning time compared with only 66 percent of K–8 teachers, indicating a potential area of need to improve working environments in the earlier grades. Similarly, 72 percent of teachers in untested subjects compared with 66 percent of tested teachers say that planning time is sufficient.

TEACHER COMMENTS



**78%**

of teachers say:  
"I feel  
**appreciated**  
for the job that  
I am doing."

“

I believe students learn more and teachers do a better job of instruction when teachers are happy, secure, and compensated fairly.”

“

It is important that I feel my school supports me and appreciates my work, effort, and skills.”

TEACHER COMMENTS



**93%**

of teachers say:  
"Most of my  
colleagues share my  
**beliefs and values**  
about what the central mission  
of the school should be."

“

My students deserve a system that values their futures.”

“

We align our words and our actions to the core belief that all students can achieve at a high level when we provide the opportunities that they deserve.”

TEACHER COMMENTS



**86%**

of teachers say:  
"My school leaders  
**protect instructional**  
**time.**" 84% of teachers  
said this in 2015, and  
82% said this in 2014.

“

Leaders in my school are extremely knowledgeable of current teaching practices; they keep faculty current on instructional trends and offer individualized support to the teachers in various areas of need. They facilitate a climate among the faculty and staff that exudes positivity and warmth.”

# Student Discipline

Tennessee educators are generally positive about the overall climate for students in their school, but teachers and administrators differ substantially about the effectiveness of disciplinary practices in their schools.



When it comes to overall climate for students, 91 percent of teachers report that their school “fosters appreciation for all staff and students’ cultural beliefs and practices.” However, teachers and administrators differ substantially about the effectiveness and consistency of disciplinary practices in their schools.

Nearly all administrators—over 95 percent—say that their school uses a consistent approach with all students when addressing disciplinary issues of a similar nature. Similarly, more than 95 percent of administrators say their school effectively handles student discipline and behavioral problems. However, fewer than 70 percent of teachers agree with either of these same statements. One teacher wrote, “Discipline in my school is very inconsistent and greatly depends on who the student is, not what the student has done.” The gaps in perceptions suggest that administrators are largely unmindful of such concerns.

While we cannot know from these survey results alone exactly what teachers were pointing to with their responses about the effectiveness and consistency of disciplinary practices, we do know that across the country and in Tennessee, there are mounting concerns among K-12 educators regarding exclusionary discipline—discipline that results in missed class time for the student.<sup>6</sup> Even in Tennessee—where suspensions and expulsions have declined by 20 percent and 80 percent respectively since 2012—more than 63,000 students missed school due to discipline infractions in 2015. Discipline rates are highest for middle and high school students, particularly in ninth grade when 1 in 5 students experience

## TEACHER COMMENTS

“Students with a discipline problem need the space to receive real emotional help and counseling. We want to be there for children, but we need support in areas besides teaching.”

**96%** of ADMINISTRATORS

VERSUS

**69%** of TEACHERS

say the school **effectively handles** student discipline and behavioral problems.

**96%** of ADMINISTRATORS

VERSUS

**68%** of TEACHERS

say their school addresses similar disciplinary issues **consistently** with all students.

at least one instance of exclusionary discipline and 1 in 10 miss at least one week from school due to disciplinary action. In addition to lost learning time, research demonstrates that frequent suspensions and expulsions correlate with higher rates of grade retention, drop-out, and subsequent involvement with the juvenile justice system, even when controlling for other student and school characteristics.<sup>7</sup>

Equally concerning, disciplinary practices are not consistently distributed across schools and student subgroups. Over half of all students who were suspended in 2014-15 attended one of just 150 schools, making some groups of students much more likely to receive disciplinary action than others. Economically disadvantaged students—approximately 60 percent of the Tennessee student population—make up 80 percent of all exclusionary disciplinary incidents. During the sixth to ninth grade time window, two-thirds of black students are suspended or expelled—a rate 60 percent higher than the average. In ninth grade, the year when expulsions are the highest, black students make up 25 percent of the student population but 71 percent of overall expulsions.<sup>8</sup>

As schools work to confront these issues, survey results indicate that teachers are aware of the need for improvement and are interested in engaging with resources and opportunities that can help them better facilitate the development of the whole student. Across the state, 82 percent of teachers indicate a need for more professional learning support for “meeting the needs of all learners.” Seventy-seven percent of teachers indicate “addressing students’ non-academic needs,” as an area of need for professional learning support. One teacher wrote that teachers, “badly need support in meeting the socio-emotional needs of our students,” a concept that recent research identifies as essential for increasing students’ attendance, cooperation, and engagement with learning.<sup>9</sup>

#### TEACHER COMMENTS

“Teachers badly need support in meeting the socio-emotional needs of our students.”

