

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 10: Assessment And Accountability

## Fall 2020

### Information About Student Learning Is More Important Than Ever

The 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years have been complicated by COVID-19, and SCORE is working with school leaders, district leaders, and classroom leaders across the state on professional supports and learning acceleration. While some education leaders are raising concerns about statewide assessments and accountability for the 2020-21 school year given this year's difficulties, others have advocated for the value of statewide summative assessment data to target the supports that are needed for students and educators. We know that the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) provides families, teachers, schools, districts, and the public with a more complete picture of student learning that informs decisions about how best to serve students. **We believe that the summative TCAP assessment is critical for understanding and responding to the COVID-19 complexities, and we support Governor Lee's decision to conduct the assessment in 2020-21.**

Tennessee has made remarkable progress in student achievement over the past decade by, among other reforms, strengthening academic standards and providing teachers with feedback about student performance. In 2010, Tennessee passed legislation to improve student achievement by raising academic expectations, using statewide assessment to measure student progress, and providing teachers with feedback about their students' learning. The results were apparent in 2013 when Tennessee became the fastest-improving state on The Nation's Report Card. In 2019, Tennessee ranked higher than ever and is at or near the national average in every grade level and content area. Tennessee's COVID-19 recovery strategy should build on what works for Tennessee students.

State and district leaders and teachers will be better equipped to respond to the education impact of COVID-19 if they have detailed, accurate information about how their students performed compared to their peers across the state. At the 2020 House Education Summer Study, we heard from district leaders about learning loss due to just the spring disruptions. District benchmarks and classroom formative checks are powerful tools for identifying and supporting students' needs. But without comparable and consistent data from a statewide assessment, parents and policymakers will not know the extent to which COVID-19 has impacted students' learning or know which schools and districts have been most affected. **COVID-19 disruptions to education make it more**

**important than ever to provide teachers with objective summative assessment data about student learning.**

We agree with federal and state executive leadership in their commitment to measure and transparently report information about student learning for the 2020-21 school year. Governor Lee made the case clearly and convincingly when he said, “We must be able to measure how our students are progressing to know where they need support and what areas to focus on, and the state remains committed to providing this critical data to educators and families.”

In this critical moment, SCORE offers three recommendations:

1. Administer end-of-year TCAP assessments in the 2020-21 academic year.
2. Transparently and publicly report student learning and all other 2020-21 measures.
3. Allow for flexibility on certain accountability measures this year to reflect the extraordinary nature of this moment.

These recommendations, detailed in the following section, are informed by conversations with educators, advocacy partners, policymakers, philanthropic leaders, and other stakeholders, who counseled us to hold steady on the things that matter deeply to advancing student success while acknowledging this unprecedented moment in education. Providing local and state leaders with a clear picture of student learning will ensure that key resources are appropriately delivered to the students who need them most. To support students and their continued learning, Tennessee educators, policymakers, families, and communities should be able to count on receiving the consistent, comparable data from the TCAP assessment.

## **SCORE's Recommendations For 2020-21 Assessment, Reporting, And Accountability**

### **1. Administer end-of-year TCAP assessments in the 2020-21 academic year.**

The summative TCAP assessment provides a big-picture, annual check on how students are progressing toward mastery of Tennessee academic standards. Teachers need this feedback on their instruction, and parents need this data to get a full picture of their child’s learning.

Additional planning and flexibility in test administration will be necessary to achieve 95 percent student participation (a federal requirement) while accommodating social distancing requirements and transitioning from remote or hybrid instruction to deliver an in-person test. The state can help districts overcome these challenges by proactively engaging with district leaders and technical experts to develop detailed logistical guidance for a wide range of scenarios. The state should:

Extend the administration window to include the final week of school calendars.<sup>1</sup> We cannot overstate how important it is to maximize instructional time for students, especially after the lost instructional time in early 2020. Because the best preparation is strong, direct instruction from a skilled teacher every day, widening the test window will benefit students and teachers.

### **2. Transparently and publicly report student learning and all other 2020-21 measures.**

The state’s reporting framework ensures transparency about the quality of educational opportunity provided to all student groups across a comprehensive set of academic and nonacademic



measures. Data gathered through statewide summative assessments provide educators, policymakers, families, and communities with valuable information about how much each student is learning. The TCAP results help teachers and parents make decisions about how to support their students to meet grade-level academic standards. Public reporting also ensures that it is transparent to the public whether state investments are targeting the schools and districts that need the most support.

