



Executive Summary

Education is the key to both Tennessee’s future and the future of every individual who lives in our great state. In a recent speech to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, President Barack Obama said, “We know that economic progress and educational achievement have always gone hand in hand in America...Let there be no doubt: the future belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens.” The same is true for states – the future belongs to the states that best educate their citizens. These states will be more successful recruiting businesses and will be better able to control the costs of healthcare and other social services. Citizens living in these states will have more opportunities and live healthier and more prosperous lives.

No single metric can fully describe how well a state educates its citizens. However, one can gain a sense of a state’s performance by examining a range of outcomes, including national and state standardized test scores, ACT and SAT scores, graduation rates, and a state’s level of educational attainment. When one examines these metrics, one finds there are essentially none on which Tennessee ranks above the national average. Many argue this should be expected, as southern states generally rank relatively low on educational measures. However, even among states in the Southeast, Tennessee only ranks in the middle, consistently ranking behind North Carolina, Florida, Kentucky, and Virginia. It is clear Tennessee has significant room to improve – first among states in the Southeast and then among states across the nation.


Tennessee has some great assets on which to build. First and foremost is Tennessee’s tradition of strong education leadership. In the early 1980s, then-Governor Lamar Alexander’s devotion to education earned him recognition as the state’s “education governor.” Alexander’s Better Schools Program, while creating some controversy within Tennessee, was broadly recognized as a model for the rest of the country and was at least a partial reason President George H.W. Bush appointed Alexander to be U.S. Secretary of Education in 1991. In 1992, Governor Ned McWherter’s leadership helped pass the Tennessee Education Improvement Act. The law not only established the state’s Basic Education Program, which aims to equitably distribute education

funding across the state, but also created the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS), which is still recognized today as one of the nation’s best longitudinal data systems.


Governor Bredesen has continued this tradition of strong education leadership, primarily by implementing the Tennessee Diploma Project, which raises the state’s standards and revises the state’s assessment tests to align with these standards. The Governor has also prioritized improving teacher quality, although several of his boldest efforts in this area are still in their development phase.

While many good things are happening in education across Tennessee, much work remains to be done to make Tennessee an education leader – first in the Southeast and then across the country. Specifically:

- Substantial work remains in providing districts, schools, and teachers the support they need to successfully implement the Tennessee Diploma Project. While the Tennessee Department of Education has provided teachers substantial training on the new standards, much work remains in helping superintendents and principals answer some of the legitimate questions the Diploma Project raises, especially about the role of career and technical education and how to identify, recruit, and train sufficient numbers of high-quality math and science teachers. Much more also remains to be done to educate the average Tennessean on the importance of the Diploma Project.



WHILE MANY GOOD THINGS ARE HAPPENING IN EDUCATION ACROSS TENNESSEE, MUCH WORK REMAINS TO BE DONE TO MAKE TENNESSEE AN EDUCATION LEADER—FIRST IN THE SOUTHEAST AND THEN ACROSS THE COUNTRY.



- The state lacks a comprehensive strategy for improving teacher quality. While there are some promising efforts, including the Governor’s task force on teacher effectiveness, the Tennessee Board of Regents’ Teacher Quality Initiative, and the State Board of Education’s Teacher Training Program Report Card, these efforts are piecemeal and do not represent a comprehensive strategy.
- The state has never systematically focused on creating a high-quality pipeline of superintendents and principals. Although the State Board of Education recently passed a policy that would in theory significantly improve the quality

of principal training, significant work remains in turning this policy into a reality.

- Tennessee has one of the best student data systems in the country. However, greater attention needs to be paid to ensuring policymakers, superintendents, principals, and teachers use this data to effectively design policies and improve classroom instruction.
- Tennessee could significantly expand learning opportunities for its students. Specifically, the state is still learning how to effectively deliver both online learning courses and courses that offer a seamless transition between high school and higher education. Although the state has made some initial efforts on both fronts, there is significant opportunity to grow and diversify these learning options.

Some districts are making bold efforts to improve student achievement in these and other areas. Thirty-four such “promising practices” are highlighted in this report on pages 44 through 51. Although it is too early for conclusive data to exist on many of these practices, they provide “promising” ideas from which others might learn.

This report concludes by examining how districts across the state are performing relative to one another. As one would expect, there is a strong relationship between student achievement and student demographic characteristics. However, many districts with varying student demographic characteristics are rapidly improving student achievement. This report highlights five of the highest-performing districts: Alcoa City, Clinton City, Trenton Special School District, Jefferson County, and Claiborne County. This report finds these districts (1) have targeted professional development opportunities for teachers that are embedded within schools and maintained over time (2) invest in training and developing strong school leaders (3) utilize data to improve teaching and learning and (4) provide supplemental services to support their most disadvantaged students.

As these districts illustrate, many good things are happening in education across Tennessee. However, Tennessee has a long way to go. SCORE’s final report, which will be released in late October, will provide specific recommendations for how the state can improve its K-12 education system in a strategic and comprehensive manner.



Courtesy of Teresa Suarez

Former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist visits with students after SCORE’s kick-off press conference at Fall Hamilton Elementary School in Nashville.