



Department of Education

# Student Support Services

Charter Operator Toolkit | June 2026



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# Student Support Services Overview

Charter school leaders are expected to ensure that all students have access to the support services they need to succeed academically and thrive in school. This includes building systems to identify student needs early, provide timely interventions, and deliver required services for students with disabilities, English Learners, and other special populations. These responsibilities are grounded in federal and state laws and policies—for which charter schools are held to the same expectations as all public schools.

Although compliance remains important, the central focus of student support services in Tennessee is the early and accurate identification of students' needs and the provision of appropriate support to ensure meaningful student outcomes. Schools must implement required frameworks (like RTI<sup>2</sup>), follow strict timelines for evaluation and service delivery, and maintain accurate documentation. This section provides resources to support charter school leaders in understanding what the state requires related to student support services and how to build systems that work from day one.

## A Note Regarding This Section

The purpose of this section of the toolkit is to provide a starting place to learn about student support services. It is not intended to cover everything a charter school needs to know about these complex, technical, and highly regulated areas. There are many detailed department resources that go far deeper than this section; some of which are referred to in this document.

Authorizers have significant responsibilities in these areas for all its public schools, including charter schools. The first step for any new charter school is to become very clear about what the authorizer will oversee, what support services it will provide, and what shared resources are available. Compliance is a shared responsibility between the charter school and the LEA. Clear communication, partnership, and alignment with the authorizer is essential from the start.

## Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI<sup>2</sup>)

RTI<sup>2</sup> is Tennessee's statewide instructional framework designed to provide students with just in time interventions and support services to accelerate learning to provide greater access and opportunity in Tier I. RTI<sup>2</sup> is not an exclusive pathway for special education. Every charter school must implement RTI<sup>2</sup> as part of its academic program, and Tennessee uses RTI<sup>2</sup> as the required process for determining eligibility for a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). [T.C.A. § 49-1-229](#), [T.C.A.](#)

[§ 49-6-311](#), and [SBE Rule 0520-01-03-.03](#) set the framework for intervention and support service requirements.

The purpose of RTI<sup>2</sup> is to ensure that schools:

- Provide high-quality, grade-level instruction to all students (Tier I).
- Deliver targeted and increasingly intensive interventions based on student need (Tier II and Tier III).
- Use regular, standardized screening to identify students who may need support services.
- Monitor student progress frequently and adjust interventions when needed.
- Use documented data to make decisions about instruction, tier placement, and potential special education referrals.

**Tennessee’s RTI<sup>2</sup> rules create both academic and compliance expectations.** These requirements apply to all charter schools and must be followed consistently from the first day of operation.

## Key Components of RTI<sup>2</sup>

Tennessee’s RTI<sup>2</sup> framework is fully detailed in the [TDOE RTI<sup>2</sup> Manual \(2023\)](#). Every charter school must implement RTI<sup>2</sup> as the statewide model for identifying student needs, delivering tiered academic support services, and supporting SLD eligibility decisions. The components below reflect the minimum expectations for implementation.

RTI Manual Reference and Components	
<p><b>Three-Tier Model</b>  <i>RTI<sup>2</sup> Manual: “Tiered Delivery of Instruction,” pp. 22–33</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tier I is standards-aligned core instruction for all students.</li> <li>• Tier II provides targeted small-group interventions based on multiple data points and need.</li> <li>• Tier III provides intensive interventions delivered more frequently and with smaller ratios.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Data-Based Decision Making</b>  <i>RTI<sup>2</sup> Manual: “Using RTI<sup>2</sup> Data to Make Decisions,” pp. 21, 24, 28, 34</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Movement between tiers is flexible and driven by data team decisions.</li> <li>• Decisions are grounded in multiple data sources including screening results, progress monitoring trends, and fidelity information.</li> <li>• Subjective decisions about tier placement are not permitted.</li> </ul>

