

# POLICY PILLARS

SUPPORTING WHAT WORKS

## Standards and Assessment: Setting High Expectations and Monitoring Progress

Tennessee's foundational commitments to raise academic standards, create and administer aligned assessments, and leverage data to support improvement have led to significant advances in student achievement.

### Understanding the Policies

**Standards:** Tennessee educators developed a common set of state academic standards that detail what each student should know and execute in each subject and grade. These standards set high expectations for Tennessee students and teachers, ensuring that students graduate high school with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education and careers.<sup>1</sup> Tennessee underwent two major overhauls of academic standards in 2009 and 2016, and Tennessee's current standards are revised, at minimum, every eight years to ensure they remain rigorous and relevant.<sup>2</sup>

**Assessment:** Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) assessments are standards-aligned exams administered annually to monitor student progress.<sup>3</sup> TCAP begins in third grade with general subject-area tests and shifts to course-specific end-of-course (EOC) exams for high school.<sup>4</sup> Administering and reporting results of this suite of assessments supports several important goals:

- Measuring student proficiency and growth toward rigorous academic standards
- Giving students and families transparent information about college and career readiness
- Informing strategies for educators to improve instruction to meet student needs

- Understanding where additional supports are needed to direct resources accordingly
- Driving decision-making to advance student-focused policies, practices, and investments

#### TCAP Assessments Provide Important Information Across Subjects and Grade Levels

Grade Level	Assessment
Grades 3-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• English language arts</li><li>• Math</li><li>• Science</li><li>• Social Studies (<i>only grades 6-8</i>)</li></ul>
Grades 9-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• English I-II</li><li>• Algebra I-II and Geometry OR Integrated Math I-III</li><li>• Biology</li><li>• U.S. History and Geography</li></ul>

**Source:** *Overview of Testing in Tennessee*. Tennessee Department of Education.

### Why Are the Policies Needed?

In 2007, Tennessee received an "F" rating from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for "Truth in Advertising About Student Proficiency."<sup>5</sup> While the state assessment suggested that 90% of its fourth-grade students were proficient in math and 88% were proficient in English language arts (ELA), the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) uncovered the stark reality.<sup>6</sup> NAEP showed that only 29% of those students were proficient in math and 27% in ELA.<sup>7</sup> Tennessee's state assessments were misleading about student performance. Tennessee was holding students to low expectations — a detriment to both the state and its students.

Tennessee boldly responded to the honesty gap with the development of new rigorous academic standards and aligned assessments. This shift marked a commitment to transparently reporting student performance and giving education leaders the information they needed to prepare students for success. That commitment to transparency through standards and assessment remains true today and is a key tenant of our state's student-centered education improvement efforts.

## What is the Impact?

Following the implementation of state academic standards and aligned assessments to hold students to high expectations, student performance improved, the state's honesty gap closed,

and Tennessee was no longer at the bottom of the pack in national comparisons.<sup>8</sup> Tennessee's academic performance notably stood out as one of the fastest growing in the nation.<sup>9</sup>

### Tennessee Made Significant Strides in Closing an Honesty Gap of Over 60 Percentage Points



#### Grade 4 reading and grade 8 math performance on Tennessee state assessment and NAEP over time

**Data Note:** TCAP data for 2009 not publicly available. NAEP is administered on a biannual basis and was not administered in 2021 due to disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Source:** NAEP and TDOE, 2024

### Fewer States Are Outperforming Tennessee on NAEP Across Subjects and Grade Levels

	2007	2022
Fourth-Grade Reading	32 states significantly outperforming TN	12 states significantly outperforming TN
Eighth-Grade Math	35 states significantly outperforming TN	19 states significantly outperforming TN

