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OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY

REVIEW OF LITERACY SUCCESS ACT: SECOND-YEAR IMPLEMENTATION



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Introduction

During its 2021 Special Session on Education, the Tennessee General Assembly passed the Tennessee Literacy Success Act (TLSA), which seeks to ensure that students in early grades are on track to become proficient readers by the end of 3rd grade.¹

The TLSA requires school districts and public charter schools to use foundational literacy skills instruction with a phonics-based approach for early reading instruction. To ensure effective foundational literacy instruction, the law requires districts and charter schools to:

- administer a universal reading screener to students in grades K-3 to identify students needing additional help with reading;
- use English language arts textbooks and instructional materials aligned with Tennessee standards and approved by the State Board of Education, unless the district or charter school has been granted a waiver; and
- develop foundational literacy skills plans, describing the time devoted to aspects of core literacy instruction, additional student interventions and supports, and their use of screeners, instructional materials, and training for teachers. Plans must be posted on their websites and submitted for state approval every three years.^A

The TLSA requires the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) to:

- provide at least one professional development course on foundational literacy skills instruction at no cost for current teachers in grades K-5 that the teachers must complete by August 1, 2023, and
- provide a Tennessee universal reading screener at no cost to school districts or charter schools.

Earlier statutory provisions that were incorporated into TLSA require TDOE to:

- identify schools with consistently low reading scores and assure that measures to address them are included in schools' improvement plans, and
- submit an annual early grades reading report to the House and Senate education committees.

The TLSA legislation also included provisions related to educator preparation programs (EPPs), requiring:

- EPPs to emphasize a phonics-based approach, aligned with state foundational literacy standards,
- TDOE to develop foundational skills standards for EPPs to be approved by the State Board of Education, and
- TDOE to provide a Tennessee reading instruction test at no cost to EPPs or candidates seeking applicable licensure.

One provision in the TLSA requires TDOE, in partnership with the State Board of Education (SBE) and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), to report on the implementation of the TLSA public chapter to the chairs of the House and Senate education committees by July 1, 2024. In 2022, the General Assembly passed additional legislation requiring the Comptroller's Office to annually review the implementation of the TLSA and report its findings to the chairs of the Senate and House education committees and the SBE by November 1 of each year.² The Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) has been designated by the Comptroller to complete this annual review. This report is the second such review. A separate annual Comptroller review of district and charter school foundational literacy skills plans is required by the TLSA. This report includes the review of plans that districts and schools updated during school year 2022-23.

The Comptroller's Office was also required by TLSA to review districts' and charter schools' adoption and use of approved English language arts textbooks and instructional materials and report to the House and Senate education committees by May 1, 2023. Find the Comptroller's review of textbook adoption and use [here](#).

^A Although many charter schools are part of traditional districts, they can make independent instructional choices, such as the selection of a universal reading screener, selection of textbooks and instructional materials, and development of literacy skills plans based on their charter status.

OREA's 2023 review of the TLSA's implementation included reviewing and analyzing data provided by TDOE on students' universal screener results, educators' participation in literacy instruction training, districts' and charter schools' updates of their foundational literacy skills plans, and educator preparation providers' use of coursework modules developed to meet foundational literacy skills standards. OREA administered a survey in September 2023 to 140 local school districts that operate K-5 classrooms and the 73 charter schools serving any grades, kindergarten through 5th grade, to collect data specific to classroom teachers' participation in literacy instruction training and more information on parent notification through home literacy reports. OREA also reviewed a sample of district and school websites, as well as TDOE's website, for the required posting of foundational literacy skills plans.