## RTI Manual Reference and Components

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cut scores should not be used to make decisions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Universal Screening</b> <i>RTI<sup>2</sup> Manual: "Universal Screening," pp. 15–17</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools administer an approved universal screener three times per year grades K-3; at least one time a year in grades 7-8 (more frequently if at risk); and through an Early Warning System in grades 9-12.</li> <li>Screeners must be from the state-approved list in grades K-3.</li> <li>All students are screened; if a student cannot access a screener, an alternative screener must be given.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Fidelity of Implementation</b> <i>RTI<sup>2</sup> Manual: "Fidelity of Implementation," pp. 19–20, 34–35</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools document that interventions were delivered as designed.</li> <li>Records include the frequency and duration of sessions.</li> <li>Documentation includes the program or strategy used.</li> <li>Instructional adjustments based on student response are recorded.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Progress Monitoring</b> <i>RTI<sup>2</sup> Manual: "Progress Monitoring," pp. 18, 34–35</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students in Tier II and Tier III are progress monitored using approved tools.</li> <li>Tier II and Tier III progress is monitored every other week unless the team determines the need to monitor more frequently.</li> <li>Progress monitoring data is documented, reviewed, and used to adjust instruction.</li> </ul>	<p><b>SLD Eligibility</b> <i>RTI<sup>2</sup> Manual: "Specific Learning Disabilities," pp. 37–42</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools maintain complete RTI<sup>2</sup> documentation for any student referred for evaluation.</li> <li>Missing or incomplete data cannot be used to delay or deny SLD eligibility determinations.</li> <li>Teams follow department timelines and documentation expectations.</li> <li>RTI<sup>2</sup> data support compliance with Child Find responsibilities.</li> </ul>

## Common Pitfalls and Misconceptions in RTI<sup>2</sup>

1. **Thinking RTI<sup>2</sup> is optional or just extra support.** In Tennessee, RTI<sup>2</sup> is required. It must include screening, interventions, progress monitoring, and documentation. It is not something we "add on" when we have time.

2. **Trying to fit Tier II or Tier III inside regular class time.** Tier II and Tier III are provided in addition to Tier I. Students receiving tiered interventions need their own protected time and smaller groups. Ensuring access by appropriate scaffolding during class is necessary, but it does not count as RTI<sup>2</sup> intervention.
3. **Not progress monitoring often enough.** Tier II and Tier III progress should be monitored every other week. Tier III may be monitored more frequently if needed. Missing progress monitoring makes it hard to see whether students are responding to the intervention and closing academic gaps. (See RTI Manual pp. 18, 34–35).
4. **Moving students between tiers without basing it on individual student needs.** Tier changes must be data-team driven based upon multiple data sources. There are no specific cut scores, required data points, or required time in a tier. (See RTI Manual pp. 21, 24, 28, 34).
5. **Believing we must “finish RTI<sup>2</sup>” before starting a special education evaluation.** This is a major misconception. RTI<sup>2</sup> does not delay or deny an evaluation (See U.S. Dept. of Educ., Memo to State Directors of Special Education (Jan. 21, 2011)). If a disability is suspected, the evaluation must be started while still collecting RTI<sup>2</sup> data. (See RTI Manual pp. 37–42).

## RTI<sup>2</sup> Process Development and Operation

<b>Pre-Opening Year</b> <b>Building the structure so RTI<sup>2</sup> works on day one</b>
<p><b>Set up the core pieces</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose your universal screener and progress monitoring tools.</li> <li>• Identify your RTI<sup>2</sup> Lead who will own and manage the system.</li> <li>• Create your RTI<sup>2</sup> Implementation Plan using the state manual as your guide.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Build schedules and staffing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protect time in the daily schedule for Tier II and Tier III.</li> <li>• Identify staff who will deliver small-group interventions.</li> <li>• Plan how you will support and coach interventionists.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Create your data systems</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decide where screening, progress monitoring, and fidelity data will live.</li> <li>• Establish clear data-based decision processes for how students move between tiers.</li> <li>• Set up simple templates for intervention logs and family notices.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Prepare for special education alignment if needed</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a process to ensure students suspected of a disability are referred for an evaluation.</li> </ul>

- Train leaders on role of RTI2 in the Child Find process including documentation of data and responsiveness to interventions.

## Operational Years

### Effective RTI<sup>2</sup> systems, fidelity, & documentation

#### Screen and group students

- Administer the universal screener in fall, winter, and spring K-6; once a year in grades 7-8; and use Early Warning System in grades 9-12.
- Group students into Tier II and III based on identified needs using multiple data sources.

