



Advisory Council for the Education of Students with Disabilities

2023-24 Annual Report

Tennessee Department of Education | October 2025

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2023-24 Advisory Council Members

Name	Area of Representation
Joey Ellis, Chair	Individuals with Disabilities
Scott Rupe, Vice-Chair	Disability Advocate
Amy Allen	Special Education Administrators
Virginia Crump	State Corrections Representative
Vacant	Private Schools
Jennifer Escue	Parents
Shannon Taylor	Parents
Chantal Hess-Taylor	Parents
Angela Jackson	State and Local Education Officials
Vacant	Organizations Providing Transitional Services
Catherine Knowles	Office of the Coordinator for Education of Homeless Children and Youth
Vacant	Higher Education Institutes Representative
Stephanie Ortego	Teachers
Darlene Walden	Parents
Vacant	Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Representative
Vacant	Representative of Charter Schools
Emily Whitson	Advocacy Groups
Martina Stump	Department of Children's Services
Jessica Peach	Parents/Teachers
Jen Aprea	Parent/Disability Advocate

*State of Tennessee
Bill Lee, Governor*

*Tennessee Department of Education
Lizzette Reynolds, Commissioner of
Education*

*Tennessee Department of Education
Kristy Brown, Chief Academic Officer*

*Tennessee Department of Education
Division of Special Education and Student Supports
Dr. Jennifer Jordan, Assistant Commissioner*

Introduction

State law requires the Advisory Council for the Education of Students with Disabilities (Council) to provide an annual report to the State Board of Education (SBE), the governor, and the state legislature. See [T.C.A. § 49-10-105\(e\)\(4\)](#). The information included in this report represents the progress made in programs for children with disabilities during the 2023-24 fiscal year. It is the council's intention to work with the Tennessee Department of Education to ensure the provision of appropriate services for children with disabilities throughout the state of Tennessee. This is accomplished through:

- reporting by the division of special populations to the council;
- the council providing feedback to the division of special populations;
- public input presented to the council; and
- experiences of council members, who represent constituents statewide.

Mission Statement

The council's mission is to influence policy that ensures student success.

Authority

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires states to establish and maintain an advisory panel to provide policy guidance on special education and related services for children with disabilities. 20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(21); 34 C.F.R. § 300.167. In Tennessee, the council is required by T.C.A. § 49-10-105 and was established in 1972. State and federal law require the council to advise and consult with the governor, the commissioner of education, the state board of education, and the director of the division of special education. The council's duties include:

- advising the Tennessee Department of Education of unmet needs in the education of students with disabilities (SWD);
- commenting publicly on any rules or regulations proposed by the state regarding the education of students with disabilities;
- advising the department in developing evaluations and reporting data to the Secretary of the United States Department of Education as required by 20 U.S.C. § 1418;
- advising the department in developing corrective actions plans to address findings identified in federal monitoring reports under IDEA;
- advising the department in developing and implementing policies relating to the coordination of services for children with disabilities; and
- advising the department in serving the needs of students with disabilities in adult prisons.

Part One

T.C.A. § 49-10-105(e)(4) states that the council shall provide an annual report to the governor, the general assembly and the state board of education that presents the council's views of the progress or lack of progress made in special education by the state, its agencies and institutions, and its school districts during the preceding year. The council's goals for the period of July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2024, are outlined in this section with a summary of the department's work related to the council goals.

Goal 1 – Promoting Inclusive Educational Services

Promote improved student learning/outcomes, including **encouraging inclusive educational services** that meet the needs of all students, regardless of their abilities, and promote a sense of belonging and mutual respect for all students while affirming each student's individuality.

