

## Tennessee's Academic Standards: A Brief History and the Challenges Ahead

Research over the past several years has shown that the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in today's workforce are much greater than the skills and knowledge that were needed to be successful in the workforce twenty years ago.<sup>i</sup> For example, seven of the ten fastest growing occupations in Tennessee today require some type of post-secondary degree (e.g., an Associate's degree, a Bachelor's degree, or a Master's degree).<sup>ii</sup>

The skills that students are expected to learn in school are established by a state's academic standards. Today, every state in the country is allowed to create its own academic standards outlining the knowledge a student should know at each grade-level and in each subject. Not surprisingly, there is tremendous variation in the rigor of academic standards across states – with some states having very low standards and other states having very high standards. With the knowledge an individual must possess to be successful in college or the workforce increasing, there has been a national movement over the past several years encouraging states to raise their standards and – in the past twelve months – for states to voluntarily adopt common standards that can be shared across multiple states.

Under former Governor Phil Bredesen, Tennessee moved to the forefront of the standards movement. This memo outlines the changes that have occurred in Tennessee's academic standards over the past several years as well as some of the challenges that lie ahead as Tennessee works to implement higher academic standards and produce a better educated workforce.

### Tennessee Diploma Project

The initial national push for higher academic standards began in 1996 at a summit of the National Governors Association and leading CEOs from across the country. This summit called for the United States to increase the rigor of its academic standards to ensure that America could compete in the global economy.<sup>iii</sup> Out of this summit, a bipartisan non-profit organization called Achieve was launched to help encourage states to adopt more rigorous academic standards. In 2005, Achieve launched a program called the American Diploma Project Network that encouraged states to adopt more rigorous standards, especially at the high school level.<sup>iv</sup>

In 2007, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce published a report card

outlining the rigor of each state's academic standards. Tennessee received an "F" on this report card, ranking behind every other state in the nation.<sup>v</sup> Motivated by this poor performance, Governor Bredesen announced that Tennessee would launch the Tennessee Diploma Project (TDP), the state's local version of Achieve's American Diploma Project. To build support for TDP, the Tennessee Business Roundtable hosted six roundtable discussions across the state with Governor Bredesen and business leaders to give the Governor the opportunity to hear business leaders' concerns about the quality of the state's workforce. The over 130 business leaders who attended these roundtables emphasized that companies needed employees with stronger math, science and communication skills, a stronger ability to work in teams and solve "real world" problems, and a strong work ethic.<sup>vi</sup>

Throughout the summer and fall of 2007, the Governor's office worked with the Tennessee Department of Education, the State Board of Education, and other key stakeholders to draft new, higher academic standards for the state in reading, language arts, math and science as well as new high school graduation requirements. The group ultimately developed new academic standards that required many skills be taught in earlier grades and that students learn more analytic thinking and problem-solving skills. The group also developed new high school graduation requirements that expanded the number of credits required for graduation from 20 to 22, including requiring a fourth year of math

### Fourth Grade Math Standards

OLD STANDARD <i>(Prior to 2009-10 School Year)</i>	NEW STANDARD <i>(2009-10 School Year and Beyond)</i>
Add and subtract fractions with like denominators	Add and subtract fractions with like and unlike denominators and simplify the answer
Determine the median of a data set	Given a set of data or a graph, describe the distribution of the data using median, range, or mode
Divide efficiently and accurately with single digit whole numbers	Solve problems using whole number division with one or two digit divisors

(previously only three years had been required) and a third year of lab science (previously only two years had been required). On January 25, 2008, the State Board of Education officially approved these new standards and graduation requirements.<sup>vii</sup>

However, this was only the beginning of the hard work, as the state now had to help teachers learn how to successfully teach the new standards. To that end, the Tennessee Department of Education launched a statewide effort to train teachers on the state's new standards. In the summers of both 2008 and 2009, the Department held two-day summer training institutes in five locations across the state. To provide additional support, the Department offered online training sessions for teachers who could not attend the in-person trainings, especially teachers who were working in low-performing schools. A total of 12,000 teachers attended the in-person trainings with several hundred additional teachers attending the online trainings.<sup>viii</sup> The expectation was that the teachers who participated in these trainings would go back to their school and train the rest of the state's 68,000 teachers on the new standards.

In the 2009-10 school year, teachers for the first time began teaching the state's higher academic standards to students. In addition, all students who were freshmen in the 2009-10 academic year began taking courses aligned with the state's new high school graduation requirements.