#### Deliver interventions

- Start Tier II and Tier III right after screening.
- Keep groups small and schedules protected.

#### Monitor progress

- Monitor progress in Tier II and Tier III every other week or more frequently if needed.
- Review trends and adjust interventions when needed.

#### Make decisions based on data

- Follow your decision rules for when students move tiers.
- Look at screening, progress monitoring, and fidelity together.

#### Communicate and align to special education

- Notify families when students enter Tier II or III.
- Share progress data with the special education team when considering SLD evaluations.
- Begin evaluations if a disability is suspected while RTI<sup>2</sup> continues.

## Special Education

In Tennessee, special education is grounded in the belief that **all students can** <https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/individuals-disabilities/idea> **learn, achieve, and thrive when provided the right support services.** The department emphasizes access, meaningful inclusion, and strong partnerships with families to ensure students with disabilities receive the services they need to succeed. For charter schools, this means delivering the same high-quality, student-centered support services expected of every public school in the state.

Special education is not a place or a separate program. Special education is specially designed instruction, services, and support that identify and address the barriers created by the student's disability, ensuring equitable access to learning, participation, and meaningful progress in school alongside non-disabled peers. Charter schools must uphold these expectations by building systems that reflect Tennessee's commitments to early identification, timely evaluation, strong Individual Education Program (IEP) development, and inclusive learning environments.

The department's [Special Education Manual \(2025\)](#) and [website](#) bring together the key state documents, guidance, and tools to manage special education effectively. These resources serve as a starting point for new coordinators and reliable references for staff, which include:

- **Core compliance documents** such as procedural safeguards, state rules, and required notices
- **Evaluation and eligibility tools** including forms, criteria sheets, and guidance documents
- **Service delivery resources** covering related services, transportation, discipline, and instructional support services
- **Family-facing materials** that help parents understand their rights and the special education process

As part of Tennessee's public education system, charter schools play a critical role in ensuring that students with disabilities receive a **Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)** in the **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**. Charter schools are expected to:

- **Provide equitable access and high expectations** for students with disabilities, supporting them in learning alongside their peers to the maximum extent appropriate.
- **Actively identify, locate and evaluate** children suspected of having a disability who may need special education services (Child Find).
- **Ensure timely evaluations and delivery of services** that match the student's strengths and needs.
- **Develop a strong Individual Education Program (IEP)** that outlines the student's present levels of performance, measurable annual goals, special education and related services, accommodations, and the extent of participation with nondisabled peers.
- **Build strong partnerships with families** by clearly explaining procedural safeguards, helping families and students understand their legal rights, and ensuring parents are

actively included in decisions affecting identification, evaluation, placement, and services.

- **Maintain accurate documentation and compliance systems**, ensuring timelines, records, service logs, and communication requirements are consistently met.

The sections that follow offer a starting point for understanding the core responsibilities and processes your school must have in place, but they are only the beginning. Strong special education practice requires ongoing learning, close partnership with your authorizer, and consistent attention to compliance and student needs to ensure every student is well supported.

## Child Find

Pursuant to federal regulation 34 C.F.R. § 300.111 of the IDEA and SBE Rule 0520-01-09-.06, each local education agency (LEA), and by extension, each charter school operating under an LEA authorizer, must establish and implement procedures to identify, locate, and evaluate all children aged 3-21 who are suspected of having a disability and may need special education and related services. These procedures are collectively referred to as “child find.”

- The LEA and charter school must **publish or announce notices** via media (including websites) of special education programs and child-find activities, so parents and community members are aware of the school’s obligation to screen and refer.
- Charter school must have **written referral procedures**: any child suspected of disability may be referred (in writing) to the school/principal or special education director, procedures for processing must be in place, documented, and approved by the state.
- As part of child-find, general education programs **must provide documented “pre-referral” intervention activities** (e.g., screening, high-risk reviews, interventions) before referral for special education evaluation.
- For initial evaluations, **parental consent must be obtained**, and eligibility must be determined within 60 calendar days of parental consent for the initial evaluation (unless a different timeline is mutually agreed upon).

## The Individual Education Program (IEP)

The IEP is a written plan that describes the educational program provided to an eligible student with a disability. The IEP is developed by an IEP Team which includes parents and required school staff and guides the delivery of specially designed instruction, services, and support

services to ensure the student receives a FAPE in the LRE. The IEP must be reviewed at least annually but can be reviewed more frequently if needed.