Multiple reviews of the TLSA

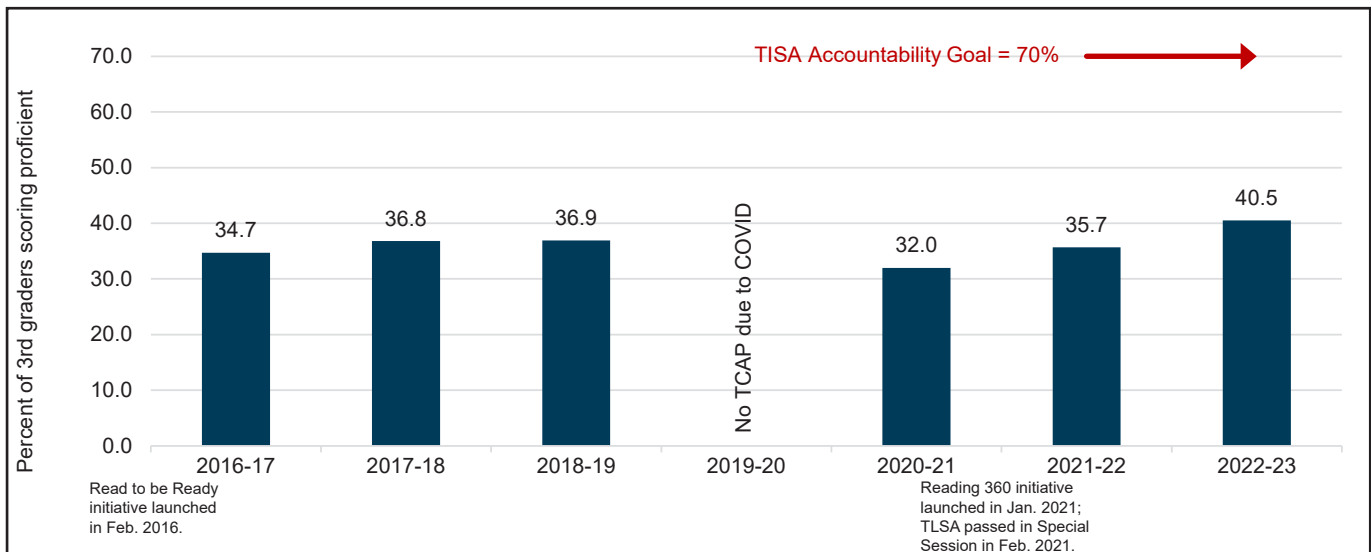
- The TLSA requires TDOE, SBE, and THEC to study the implementation of the act and report to the Senate and House education chairs by July 1, 2024.
- The TLSA requires the Comptroller's Office to annually review and report on foundational literacy skills plans and their approvals by TDOE and the implementation of the TLSA. Both reviews are due to the Senate and House education chairs, as well as to SBE by November 1 each year.
- The newly created Tennessee Reading Research Center, housed in the UT College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences, is tasked with evaluating the impact of the state's Reading 360 initiative and provisions of the TLSA, such as the effects of teachers' professional development on student achievement.

Sources: Public Chapter 3, 2021, 1st Extraordinary Session; Public Chapter 717, 2022; TDOE March 7, 2022, news release.

Students' TCAP scores in English language arts are increasing

The TLSA legislation requires numerous efforts to strengthen reading instruction on the part of local schools and districts, TDOE, and postsecondary programs that train teachers. The primary measure used to assess these efforts is the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP), specifically 3rd grade students' scores on the English language arts portion of the assessment. One of the four core subject areas assessed by TCAP is English language arts, a broad area that includes foundational reading skills. TCAP, first given to all Tennessee students in 3rd grade, assesses how students are able to apply their reading skills toward mastery of the Tennessee academic standards.^B The importance of 3rd graders' TCAP scores are further emphasized in the state's new funding formula, Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA), which requires school districts to begin submitting accountability reports in 2023-24 that set their goals for meeting a benchmark of 70 percent of students scoring proficient on the English language arts portion of TCAP.

Exhibit 1: More 3rd graders scored proficient on TCAP's English language arts assessment last year than they have in the last six years



Note: Proficient scores are those that fall in the “meets” and “exceeds” grade-level expectation categories.
 Sources: University of Tennessee-Knoxville, *A Landscape Analysis of Foundational Literacy Skills in Tennessee, PreK to Grade 5*, April 14, 2022; Tennessee Department of Education for 2021-22 and 2022-23 data.