“We, teachers, need more support with discipline. Our students need more emotional and social support.”

**77%** of **TEACHERS**

indicated “**addressing students’ non-academic needs**” as **an area of need** for professional learning support.

# Evaluation and Professional Learning

More teachers than ever say the teacher evaluation system is improving teaching and learning.

Seventy-one percent of teachers report that the teacher evaluation process has led to improvements in their teaching, up from 38 percent in 2012. Similarly, two-thirds of all teachers report that the process has led to improvements in student learning, up from about one quarter in 2012.<sup>10</sup>

Teachers also report that they value the feedback received on evaluations and take action as a result of this feedback more often than not. Nearly every teacher who reported receiving feedback on their evaluation also reported taking at least some action as a result of that feedback. As an even more encouraging sign, teachers with lower Level of Effectiveness (LOE) scores were more likely than their peers with higher LOE scores to take major action, suggesting that those who need to make the greatest improvements in practice are more seriously listening to the feedback they receive.

At the same time, there is a striking difference between the percentage of teachers who report receiving feedback on their evaluation, and administrator reports of teachers in their school receiving feedback. Ninety-four percent of administrators report that teachers received feedback on their previous year's evaluation. However, only 58 percent of teachers say that they received such feedback. Taken together, the pattern of responses on evaluation feedback items suggest that increasing the percentage of teachers receiving feedback on their evaluation will lead to a greater quantity of teachers taking meaningful action to improve their educational practices.

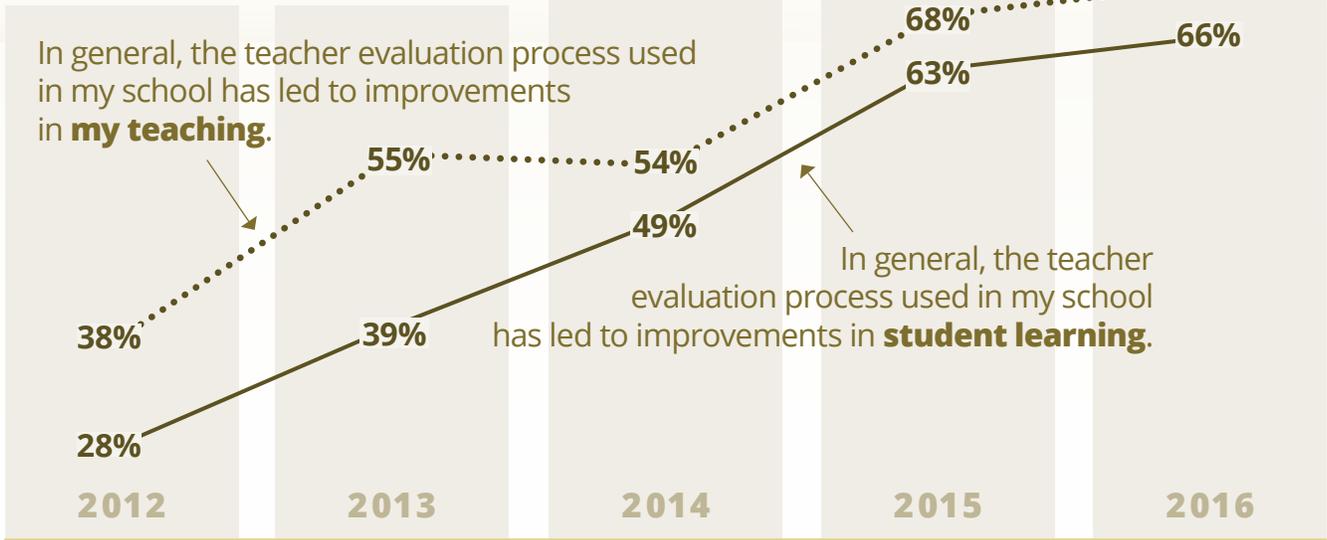
But teachers want more than feedback alone to improve their practice. Primarily, teachers want school leaders to provide more time and better support for collaboration with their peers. Teachers report that peer collaboration is more valuable toward their development than any other aspect of professional learning, mentoring, or support. However, they consider both the amount of time and the resources available for collaboration in their schools as insufficient. Only 32 percent of teachers say that the amount of common time provided for collaboration with peers is adequate, while only 10 percent say the amount of paid time for collaboration outside of regular work hours is adequate. Similarly, only 23 percent are satisfied with resources and materials available during collaboration and 32 percent are satisfied with staff expertise available during collaboration.

