

# Tennessee Educator Survey Report

Division of Data & Research | 2015





# Acknowledgments

Many individuals contributed to the Tennessee Educator Survey.

Thank you to Dale Ballou, Susan Burns, and Matthew Pepper from Vanderbilt's Tennessee Consortium on Research, Evaluation, and Development who directed 2015 survey implementation and design.

This report was written by members of the Tennessee Department of Education's Office of Research and Policy: Jonathon Attridge, Laura Booker, and Nate Schwartz. The report was designed by the department's communications team.

We especially want to express our appreciation to the more than 36,000 teachers and 2,000 administrators and school personnel who took time to share their voices from the classroom.



# View from the Classroom

02 | **About the Survey**

03 | **Introduction**

04 | **Highlights**

05 | **Areas for Improvement**

06-11 | **Teacher Opinions**

06-07 | Job Satisfaction

08-09 | Evaluation &  
Professional Learning

10-11 | Student Testing

12-16 | **What Now?**

# About the Survey

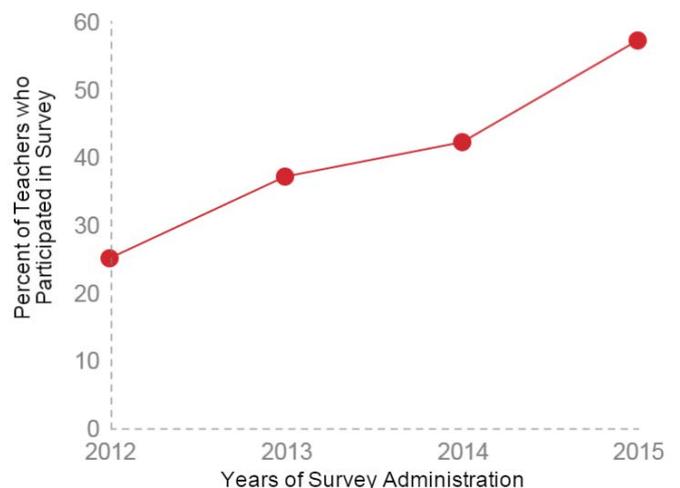
For the last three years, the department has collaborated with Vanderbilt University's Tennessee Consortium on Research, Evaluation and Development (TNCRED) to deliver a survey to all educators in the state with a valid email address in the state system. This year's survey was available between April 16 and May 29, 2015. All participants received both a core survey aimed at their specific role (teacher, principal, school support staff, etc.), as well a random additional section on a specific topic such as collaboration, evaluation, or assessment.

Teacher participation in the survey was notably higher this year than ever before. Nearly 60 percent of both teachers and administrators responded, which is up from 42 percent in 2014. Even though more teachers than ever before took this year's survey, we saw similar trends between teachers that were taking the survey for the first time and those teachers that have taken the survey every year for the past three years.

Survey participation has **steadily increased** each year since the initial year of administration

**36,728**

teachers completed the survey in 2015



# Introduction

It is an important year for Tennessee students and educators. This spring, students will take TNReady, a new and improved TCAP test in math and English language arts. The test is aligned with the Tennessee state standards and is designed to measure students' comprehensive understanding of the material. Additionally, graduating seniors will be able to take advantage of the new and nationally recognized Tennessee Promise scholarship that provides two years of tuition-free attendance at any Tennessee community college or technical school.

These changes accompany several major successes. Student achievement has climbed steadily in the majority of subjects, and Tennessee's gains in 2013 on the nation's Report Card, officially called the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), identified the state as the fastest improving in the nation. This growth has taken place without sacrificing student engagement; Tennessee's graduation rate has increased more than any other state's in the past decade, with 87 percent of ninth graders earning a four-year high school diploma in 2014.

