



# WHAT TEACHERS SAY ABOUT TVAAS

S C  R E  
State Collaborative on Reforming Education

# INTRODUCTION

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Since the early 1990s, Tennessee has used the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) as an indicator of teacher and school impact on student academic growth. In 2010, state law incorporated TVAAS into annual teacher evaluations as one of multiple measures of teacher performance. A teacher in a tested subject receives a value-added score that composes 35 percent of his or her overall evaluation, or 25 percent for teachers in non-tested subjects. These data join results from classroom observations and other student performance measures to produce a more complete view of teachers' strengths and opportunities for improvement than any one measure can offer.

A nonprofit, nonpartisan research and advocacy organization focused on improving student achievement, the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) holds a strong commitment to elevating educator voice in policy. This commitment is coupled with our belief in the strengths of a multiple-measure teacher evaluation system grounded in high-quality assessment and observation, including value-added measures of teaching. These commitments motivated our work to better understand how teachers understand and use TVAAS data to inform instruction and support students in their areas of identified need.

In the winter and spring of 2016, SCORE engaged teachers and school leaders through focus groups and a statewide survey to understand what they were saying about TVAAS. We then developed a report presenting findings and offering recommendations for our partners in Tennessee. The full report, **Making the Most of TVAAS: Meeting the Needs of Tennessee Teachers to Understand and Use Student Growth Data**, can be found on SCORE's research and policy web page. This brief is a companion to that report, serving as both an overview and guide to action.

In conversations with educators, we found that teachers use student growth data to inform instructional practice, and principals consider TVAAS data in personnel decisions. Beyond the school and classroom, TVAAS data give additional information about whether a school or district is advancing student learning to parents, policymakers, and community members. Still, we identified persistent gaps in resources, training, and communication to enable teachers to understand and use TVAAS data. Based on input from teachers and school leaders, we present recommendations to address these gaps.



## WHY FOCUS ON TVAAS?

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TVAAS data, when used alongside other evaluation tools, can help teachers provide individual supports to students in their areas of greatest need, as well as evaluate and support teachers in their own improvement and professional growth. TVAAS data also can provide school and district leaders with information on overall student academic growth, leading to conversations about teacher placement and school and district priorities. In many cases, the benefits provided by student growth data are not apparent to teachers and school leaders because they do not receive clear information on TVAAS, and they feel uncertain of how it works.

Tennessee educators report difficulty trusting TVAAS as a reliable indicator of their contributions to student growth. They also express skepticism of the value of TVAAS data to inform instructional or personnel decision-making, citing a lack of clear information, dedicated resources, and coordinated supports. Too many educators view TVAAS as an accountability mechanism only, unable to see how TVAAS data can provide a basis for conversations about professional growth. Educators desire a clear understanding of TVAAS and how it informs their evaluations and professional support.

Tennessee's challenges during the implementation of TNReady assessments have amplified concerns about how measures of student growth affect educators, schools, and districts. In addition, a culture perceived by many educators of using data primarily for evaluating performance, rather than improving professional practice, has eroded confidence in the reliability and usefulness of value-added data.

### KEY QUESTIONS GUIDING OUR WORK

To understand these issues and concerns, the following questions guided our research:

1. What resources do educators use to understand how TVAAS is calculated and how it factors into their evaluations? What are perceptions on information access and clarity, helpfulness of training, and quality of supports?
2. How do educators use TVAAS data to inform instructional practice and personnel decisions? What are perceptions and misconceptions?
3. What differences in perspective on TVAAS are associated with educator roles, years of experience with an evaluation system incorporating value-added data, geography, grades served, and school type?

These questions guided the structure and content of both the online survey and in-person focus groups and interviews. For the focus groups, we spoke with teachers and school leaders from schools in and around Chattanooga, Clarksville, Greeneville, Jackson, Knoxville, Memphis, and Nashville. For district-level perspectives, we interviewed leaders across professional learning, assessment, and data departments. We also conducted interviews with educator preparation program leaders and experts in Tennessee. In all, we spoke directly with approximately 140 educators, district leaders, and higher education representatives. We also invited a sample of over 4,000 educators—including teachers, instructional coaches, and school leaders—to respond to our online survey. Nearly 1,000 educators responded, producing a response rate of 24.3 percent, which gave us enough data to incorporate survey results into the report. After analyzing the data collected through these processes, we identified the findings detailed in the following section.

