

Dear Parents,

Thank you so much for taking the time to reach out with your questions and concerns. I admire your dedication to ensuring that all students get the education they need to be prepared for their chosen path in life, and that's the foundation of our work at the state level, too. Many of your questions were related to equity in schools and the TNReady assessment, and I wanted to share a bit about each of those as well as answer your specific questions.

Equity

Ensuring that every child has equitable access to an excellent education is at the heart of what we do at the state level. We believe that education is the greatest equalizer we have and that our purpose is to equip every student with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in school and college, pursue a fulfilling career, and become informed, active, and productive citizens. To make sure that each student in Tennessee has equal access to an excellent education, we think carefully about how we can equitably serve every one of our students.

One of the ways we work for equitable access to education is how we provide resources to schools and students, and you asked a couple of key questions about equitable funding. First, our state's funding formula, also known as the BEP formula, is specifically designed to allocate state education funds where students need them most, especially for our historically underserved populations, such as students of color, students who are economically disadvantaged, our English learners, and students with disabilities. Disparities indisputably exist in how schools are equipped with resources such as technology, books, and instructional materials, and this is largely due to the nature of additionally funding local schools with local tax dollars.

Second, state funds for education are dispersed to districts, with some guardrails on how those funds are to be spent. For a more detailed look at how funds are spent in districts and in schools, parents should look locally at district and school budgets and expenditures.

Assessment

We believe that assessment is one of the key tools we have to work toward an equitable education. Born out of civil rights legislation, statewide assessments give us a common measuring stick so that we can see how each student in Tennessee is learning and growing, regardless of where they live or how they learn, and put supports in place to help those who need it.

Best,
Candice McQueen
Commissioner of Education

Questions We've Heard from Parents:

1. Why do students need to take TNReady and ACT?

Students are required by federal and state law to take an annual assessment, and they are required by state law to take the ACT during their junior year of high school. There are a couple of key ways in which these assessments differ, though they both are important.

Alignment: Our standards are specific to Tennessee, and only TNReady is aligned closely to those standards. ACT and ACT Aspire are not. Though the two tests measure similar constructs, they do not completely overlap in design or function; if students took a national test that is not aligned with our standards they could be tested on material they were not supposed to learn. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education has raised concerns when other states, like Alabama, moved to ACT Aspire, saying it did not appear to align with their standards. Organizations like Achieve have raised similar concerns for both the ACT and SAT.

Purpose: TNReady and ACT serve different purposes. TNReady measures content a student learned during one specific school year, so we can get an apples-to-apples picture across the state of how all students in each grade level are performing. ACT includes content learned throughout a student's entire school career – K to 12th grades - and is a common national assessment that is important in measuring students' college readiness, regardless of the state in which they plan to attend. However, it is not fully aligned with our state standards in terms of either breadth or depth, and therefore cannot be taken instead of TNReady.

The tables on the next page explain what each of these tests measure and why each is important.

TNReady Subject Tests	What TNReady Measures	Why it's Important
ELA Four subparts, including writing, multiple item types	Grade-level state academic standards in reading comprehension, writing, vocabulary, and language conventions	Assessing literacy provides educators a view of student progress toward 21 st century communication skills. Two-thirds of salaried positions require extensive writing (<i>report of the National Commission on Writing</i>), so this skill should be assessed annually.
Math Three subparts, calculator and non-calculator	Grade-specific math expectations, including application of formulas and multi-step problems	Assessing grade-specific mathematics standards each year provides educators valuable information on students' progress in problem solving application and procedural fluency.
Science One to two subparts, based on grade	Grade-specific scientific content knowledge, as well as embedded engineering and technology skills	Information on specific content knowledge affords teachers the ability to identify and address gaps in understanding that may limit student success in STEM-related occupational fields.
Social Studies Three parts for U.S. History	Grade-specific social studies content knowledge and analytical skills	Assesses student understanding of American history and their ability to analyze interconnectivity of historical events.

