

# Frequently Asked Questions about Changes to Tennessee's Accountability System

December 2025



## Why does accountability matter?

Accountability systems are a set of policies and practices a state uses to identify how schools are performing and where schools need to improve the performance of all students and individual student groups. An important function of accountability systems is identifying the lowest-performing schools and targeting additional resources and support to address the needs of students in these schools. Identified schools must engage in school improvement activities, typically with limited support via federal or state funding. Schools whose performance does not meaningfully improve over time may be subject to additional interventions including state takeover or closure.

Accountability systems also increase transparency for families and communities through data and tools like state school report cards that publicly report progress on accountability measures for all students and student groups including English learners, students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and students with disabilities.

## Why are we talking about accountability?

The Trump administration has encouraged states to seek waivers to their Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plans, which could include adjustments to accountability systems; [Indiana](#) and [Kansas](#) have already publicly posted plans for ESSA waivers related to their accountability systems. The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) has also indicated an interest in leveraging this moment to make similar changes switching from two, parallel accountability systems to a single system (letter grade). TDOE is currently seeking input from advocates, providing an opportunity to promote a fairer, clearer system.

## What school accountability requirements exist under ESSA?

In 2015, the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was reauthorized as ESSA. Under ESSA, states are required to create an accountability system to meaningfully distinguish between schools. Accountability requirements include:

## **Student Group Performance**

States must report on measures for all students as well as student subgroups (e.g., English learners, students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, students with disabilities, etc.).

- Tennessee reports disaggregated student group data for each indicator.
- Although not required, Tennessee also rates student subgroup performance — specifically, economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, English learners, and a combined student group of Black, Hispanic, and Native American (BHN) — across indicators within the federal accountability system (not the state accountability system) to inform school designations.

## **Academic Achievement**

States must report on results from statewide math and ELA standardized assessments in grades 3–8 and once in high school. Math and ELA are also required components of school ratings. Science only needs to be assessed and reported in grades 3–5, 6–9, and 10–12.

- Tennessee uses TCAP and high school End-of-Course exams to evaluate schools based on the higher score between proficiency and growth. Growth is assessed using annual measurable objectives (AMOs), performance targets based on prior year results that expect schools to reduce the underperforming share of students by half within eight years.
- Although not required, the absolute performance of students in science and social studies is also part of the rating for school designation through the state system.

A state must implement alternative assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities but no more than 1% of all students tested may take the alternative assessment.

- Tennessee transitioned to the Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) from the Multi-State Collaborative Alternative Assessment (MSAA) in SY 2023–2024. Similar to many other states, Tennessee submitted a [waiver](#) to exceed the one percent cap with a goal of moving towards 1% over time.

## **Student Growth or Another Academic Indicator**

- Tennessee uses Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) to measure student-level progress on TCAP. It controls for individual student results on different performance measures (i.e., achievement, post-secondary readiness, engagement, and graduation) and sets an expectation for growth based on progress at the state level.
- The state system also uses Growth25, which is the TVAAS All Subjects composite for the lowest performing 25% of students on the TCAP.

## **Graduation Rate (High Schools)**

- Tennessee's graduation rate counts students who graduate with a traditional high school diploma or alternate academic diploma within four years and one summer overall as well as a school's progress on their AMOs.
- Tennessee meets this ESSA requirement through the federal system and does not include graduation rate in the state system.

## **English Language Proficiency (ELP)**

- Tennessee transitioned its English language proficiency assessment (ELPA) system from WIDA ACCESS to ELPA21 in SY 2024–2025. English language learners with significant cognitive disabilities take ELPA21-Alt but this is not part of the accountability system.
- Tennessee meets this ESSA requirement through the federal system and does not include ELP in the state system.

## **School Quality and Student Success (SQSS)**

- This is designed to be a non-academic measure to get a more complete picture of student success. Common measures include [college and career readiness, school climate, or student or teacher engagement](#).
  - Tennessee uses chronic absenteeism for all schools and the [Ready Graduate indicator](#) in high schools.

## **School Designation**

By weighting the above indicators (e.g., student group performance, academic achievement, etc.), states evaluate the performance of schools to identify those in need of the most intensive support.

- Tennessee uses their federal system to identify school quality and target supports. Unlike the state system, the federal system looks across indicators to weigh all students (60%) and student groups (40%) to help assign final scores. The result is one of three school designations for low-performing schools—Comprehensive Support and Intervention (CSI), Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI), and Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI). Tennessee also translates these federal designations to priority school, focus school, and reward school. Notably, the reward school designation identifying the highest-performing schools is not a federal requirement.
- Tennessee’s state system is used for the state report card to communicate school quality via letter grades (A–F).

## **How can I engage to share feedback?**

It is a federal requirement for TDOE to engage stakeholders and members of the public in the process of making changes to the accountability system. Advocates can contact TDOE and engage in public comment when they invite it.

## **What is the timeline for revisions?**

During the November Federal Education Deregulation Cooperation Working Group meeting, TDOE shared that it is aiming to submit an accountability related waiver in December. Now is the time to provide feedback to inform revisions. States seeking an ESSA waiver are legally required to hold a public comment period. We are still waiting for TDOE to announce the timeline for the public comment period.

## Where can I learn more?

- What is ESSA:
  - [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#)
  - [What is the Every Student Succeeds Act? | U.S. Department of Education](#)
- [Reassessing ESSA Implementation: An Equity Analysis of School Accountability Systems — EdTrust](#)
- Accountability in Tennessee: [SCORE-School-Accountability-Memo-FINAL.pdf](#)
- ESSA Waivers: [ESEA-Waivers-101.pdf](#)
- TN's Federal Accountability: [2025–26 Accountability Protocol](#)
- TN's State Accountability: [2025–26 Accountability Protocol](#)

**Have questions?** Let us help find the answers! Email [nhunter@edtrust.org](mailto:nhunter@edtrust.org) to ask.