

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR A PROSPEROUS TENNESSEE

Policy Priorities Summary August 2018

Tennessee's Success Depends on an Early Learning Transformation

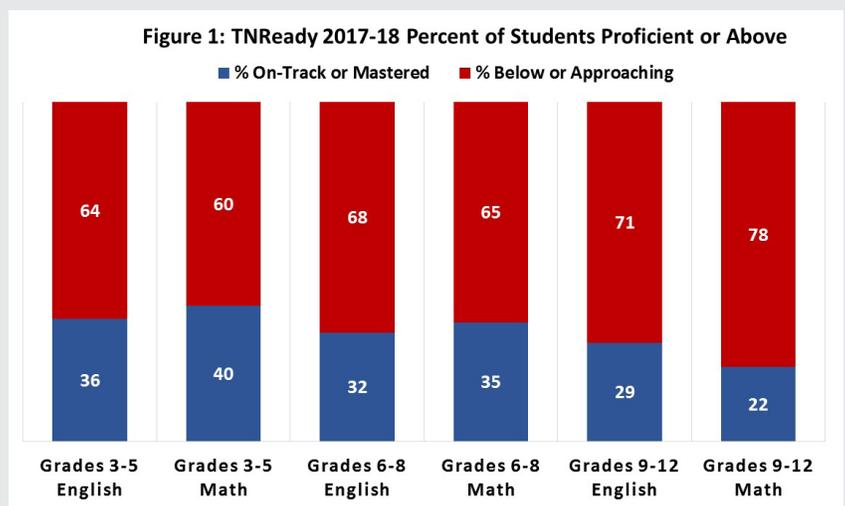
In the last decade, Tennessee's education reforms have driven historic improvements, resulting in high academic standards, standards-aligned assessments of student progress, and accelerated growth in statewide academic achievement for students in grades 3 through 12.^{1,2,3}

But despite the improvements, student proficiency still falls far short of Tennessee's goals.^{3,4}

TNReady, Tennessee's standards-aligned end-of-year assessments, reveal that the majority of Tennessee's students, in all tested grades 3-12, are not proficient in reading and math.⁵ See *Figure 1*.

The Nation's Report Card (NAEP) tells a similar story. Despite Tennessee being the fastest improving state in the country, low proficiency rates still place it behind the nation as a whole.³ See *Figure 2 on next page*.

Especially striking is that by 3rd and 4th grades Tennessee's students are already significantly behind, with nearly two-thirds not proficient in English and math.⁵



It's widely acknowledged that 3rd grade is a critical K-12 benchmark. If a student is not proficient by third grade, they are four times more likely to drop out of high school and 60% less likely to pursue a post-secondary degree.^{6,7} As Tennessee data demonstrates, once students fall behind in third grade, they tend to stay behind, or fall further, in subsequent years.⁵

Low proficiency in third grade is a clear indication that the quality of children's learning experiences leading up to 3rd grade requires significant improvements.

Learning begins well before third grade.

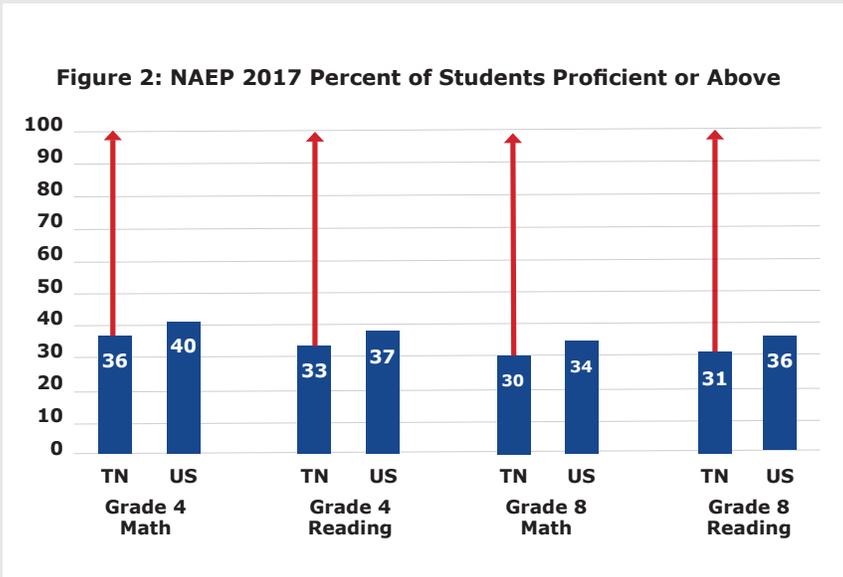
The brain develops more in the first five years than at any other time during a person's life.⁸

Deficits in early literacy and math skills begin as early as 9 months and widen from there along family income lines.⁸

Research has clearly demonstrated that early literacy and math skills, as well as early social and work-related skills, at kindergarten entry, are strong predictors of future academic success.⁹

K-12 educational achievement and post-secondary success require a strong early learning foundation, from birth through third grade.