# WHAT WE FOUND

## EDUCATOR LEARNING ABOUT TVAAS

### School Leaders Receive More Information on TVAAS than Teachers, Indicating an Information Gap.

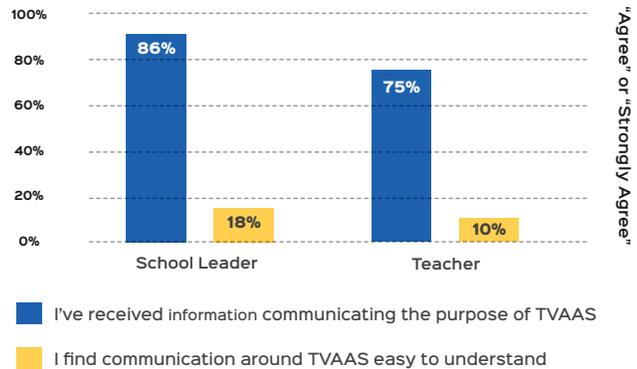
Based on statewide survey data, Figure 1 indicates the gap between the information teachers and school leaders receive versus how understandable they regard TVAAS communications.

Further, school leaders reported receiving information on TVAAS at higher rates than teachers. This finding suggests current communication efforts are not reaching or resonating with teachers. Figure 2 shows this information gap between school leaders and teachers.

### Educators Want Clear, Accessible, and Differentiated Information on TVAAS.

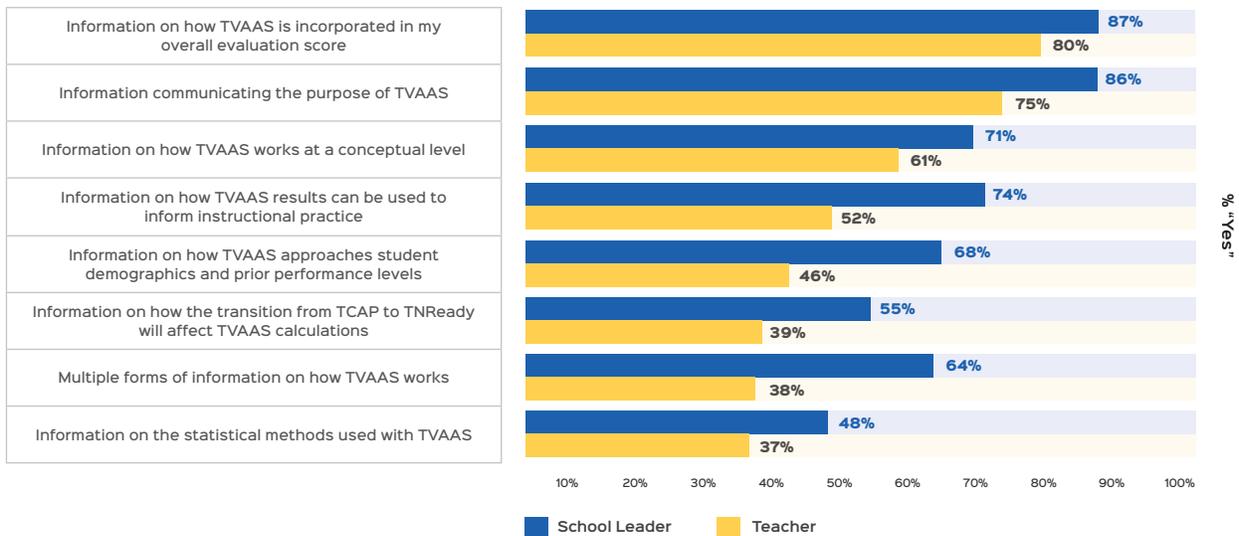
Although nearly eight in ten teachers across the state have received information on the purpose of TVAAS, only one in ten find communication about TVAAS is easy to understand. Educators expressed the need for resources that meet them at their level of knowledge about TVAAS. Focus group participants in multiple locations suggested tiered guides providing information at “beginner,” “intermediate,” and “advanced” knowledge levels of TVAAS. In addition, educators—especially school leaders—expressed preference for online videos, FAQs, and email communications about TVAAS.