Department Work Related to Goal 1

- a. The department focused on increasing the access of students with complex needs¹ to meaningful, standards-aligned instruction with the State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG), Teaching All Students (TAS). Cohort one, composed of 18 schools, completed three years of training and coaching. Cohort two, composed of 11 schools, is in the final year of training and coaching. Cohort three, composed of 8 schools with historically lower inclusion rates than the state, completed the first training week. An analysis of cohort one and two results indicates that TAS increases inclusive services and, as a result, the students' outcomes. Some highlights of this data are:
 - Nearly every student in the school is participating in at least one academic general education course, and those who are not are a rare exception but have goals to support inclusion in the future. Reasons why a student may not yet be in general education are primarily medical/health-related decisions based on medical recommendations.
 - Students traditionally served in a self-contained setting are now integrated in the school throughout all activities, including the cafeteria, pep assemblies, attending school sporting events, and clubs.
 - Increased use of peer mentors and decreased use of one-to-one paraeducators.
 - Students obtained paid work during their senior year of high school or upon graduation in inclusive work settings aligned to personal goals.
 - Students with significant cognitive disabilities are competing on their school athletic teams.
- b. A professional learning network was provided through the State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) 3.0.
- c. The Access for All Learning Network (AALN) merged with the Acceleration for All Learning Network (A4A) to better align with the department's initiatives by ensuring students with disabilities have access to high-quality instructional materials, literacy instruction, and intervention. There are 14 K-12 districts and 17 additional districts focusing on early childhood supports participating in ongoing professional learning. The K-12 work has shifted to include mathematics during the 2024 summer trainings.
- d. The development of a new Individualized Education Program (IEP) platform, TN PULSE, provided an opportunity to adjust the IEP to encourage IEP teams to fully consider inclusive education options and the least restrictive environment annually. IEPs no longer duplicate the individualized programmatic components from the previous year, requiring teams to consider the student's unique and current needs. Additionally, the services page includes all supplementary aides and services considerations, including accommodations, modifications, and assistive technology, and the Extended School Year (ESY) determination was expanded to individualize services. Simultaneously, the team embedded practices for inclusive education planning within

¹ "Students with complex needs" refers to students with cognitive disabilities and students with multiple disabilities (including cognitive) or who present as having a cognitive disability. This definition includes both students who meet eligibility requirements for the alternate assessments and those who do not.

the trainings on how to use the new TN PULSE platform. New guidance documents were also created and linked to the platform for IEP team reference.

- e. The Tennessee Technical Assistance Network (TN-TAN) has been leveraged to create resources, trainings, webinars, and tools for inclusive education from preschool through high school (age 21). These tools and resources are available online, shared monthly on the special education director calls, in the student supports newsletter, and at multiple events, meetings, and venues throughout the year. All but one school district has engaged with TN-TAN.
- f. The department restructured to align the work of student supports to include special education, English as a second language (ESL), dyslexia, 504, response-to-intervention, and other supports designed to address individualized needs. Creating a unified team ensures that students are not “falling through the cracks” of services and that the policies and practices are easily braided and blended to meet the needs of each learner.

Goal 2 – Transitioning into Independent Living

Promote expanded access and quality of services for students with disabilities to better prepare them for **transition into independent living**, meaningful work, or post-secondary education.

Department Work Related to Goal 2

- a. The department focused on transition in addition to instructional opportunity within the TAS initiative. The training includes a focus on meaningful, interest-based transition planning and intervention. The first cohort is composed of 18 high school teams representing all eight regions and both rural and urban districts. The kick-off training was highly successful, and the schools have all engaged in coaching sessions to continue the work. Cohort two is composed of 13 high school teams and began in the summer of 2023.
- b. Three Transition Academies were held in each grand division with professional learning focused on transition planning to support students with disabilities and improving post school outcomes. More than 200 attendees (i.e., special education directors, special education providers, pre-employment transition service providers) benefited from these academies.
- c. Intentional inter-agency collaboration also continued to improve postsecondary outcomes for students.
 - a. The Employment First Roundtable and TransitionTN collaborated with the department monthly.
 - b. Members of the department served on the Tennessee Rehabilitation Center Advisory Board and the Vocational Rehabilitation State Rehabilitation Council to discuss ways to transform vocational rehabilitation (VR) services for students with disabilities.
- d. Training and guidance on high-quality transition planning was developed and disseminated to Local Education Agencies (LEAs).
- e. There was increased collaboration with Career and Technical Education (CTE) to improve access for students with disabilities.

Goal 3 – Ongoing Assessments

Promote the use of **ongoing assessments and unique accommodations** that will accurately evaluate SWDs, while considering the scope of individual needs encountered.

Department Work Related to Goal 3

- a. Ten collaborative communities of practice for speech language pathologists and school psychologists were hosted to improve evaluation practices. The sessions included topics centered around dyslexia, using best practices when completing evaluations, and incorporating assistive technology within the student’s educational setting.
- b. Intensive support and on-site training were provided to ten districts who had findings of disproportionate representation.

Goal 4 – Quality and Quantity of Special Educators

Promote increased **quality and quantity of special educators, general educators, and paraprofessionals** serving eligible children and youth with disabilities.