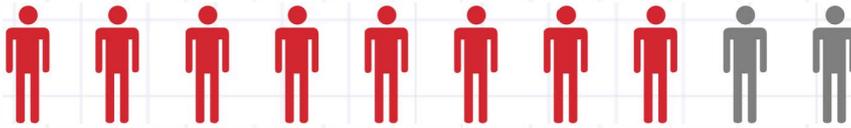
But the gains also call attention to areas we still need to improve. While the vast majority of students graduate high school, recent data shows that less than 60 percent of our students enroll in a college or technical school, and less than a third go on to earn a postsecondary degree. With the transition to new statewide tests this school year, we expect to see additional evidence of gaps in student knowledge and skills that will demand ever more responsive classroom instruction.

Meeting these needs will require the continued commitment of all our educators. The Tennessee Department of Education is dedicated to creating the conditions necessary for educator success. The department's new strategic plan elevates supporting educators as one of its five central priorities and aims to ensure strong support through every aspect of the job, including preparation, a teacher's first days in the classroom, and ongoing professional learning throughout their career.

The Tennessee Educator Survey, designed in partnership with Vanderbilt University, aims to take the pulse of teacher perceptions, monitor school climates and culture across the state, and include teachers' voices in the policy discussion. The survey offers a baseline for where we are – and where we need to go – if we are to meet our collective goals around excellence and equity, ensuring that all students find success both while attending our public schools and following high school graduation.

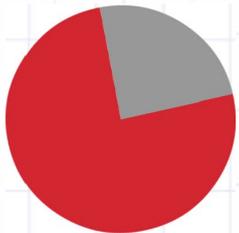
# Highlights

## Teachers feel increasingly satisfied with working conditions at their schools.



- Nearly eight out of ten teachers report that teachers in their school are satisfied, like being there, and feel recognized for their work.
- Staffing data confirms that the overwhelming majority of teachers remain in the classroom from year to year.

## More than ever before, teachers see the evaluation process as leading to improvements in teaching and learning.



- Over two-thirds of teachers say the process has improved their teaching, an increase of 14 percentage points since 2014 and of 30 percentage points since 2012.

## Teachers feel more comfortable using data from student tests to tailor their teaching to student needs.

- Nearly eighty percent of teachers say that they understand how to use standardized assessment results to improve their teaching and over half believe that these results help them to determine if their students have the skills required to meet state standards.

**80%**

# Areas for Improvement

**Many teachers feel that the supports they receive for instructional improvement are insufficient.**

➤ Fewer than four out of ten teachers say they are provided with adequate time for collaboration or access to instructional resources and expertise.



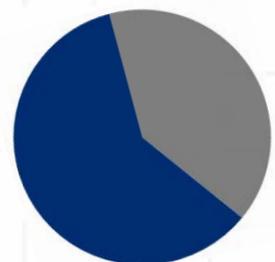
**Although most teachers find evaluation useful, they continue to find the process cumbersome.**



➤ Half of teachers rate the evaluation process as a considerable burden, and a third of teachers feel that the system is unfair.

**Teachers feel concerned about the amount of time and effort being devoted to testing and test preparation.**

➤ Sixty percent of teachers say they spend too much instructional time helping students prepare for statewide exams and seven out of ten believe that their students spend too much time taking exams.



# Teacher Opinions on Job Satisfaction

Teachers in Tennessee feel increasingly satisfied with their work. On a variety of measures, teachers report greater satisfaction in their roles than they have over the past several years. These changes represent real shifts in perceptions. Although more educators than ever before took this year's survey, teachers that have responded to the survey every year for the past three years reported similar increases in teacher satisfaction.

## School Climate

More teachers say they like being at school. Almost 80 percent of teachers agree or strongly agree that "the teachers at this school like being here," up from 67 percent in 2014. Correspondingly, the percentage of teachers who believe that the "stress and disappointments involved in teaching at this school aren't worth it" has consistently decreased from 29 percent of teachers in 2012 to 20 percent of teachers in 2015.

## Recognition & Appreciation

More teachers say they feel appreciated. Seventy-seven percent of teachers say that they "feel appreciated" for the job they are doing, a gain of five percentage points from the previous year. Equally importantly, teachers report real opportunities for growth and development in their roles. Eighty-seven percent of teachers report that teachers in their school are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles, a number that has stayed constant over the past two years.