**Figure 1. Information VS. Understanding**



**Figure 2. Survey Response:**

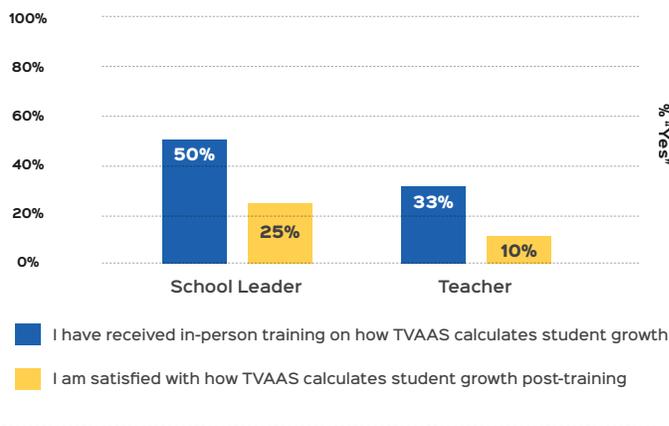
“Please indicate whether you have received the following information on TVAAS”



### The More Personalized Trainings Can Be, the Better.

Not all educators have received TVAAS training. Many who have point out that one-size-fits-all training opportunities do not meet them at their level of understanding of TVAAS. A tiered approach to training content was cited by many teachers as most effective to obtain the information needed to make sense of TVAAS data and use it constructively. Educators also cited small group trainings and one-on-one conversations, where TVAAS data can be discussed thoroughly, as helpful in understanding and using TVAAS. Figure 3 indicates teacher and school leader responses regarding in-person training on TVAAS calculation and their satisfaction level post-training.

**Figure 3. Survey Response**  
“Please indicate whether you have received the following types of training or support on TVAAS”



### EDUCATOR USE OF TVAAS DATA

#### Many Educators Use Growth Data to Inform Instruction and Personnel Decisions.

Despite incomplete understanding of TVAAS, teachers and school leaders use value-added data in significant ways. Teachers use growth data to reflect on instructional strategies with their colleagues. Principals consider teacher TVAAS data when making grade and subject assignments, reflecting on where teachers show greatest effect on student growth.

### The TVAAS Website Is Widely Used, but Educators Find It Difficult to Navigate and Understand.

The website is the key portal to access and understand TVAAS data—nearly all educators access it on an annual basis, and a significant number do so more regularly. Teachers and school leaders cited challenges navigating and understanding the purpose of reports, as well as difficulty accessing specific student data as key areas to improve user experience and application of data.



### Some Teachers and School Leaders Use TVAAS in Concerning Ways.

In some cases, we found uses of TVAAS data based on misconceptions about calculation or lack of information on how data should inform practice. For example, some educators invest disproportionate attention and instructional supports in particular students based on “predicted” growth, in the attempt to achieve the highest composite growth score possible. In another case, teachers described school leaders using student growth predictions to form high, medium, and low class-level “tracks, “ assigning the most-effective teachers to the classes with the highest perceived growth potential to facilitate higher school TVAAS scores. These findings suggest the need for clear guidelines to support educators as they think about and use TVAAS data.

## EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS OF TVAAS

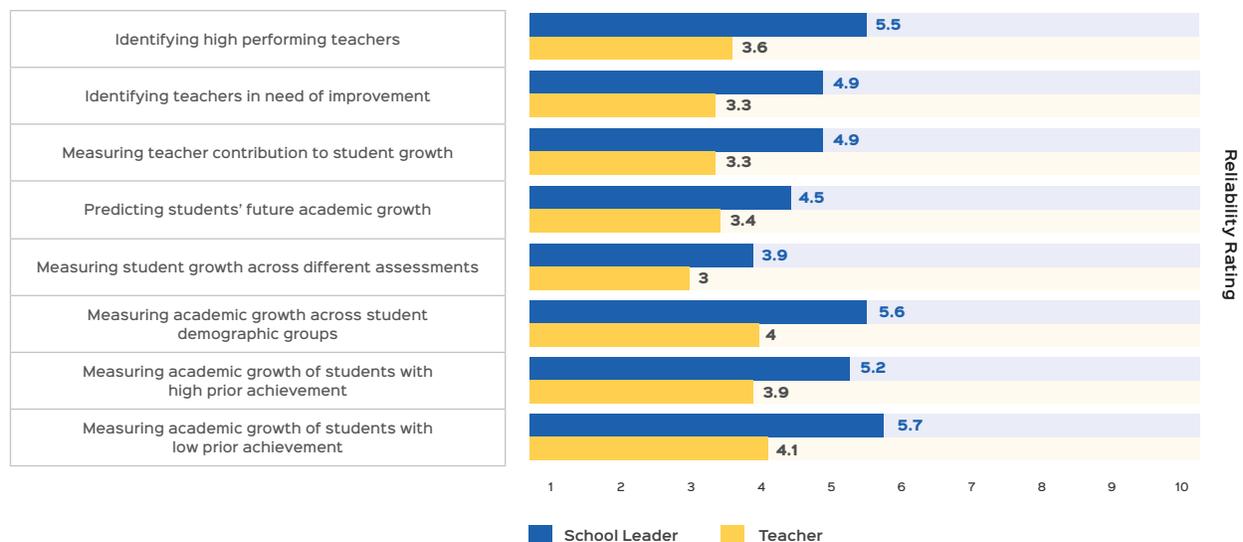
### Perceptions of TVAAS Reliability Vary Widely between Teachers and Principals.

To understand educator perceptions, we asked survey respondents to rank TVAAS reliability across several dimensions on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 indicating very unreliable and 10 indicating very reliable. As indicated in Figure 4, teachers consistently gave lower ratings than school leaders. This gap may relate to the finding that teachers receive less TVAAS-related information than school leaders, as indicated in Figure 2.

### Perceived Confidence in TVAAS Is Greater at Higher Levels of School Administration.

Considering the important role of leadership in how evaluation systems are perceived and implemented, we surveyed teachers and principals on their supervisors’ confidence in TVAAS. Our findings indicate a connection between level of trust and level of leadership; principals attributed greater confidence in TVAAS among their district leadership than teachers attributed to principals.

**Figure 4. Survey Response:**  
 “Using the scale of 1-10, please rate TVAAS reliability in the following areas”



# RECOMMENDATIONS

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Reflecting on the findings about educators' understanding, use, and perceptions of TVAAS, we offer the following recommendations for the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE), school districts, policymakers, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), SCORE, and SAS (Tennessee's data and analysis firm). The goal of these recommendations is to improve understanding and use of student growth data as a tool to inform teacher improvement and increase student learning outcomes.

## 1. DELIVER CLEAR, ACCESSIBLE, AND DIFFERENTIATED INFORMATION ON TVAAS

### TDOE should:

- Put structures in place to regularly collect educator feedback on TVAAS communication and supports.
- Develop clear, differentiated information on how TVAAS works in multiple formats. Resources should feature tiered content to reflect educators' differing knowledge levels of TVAAS.
- Incorporate TVAAS training into programs like the Integrated Leadership Courses (ILCs), where effective principals develop and deliver training to their peers.
- Highlight best uses of TVAAS data.
- Incentivize TVAAS learning and use through credentialing pathways, including micro-credentials and TEAM certification.

### In partnership with THEC, TDOE should:

- Enhance TVAAS eLearning modules and encourage their use across Tennessee educator preparation programs.

## 2. DEVELOP STATE CAPACITY TO ENHANCE TVAAS SUPPORTS AND CONNECT THESE SUPPORTS TO EDUCATOR IMPROVEMENT

### TDOE should develop internal capacity to enhance supports around TVAAS, with intentional focus on teacher improvement.