## TEACHER COMMENTS

“As I reflect on my career in teaching, I can see the great strides we have made to improving education in TN. I can also see the vast distance we have left to go!”

## CHANGE OVER TIME IN EVALUATION PROCESS RESPONSES

Percentage of Teachers Who Agree



**94%** of **ADMINISTRATORS** say teachers received feedback on last year's evaluations

**BUT ONLY**

**58%** of **TEACHERS** report receiving such feedback

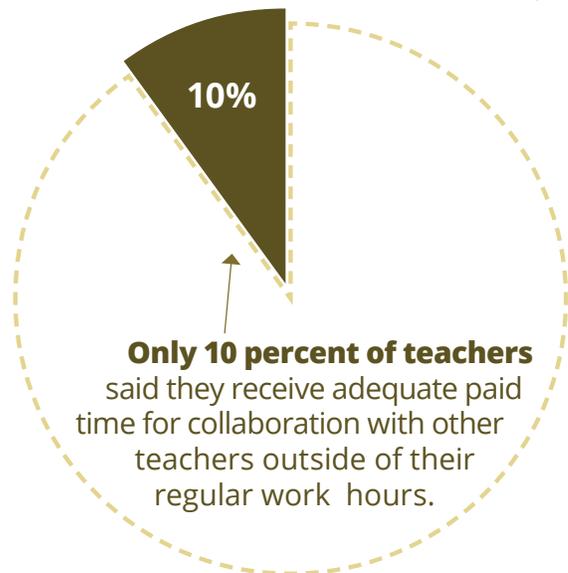
### TEACHER COMMENTS

“Evaluators should be having conversations with teachers about what they are doing well, and where and how to improve.”

“Evaluations should be used to show where you can improve.”

### TEACHER COMMENTS

“Facilitating effective learning opportunities is a struggle when there are inadequate opportunities for collaboration, planning, and professional development.”



# Additional Findings

This year's survey covered a wide range of topics. This section goes beyond the major survey findings to offer an initial glimpse into other issues affecting Tennessee schools.

## Technology in the Classroom

Most teachers report having access to technology that can enhance learning, but few report having adequate support to integrate the use of this technology into their teaching and very few teachers report making digital classroom assignments a regular part of instruction. Teachers point to both in-school support and

professional learning opportunities as insufficient for promoting the effective use of technology in schools. One teacher wrote, "There is an increasing expectation for the use of technology in the classroom, which is completely understandable. However, the resources to implement relevant technology are severely lacking."

## Postsecondary Readiness

Tennessee high school teachers offer positive views on the culture of postsecondary readiness in their school, even in those schools where outcomes point to a need for significant improvement. Seventy-nine percent of high school teachers overall say a majority of students in their school plan to continue into postsecondary enrollment. Even among schools where less than 40 percent of students matriculate to postsecondary within six months of high school graduation, 70 percent of teachers still say the majority

of their students are planning to go to postsecondary. Similarly, even in schools where less than one-quarter of high school students enroll in early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs) such as dual enrollment, dual credit, or Advanced Placement, 66 percent of teachers say that current placement practices ensure that all EPSO-ready students are enrolled into EPSOs. To meet Tennessee's goal of the majority of high school graduates earning a postsecondary credential, we must address these gaps.

