

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to education at all levels, and the potential impact on student outcomes will be felt for months and possibly years ahead. The SCORE series of COVID-19 Impact Memos analyzes challenges, examines potential responses, and highlights student-centered solutions.

COVID-19 Impact Memo 6: K-12 Policy Changes

Spring 2020

Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak had an immediate impact on the education policy landscape in Tennessee. After Governor Lee declared a state of emergency in March, the Tennessee General Assembly quickly passed legislation to provide flexibility and stability for K-12 students, teachers, schools, and districts. With many aspects of the next academic year still unclear, the newly enacted Public Chapter 652 provides a solid foundation for the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) and the Tennessee State Board of Education (SBE) to make additional policy changes that keep students safe and maintain high expectations for their education.

COVID-19 Policy Changes

Before a two-month recess, the legislature approved a 'base budget' with substantial reductions from the governor's original proposal. Most notably, the amended budget removed funding for a statewide literacy initiative and reduced the proposed increases intended for teacher pay. With state revenues for the most recent quarter below original projections, additional reductions to the budget are possible.

The primary piece of K-12 education legislation that passed in March likely will not need any further tweaks. Public Chapter 652 had a large impact on school districts and was structured to provide comprehensive support to school districts while creating parameters for TDOE and SBE to make additional adjustments as needed.

Public Chapter 652

The law impacts preK-12 schools in regard to assessment, accountability, instructional days, funding, graduation requirements, emergency rulemaking, and, importantly, waiver authority. The legislation includes the following:¹

- No statewide assessment, including portfolio, is required for the 2019-2020 school year
- Graduation requirements, such as the civics exam and the ACT, are waived for graduating seniors
- The requirement that school districts provide 180 instructional days is waived
- State funding is dispersed to school districts as previously estimated before school closures, even though instructional time and student attendance would typically be a factor
- The SBE may adopt any rule necessary to respond to issues created by the outbreak of COVID-19

- The TDOE Commissioner, with approval of the SBE, shall waive any statute or SBE rule that hinders a school district’s ability to meet the LEA’s goals due to the outbreak of COVID-19

State Board of Education Emergency Rules

The State Board in April adjusted rules and policies in response to COVID-19 and subsequent school closures. Additional rule and policy changes include:²

- Schools may take attendance for determining access to programming, but absent students will not be considered truant
- High school credit requirements for the 2020 graduating class were reduced from a minimum of 24 credits to a minimum of 20 credits
- Final student grades cannot be lower than the grade earned as of March 20, 2020. However, students may be provided an opportunity to earn additional credit or improve their grade after that date.
- Teachers will not receive a rating for their level of overall effectiveness for the 2019-20 school year. Administrators are not required to complete any classroom observations that were not completed before school closure.
- Teacher candidates finishing their educator preparation programs who were unable to submit qualifying scores on required assessments or complete their clinical practice assignment due to school closures will be granted a temporary, one-year practitioner license (if all other requirements have been met)

Conclusion

COVID-19 has impacted every aspect of the Tennessee education system. State and district leaders, policymakers, and education stakeholders have responded quickly and thoughtfully to continue serving students. As districts work to serve the emerging needs of Tennessee students, teachers, and families, the state policy framework provides stability that protects student learning and flexibility to empower district innovation.

Endnotes

¹ [Tennessee Public Chapter Number 652](#), 2020.

² [Tennessee State Board of Education](#), 2020.