- Invest in people to focus on TVAAS communication and resources and coordinate trainings across Tennessee.
- Assign key personnel to coordinate TVAAS activity across evaluation and professional improvement teams within the TDOE.

### 3. EXPAND PORTFOLIO GROWTH MODELS SO MORE TEACHERS HAVE INDIVIDUAL GROWTH DATA

#### TDOE should:

- Continue expansion of portfolio assessment models through intentional conversation with district leaders and policymakers.
- With SCORE's support, engage districts to discuss benefits and barriers to adoption of portfolio assessment models.
- Expand portfolio assessments to other untested subjects, such as career and technical education classes.

#### Districts should:

- Consider portfolio assessment models as a supplemental tool to inform instructional improvement efforts.
- Engage teachers and school leaders around potential adoption of models.

#### Policymakers should:

- In collaboration with TDOE, develop policy pathways for district adoption of at least one portfolio assessment model for teachers in untested subjects.

### 4. EMPOWER DISTRICTS AND SCHOOL LEADERS TO DELIVER PERSONALIZED, ENGAGING TVAAS TRAINING

#### TDOE should:

- Collaborate with districts and partners to develop, field test, and deliver training modules.
- Build high-quality training modules and share these resources with districts through Centers of Regional Excellence offices and professional organization partners such as the Tennessee Organization of School Superintendents.

#### Districts should:

- Integrate TVAAS evaluation and teacher development efforts.
- Inventory current resources and people dedicated to evaluation and educator professional learning. Consider how these resources are organized and coordinate efforts.
- Explore initiatives that bridge evaluation data with teacher improvement efforts. For example, districts should expand use of the Instructional Partnership Initiative, where highly effective teachers provide coaching to teachers needing more support to improve instructional practice.

## 5. ENHANCE TVAAS WEBSITE TO IMPROVE EDUCATOR USE OF GROWTH DATA

### SAS should:

- Under the direction of TDOE and engaged educators, pursue ongoing improvement of website navigation, clarity, and support. Potential enhancements include, but are not limited to:
  - Communicating report concepts clearly.
  - Improving navigation through a menu linking reports to desired actions.
  - Increasing visual prominence and specificity of help functions.
  - Enabling “batch-printing” of student projection reports.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

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Value-added measures are an important part of instructional improvement and, subsequently, teacher evaluation. As our research highlights, there is much work to be done to better communicate and support educators in their understanding and use of student growth data in Tennessee.

Too many educators see TVAAS primarily as a punitive accountability tool that provides a basis for removing teachers from their jobs. This perception highlights the need to better integrate evaluation with professional learning and improvement efforts at the state and local levels.

SCORE is working with TDOE and other partners to discuss the findings of this report and implement key recommendations in the coming months and years. We are committed to supporting work to improve the quality of supports for educators around TVAAS.

Educators can also play key roles in the work to improve TVAAS communication and use across Tennessee. We urge educators to continue to make their voices heard at the local level and in state advisory groups to strengthen information and training development, guiding state and district support efforts. Through the collective voice of educators, value-added data can become the practical, reliable tool teachers, principals, and district leaders seek to inform continuous instructional improvement, professional learning supports, and personnel decisions. We also encourage educators to re-engage with TVAAS through the help of enhanced state supports and resources. Their input is needed to ensure teachers statewide can both understand and put to use student data in Tennessee classrooms.

SCORE undertook this project to amplify voices of educators and to help identify the kinds of training and support they need to use and understand TVAAS data. More than a measure used for educator evaluation, TVAAS is a powerful tool, when used appropriately, to inform instructional approaches that meet students' needs and advance their educational growth. Based on what we heard from teachers and school leaders across Tennessee, our state faces real challenges but has an equally real opportunity to better equip educators through direct resources, training, and ongoing support. Our state's teachers should have every available resource to promote their students' achievement, including a TVAAS system they know and have the confidence to use. That confidence can further empower teachers to meet the ultimate goal of preparing every student for success.