## Statewide Assessments

With the suspension of online statewide testing in early spring and the termination of paper testing in grades 3 through 8 taking place squarely in the middle of the survey period, it is unsurprising that teachers expressed their general frustration related to the new TNReady exams. Despite a majority of teachers reporting strong alignment between TNReady and

their current classroom practices, very few teachers reported positively about the level preparation for the new tests. Results point to widespread dissatisfaction with the amount of time given to cover necessary material, the practice tools for students, and the testing blueprints for teachers.

## TECHNOLOGY

Most teachers report having access to technology that can enhance learning, but few report having adequate support to integrate the use of this technology into their teaching.

**76% of TEACHERS AGREE**

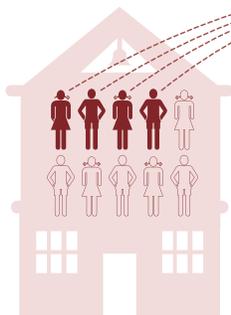
I have **access to the appropriate technology** that allows me to effectively teach my students.

**62% of TEACHERS AGREE**

Teachers have the **resources and support** to select and apply technologies and digital content based on the needs of the individual learners.

## POSTSECONDARY READINESS

Even in those schools where **less than four in 10 students** actually go on to postsecondary...



**70%**  
of teachers

still claim that **the majority of their students** are planning to attend postsecondary.



## TNREADY

Few teachers report TNReady resources as having been adequate for students or teachers.

**17% AGREE**

TNReady practices tools were adequate for introducing students to the content changes expected with the new standardized test.

**23% AGREE**

TNReady practices tools were adequate for introducing students to new question types.

**37% AGREE**

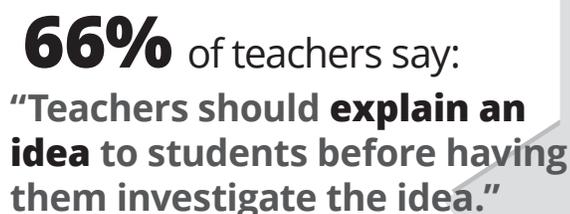
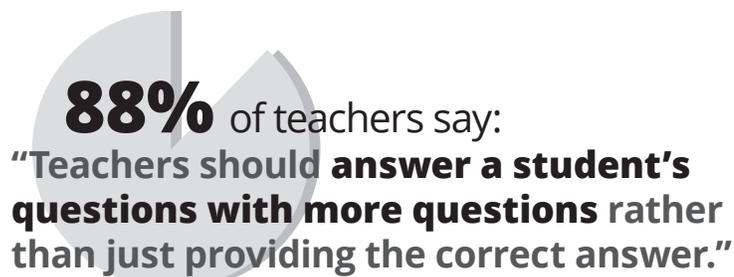
The TNReady assessment blueprints met my needs in understanding what would be tested on each part.

# At a Glance: Educators in Practice

This year's survey captured valuable insights into preferred classroom and school practices. Here is a brief snapshot.

## Teachers

Nearly 9 in 10 Tennessee teachers believe that students' questions should first be answered with more questions rather than an immediate answer. At the same time, two-thirds of teachers believe it is best to explain an idea before having students investigate the idea; however, this belief looks different across teachers of state-tested subjects and teachers of untested subjects. Over 70 percent of teachers of untested subjects said that an explanation should precede student explanation while only 59 percent of tested teachers agreed with this statement. Tennessee research has shown that students achieve stronger performance on assessments when allowed to productively struggle in learning new concepts.<sup>11</sup>



## Administrators

Fewer administrators report that they are making significant use of data to track their school's performance over time. Compared to 2015, administrators' reports of using data around student attendance, student discipline, and teacher observation all decreased by at least four percentage points. Overall, administrators remain more likely, by a significant margin, to engage with academically-focused data than data on non-academic matters. Nearly a quarter of administrators report extensive use of academic data points, including standardized testing and benchmark assessments. However, fewer than half report extensive use of non-academic data points such as student discipline data. This difference is a concern because lost learning time due to discipline and attendance impacts academic performance.