## School-level Support

Teachers report that school leaders honor their teaching time. Eighty-four percent of teachers report that their school leaders "protect instructional time" and 76 percent say teachers in their school are "allowed to focus on educating students with minimal interruptions." Both measures increased slightly since last year. Consistent with previous years, 80 percent of teachers agree that there is an "atmosphere of trust and mutual respect" in their school. Around four-fifths of teachers feel supported by their leadership in other areas as well, with 80 percent reporting that school leadership makes an effort to address staff concerns and 81 percent saying that the staff feels comfortable raising issues with school leadership. Notably however, these last two measures each decreased since the past year, suggesting an area for improvement moving forward.

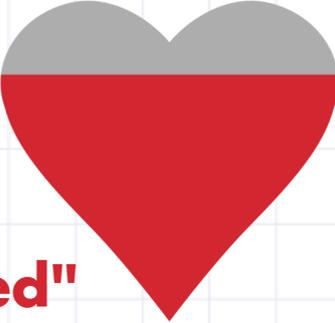
## Teacher Retention

The vast majority of Tennessee teachers stay in Tennessee year to year. Ninety-one percent of Tennessee teachers remained in the classroom from the 2013-14 to the 2014-15 school year, a figure that has not changed since 2012 when the state began consistently calculating these rates. These numbers closely mirror the latest national figure of 92 percent teacher retention (Teacher Follow-Up Survey, 2013). Notably, Tennessee teacher retention figures differ considerably by how effective a teacher is, as measured by the evaluation system. Teachers who receive ratings of 4 or 5 for their evaluation score are retained at a 94 percent level, while teachers who are rated level 1 stay at only 72 percent of the time.

# By the Numbers...

"Teachers at my school like being here"  **13% pts** since last year

Consistent with previous years, **over 25,000** teachers believe that there is an "atmosphere of trust and mutual respect" in their school.

 **5% pts** since last year **3/4**  of teachers "feel appreciated" for the job they are doing.

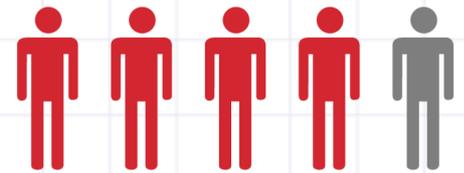
## Instructional Time

**84%** believe that school leaders protect their instructional time.

**76%** teachers can "focus on educating students with minimal interruptions."

## School Leadership

**4 of 5**



teachers feel supported by school leaders.

 **3% pts** since last year



**80%** believe school leadership makes an effort to address staff concerns.

 **5% pts** since last year



**81%** feel comfortable raising issues to school leaders.

Tennessee teachers remain in the classroom from year to year at a rate consistent with the nation.

**9 of 10**  teachers remained in the classroom from the 2013-14 school year to the 2014-15 school year.

# Teacher Opinions on Evaluation & Professional Learning

Teachers feel notably better about the evaluation process than they did when it was first introduced in 2012, with a strong majority reporting that the system improves teaching and learning across the state. Yet teachers continue to express concerns about the burden of the system and to call for greater time and resources to pursue their own instructional improvement.

## Evaluation Process

More teachers than ever before say the teacher evaluation system is improving their teaching. In 2012, only 38 percent of teachers reported that the teacher evaluation process improved teaching in their school and 28 percent reported that it improved student learning. Over the course of the past three years, those numbers have risen steadily to 68 percent of teachers in 2015 who agree that the process improves teaching and 63 percent who agree that it improves learning. As with the other changes over time described in this report, the size of the increases remains similar even when we focus only on the teachers that have consistently responded to the survey for the last three years. Respondents' perceptions of the evaluation process were strikingly positive in the 2015 survey, with 81 percent of teachers reporting that evaluation helps them identify areas where they can improve and 71 percent saying it provides them with clear expectations for their teaching.