To measure whether students were learning the new standards, the state also had to change its existing statewide test, called the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP). The new, harder version of the TCAP was administered for the first time in Spring 2010, and the results of this test were released publicly in January 2011. While approximately 90% of elementary and middle school students had been "proficient" on the old test, only 51% of students were "proficient" in reading on the new test and less than 35% of students were "proficient" in math on the new test.<sup>ix</sup> Although on the surface this suggests that Tennessee students might be performing less well than in previous years, in truth it simply means that Tennessee has raised the bar for its students.

## **Common Core State Standards**

Although 34 states - including Tennessee - had raised at least a portion of their academic standards by 2009, there was still a feeling among many national education leaders that there was still too much variation between states' standards and that states could potentially develop better standards and save money by working together to develop common standards.<sup>x</sup> As a result, in 2009, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers announced they would partner together to create a set of rigorous academic standards that could be used across multiple states. They called these standards the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

Around the same time, the Obama administration announced a new federal grant competition called Race to the Top, the largest competitive discretionary grant competition ever conducted by the U.S. Department of Education. One of the key elements of the competition, which was intended to provide additional funding to states that were on the cutting edge of education reform, was that states would be viewed much more favorably in the competition if they adopted the CCSS.

In order to be as competitive as possible, Tennessee committed to adopting the CCSS as part of its Race to the Top application. In March 2010, it was announced Tennessee was one of only two winners in the first round of the Race to the Top competition, bringing over \$501 million in new federal funding to the state. In July 2010, the State Board of Education formally adopted the CCSS, requiring that these new standards be fully implemented by the 2013-14 school year.

In practice, the CCSS is not that different from the standards Tennessee adopted as part of the Tennessee Diploma Project. In fact, an analysis by the Tennessee Department of Education has shown that the Tennessee Diploma Project reading standards were 50% aligned with the CCSS reading standards and that the Tennessee Diploma Project math standards were 85% aligned with the CCSS math standard.<sup>xi</sup> As a result, Tennessee will be able to adopt the CCSS without much more additional effort than adopting only the Tennessee Diploma Project standards.

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## **In-Brief: Common Core State Standards**

***The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a state-led initiative organized by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to set clear educational expectations of what students should know in each grade-level and subject. The standards were created to ensure that every student who meets the standards graduates high school prepared for postsecondary education or the workforce. States voluntarily choose whether or not to adopt the standards. To date, over 40 states and the District of Columbia have chosen to do so. Recognizing that every state is not the same, a state can adopt the Common Core State Standards while still having 15% of its standards be unique based on the state's individual needs and history.***

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## **Common Core Assessments**

Just as the TCAP assessments had to be revised to align with the Tennessee Diploma Project's more rigorous standards, a new assessment will have to be developed to align with the CCSS. Fortunately for Tennessee, the federal government has provided funding to help develop this assessment. In September 2010, it was announced that Tennessee was one of thirteen governing members in the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), one of two consortiums of states that are being funded by the federal government to develop new assessments aligned with the CCSS.<sup>xii</sup> Over the next four years, Tennessee and other states in the PARCC consortium will work together to develop new assessments aligned with the CCSS. These new assessments will begin being piloted in 2012-13 and fully rolled out by 2014-15. These assessments will be administered online and will include not only end-of-the-year assessments but also several mid-year assessments that will allow teachers to better monitor their students' progress throughout the year and adapt their teaching methods accordingly.

## **Expected Benefits**

Tennessee will see many benefits from its adoption of the Tennessee Diploma Project, CCSS, and PARCC Assessments. First and most importantly, Tennessee students will be taught a more rigorous curriculum that will help them be better prepared to enter college or the workforce. In fact, the CCSS was specifically designed to ensure that any student who mastered the CCSS would be prepared to enter college or the workforce and compete in today's global economy. Second, participating in the CCSS will allow teachers in Tennessee to share curricular resources and professional development opportunities with teachers in other states. While there was some cross-state collaboration prior to the CCSS, the CCSS will greatly enhance collaboration as all teachers in each grade and subject-level will now be teaching a common curriculum, making it much easier to share resources across states. Third, participating in the PARCC Assessments will allow Tennessee to compare the performance of its students to the performance of students across the nation. This will be critical in helping ensure the state's students are competitive for today's global workforce.

## **Expected Challenges**

Although Tennessee will see many benefits from adopting higher academic standards, the state will also face at least four challenges in fully implementing these standards.

**Stakeholder Engagement** It will take time for Tennessee students to meet the new, higher expectations set by the Tennessee Diploma Project and the CCSS. It is critical that key stakeholders across the state be patient and supportive of our schools as they transition to these higher standards. While the public must hold schools accountable for results, everyone needs to understand that raising the bar for all students will take time and lots of hard work by students, educators, parents, and the broader community.