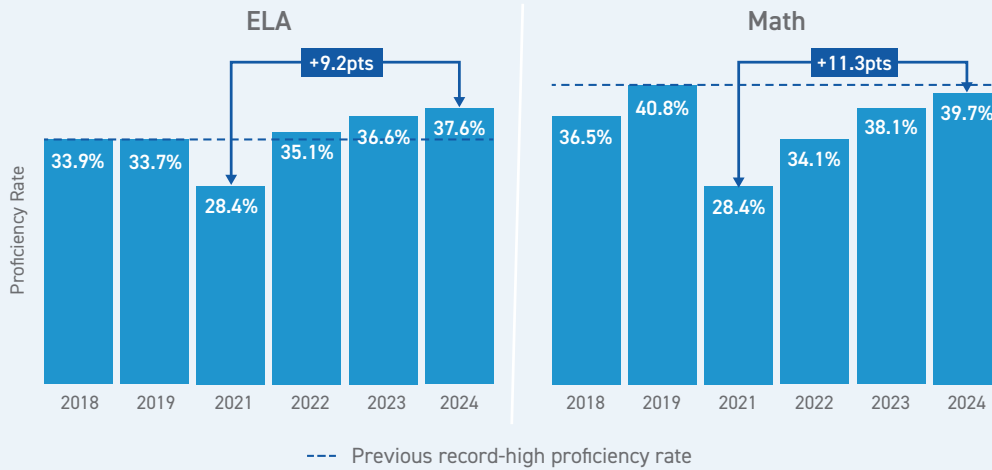
**Data Note:** States that significantly outperform Tennessee are states with average scale scores higher than Tennessee's by a statistically significant margin. Scale scores can be significantly higher, significantly lower, or not significantly different. Some apparent differences between estimates may not be statistically significant.

**Source:** NAEP Tennessee Profile, State Comparisons

Tennessee's rigorous standards and assessments also provide an essential building block for improving student success. Student achievement in Tennessee rose as educators, schools, and districts had the information they needed to improve instruction and support students, and fewer students needed remedial learning support in their first year of postsecondary education.<sup>10</sup> With the foundational policies of standards and

assessment in place, the state's resiliency stood out after the COVID-19 pandemic and research highlighted Tennessee's academic recovery as one of the most robust nationally.<sup>11</sup> State assessment results show that Tennessee now exceeds prepandemic ELA proficiency levels for students in grades 3-8, and math proficiency is just shy of the prepandemic high.

## Tennessee Has Seen Large Gains Across Subjects Since 2021, Nearly Catching up to or Surpassing Prepandemic Results



### Grades 3-8 ELA TCAP proficiency for ELA and math, 2018-2024

**Data Note:** Due to school closures and assessment waivers, data is not available for 2020.

**Source:** TDOE state-level assessment data downloads, 2024

## Looking Forward

Rigorous standards and assessments have been key contributors to improved student success, providing honest information about achievement and growth. As Tennessee continues to champion significant initiatives and investments to bolster student outcomes, foundational policies that monitor performance and guide improvement strategies are more important than ever. **Tennessee should maintain high expectations through rigorous academic standards and aligned assessments that reflect student preparation for school, careers, and life. Moving forward, the state should also commit to better connecting education and work data and making data insights about long-term student success more accessible and actionable for all Tennesseans.**

<sup>1</sup> *Academic Standards*. Tennessee Department of Education.

<sup>2</sup> Potts, Kim and Katie Cour. *On the Horizon: More Rigorous Standards and New Graduation Requirements*. Office of Research and Education Accountability, Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury. (September 2009); Balakit, Melanie. "Tennessee phases out Common Core." *The Tennessean*. (April 2016); Tennessee Public Chapter 192, 113th General Assembly (2023).

<sup>3</sup> *Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP)*. Tennessee Department of Education.

<sup>4</sup> *Overview of Testing in Tennessee*. Tennessee Department of Education.

<sup>5</sup> *Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-State Report Card on Educational Effectiveness*. U.S. Chamber of Commerce. (February 2007).

<sup>6</sup> SCORE Report. *The State of Education in Tennessee*. Tennessee SCORE. (July 2009); Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) Results. (2007).

<sup>7</sup> *Tennessee Overview*. The Nation's Report Card.

<sup>8</sup> *Data Downloads & Requests, State Assessments*. Tennessee Department of Education; Tennessee State Comparisons. The Nation's Report Card.

<sup>9</sup> Camera, Lauren. "Tennessee Nails Student Growth." *U.S. News & World Report*. (December 2017); Reardon, Sean. "Educational Opportunity in Early and Middle Childhood: Using Full Population Administrative Data to Study Variation by Place and Age." *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*. (March 2019); Reardon, Sean. "Educational opportunity in early and middle childhood: Variation by place and age." *Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis*. (March 2018).

<sup>10</sup> *Data Downloads & Requests, State Assessments, Tennessee Department of Education; Tennessee Higher Education Commission Fact Book 2022-2023*. Tennessee Higher Education Commission. (June 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Tropp, Rachel. "New Research Shows Tennessee Students Are Recovering From Significant Pandemic Learning Loss; Progress is Uneven Across Districts." *Education Recovery Scorecard*. (January 2024).