## Burden & Fairness

While most teachers report that evaluation helps them improve practice, a considerable number remain concerned about both the amount of effort the process requires and the overall fairness of the system. On a scale of 1 to 5, 52 percent of teachers rate the burden of the system as a 4 or 5. Sixty-eight percent of teachers agree that "the processes used to conduct teacher evaluation are fair to me." Interestingly, although the process used to calculate evaluation scores differs for teachers who teach in subjects with statewide exams versus those that don't (e.g. math vs. art teachers), there is very little difference in perceptions of fairness across the two groups (69 percent for teachers in tested subjects versus 67 percent for teachers in untested subjects agreeing that the process is fair).

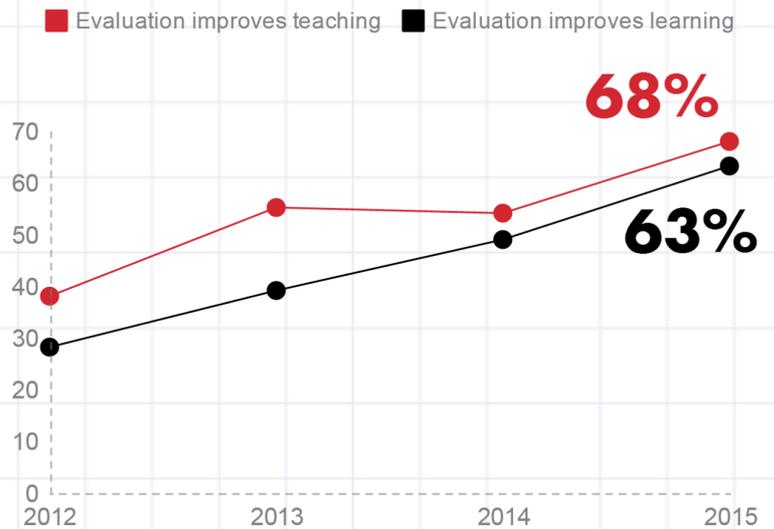
## Collaboration & Resources

Teachers want more opportunities to learn from each other. Teachers in Tennessee overwhelmingly say they work to improve their practice each year, and nearly all can point to an area of specific improvement in the past year. However, they still believe they lack some of the necessary resources to make changes. In particular, survey results call attention to the need for more job-embedded opportunities to collaborate with others in the school. After self-reflection, teachers rate collaboration with peers as the most important factor contributing to their improvement (other possible options included formal professional development and guidance from school leadership). However, only 38 percent of respondents rated the time they had for collaboration with other teachers as adequate. Similarly, only 33 percent of teachers rated as adequate their access to informational resources or staff expertise (such as instructional coaches).

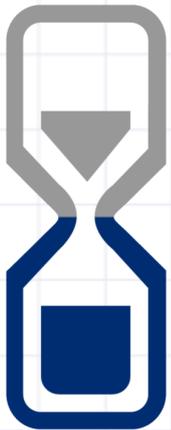
# By the Numbers...

More than ever before, teachers believe that the evaluation process is valuable.

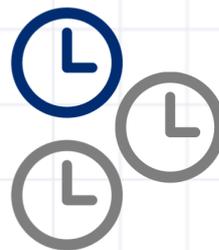
Over **2/3** believe the evaluation process helps improve teaching and learning.



Teachers want more time for collaboration and resource sharing.

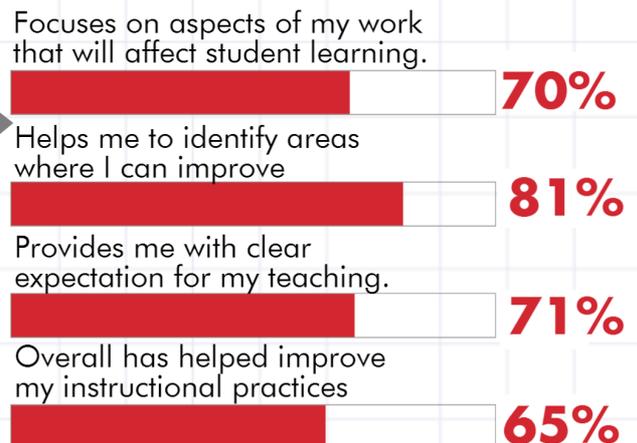


**50%** think the evaluation process is too time consuming.



Less than **2 of 5** teachers feel they have enough time to collaborate.