### Percent of administrators who report using the following data to a great extent:

#### ACADEMIC

**75%** standardized test scores

**72%** benchmark/formative assessment

**55%** student's grades

#### NON-ACADEMIC

**50%** student attendance

**41%** student discipline

## Instructional Coaches

Almost all (98 percent) instructional coaches report satisfaction with their ability to develop meaningful relationships with their colleagues but are less satisfied with their ability to help teachers critique and reflect on their own practice. Coaches list “teachers are resistant to change,” as the biggest challenge to being

an effective coach. This challenge is compounded by the fact that coaches spend the most time, compared with all other duties, on gathering materials for teachers, despite listing “planning with teachers,” and “observing and providing feedback,” as the most effective uses of their time.

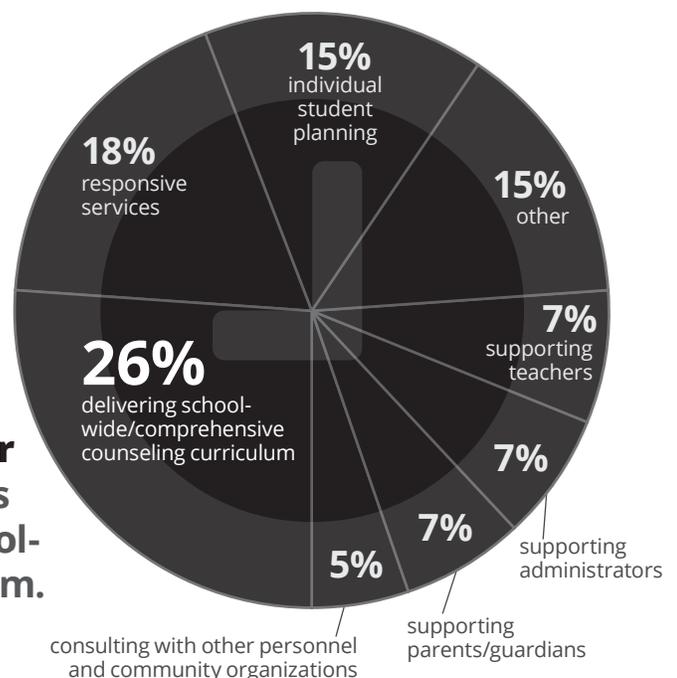
### There is misalignment between what coaches view as an effective use of time and how time is spent.

	<b>EFFECTIVE USE OF TIME</b> <i>as ranked #1-10 by coaches</i>	<b>HOW TIME IS ACTUALLY SPENT</b> <i>relative to other areas, as identified by coaches</i>
Planning with teachers	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
Observing and providing feedback	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Providing professional development to teachers	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>
Modeling lessons for teachers	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>
Helping teachers obtain resources and materials	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>
Co-teaching with teachers	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
Meeting with other coaches for your own professional learning	<b>7</b>	<b>10</b>
Leading PLCs	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>
Meeting with administrators to discuss instructional improvement	<b>9</b>	<b>5</b>
Conducting observation for evaluation purposes	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>

## Counselors

Counselors report that, on average, only about one quarter of their time is spent delivering elements of a school-wide comprehensive counseling program. Only about two-thirds of counselors say that their school leaders understand the counselor role and protect counselor time. Complicating time-use matters further, nearly half of counselors surveyed report having been assigned a larger than recommended student caseload.

**Only about one quarter of a counselor’s time is spent delivering a school-wide counseling program.**



# What's Ahead for Tennessee's Educators and the Department?

The Tennessee Department of Education values the contributions of educator voices throughout the state.

Each year, the department will seek to improve its responsiveness to the perceptions shared by educators through the annual educator survey and other avenues for feedback. This section describes several of the department's latest strategies to address areas identified as in need of improvement.

## Support for Collaboration & Instructional Improvement

Last year, the department launched the Instructional Partnership Initiative (IPI), an effort which drives instructional improvement by using teacher evaluation data to pair teachers in one-on-one, collaborative partnerships based on complementary areas of strength and growth. This initiative will expand dramatically for the 2016-17 school year and will be offered to all schools in the state the following year.

## Increased Opportunity for Teachers to Receive Feedback

Portfolio assessment options are expanding to more districts and more subject areas, including pre-K and kindergarten teachers. The State Board of Education also recently approved the addition of a first grade portfolio option. Portfolios highlight the work of educators in non-tested subjects and aim to improve the feedback these teachers receive during the evaluation process. The department expects a significant increase in the number of districts implementing one or more of the approved portfolio models for the 2016-17 school year.