Each student's IEP must be implemented exactly as written. All supplementary aids, special education and related services, and support services must be delivered by appropriately licensed staff and documented consistently. **Failure to implement an IEP as written constitutes a compliance violation, regardless of intent, staffing challenges, or scheduling constraints.**

Special education caseloads and class sizes must be manageable enough to allow IEP services to be delivered as written. Charter schools should consider student needs, service intensity, and documentation requirements when staffing for special education. **Caseloads that exceed what staff can reasonably support increase the risk of missed services and compliance findings.**

## Timelines and Dispute Resolution

The special education process has specific timelines for every step. These timelines protect student rights and ensure schools act quickly when a need is identified. Leaders must have reliable systems to track deadlines, document actions, and communicate with families. The [Special Education Timelines document](#) lays out every required deadline and is an essential reference for anyone coordinating evaluations, eligibility, or IEP meetings.

The IDEA and its implementing regulations require states to have processes to resolve disputes between parents of students with disabilities and public education agencies, including local school districts. These processes are outlined in the [Notice of Procedural Safeguards](#) that must be provided to parents of children with disabilities.

The most commonly used dispute resolution process is an administrative complaint, which is a written complaint submitted to the department alleging that a public education agency has not followed one or more requirements of the IDEA or state special education law and requesting that the department investigate the allegations. The department has an [Administrative Complaints Manual](#) which outlines this process.

For a charter school, any dispute resolution process requested by the parent, including the administrative complaint, is legally treated as a complaint against the authorizer (the LEA or the TPCSC). **The authorizer is the responsible public agency under IDEA and must manage the full complaint and corrective action process.** The following are some important points:

- Findings are issued to the authorizer but apply directly to the charter school. The school is responsible for completing required corrective actions.

- The authorizer leads the investigation, drafts responses, communicates with families, and coordinates with the department.
- The authorizer must monitor charter special education practices, just as it does with other schools under its jurisdiction, to ensure services are delivered, timelines are met, and documentation is complete.

## English Learners (EL)

English Learners must have full access to grade-level academic instruction alongside their peers. ESL services are designed to support that access, not replace core content learning. Strong programming ensures students receive both intensive English language development instruction and high-quality instruction in all content areas.

Tennessee’s Acceleration for All (A4A) framework supports strong Tier I instruction for English Learners by aligning grade-level academic standards, the [Tennessee ELD Standards](#), and the [Instructional Practice Guide \(IPG\)](#). Together, these resources help educators identify the language demands of instruction and intentionally plan support services that allow English Learners to engage meaningfully in rigorous content.

## ESL Service Models and Programming Considerations

Tennessee allows flexibility in how schools deliver ESL services, as long as services are effective, standards-aligned, and responsive to student needs. Charter schools should select service models intentionally, based on staffing, student profiles, and scheduling structures. ESL service models include:

- Pull-out ESL instruction focused on explicit language development.
- Dedicated ESL courses for secondary students.
- Co-teaching or collaborative models, where ESL and content teachers plan together to integrate language instruction into core classes.

Regardless of the model used, strong programs share common features:

- ESL instruction is treated as core instructional time, not intervention or remediation.
- Student progress is monitored using both language proficiency data and academic indicators.

The department’s [English as a Second Language Manual](#) provides support for managing ESL programs and projects. It may also be useful to train teacher leaders and clarify best practices and policies.

## English Language Development (ELD) Standards

Tennessee’s English Language Development (ELD) Standards describe how English Learners develop the language needed to engage meaningfully in academic instruction. These standards are not a separate curriculum. They function as a framework that helps educators intentionally teach the language students need to read, write, speak, and reason in each content area.

The Tennessee ELD Standards are aligned to the state’s academic standards and emphasize how language is used in disciplines such as English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. For charter schools, effective use of the ELD Standards means:

- Planning lessons that identify the language demands of grade-level tasks.
- Explicitly teaching vocabulary, sentence structures, and discourse patterns students need to participate in instruction, and
- Using student language data to adjust instruction and support services over time.