ACT Subtests	What ACT Measures (not grade specific, measures K-12 standards)	Why it's Important
English 75 questions 45 minutes	Conventions of language, organization of ideas, and word choice and sentence elements	Recognizing and using standard English is key to effective communication
Reading 40 questions 35 minutes	Use and comprehension of complex text	Reading comprehension is a required skill for all occupations, as a cornerstone of training, development and communication
Science 40 questions 35 minutes	Reasoning: Ability to find information, interpret data, and synthesize different viewpoints	Ability to quickly locate and synthesize information is typical of problem solving skills required in the workforce and postsecondary
Math 60 questions 60 minutes	Basic numerical computation and problem solving skills	Demonstrating basic numeracy skills and applying those skills in context is a typical requirement for workforce and postsecondary

2. Are some students less likely to be successful on standardized assessments?

TNReady is designed so that all students can show what they know and have learned over the course of the school year. Tennessee teachers carefully review the questions for bias and sensitivity to make sure that stimuli and test items are fair for various groups of test takers.

We have noticed some encouraging trends in our 2018 TNReady results. Students in historically underserved populations – English learners, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, and students who are Black, Hispanic, or Native American – often grew faster than their peers, and they frequently bucked the trend when overall progress was down. While there is still a need to further narrow performance gaps, the results show progress.

- Students who are Black, Hispanic, or Native American narrowed performance gaps in math across the board.
- Students with disabilities narrowed performance gaps in middle school for both math and ELA.
- Students who were recently English learners improved proficiency rates faster than all students in many areas – ranging from grades 3-5 ELA to U.S. history.
- The full English learner student group, which includes recently exited students, narrowed the gap with their non-EL peers in both math and ELA, with an across-the-board increase in the percent of EL students scoring on track and mastered.
- Students who are economically disadvantaged also narrowed performance gaps in ELA.
- Across the board in ELA, the percentage of students from these populations who were in the lowest achievement level decreased – so students are growing, even if they are not yet on track.
- Students in Priority schools – including the Achievement School District – grew faster than their non-Priority school peers nearly across the board.

TNReady is designed to measure the knowledge and skills students will need to be successful in school, college, and career. In the past, we have not done a good job of making sure that our assessments tell us a true story of what our kids know and can do. For example, in 2007, Tennessee received an “F” in truth in advertising from the U. S. Department of Commerce. At that time, our Tennessee assessment, TCAP, was telling us that our students were proficient at high levels, while the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the nation’s report card, told us a very different story of low proficiency rates. This “honesty gap,” between what our state assessment tells us about our students’ learning and what national assessments tell us, has been eliminated because of our transition to TNReady. You can read more about that [here](#). TNReady was created to be a better measure of what our students need to learn to be successful. So, while our students are still not performing at levels we would hope to see – especially our students who come from historically underserved populations – we at last know the truth about what our students can do and can begin to put supports in place to help all of them improve.

3. Why do we use online assessments when not all districts have technology and the platform has failed?

- **District technology:** We have learned that districts that have 1:1 devices had a better online testing experience, and we believe that equitable access to technology is key in making sure all students have what they need to be successful in an increasingly technology-focused world. Because of this, we have doubled the state's technology investment in the BEP over the past couple of years, and districts can spend those funds to meet their technology needs.
- **Online improvements:** We have planned key improvements for online assessment administration this school year. We are bringing in a third-party expert to analyze all of Questar's systems, and we are adjusting the pace of the online transition based on the proof points we need to see. We're also adding a large-scale online platform verification test to make sure the platform works with significant volume before both the fall and spring testing windows open. We have heard from teachers and parents across the state that we must move ahead with online testing to keep pace with the technology demands our students will face in their careers. Our students need to be technologically literate for the jobs of the future, and providing online assessments creates an environment for our students to be competitive in that technological landscape.
- **We also know that when online assessments are a reality, districts prioritize technology investments in schools.**

4. How are teachers involved in TNReady? How are they prepared to teach to the standards?

- **TNReady:** Tennessee teachers are an integral part of the entire assessment process—from item writing through standards setting. Teachers are involved in the item writing, item review, bias and sensitivity review, accessibility review, and range finding processes. Also, both educators and community members participate in the standards setting process.
 - Item writing: Tennessee educators are trained to write items that will eventually be on field tests and operational tests.
 - Item review: Tennessee educators review items for alignment to academic standards and grade level appropriateness. During these reviews Tennessee educators can accept, reject, or make suggestions for revisions to an item.
 - Bias and sensitivity review: Tennessee educators review items for bias and sensitivity issues. These educators ensure items are bias free and represent the values of Tennesseans. During these reviews Tennessee educators can accept, reject, or make suggestions for revisions to an item.
 - Accessibility review: Tennessee educators review item format to ensure the accessibility of the item for all students. This group closely reviews for accessibility for students with disabilities.
 - Range finding: Tennessee educators score a sampling of Tennessee student essays in English language arts and social studies in order to set the anchor papers that determine the cut off for each trait at each level. The anchor papers selected by Tennessee educators are in turn used to train graders and continue recalibrating graders throughout the scoring process.