^B About 75 percent of school districts administer TCAP in 2nd grade (which covers only English language arts and math), but all districts are required to administer TCAP in 3rd grade.

Teachers received foundational literacy skills instruction training

Classroom teachers required to receive training

The TLSA requires all K-5 teachers to complete at least one state-approved course in foundational literacy skills instruction, offered at no cost, by August 1, 2023. TDOE has approved two courses that meet this requirement and are offered at no cost to teachers: the Early Reading Training Course I and the Secondary Literacy Training Course I. (See the pullout box for more about these courses.)

OREA's survey of school districts and charter schools found that as of August 30, 2023:

- Thirty-seven of the responding 106 districts reported that 100 percent of their K-5 teachers have met the literacy skills instruction training requirement.
- Eighty-six of the responding 106 districts reported that at least 80 percent of K-5 teachers have met the literacy skills instruction training requirement. In districts where some teachers had not yet completed the training, many districts stated that the teachers were new hires and plans have been developed to ensure the teachers complete the requirement. Several districts have designated professional development days to complete the training, while others reported the training will be completed independently by teachers.
- Seven of the responding 16 charter schools reported that 100 percent of their K-5 teachers have met the literacy skills instruction training requirement. Charter school officials stated that some teachers who had not yet completed the training were new hires and there were plans to ensure the teachers completed the required training.

Of the 140 local districts with K-5 classrooms surveyed, 106 (76 percent) responded. Among all district respondents combined, over 84 percent of K-5 teachers were reported to have met the literacy skills instruction training requirement. Many responding districts (44) reported a specific timeline for the remaining teachers to complete the training requirements. Of those 44 districts, 10 reported that teacher training will be finished by October, 12 stated teachers will have completed the training by the end of 2023, and 22 indicated trainings will be done by the end of the 2023-24 school year. Some districts stated that plans to ensure K-5 teachers have completed the required training will coincide with the teachers' license renewal process. (See page 5 for more about the separate license renewal requirement in the TLSA legislation.)

Of the 73 charter schools serving students in at least one K-5 grade, 16 (22 percent) responded to OREA's survey. Several schools stated that teachers who had not yet completed the foundational literacy skills instruction training will do so by the end of October, and a few schools reported that they would ensure all teachers had completed the training by the end of 2023. Among all 16 charter school respondents combined, 78 percent of their K-5 teachers were reported to have met the training requirement.^C

TDOE-approved foundational literacy skills instruction training

Early Reading Training Course I – Online, asynchronous (participants learn on their own time) training for K-5 educators focused on research on foundational literacy skills, how those skills are built into Tennessee standards, the systematic development of those skills, and the research behind high-quality instructional materials. Teachers must pass a multiple choice assessment. (Approximately 25 hours.)

Early Reading Training Course II – Week-long, in-person training for K-5 educators typically offered during the summer and focused on how to implement a foundational literacy curriculum and instructional materials in planning, preparing, and providing instruction. Participants must pass the assessment for Course I before taking Course II. (Approximately 30 hours.)

Secondary Literacy Training Courses I and II – Similar to the Early Reading Training courses, the secondary literacy training for teachers in grades 5-12 consists of a one-week online course and a one-week in-person course. These courses focus on how reading skills develop and how reading comprehension is supported by vocabulary growth with the use of high-quality instructional materials and alignment with state standards.

Sources: TDOE, Reading 360: Tennessee Early Reading Training, weeks 1 and 2 overview; TDOE, Request for Proposals for Secondary Literacy Training, April 15, 2021.

^C Because of the low charter school survey response rate, the reported combined percentage of teachers completing the TLSA training requirement may not accurately reflect all charter schools' compliance rates.