With the policy priorities outlined below, TQEE offers a blueprint for the most effective and direct route to transform early learning to ensure Tennessee's youngest students achieve accelerated and sustained academic success.



Engaged and Empowered Parents

Parents are children’s first and most influential teachers. Beginning at birth, parents support their children’s learning through frequent conversations, asking and answering children’s questions, reading with children, singing songs, and participating in shared experiences. Research from the fields of neuroscience, molecular biology, education, economics, and human development point to the critical importance of these early child-adult interactions as a primary vehicle for children’s brain development.¹⁰ **Positive, nurturing relationships with parents and primary caregivers protect and expand children’s brain development, improving their self-confidence, motivation to learn and ability to control impulses, helping them to realize their academic potential.**⁸

As young children enter care outside the home, and then progress to pre-school and school age, positive parent communication with the child care providers and teacher further accelerates early childhood learning. Research is clear that early education settings such as childcare and elementary schools that facilitate strong parent-teacher partnerships enhance children’s academic learning and healthy growth and development, helping set children on a course to realize their academic potential.^{15,16,17}

Conversely, frequent and reoccurring negative stress diminishes young children’s brain development.⁸ In Tennessee, 35% of children live at or near poverty and 25% have experienced two or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) – such as domestic violence, neglect, and exposure to substance abuse.^{11,12} Poverty and ACEs create conditions that can disrupt parents’ abilities to support their child’s healthy growth and learning. Left unaddressed, these conditions diminish young children’s brain development and acquisition of critical foundational skills and knowledge.⁸ **To overcome negative conditions, parents and children need resources such as mental health and health care, coaching and support to optimize parent-child interactions, and high quality learning opportunities anchored in strong partnerships with teachers and caregivers.**¹³

The good news is, already in Tennessee there are proven models for mitigating the negative impact of disadvantaged conditions, and for promoting positive parent-teacher partnerships. These models are effectively supporting parents’ role in their children’s early learning and consequently merit attention and expansion.

With these considerations in mind, TQEE recommends three policy priorities:

- ★ Expand evidenced-based home visiting programs to provide early parenting support for families in need;
- ★ Encourage parent-teacher partnerships in childcare and elementary schools to boost children’s early learning and academic success; and
- ★ Expand birth to third grade school-community partnerships that connect families in need to critical resources and services.



High Quality, Affordable Child Care

Child care quality, affordability, and accessibility have a major impact on family stability, workforce productivity and economic prosperity across Tennessee. With nearly 300,000 children under age six in Tennessee having all available parents in the workforce, the vast majority of our state's infants, toddlers and preschoolers are spending significant time in paid childcare.¹⁸ **For working parents, affordable child care enables them to be productive at work and maintain family economic stability. For children, depending on program quality, child care can either advance or impede early learning and, in turn, future education and workforce success.**

The opportunity at hand, then, is to ensure child care settings are of sufficiently high quality to promote meaningful early learning. For children from disadvantaged families who start falling behind their more advantaged peers as early as 9 months of age, high quality child care can be an early education game changer. Regrettably, Tennessee's current child care policies and public investment do not support the program quality needed to maximize young children's learning, making it extremely challenging for families to access the affordable, high-quality care their children need, and for providers— particularly those in low-income neighborhoods— to stay in business.^{19,20}

Child care quality is currently measured by Tennessee's Child Care Report Card Program and voluntary Star-Quality rating system. While the current rating systems do evaluate childcare teachers' job qualifications and required hours for professional development, neither system includes ambitious standards and resources for the continuous improvement of teaching and learning.²¹ The quality and availability of professional development options for child care staff vary widely, and teacher salaries are not competitive to recruit and retain excellent staff.²²



The good news is, there are unused and underutilized resources available, and demonstrated public returns on investment as high as \$16 for every \$1 spent on quality early care and education. Today Tennessee is spending roughly \$110 million, mostly federal dollars, annually to distribute childcare "vouchers" to a portion of income-eligible parents who may spend it with whatever childcare provider they wish, irrespective of quality or licensure.²³ In part due to the federal government's recent doubling of childcare (CCDBG) funds in March 2018, there are significantly more funds available which could be deployed to help providers improve quality and to make childcare affordable for more disadvantaged families.²⁴

TQEE recommends a full examination and restructuring of Tennessee's child care system to provide more high quality, affordable and accessible options for Tennessee's working families.

Key considerations include:

- ★ Establishing high standards for quality teaching and learning, with a focus on learning outcomes;
- ★ Improving strategies for training/education, recruitment, retention and professional development of high quality teachers;
- ★ Adjusting state reimbursement rates so they adequately cover the costs of quality; and
- ★ Maximizing state and federal childcare funding streams so more low-income working families can send their children to high quality childcare.