- Standard setting: Tennessee stakeholders including parents, educators, and community members review actual test items and recommend the cut scores for each performance level descriptor (below, approaching, on-track, and mastery) for the assessments.
- **Standards instruction:** Of course, the work that happens every day in classrooms is at the heart of education, and we invest heavily in providing our teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to teach all students well. TNReady is an assessment that is aligned with our Tennessee state standards, and we support teachers' understanding of those standards through opportunities such as summer standards training and in-the-field guidance from our Centers of Regional Excellence (CORE) offices.

5. How is TNReady going to be improved for next year? Is there a better procedure for make-up tests?

- **TNReady improvements:** We're improving TNReady in 3 key ways:
 - Less time: We are eliminating the English III and chemistry EOC tests, pausing stand-alone field tests for the next 2 years, reducing testing time in 3rd and 4th grades, reducing the amount of time for grades 5-8 science, and making it less burdensome to administer for teachers by streamlining other components, particularly for the paper exam (one core form, test booklets, etc.).
 - Better technology: We're adjusting the pace for online phase-in, partnering with a third party to analyze Questar's systems, and scheduling a large-scale online platform verification check this fall.
 - Right vendor: A new RFP will help us identify the right vendor for delivery, scoring, and reporting in 2019-20 and beyond. We're also amending the relationship and contract with Questar to improve for 2018-19 (including adding in additional steps they must take to prove readiness, adjusting pricing, and moving key work of test design to ETS). Finally, we're improving customer service with Questar and adding a new role at the department focused on this and the development of our TNReady Ambassadors
- **Make-up tests:** All districts have the option to allow students to make up a test during a make-up day. If a student does not make up the test on a make-up day, the district should use local attendance policy to determine how this will factor into the student's grade.

6. How can parents be involved in TNReady? How can parents support their students in being prepared for TNReady?

Parents are critical in supporting their children's learning, and the best involvement comes through the support you offer to your child every day. We have a TNReady parent guide for the 2017-18 school year that you can access [here](#), and watch for updated information to come home from school with your child. Reading daily with your student, engaging in daily, positive discussions about school, ensuring that your child arrives at school well-rested and ready to learn, and being an active partner with your child's teacher are all proven to improve student success in school.

7. How are we preparing students for careers? Why aren't there more CTE options for our students?

We believe every student needs to have the knowledge and skills they need to be success in college and career. As a state, we are committed to preparing significantly more students for postsecondary completion. The Drive to 55 Alliance, which includes Tennessee Promise, is designed to increase the number of Tennesseans with a postsecondary degree or credential to 55 percent by the year 2025 so that more Tennesseans are equipped with the skills and credentials needed to be successful in our state's economy now and in the future. We're working to accomplish that goal in several key ways, including:

- The addition of a new accountability indicator, Ready Graduate, to ensure that more students are ready for college and career when they leave high school. A student is considered a Ready Graduate based on earning a 21+ on the ACT or by earning credit and/or participating in early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs), like CTE courses.
- The relaunch of Tennessee Pathways, a program designed to provide high-quality college and career advisement, rigorous early postsecondary and work-based learning opportunities in high school, and seamless alignment between K-12, postsecondary programs, and career opportunities
- The addition of 21 new industry certification options, for a new total of 46 available CTE programs of study with specific certifications and 80 industry certifications that we recognize.

There have already been promising improvements in CTE. As of 2017, about 37,000 students are concentrating in CTE – about 10,000 more and a 40 percent increase from 2015. In a similar improvement, as of two years ago, only 26 percent of CTE students concentrated in a program leading directly to a high-demand occupation in their region. Now, 76 percent of CTE programs directly align to regional labor market needs.

In your area, Shelby County Schools is prioritizing CTE efforts by increasing their investment (\$8 million proposed budget) in EPSO offering and redesigning their CTE programs. Shelby County's CTE goals for 2018-19 include increasing ACT scores of CTE concentrators, expanding EPSO opportunities in dual credit and dual enrollment, and focusing on significantly expanding student access to industry certification courses.