**Professional Development** Both principals and teachers will need significant amounts of ongoing professional development about how best to teach the new standards. For teachers, this will require both the state and districts providing ongoing, targeted grade-level and subject-specific professional development. For principals, this will require significant professional development around how to offer constructive feedback to teachers about their teaching strategies on the standards.

**Technology** As mentioned above, the PARCC Assessments will be administered online. This means that by 2014-15 every school in Tennessee must have the technology infrastructure to test students online. Both the state and districts must begin thinking about how they will ensure every school has the Internet bandwidth and computers needed to administer online assessments in 2014-15. This will likely take thoughtful budgetary planning over the next several years at both the state and district level.

**Innovation** Ensuring that every student in the state meets the higher expectations of the Tennessee Diploma Project and the CCSS will require significantly innovation. The state, districts, and individual schools will have to be very innovative in how they use resources (including teachers, in-school time, and technology) to help every Tennessee student achieve proficiency on the new standards. This may require the state giving districts more flexibility from outdated regulations as well as helping districts and schools share best practices as they find innovative ways to increase student achievement, especially for the state's most disadvantaged students.

## **Conclusion**

Over the past several years, Tennessee has significantly raised the bar for its students by implementing the Tennessee Diploma Project, adopting the Common Core State Standards, and participating in the PARCC Assessment Consortium. Over time, these higher expectations will result in more Tennessee students being prepared to compete in a global economy. However, meeting these higher expectations will not be easy. In the coming years, it will be critical that policymakers, educators, and the broader public continue to support higher academic standards and commit to providing educators with the flexibility, support, and resources they need to be successful.

<sup>i</sup>Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., Strohl, J. (2010, June). *Help Wanted: Projections of Job and Education Requirements Through 2018*. Retrieved from Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce: <http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/ExecutiveSummary-web.pdf>.

<sup>ii</sup>Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development. (2008, September). *Investing for Growth in Tennessee's Workforce to 2016*. Retrieved from U.S. Chamber of Commerce: [http://www.dleta.gov/Programs/2007/ReportsAndPlans/Economic\\_Analysis\\_Reports/TN.pdf](http://www.dleta.gov/Programs/2007/ReportsAndPlans/Economic_Analysis_Reports/TN.pdf).

<sup>iii</sup>Achieve. (2010). *Education Pipeline Data State Profile, Tennessee*. Retrieved from Achieve: <http://www.achieve.org/tennessee>.

<sup>iv</sup>Achieve. (2010). *National Education Summits*. Retrieved from Achieve: <http://www.achieve.org/Summits>.

<sup>v</sup>Achieve. (2010). *About Achieve*. Retrieved from Achieve: <http://www.achieve.org/files/AboutAchieve.pdf>.

<sup>vi</sup>U.S. Chamber of Commerce. (2007, February 28). *Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-State Report Card on Educational Effectiveness*. Retrieved from U.S. Chamber of Commerce: <http://www.uschamber.com/reportcard/2007>.

<sup>vii</sup>Wilson, J. P. and Cour, K. (2009, September). *On the Horizon: More Rigorous Standards and New Graduation Requirements*. Retrieved from Offices of Research and Education Accountability, Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury: <http://www.mmps.org/AssetFactory.aspx?did=39341>.

<sup>viii</sup>Tennessee Department of Education. (2010). *Tennessee Diploma Project: Graduation Requirements*. Retrieved from Tennessee Department of Education: <http://www.tn.gov/education/gradreq.shtml>.

<sup>ix</sup>Tennessee Department of Education. (2010, May 29). *Tennessee Department of Education Announces New Standards Training*. Retrieved from Tennessee Department of Education Newswroom: <https://news.tennesseanetnews.org/node/2036>.

<sup>x</sup>Achieve. (2009). *Closing the Expectations Gap: Fourth Annual 50-State Progress Report on the Alignment of High School Policies with the Demands of College and Careers*. Retrieved from Achieve: <http://www.achieve.org/files/50-state-2009.pdf>.

<sup>xi</sup>Interview with Tennessee Department of Education official (2010, December 29).

<sup>xii</sup>Achieve. (2010). *Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers*. Retrieved from Achieve/PARCC: <http://www.achieve.org/PARCC>.

*The State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that works with state and local governments to encourage sound policy decisions in public education and advance innovative reforms on a statewide basis. SCORE is chaired by former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist.*