Department Work Related to Goal 4

- a. Development of a tuition reimbursement program for school psychologists via the federally-funded Project RAISE grant. Project RAISE successfully recruited 18 candidates who will be enrolled in a state-approved program for school psychology beginning fall 2025.
- b. Tennessee established low- to no-cost teacher apprenticeship pathways, registered through the U.S. Department of Labor, to expand the educator pipeline and reduce vacancy rates. To date, 92 school districts and 16 educator preparation providers (EPPs) have been approved to participate, with more than 200 individuals earning licensure and serving as teachers of record since the inception of the program.
- c. Ten EPPs offer Special Education pathways through the apprenticeship program, including add-on endorsements and dual licensure options, increasing access to high-need areas of instruction.
- d. Special Education licensure options that are part of the Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Program (RTAP) include Pre-K–3 Integrated, Comprehensive K–12, and Interventionist tracks for grades K–8 and 6–12, helping build a stronger, more specialized workforce to support students with disabilities.

Goal 5 – Sufficient Funding for Special Education Services

Promote **sufficient funding for special education services** and encourage the equitable distribution and utilization of funds to promote best practices for students with special needs.

Department Work Related to Goal 5

- a. Through a competitive application process, the department provided districts the opportunity to attain *IDEA Partnership for Systemic Change Grants* (preschool and K-12): Awarded over \$2.8 million in grants (18 preschool and 40 K-12) for the 2023-24 school year.
- b. Resources and leverage funding were aligned to improve outcomes for students with disabilities through a coordinated and evaluated network of free, strategic support to school districts through the TN-TAN. The department also added a new component, Assistive Technology, to the network.

Goal 6 – Use and Application of State and Local Data

Promote improved **use and application of state and local data** related to special education to improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

Department Work Related to Goal 6

1. Local determinations were completed as part of the IDEA Annual Performance Report (APR) process to assess each district's implementation of IDEA requirements and the effectiveness of supports for students with disabilities. These determinations incorporated a range of data, including compliance indicators, results indicators, and required corrective actions, designed to evaluate district performance and drive continuous improvement.
2. Professional development was provided to all districts through a variety of delivery methods, including targeted sessions at the annual Federal Programs Institute, targeted webinars, and data collection and analysis resources. These supports were aligned to statewide APR priorities to help districts use their data to guide instructional decisions, address compliance issues, and improve results for students with disabilities.
3. District improvement plans were reviewed and approved to ensure that identified areas of noncompliance or

low performance were addressed through focused, evidence-based strategies. Department staff provided feedback and required revisions as needed to ensure alignment with state and federal expectations.

4. Targeted technical assistance was delivered to districts with the greatest need, based on local determination outcomes and APR indicator performance. Department staff supported districts through structured root cause analysis, strategic planning, and development of data-driven improvement plans with embedded evaluation measures.
5. Monthly Special Education Director calls served as a consistent platform to communicate data, share statewide updates and trends, and guide district leaders in interpreting and applying their local data.
6. IDEA Data Office Hours were held regularly throughout the year, offering districts direct access to data and programming specialists for clarification, troubleshooting, and individualized support in understanding and applying their data to local needs.
7. Regular, on-going, cross-divisional meetings were held to collaboratively review and analyze data collected across multiple departmental teams. These meetings created a structured forum for sharing information, identifying emerging trends, detecting potential patterns of concern at the district level, coordinating technical assistance, and monitoring activities, and aligning communication and messaging to districts. These activities enabled the department to adopt a more comprehensive and proactive approach to supporting LEAs.

Goal 7 – Enhanced Communication

Promote **enhanced communication** among the community, educators, the state education agency (SEA), and other stakeholders on special education services.

Department Work Related to Goal 7

- a. Sessions were presented at various conferences, including the Tennessee Association of Administrators in Special Education (TAASE), regional special education supervisors' conferences, Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Special Education Collaborative, and the state-wide special education supervisors' conference on a wide variety of topics related to students with disabilities.
- b. Monthly special education supervisor calls were held to communicate updates from the department related to students with disabilities and gather feedback from LEAs.
- c. Bi-monthly virtual calls were held with school psychologists to share resources and discuss evaluation questions.
- d. Monthly office hours were hosted for related service providers.
- e. Listening sessions were participated in with advocates to address concerns, obtain input and feedback on developing technical assistance opportunities for school districts, and work collaboratively to develop needed resources for families.
- f. State Interagency and Local Interagency Coordinating Council meetings were participated in.
- g. Special Education Supervisor Study Council meetings were attended (virtually) in all regions, soliciting feedback and providing information to the groups.
- h. Resources were developed, and regional special education advocacy network group meetings were hosted by the Arc TN to enhance family and community engagement.
- i. Participation with the Council for Developmental Disabilities, Employment Roundtable, Supported Decision Making Council, Pathfinder Leadership Committee, Deaf Literacy Council, Employment Roundtable, and TransitionTN continued.
- j. Members of the department served on the Tennessee Rehabilitation Center Advisory Board and the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) State Rehabilitation Council to discuss ways to transform VR services to in-school students with disabilities.

