



Department of Education

# Academic Readiness

Charter Operator Toolkit | June 2026



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# Academic Readiness Overview

In this context, academic readiness refers to the decisions and planning necessary to deliver a high-quality academic program. The Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002 establishes academic flexibility as a defining feature of the charter model and as a core statutory purpose as expressly outlined in T.C.A. § 49-13-102(a):

*“The purpose [of this Act] ... is to encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods, and provide greater decision-making authority to schools and teachers in exchange for greater responsibility for student performance;”*

Charter schools operate under a unique situation often called the “charter bargain.” In this bargain, authorizers grant schools autonomy and flexibility to innovate in exchange for accountability for results. While charter school leaders are allowed a great deal of autonomy over academic programming within a charter school, they are expected to develop and maintain a high-quality academic program that meets the requirements set by Tennessee law, rules, and policies unless the requirement has been waived pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-111. Information on allowable waivers can be found in the Governance and Leadership section of the toolkit.

## Key Points

- A charter school’s academic focus and academic program are defined in the approved charter application. Because the charter agreement incorporates the approved application, the academic focus and academic plan become binding components of the charter agreement.
- Charter schools are public schools and must operate within the requirements of both public schools **and** the charter school’s approved charter agreement.
- Charter school leaders should read and understand the academic and instructional requirements outlined in state law and SBE rules and policies.
- Charter schools may submit a waiver request for any academic requirement established in law or rule unless the subject of the waiver is expressly prohibited pursuant to [T.C.A. § 49-13-111](#).

# Academic Focus and Academic Plan

A charter school's academic focus is its distinctive, thematic program such as math, science, arts, general academics, or an instructional program such as Montessori or Paideia. The academic plan defines the instructional goals, methods, curriculum, and materials the school will use to implement its approved academic focus and meet state academic standards. A school's academic focus is implemented through its academic plan.

This plan is included in the charter application and incorporated into the charter agreement. The governing body must ensure the school operates in accordance with the charter agreement, including the approved academic focus and academic plan.

The academic plan should provide a comprehensive, clear description of the educational program (e.g., instructional approaches, student experience, learning environment) that is aligned with school mission, anticipated student population, and stated outcomes. The instructional approach should identify clear instructional strategies (e.g., direct instruction, inquiry-based learning, culturally responsive teaching, blended learning) as well as specific methods and systems for differentiating instruction and how students at different levels will be supported within the core classroom environment.

## Academic and Instructional Requirements

[T.C.A. § 49-1-302\(a\)\(8\)](#) authorizes the State Board of Education to “approve all academic standards and adopt rules and policies governing courses of study in the public schools.” The approved standards outlined in [State Board Rule 0520-01-03](#) are to be the basis for planning instructional programs in each local education agency (LEA), state special school, and public charter school.

This section of the toolkit will highlight several areas but should not be considered the definitive resource for any particular area. Where available, charter leaders should reference the SBE rules and policies, the department's academics webpages, and [Best for All Central](#) for academic program requirements and guidance.

The [Pre-Opening Year Academic Readiness Checklist](#) is a tool that can be used to ensure that the above requirements are addressed, and the school is prepared on day one for implementation.

The following table provides a summary of the main statewide academic obligations that apply to all Tennessee public schools.

## Academic and Instructional Requirements

### Curriculum and Instruction

- Employ properly licensed and endorsed teachers.
- Align all coursework to the [Tennessee Academic Standards](#).
- Use state-approved textbooks and instructional materials as core materials.
- Develop and implement a Foundational Literacy Skills Plan (FLSP) for K-3.
- Adopt and implement promotion and retention policies for grades K-8.
- Evaluate and report academic progress to parents or guardians at least every nine weeks in accordance with local grading policy.
- Implement a uniform grading system for grades 9-12.
- Maintain a Continuous Learning Plan (CLP) to provide quality instruction to students during emergencies.
- Develop a plan for high school and beyond with all 8<sup>th</sup> grade students.
- Provide required high school coursework aligned to statewide graduation requirements.
- Adopt and implement a credit recovery policy for grades 9-12.
- Implement a civics assessment in grades 9-12.
- Comply with statewide requirements governing virtual education programs.
- Implement the RTI<sup>2</sup> framework, including tiered, data-driven instruction and interventions in reading, mathematics, and/or writing within the general education setting as appropriate.
- Complete universal screenings as required, including screening for characteristics of dyslexia.
- Meet the academic needs of all students by providing accessible, differentiated, and inclusive learning experiences for students with and without special education needs.
- Offer Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs consistent with state-approved programs of study.
- If offered, implement work-based learning (WBL) in accordance with state requirements.
- Track and report early postsecondary opportunities (EPSO) participation, CTE concentrator status, and industry credential attainment.
- Comply with early graduation pathways.

## Academic and Instructional Requirements

### Assessment and Accountability

- Administer all state-mandated student testing programs in accordance with department procedures.
- Meet minimum student assessment participation thresholds.
- Include required end-of-course (EOC) assessments in final course grades.
- Administer alternate assessments for eligible students.
- Administer a state-recognized postsecondary readiness assessment in grade 11.
- Use assessment results for accountability and instructional planning.