**For schools and districts:**

Indicator scores for student achievement and growth provide clarity about student learning to target state investments where most needed and replicate practices from schools and districts that are serving students well. We recommend the state update the State Report Card with school and district indicator scores for 2020-21. For context, indicator scores and other information about academic performance from prior school years should be added back to the public Report Card.

Other measures, in addition to achievement and growth, indicate the extent to which all Tennessee children can access learning opportunities. The state must **ensure consistent recording and public reporting for all other indicators** that have previously been part of the State Report Card: graduation rate, chronic absenteeism, English Language Proficiency Assessments (ELPA), Ready Graduate, per-pupil spending, and postsecondary enrollment.

Improve the State Report Card by **adding metrics that set the context** for students' opportunity to learn in 2020-21 alongside student outcomes data, for example access to internet and devices, access to synchronous instruction, enrollment numbers by instructional model (e.g. in-person, remote, etc.), COVID-19 case totals for school-aged children, access to high-quality instructional materials, student engagement survey outcomes, and teacher vacancies.

**For educators:**

Teacher evaluation is a tool for reflection and feedback about individual instructional practice, but the Tennessee General Assembly should enact legislation to ensure that **data from the 2020-21 assessment only be included in an evaluation if it benefits the educator**. The state should also **expedite scoring and reporting timelines** as much as possible to ensure that individual educators have access to their students' results as soon as possible to inform 2021-22 school year planning.

**Create additional options for observation flexibility.** The state should allow district instructional leaders to adjust the number of observations, the duration of each observation, and relevant components of the rubric to ensure that feedback to teachers is tailored for in-person, hybrid, and fully virtual instruction. For example, a district could plan for evaluators to observe virtual instruction more frequently but for shorter periods of time.

**3. Allow for flexibility on certain accountability measures this year to reflect the extraordinary nature of the moment.**

We recommend that the Tennessee General Assembly take action so that no Priority List is released in 2021 and no overall school ratings in the form of letter grades are issued for 2020-21 results. There should still be a pathway for schools that have met the improvement criteria to exit the Priority List in 2021.



In order to preserve the systems-level accountability while acknowledging the challenges that teachers and leaders are experiencing during this time, the Tennessee General Assembly should pass legislation to **prohibit adverse employment decisions** related to compensation, tenure, licensure advancement, next year's observation requirement, or other employment decisions based on 2020-21 observations, student proficiency, or student growth.

To alleviate student stress, we recommend that **test scores be incorporated into a student's final grades ONLY if doing so results in a higher grade.**<sup>2</sup> This gives students an opportunity to show what they have learned and preserves district flexibility for determining what percentage the score will count for their students.

We acknowledge that there are elements of the assessment and accountability program that this memo does not address directly. For these and other considerations, the Governor and legislative leadership must work together in order to ensure a 2020-21 state assessment is implemented and to publicly report results in a manner that best supports student learning and systemwide recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

## Conclusion

Maintaining high academic expectations and collecting reliable, comparable data about student learning and success will be critical for recovering from COVID-19 setbacks and rebuilding the Tennessee economy. The information delivered by TCAP summative assessment is essential to state leaders, educators, parents, and communities working to support students and schools.

The COVID-19 pandemic has both exposed and widened the inequities in the public K-12 education system. Transparent information about student learning is critical for ensuring that the short- and long-term recovery strategy of Tennessee's education system is responsive to student needs. State and local leaders must commit now to measuring and transparently reporting information about student academic performance and learning conditions to inform longer-term recovery efforts.

**State leaders must remain committed to administering the full suite of end-of-year TCAP assessments in the 2020-21 academic year. Tennessee should publicly report school and district student performance data so educators, parents, policymakers, and communities can better understand the impact of COVID-19 on student learning and develop effective responses. The state also should make thoughtful adjustments to accountability for teachers, schools, and districts this year.**

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> If districts are able to administer assessments at the very end of the school year, then raw scores would not be available in time for student grade incorporation.

<sup>2</sup> If the test administration window is extended, as we recommend, then raw scores would not be available in time for student grade incorporation and no legislation would be required.