Other educators also receive training

In addition to classroom teachers, other educators and administrators have participated over the past two years in the foundational literacy skills instruction training provided by TDOE. TDOE reports that a total of 40,562 educators accessed the Early Reading Training Course I from summer 2021 through summer 2023. Of those educators, 74 percent were licensed with an endorsement relevant to K-3 instruction. An additional 9,102 educators accessed the Secondary Literacy Training Course I during the same time period. Other educators participating may include reading interventionists, librarians, instructional leaders, and other licensed personnel.^D

The foundational literacy skills instruction courses may be used to meet new licensure requirements for educators seeking to obtain, renew, or advance teaching licenses with endorsements covering K-3 instruction and for those seeking to obtain, renew, or advance instructional leader licenses. Beginning in summer 2023, these licensure requirements could also be met by passing a new reading instruction test: the Tennessee Early Literacy Assessment. (See page 14 for more about the new test.)

As part of the state's Reading 360 initiative, teachers who completed the Early Reading Training Course I and II or the Secondary Literacy Training Course I and II received a \$1,000 stipend. TDOE provided the incentives from summer 2021 through summer 2023, using federal pandemic relief funds for education. Training incentives were not planned to continue after the summer 2023 trainings.

Looking ahead

TDOE plans to continue offering the Early Reading Training Course I and Secondary Literacy Training Course I as online courses housed on its professional development platform at no cost to educators, districts, and charter schools. The companion courses (Course II) for both Early Reading and Secondary Literacy will also be made available online by spring 2024. TDOE's federally funded contract with TNTP (formerly known as The New Teacher Project) to develop and provide the literacy instruction training courses expires in March 2024. As federal funding ends, TDOE anticipates costs for continued educator professional development will shift to state funding sources.

The TLSA's professional development requirement is not ongoing. All K-5 classroom teachers were expected to meet the requirements by August 1, 2023. After that date, districts may set policies for new hires to complete the foundational literacy professional development courses provided by TDOE online, but this is not required by the state. Another provision in the TLSA statute requires K-3 teachers and instructional leaders to document that they have either taken one of the foundational literacy courses or passed the new Tennessee Early Literacy Assessment before they can renew or advance their licenses. Once documented, educators do not have to repeat the courses or assessment again. Teachers who did not meet the TLSA professional development requirement must meet the license renewal requirement related to foundational literacy instruction.

Universal reading screener results show positive trends

The TLSA requires districts and charter schools to adopt a state-approved universal reading screener and administer it to their K-3 students three times per year. In 2021, the state designated aimswebPlus, created by NCS Pearson, Inc., as the Tennessee Universal Reading Screener (TN URS). The TN URS is one of seven screeners approved by the State Board for TLSA.^E The TN URS is the only screener provided to districts and schools free of charge. Districts and charter schools identify their adopted screener in their foundational literacy skills plans submitted to TDOE and screener results for all students are reported to TDOE. School year 2022-23 was the second year universal reading screeners were administered under TLSA requirements. Two years of available results show some positive trends in more students achieving higher scores.

^D In the 2021-22 school year, classroom teachers at all grade levels totaled about 59,700 and other licensed instructional staff totaled about 15,600.

^E SBE-approved universal reading screeners include aimswebPlus; Dibels 8th edition; Easy CBM; Fastbridge Suite (which now incorporates the Formative Assessment for Teachers (FAST)); STAR Early Literacy; Measure of Academic Progress (MAP); and the iReady Diagnostic for Reading and iReady Early Reading Tasks.

What is a universal reading screener?

A universal reading screener is a short, standardized assessment to check that students are on track in developing their early reading skills. “Universal” refers to their administration to all students in a grade level. Screeners are nationally normed, with results based on comparisons to other students in the same grade and school year season. A single screener is a combination of very short subtests, each focused on a key skill. Different combinations of subtests are given to students based on their grade and school season (fall, winter, spring).

Tennessee contracted with NCS Pearson, Inc. to make the aimswebPlus reading screener available at no charge to local districts and charter schools. Each year of the contract was budgeted at \$2.5 million, using federal funds, and includes several other K-3 screeners, as well as an online reporting platform, training for district educators, and technical support.