Goal 8 – Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI²)

Encourage implementation of **RTI²** to promote **positive behavior support** including planning, collaboration, and development of best practices that create a positive learning environment and successful experiences for students

with disabilities.

Department Work Related to Goal 8

- a. Through the TN-TAN network, the Tennessee Tiered Support Center (TSC) provided training at district and school levels to build capacity around the alignment of RTI²-Academics and RTI²-Behavior. This year, they have offered districts in partnership two major trainings, an overview of this alignment and tier I for RTI².
- b. Through the TN-TAN network, the TSC develops resources to support and promote a positive learning environment. This year, they created a resource pack *Responding to Challenging Behavior* that includes six implementation tools.
- c. Data-Based Decision-Making training was conducted at TAASE to encourage the analysis of all data to support students academically and behaviorally. Additionally, this training was also presented virtually and recorded to be placed on the website for access by all districts.
- d. Through the TN-TAN network, the Intensive Behavior Supports team supported 97 school districts and 639 educators through training, coaching, or consulting to address students with complex behavioral needs. Vanderbilt TRIAD offered more than 30 professional development opportunities, both virtually and in-person, including hosting six regional trainings on completing Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs) and Behavioral Intervention Plans (BIPs).
- e. Guided root cause analyses were conducted for the 16 districts identified as having significant disproportionality in the area of discipline. Technical assistance was provided regarding the manifestation determination review process as well as alternative solutions to exclusionary behavioral consequences.
- f. The restraint and isolation review processes were revised from annual to monthly reviews. The department collaborated with Vanderbilt TRIAD through TN-TAN Complex Behavior contract to provide support to districts that reported high numbers of restraint and isolation. Additionally, districts were offered training for restraint and isolation reporting practices.
- g. Four trainings were conducted with district special education faculty and administration on Special Education Behavioral Supports Act (SEBSA) and restraint and isolation reporting requirements. The department also hosted restraint and isolation training at the regional special education summits.
- h. Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) and Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP) templates were updated to better align with State Board of Education (SBE) and improve practices.

Part Two

The tables below provide a snapshot count of students with disabilities ages 3-21+ receiving services as of December 1 of each school year. This data does not contain duplications and, since used in a federal report, does not include the state-defined exceptionality categories of intellectually gifted and functionally delayed. All data reported below reflects the 2023-2024 school year.

Total by Grade	
Grade	Student Count
P3 – (Preschool)	3,284
P4 – (Preschool)	6,786
K	8,952
1	10,781
2	11,419
3	11,436
4	11,994
5	10,989
6	10,008
7	9,065
8	8,545
9	8,428
10	8,163
11	7,627
12	8,121
TOTAL	135,598

Total by Early Childhood Environment	
Early Childhood Environment	Student Count
Children attending regular early childhood program 10+ hours and receiving majority of special education services in regular early childhood program	3,847
Children attending regular early childhood program 10+ hours and receiving majority of special education services in other location	1,236

Total by Early Childhood Environment	
Children attending regular childhood program <10 hours and receiving majority of special education services in regular early childhood program	255
Children attending regular early childhood program <10 hours and receiving majority of special education services in other location	123
Children attending a special education program (not regular early childhood program), and attending a separate special education class	3,468
Children attending a special education program (not regular early childhood program), and attending a separate school	39
Children attending a special education program (not regular early childhood program), and attending a residential facility	0
Children attending neither a special education program nor special education program, and getting special education services at home	23
Children attending neither a special education program nor regular education program, and getting special education services at service provider location or other location	1,041
TOTAL STUDENTS	10,032*