When ELD Standards are embedded into daily instruction, English Learners are better positioned to access rigorous content while continuing to develop English proficiency. To support implementation, Tennessee has developed [ELD Standards crosswalks](#) that illustrate connections between the ELD Standards and grade-level academic standards. These crosswalks are designed to help educators identify where language development naturally aligns with content instruction.

## Students Experiencing Homelessness

The McKinney-Vento definition of the term “homeless children and youths”—

(A) means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and

(B) includes—

(i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals;

(ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for a human being;

(iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and

(iv) migratory children who qualify as homeless for this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii)<sup>3</sup>

Eligibility for McKinney-Vento services is dependent on the criteria of "fixed, adequate, and regular" being met. If the primary nighttime residence does not meet all criteria of being "fixed, adequate, and regular," then eligibility for services can be denied. However, the determination should always be made on a case-by-case basis.

Homeless children and youth must have equal access to the same free, appropriate public education (FAPE), including public preschool education, as provided to other children and youth. LEAs must review the requirements in laws, regulations, practices, or policies that may act as a barrier to the identification, enrollment, attendance, or success in school of homeless children and youth.

## Key Points

- The authorizing LEA is responsible for ensuring that the charter school follows all federal requirements governing homeless students.
- Charters must enroll students, which means allowing the student to attend classes and participate fully in school activities, *right away*, even if they lack key documents (e.g., proof of residency, immunizations, transcripts, proof of age/live birth).
- Students have the right to remain in their *school of origin*, even if their housing changes.
- Transportation must be provided if the student does not have transportation to school, and if transportation is requested, it should be set up within 1-2 days of enrollment.

The [McKinney-Vento Toolkit](#) provides more information on the federal requirements for educating students experiencing homelessness.

# Migrant Education Program

According to §§ 1115(b)(1)(A) (incorporated into the Migrant Education Program by virtue of sections 1304(c)(2) and 1309(2)) and §§ 200.81(e) and 200.103(a) of the regulations for Title I, Part C, Education of Migratory Children, under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) a child is eligible for the services provided by the MEP if the following conditions are met:

1. The child is not older than 21 years of age; and
2. The child is entitled to a free public education (through grade 12) under state law or is below the age of compulsory school attendance; and
3. The child is a migratory agricultural worker or a migratory fisher, or the child has a parent, spouse, or guardian who is a migratory agricultural worker or a migratory fisher; and
4. The child or child's parent(s) moved within the preceding 36 months in order to seek or obtain qualifying work, or to accompany or join the migratory agricultural worker or migratory fisher identified in condition 3, above, in order to seek or obtain qualifying work; and
5. Regarding the move identified in condition 4, above, the child:
  - has moved from one LEA to another; or
  - in a state that is comprised of a single LEA, has moved from one administrative area to another within such LEA; or
  - resides in an LEA of more than 15,000 square miles and migrates a distance of 20 miles or more to a temporary residence.

## Key Points

- Schools do not determine students' migratory program eligibility, but they play a key role in referral and identification.
- Determining a student's migratory program eligibility is done through the state's Migrant Education Program, not the school.
- Migratory students are entitled to supplemental academic and support services
- Enroll new migratory students in school in a timely manner and ensure proper grade/course placement.

The [Title I, Part C Migrant Education FY26 Program Guide](#) provides more information on the Migrant Education Program. The department contracts with the non-profit [Arroyo Research Services \(ARS\)](#) for recruiting/advocacy and outreach activities for the migratory children and their families.

# TN Pulse

TN PULSE is the state's online platform for managing all required student learning plans. This includes Individual Learning Plans for ELs (ILPs), IEPs, 504 plans, and Individual Learning Plans for students exhibiting characteristics of dyslexia (ILP-Ds). It is the system of record that the department and authorizers use to monitor compliance, timelines, services, and documentation. Importantly, it plays a critical role in special education funding through TISA.

## Key Points

- Access to TN PULSE is provided through the authorizer, who creates the school account and staff permissions in the system.
- Charter leaders should name a TN PULSE point person who manages access, permissions, and oversees plan completion.
- Staff will need individual login credentials and basic training on the platform. Train staff early so they understand how to use the platform before deadlines hit.
- Set a simple monitoring routine (e.g., weekly or biweekly) to check for overdue plans, missing signatures, or incomplete documentation.

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