## Changes for Statewide Assessment

This year will see considerable changes to statewide assessments in response to educator feedback over the last year. The 2016-17 TCAP will be given during a single assessment window at the end of the school year rather than as separate Part I and Part II sections. Shorter testing blocks will improve testing coordination logistics for school officials. In grades 3-8, students will

have tests that are 200-210 minutes shorter. In high school, most individual end-of-course assessments have been shortened by 40-120 minutes. Finally, the department has sought to improve the resources available to help teachers prepare their students for the test. Revised assessment blueprints include an updated format and information that is more clear and concise. Updated practice tests, made available as early as August via EdTools, will reflect the updated structure of tests. The online item sampler tool will be made available ahead of the 2017-18 school year.

## Improving Culture around Postsecondary Readiness

The gap between the perceived culture of postsecondary readiness and actual outcomes is significant. As a result, the department will actively seek additional opportunities to share data with educators about EPSO opportunities, associated outcomes, and cohort data related to college-going and retention.

## Supporting Students' Social and Emotional Needs

Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI<sup>2</sup>) is a multi-tiered, problem-solving framework used to meet the needs of each individual student. Beginning July 2014, Tennessee schools have been using the RTI<sup>2</sup> Framework to design academic interventions and systems of support within their schools. During this implementation, it became clear that for many students, behavior is the underlying area of need impacting academic success. The purpose of the Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI<sup>2</sup>-B) Framework is to help districts, schools, staff, parents, and students align clear expectations with behavioral interventions in one cohesive multi-tiered system of supports that is sustainable for schools and districts to implement. The RTI<sup>2</sup>-B framework will help guide districts and schools in developing a problem-solving approach that addresses the whole child.

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## Endnotes

1. The Tennessee Education Research Alliance was previously known as the Tennessee Consortium on Research, Evaluation and Development (TNCRED).
2. Educators received an invitation to complete the survey if listed in TNCompass and/or Education Information System (EIS).
3. The department works with Westat to provide weighted results that take into account educator response patterns. Weighted results aim to reduce potential biases and variances in using the data to represent the entire population of Tennessee educators from which the sample was drawn.
4. Pratt, T. & Booker, L. (2015). *Teacher retention in Tennessee: Are we keeping our best teachers?* Nashville, TN: Tennessee Department of Education.
5. Goldring, R., Taie, S., and Riddles, M. (2014). *Teacher Attrition and Mobility: Results from the 2012–13 Teacher Follow-up Survey* (NCES 2014-077). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
6. United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2016). *2013-2014 Civil Rights data collection: Key data highlights on equity and opportunity gaps in our nation's public schools*. Washington, DC: US Department of Education.
7. Fabelo, T., Thompson, M. D., Plotkin, M., Carmichael, D., Marchbanks III, M. P., & Booth, E. A. (2011). *Breaking school rules: A statewide study of how school discipline related to students' success and juvenile justice involvement*. College Station: Texas A & M University, Council of State Governments Justice Center and Public Policy Research Institute.
8. These patterns in Tennessee mirror regional trends as shown by a recent report, *Disproportionate Impact of K-12 School Suspension and Expulsion on Black Students in Southern States*, which highlights the extent to which black students experience exclusionary discipline at far higher rates than their peers across the entire series of Southern states. See Smith, E.J. & Harper, S. R. (2015). *Disproportionate impact of K-12 school suspension and expulsion on black students in southern states*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education.
9. Decker, D. M., Dona, D. P., Christenson, S. L. (2007). Behaviorally at-risk African American students: The importance of student-teacher relationships for student outcomes. *Journal of School Psychology*: 45(1), 83-109.
10. As with other longitudinal data included in this report, the trends remain consistent even when analysis is limited to the participants who responded to the same question over consecutive years.
11. Stein, M.K., Correnti, R., Moore, D., Russell, & Kelly, K. (Submitted). Using theory and measurement to sharpen conceptualizations of mathematics teaching in the Common Core era. *AERA Open*.