## Academic Resources

In addition to the law and rules referenced above, the following are resources related to the outlined requirements.

- The [Academic Standards webpage](#) provides information on the academic standards for grade levels and subjects. It also provides links to SBE standards review processes and the [official lists of textbook and instructional materials approved](#) by the Textbook and Instructional Materials Quality Commission
- The [Foundational Literacy Skills Plan Toolkit](#) is a helpful, easy-to-use resource that walks you through exactly what to include in your plan and how to meet state expectations. It breaks down each component with clear examples, guidance, and templates. Use it as your step-by-step guide as you build your quality plan.
- The [Tennessee Universal Reading Screener](#) provides a step-by-step guide for choosing a screener and provides a “one stop shop” for information related to ordering, training, and implementation to help prepare for implementation.
- The [Promotion & Retention Guidelines and Toolkit](#) provides additional resources for promotion and retention decision in third and fourth grade. The [Learning Acceleration](#) webpage provides information on promotion and retention related to the Tennessee Literacy Success Act, including promotion pathways, summer programming, and parent appeals.
- The [Continuous Learning Plans](#) webpage provides the CLP template and resources for developing a new plan or revising the current plan.
- The [Future Ready Tennessee Official Home Page](#) is the place to learn about the four key pillars--Credentials of Value, Seamless Transitions, Individualized Advising, and Work-Based Learning—and find resources on CTE programs, graduation requirements, and WBL.

# Academic Performance Evaluation

A charter school’s academic performance is monitored and evaluated through the academic performance goals incorporated into the charter agreement and in the performance framework established by the authorizer. These academic outcomes factor into renewal, corrective action, and revocation decisions.

Authorizers may create their own model performance framework, or they can adopt a performance framework aligned to the [model performance frameworks](#) developed by the Tennessee State Board of Education. At a minimum, the model performance framework should include student academic performance, achievement gaps between major student subgroups, postsecondary readiness, and financial performance and sustainability.

The purpose of a performance framework is to measure a school’s academic success, financial health, and organizational stability using clearly defined benchmarks by which charter schools are annually evaluated. A charter school’s outcomes indicate the overall success and health of the school and is used by the authorizer to inform the need for intervention as well as high-stakes renewal and revocation decisions. An authorizer’s intervention policy lays out the possible interventions and sanctions for failure to meet the standards set forth in the performance framework.

The Academic Framework in the model performance framework is designed to measure the academic performance of a school utilizing measures such as proficiency, growth, postsecondary readiness, and mission-specific goals. The authorizer may adjust the weights and inclusion of these indicators.

Indicators
<b>A. Student Outcomes (30%)</b>
• School Letter Grade
<b>B. Comparative Performance (30%)</b>
• Overall Achievement
• Subgroup Achievement
<b>C. Growth (30%)</b>
• Overall Growth in Math and ELA
• Subgroup Growth in Math and ELA
<b>D. Mission-Specific Goal(s) (10%)</b>
• Goal(s) specific to the school

# Appendix

## A: Pre-Opening Year Academic Readiness Checklist

### Curriculum and Instruction

- Ensure that all courses are explicitly aligned to Tennessee academic standards and that alignment is documented.
- Adopt or create high-quality course curricula and instructional materials that meet state requirements.
- If not included in your approved application, submit any waiver requests necessary.
- Adopt policies related to applicable requirements such as promotion and retention, progress reporting, uniform grading, credit recovery, etc.
- Develop and submit the FLSP if applicable.
- Design and adopt an RTI<sup>2</sup> framework that implements required universal screening, clearly defines tiered instruction and interventions, and employs data-based decision-making.
- Align intervention systems to foundational literacy requirements and other academic data where applicable.
- Implement dyslexia-specific screening and intervention for students who flag for characteristics of dyslexia.
- Assign clear responsibility for overseeing progress monitoring and RTI implementation to ensure fidelity and compliance once the school opens.
- If serving middle grades, design a process for eighth-grade students to begin development of a high school and beyond plan aligned to SBE policies.

#### **High school only:**

- Confirm that all courses offered for credit appear on the State Board's Approved High School Courses List, and that correct course codes and endorsements are used.
- Identify any non-standard or innovative courses early and determine whether a special course approval or waiver request is required before implementation.
- Develop a complete set of course offerings that enable students to meet state graduation requirements and diploma expectations.
- Understand early graduation pathways and have processes in place to make them available to eligible students.
- Establish clear processes for awarding high school credit, including credit earned through aligned college-level coursework such as dual enrollment.

- Develop procedures to ensure coursework completed in other approved settings is fully transferable.
- Develop a plan for credit recovery.
- Determine whether WBL experiences will be offered and, if so, ensure alignment to the requirements.

### **Assessment and Accountability**

- Identify which state-mandated testing programs apply to the school based on grades served and review applicable procedures.
- Establish internal roles and systems to support compliant administration of required assessments.
- Align planning tools, timelines, and staff responsibilities to ensure these requirements can be implemented smoothly once the school opens.
- Develop a plan for implementing alternative assessments and accommodations required by student Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

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