Overall, teacher evaluation is perceived to have a positive effect on the teaching environment.



# Teacher Opinions on Student Testing

Teachers report concern about the time that they and their students devote to standardized testing and test preparation, however, they also report more comfort in using the data from these tests to improve their teaching and measure student learning.

## Time Spent on Testing

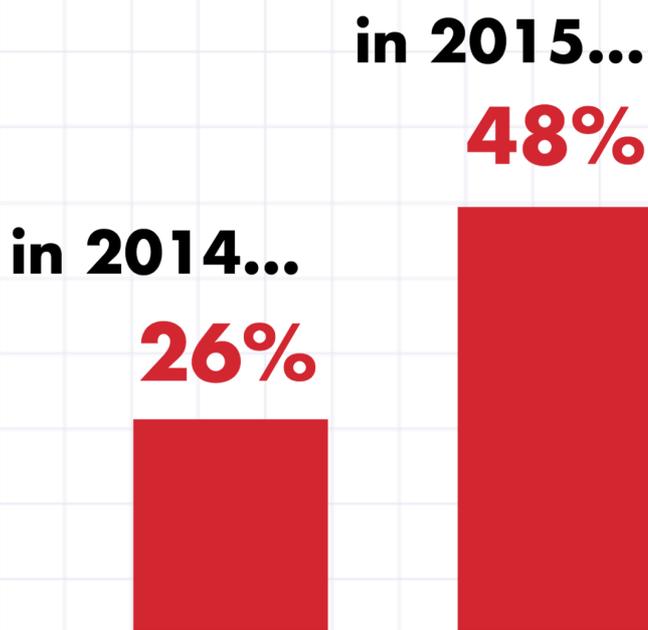
The majority of teachers say they have spent too much time on test prep. For a second consecutive year, over 60 percent of all teachers believe that they have spent too much time “helping students prepare for statewide assessments” and almost 70 percent of teachers believe “students spend too much time taking statewide standardized exams.” Among teachers who teach in classes with statewide assessments, 75 percent or three out of four teachers agree with these statements. Correspondingly, almost half of teachers say that their typical students spend more than 20 class periods “preparing for state assessments (e.g. taking practice tests, learning test-taking strategies, reviewing sample questions).”

## Utilizing Results from Student Tests

More teachers report using data from tests to help tailor their teaching. Although teachers are voicing concern about testing time, they are also reporting greater comfort with the information that comes from statewide tests. Half of teachers use the information from statewide assessments to identify areas where they need to strengthen their content knowledge or teaching skills, up from only one-quarter in 2014. Teachers are also far more likely to use the results from statewide, benchmark, and teacher-generated tests to discuss teaching and learning with their peers. Over half of teachers of teachers report using statewide exams for this purpose, up from 26 percent in 2014, and 63 percent report this kind of collaboration around their own tests, up from 54 percent in 2014. So, while teachers still seek more time to collaborate with peers, teachers are reporting that test results are providing a useful tool for teachers to learn from one another.

# By the Numbers...

Nearly twice the number of teachers since last year are comfortable using student test results to strengthen their teaching.



Teachers express concern about the amount of time spent testing

**Seven**  
**of 10**

believe their students spend too much time testing.

**&**  
**Over 60%**

of teachers say they spend too much time helping students prepare for state-required tests.

Teachers are far more likely to use student assessment data to collaborate and learn from their peers.



## What Now?

The Tennessee Department of Education takes the findings from the Tennessee Educator Survey very seriously and believes this survey is a critical way to get feedback from Tennessee teachers. The list below describes several of the department's major strategies to address the areas where survey results suggest the greatest need for improvement.

# Support for instructional improvement and teacher collaboration

## Strategy One

Great teaching is far more likely when teachers are given meaningful opportunities to hone their craft. In the next year, the department's efforts in this area focus on ensuring that districts are equipped with well-trained instructional coaches and that teacher leaders are providing strong feedback tailored directly to individual needs. We highlight two such initiatives below.