Excellent Early Grades Teaching

A 2015 Vanderbilt University study found that disadvantaged children who attended Tennessee’s Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) were significantly better prepared for kindergarten than those who did not attend. However, that study, as well as research conducted by Tennessee Department of Education, found wide variation in the quality of Pre-K– 3rd grade classrooms across the state. **Especially striking were the studies’ findings that K-3 classrooms failed to provide instructional quality sufficient to sustain earlier Pre-K gains.**³⁸



Together with the fact that the majority of Tennessee’s 3rd graders are not proficient in reading and math, with the most recent scores revealing declines in math and science, this combined evidence points to an urgent need to transform the quality of instruction along the full Pre-K –3rd grade early learning continuum.

Since 2015, Tennessee has prioritized early literacy through multiple statewide initiatives aimed at significantly improving third grade reading outcomes.^{25,26} **Improving early literacy instruction is a critical step in the right direction. But it is not near enough to drive significant movement in early grades academic outcomes.**

An early grades transformation starts with developmentally-appropriate teaching. In recent decades elementary schools have lost focus on teaching that is designed to meet children where they are in their natural stage of development. Instead, schools have implemented “pushed-down” curricula and instructional methods, despite years of research demonstrating the benefits of developmentally-appropriate teaching, including increased academic learning and demonstrable improvements in social skills.^{27,28,29,30,31}

Additionally, recent examination of elementary classroom instruction across the state has revealed a need for more knowledge-building in the early grades to ensure students not only read fluently by third grade, but read with advanced comprehension skills and vocabulary, reflecting sufficient conceptual knowledge about the world.²⁶ The most effective way to increase conceptual knowledge in young children is to provide children with a plethora of hands-on, inquiry-based learning experiences rooted in science, math, social studies and arts-related subject matter.³²

Of particular importance in the early grades is time spent on math instruction. Children’s early math exposure and knowledge are associated with long-term academic achievement in all areas, not just math. Thus, the more time children get to spend in activities designed to help them grasp mathematical concepts while they are in the early grades, the better prepared they will be for academic success in third grade and beyond.^{33,34,35}

Further, while academic skills are essential, equally important is the development of work-related or “soft” skills. These skills are not currently prioritized in the state’s K-12 education improvement efforts, despite years of research demonstrating that children with skills such as the ability to cooperate, resolve conflicts, persevere on complex tasks, and communicate effectively are more likely to achieve academically and attain well-paying jobs later in life.^{36,37}

Given that 35% of Tennessee’s school-age children live in poverty or near poverty, it is crucial to ensure early grades instruction propels disadvantaged children’s academic growth and achievement, while simultaneously and continuously challenging and engaging all students, irrespective of their starting points.¹¹



To accelerate student outcomes in 3rd grade and beyond, Tennessee needs an early grades transformation anchored in four key pillars of high quality instruction: developmentally-appropriate instruction; knowledge-building curricula; social and work-related skill-building; and high expectations with academic challenge for all students delivered through high-quality, differentiated teaching.

TQEE offers six policy priorities to accomplish this transformation:

1. Improve and expand quality pre-k to propel disadvantaged students' growth and achievement;
2. Expand the use of knowledge-rich, developmentally-appropriate and inquiry-based curriculum in the early grades – across content areas;
3. Strengthen early grades teacher preparation and training;
4. Prioritize recruitment and retention of highly effective teachers in the early grades;
5. Provide comprehensive professional development for early grades teachers focused on the four pillars of high-quality early grades instruction; and
6. Build elementary school principals' knowledge of high quality early grades instruction.

Strengthen Accountability and Continuous Improvement in Early Education

In early education, continuous improvement systems collect, coordinate, and govern the use of data to inform improvements to early childhood programs and services and to provide visibility into their effectiveness.³⁹ Unfortunately, Tennessee has limited statewide data on the quality of children's early learning experiences and learning outcomes from birth to third grade, leaving Tennessee with a blind spot on how to improve early learning. This means that parents, policy makers and other stakeholders don't have adequate information to direct resources at appropriate solutions for quality improvement or to effectively hold early education systems – from childcare to elementary schools --accountable for high quality and good outcomes.

The good news is, Tennessee is not starting from scratch to establish high quality early learning data systems. Early childhood programs collect and use outcomes data specific to their program to drive improvements, and the department of education recently implemented new methods of data collection in the early grades to monitor the growth and progress of young children in school, pre-k through third grade.^{40,41,42,43,44} As well, the state collects annual data to map resource allocation across departments that serve children.⁴⁵

These points of progress should be leveraged to build and strengthen statewide accountability and continuous improvement systems in early education so that programs and services for disadvantaged children reach the children and families who need them most; and so programs and public elementary schools offer the highest quality learning experiences for young children, propelling them to greater and longer-lasting academic gains.

To ensure Tennessee is getting value from its early education investments and is directing resources to effective solutions, TQEE recommends three priorities for action:

1. Establish a birth to age 5 coordinated early learning data system to maximize the reach and effectiveness of early education programs and services;
2. Develop a streamlined system for monitoring, measuring and improving instructional effectiveness and learning outcomes, Pre-K through 3rd grade; and
3. Ensure early grades teachers have extensive training and support to know how to use early grades data, such as data provided by the new student growth portfolio model, to improve instruction.



Endnotes

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