



# UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

JAN 8 2009

The Honorable Tim Webb  
Commissioner of Education  
Tennessee Department of Education  
Sixth Floor, Andrew Johnson Tower  
710 James Robertson Parkway  
Nashville, Tennessee 37243-0375

Dear Commissioner Webb:

As we approach our seventh year of implementing the accountability provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, I want to take a moment to thank you and your colleagues for all your hard work to help realize the goals of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB), which has led to real and meaningful improvements in student achievement. These outcomes are due, in no small part, to the efforts of the dedicated educators in your state. We have seen an increased attention on high expectations for every child, an improvement in student performance across the board and a decrease in achievement gaps.

As Secretary Spellings is fond of saying, "what gets measured, gets done." With that in mind, I want to take this opportunity to update you on the status of some NCLB cornerstones with respect to Tennessee. Detailed information on specific components of your state's assessment and accountability system is contained in an attachment to this letter.

- Assessment system: An assessment system that produces valid and reliable results is fundamental to an accountability system that holds schools and districts accountable for educating all students. Please accept my congratulations on Tennessee's standards and assessment system meeting all statutory and regulatory provisions required for reading/language arts, mathematics, and science as of 2007-08.
- Accountability components: The Department's new Title I regulations provide for greater scrutiny to states' accountability systems, including establishing a uniform and more accurate measure of calculating high school graduation rate that is comparable across states and requiring that states ensure that statistical measures maximize the inclusion of students and student subgroups in accountability determinations. Hence, the regulations also require that all states submit portions of their Accountability Workbook for peer review. In the attachment to this letter you will find information on Tennessee's minimum group size, annual measurable objectives, confidence interval, full academic year definition, and graduation rate.
- Departmental flexibilities: Over the past several years, the Secretary has offered several flexibilities to states, such as growth model and differentiated accountability pilots, assessing students with disabilities, and discretionary grant programs, such as the Teacher Incentive Fund, Enhanced Assessment Grants, and State Longitudinal Data System Grants. I am pleased to note that Tennessee is participating in several of these endeavors.
  - Two percent transition flexibility: Tennessee was approved in 2007-08 to include a proxy calculation for any school or district that did not make AYP due to the students with disabilities subgroup in grades 3-8. Tennessee is eligible for this flexibility because the SEA is developing an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAAS) for students with certain disabilities.

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- Growth Model: Tennessee measures AYP based on individual student growth rather than on how many students are already proficient. The Department approved Tennessee to use its growth model in making AYP determinations for the 2007–08 school year and on December 22, 2008 granted a four year extension for use of the growth model through 2011–12.
  - Reversing Choice and SES: Tennessee was approved to offer Supplemental Educational Services (SES) to Title I schools in the first year of school improvement.
  - Teacher Incentive Fund Grants: New Leaders, Inc. has a grant for Memphis City Schools. Total: \$7,513,659, Year 1: \$3,109,944, Year 2: \$2,196,767, Year 3: \$2,206,948
  - In 2006, Tennessee received a Statewide Longitudinal Data System Grant of \$3,226,313.
  - General Supervision Enhancement Grant: Tennessee, along with Hawaii, South Dakota, and Wisconsin, is working towards the development of an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards. (Year 1: \$1,431,440; Year 2: \$1,199,967; and Year 3: \$1,199,949)
- Tennessee-specific issues: Finally, I'd like to take this opportunity to note the new assessments Tennessee is moving towards in the next few years. Please do not hesitate to let us know if we can be of assistance in this process.

In addition, for your information, I am enclosing a file that provides information across all states on the current assessment status, participation in flexibilities offered by the Department, AYP information, and discretionary grants. I wish you continued success in raising the achievement in Tennessee. NCLB has focused our attention on closing achievement gaps and increasing the awareness of those students who have often been left behind: economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient, and students with disabilities. I have enjoyed the opportunity to work with you and all your colleagues across the country on such important issues.

Sincerely,



Kerri L. Briggs, Ph.D.

Enclosures

cc: Governor Phil Bredesen  
Connie Smith

### Assessment System

- Your assessment system met the requirements to be considered *Fully Approved*. This means that Tennessee's assessment system includes assessments in grades 3-8 and high school in reading/language arts and mathematics. Tennessee's science assessments are fully compliant as well. I encourage you to consider whether there are any areas in which the Department can provide or facilitate technical assistance as you implement the changes to your current assessment system. For additional detail, please see the enclosed fact sheet.

### Accountability System

- Minimum group size (the state-defined minimum number of students necessary to have valid and reliable AYP determinations): Tennessee's minimum group size is the larger of 45 or one percent of students in the school. (The average across all states is approximately 30 students.)
- Annual measurable objectives (AMO) (the yearly target for the percentage of students required to be proficient or above for a school to make AYP):
  - 2008–09: Tennessee's goal for this year is 89 percent of students scoring proficient in grades 3-8 and 93 percent in high school in reading/language arts and 86 percent for grades 3-8 and 83 percent for high school in mathematics.
  - AMO type: Tennessee set its AMOs consistent with the statutory requirements, using a stair-step method. This means that AMOs increase in equal increments every three years.
- Confidence interval: The state uses a confidence interval of 95%.
- Full academic year definition (for purposes of determining whether a student's score must be included in AYP determinations): In Tennessee, a student must be continuously enrolled from the first 20 days of the year (reported on October 31) until test administration in order to be included in AYP determinations.
- Graduation rate:
  - Currently, Tennessee is using a graduation rate that can be described as a completer rate, which means Tennessee divides the number of graduates by the number of graduates plus the dropouts from each of the previous four years.
  - As required by the recently issued Title I regulations, states must report graduation rate data, in the aggregate and disaggregated by subgroup, using the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate beginning with report cards providing assessment results for the 2010-11 school year.
  - The graduation rate target Tennessee requires for the district or school to make AYP is 90 percent or improvement from the previous year in the current rate or the 2-year or 3-year average.
  - According to the National Governor's Association 2008 report *Implementing Graduation Counts: State Progress to Date, 2008*, Tennessee will have the capability of calculating the 4-year rate 2010.