### **Coaching to Improve Instruction:**

In collaboration with the University of Pittsburgh, the department has launched a program aimed at developing a framework and set of best practices for instructional coaching in Tennessee that can work across a variety of district staffing structures. The department will continue to refine the program next year and create a model that can be used to create statewide literacy and math coach networks in 2016-17.

### **Instructional Partnership Initiative:**

Over the past two years, the department has piloted a program to create collaborative relationships between teachers who struggle in particular areas of practice and those who have demonstrated success in those areas. Initial results suggest the program can have large impacts on student achievement, raising TCAP scores by 5 to 7 points in reading and math for schools that participated versus those that did not. These partnership opportunities will be offered to approximately half the schools in the state in 2015-16.

If you have questions about any of the initiatives above or would like to get involved, please email [TNCore.Questions@tn.gov](mailto:TNCore.Questions@tn.gov).

# Continuous improvements to teacher evaluation

## Strategy Two

Tennessee's teacher evaluation system is designed to be a system that will adapt and improve over time, and each year the department releases a report (here) detailing lessons learned and recommendations for future years. Next year's work focuses on ensuring fairness and transparency across the transition to a new assessment while allowing greater district-level autonomy to determine the model of evaluation that works best at the local level.

### **Teaching Evaluation Enhancement Act:**

The Tennessee Teaching Evaluation Enhancement Act was presented by the governor and passed by the legislature during the 2015 legislative session. This legislation adjusts the formula for calculating teacher evaluation scores to reduce the weighting of TNReady student growth data during the first years of the new assessment, and additionally reduces the weight of school-wide student growth data for teachers in non-tested grades and subjects. More information can be found [here](#).

### **Portfolio Models:**

For teachers in non-tested grades and subjects, portfolio growth models provide the opportunity to demonstrate the quality of their teaching and to receive additional support and recognition. Our goal is to continue increasing portfolio coverage each year, initially through the expansion of pilot programs.

### **Local Flexibility:**

As school leaders and teachers become more comfortable with evaluation, we are seeing more districts take advantage of flexibility to customize evaluation and make it their own. The department has created explicit goals around helping districts take advantage of the flexibility that already exists and increasing options for district autonomy in areas such as evaluation model selection, use of alternative growth measures, and observation practices.

If you have questions about any of the initiatives above or would like to get involved, please email [TEAM.Questions@tn.gov](mailto:TEAM.Questions@tn.gov).

# Commitment to clarity regarding assessments

## Strategy Three

As the state transitions to a new set of student tests, the department has pledged to improve the environment around assessment, maximizing the benefits while limiting the challenges. This involves an attempt to clarify the purposes of the different assessments used at the state and district level as well as monitor the demands on both teachers and students.

### **Tennessee Task Force on Student Testing and Assessment:**

On March 2, 2015, Commissioner Candice McQueen created a task force in response to feedback about the volume of testing and test preparation across the state. The task force was directed to identify and study best practices in student assessment, to ensure local school districts and the state are appropriately using tests to improve student achievement, and to better inform the public, teachers, and parents about the state-required tests. The task force will be releasing a set of recommendations in the fall of 2015.

### **TNReady Transition:**

Although the new TN Ready tests will offer more authentic assessments of student progress than the previous year's TCAP exams in math and English language arts, they require a very similar time commitment from students. At the same time, because the testing window has been extended, districts have more flexibility than ever before to decide when their students will take the test. This flexibility will minimize the interruption of teaching and learning and will help school schedules continue as normal even when students are testing. More information about the tests and test logistics can be found [here](#).

If you have questions about any of the initiatives above or would like to get involved, please email [TNed.Assessment@tn.gov](mailto:TNed.Assessment@tn.gov).

## **In Conclusion...**

The Tennessee Educator Survey will continue to be given to teachers across the state in upcoming years. This report focused on broad findings from teacher responses to this year's survey. Over the course of the 2015-16 school year, we will release more briefs on specific topics such as assessment, data and digital use, professional learning, and evaluation. Please visit the department's website to view survey results in detail at the state, district, and school level.