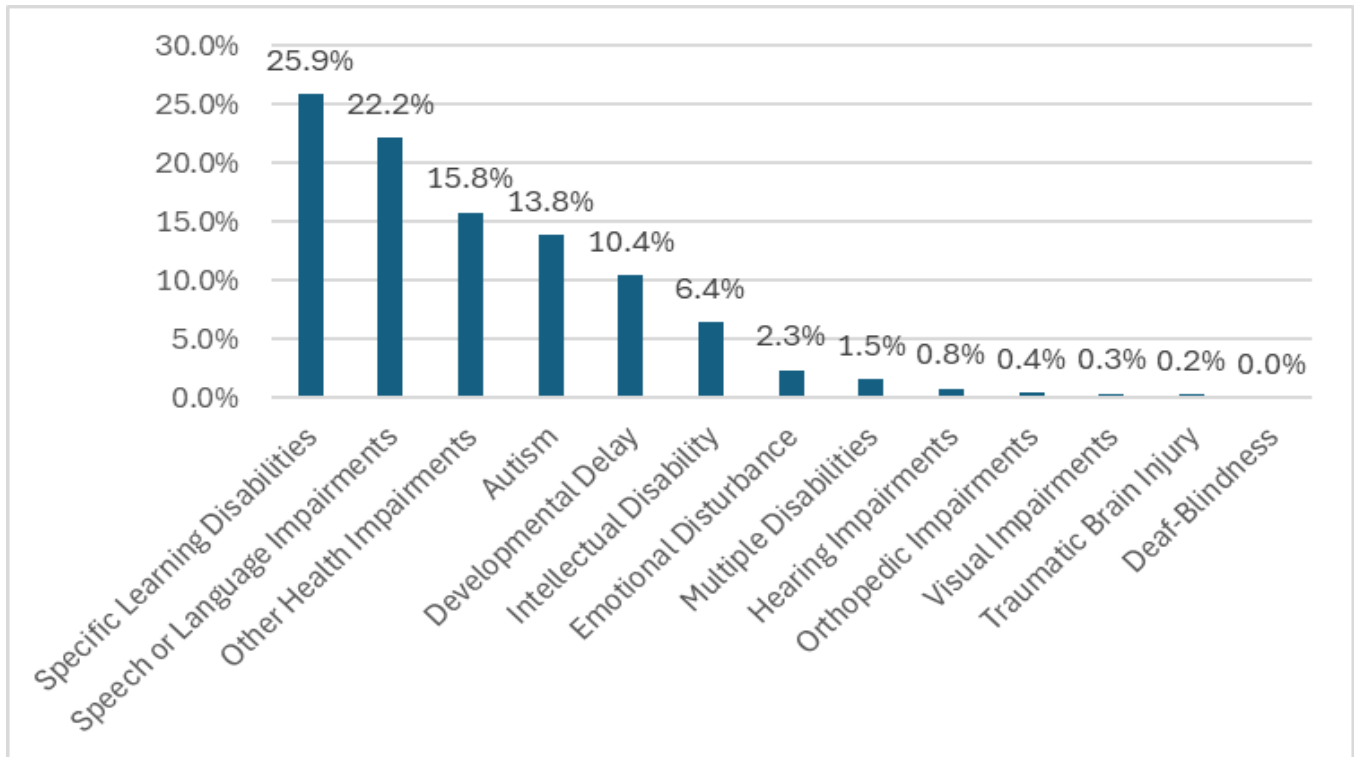
*In some cases, a student's grade may not align with their environment category due to the student's age.

Total by Gender	
Gender	Student Count
Female	46,802
Male	88,796
TOTAL	135,598

Total by K-12 Environment	
K-12 Environment	Student Count
Inside a regular classroom 80% or more each school day	94,393
Inside a regular classroom 40% - 79% of each school day	14,673
Inside a regular classroom less than 40% of each school day	13,503
Attending a separate school	706
Attending a residential facility	124
Homebound or in a hospital	694
Correctional facilities	58
Parentally placed in private school	1,415
GRAND TOTAL	125,566

Total by Disability	
Disability Category	Student Count
Autism	18,750
Deaf-Blindness	17
Developmental Delay	14,134
Emotional Disturbance	3,160
Hearing Impairments	1,036
Intellectual Disability	8,633
Multiple Disabilities	2,052
Orthopedic Impairments	487
Other Health Impairments	21,425
Specific Learning Disabilities	35,090
Speech or Language Impairments	30,065
Traumatic Brain Injury	302
Visual Impairments	447
TOTAL	135,598

Percentage of Students with Disabilities by Category



Part Three

Through engagement and advisement from the council, the department is better informed and responsive to the areas of need related to special education services for students with disabilities. The council meetings are a vital mechanism for seeking feedback and guidance from statewide constituents for the benefit of Tennessee students.

All agendas for the state fiscal year 2024 council meetings can be found on the department's [website](#). Meetings were convened on:

- July 10, 2023
- October 9, 2023
- January 8, 2024
- April 8, 2024

The department continues to value the collective voice of the council to guide our work and improve outcomes for students with disabilities through newly prioritized goals in the next year.

Conclusion

The mission of the Student with Disabilities Advisory Council is to promote the education and well-being of Tennessee's children and youth with disabilities. The council provides guidance to the Tennessee Department of Education on special educational programs and related services for children and youth in local education agencies. The 2023-24 report highlights the collaborative efforts with department and community stakeholders, showcasing recent activities, achievements, and ongoing initiatives aimed at improving resources, communication, services, and support for children and youth with disabilities.

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