The state's contract with Pearson for the TN URS expires June 30, 2024. TDOE is having internal discussions on funding and administering the TN URS after that date and anticipates the cost to provide a free reading screener will shift from federal to state funding sources

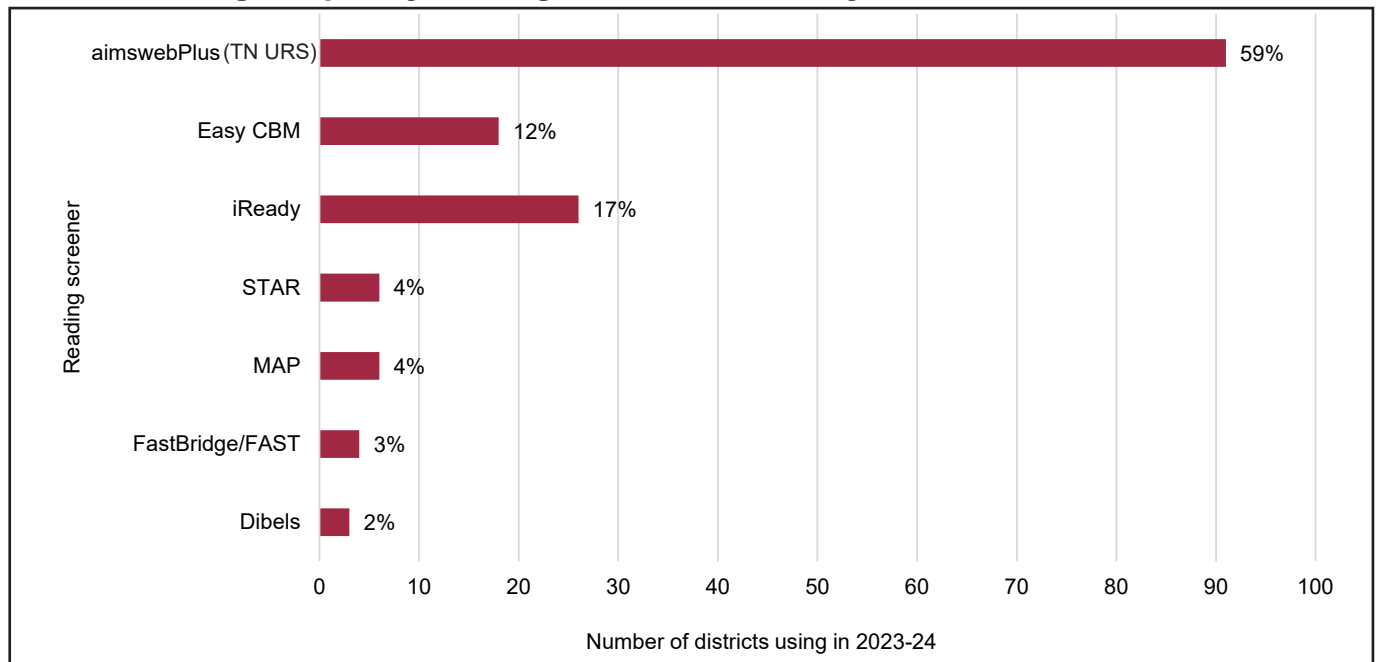
Sources: TDOE interviews, presentations, and guidelines; July 2021 contract with NCS Pearson, Inc.

Screeners chosen by districts and charter schools

Districts continue to adopt the TN URS. The number of districts using TN URS as at least one of their screeners for K-3 will reach its highest point yet during the 2023-24 school year.

The trend of districts replacing screeners they have used in the past with the TN URS has continued, with 80 districts using it as their only K-3 reading screener (up from 75 districts in 2022-23) and 11 districts using it in conjunction with other approved K-3 reading screeners (up from two last year).

Exhibit 2: The number of districts using the Tennessee Universal Reading Screener (TN URS) will reach its highest point yet during the 2023-24 school year



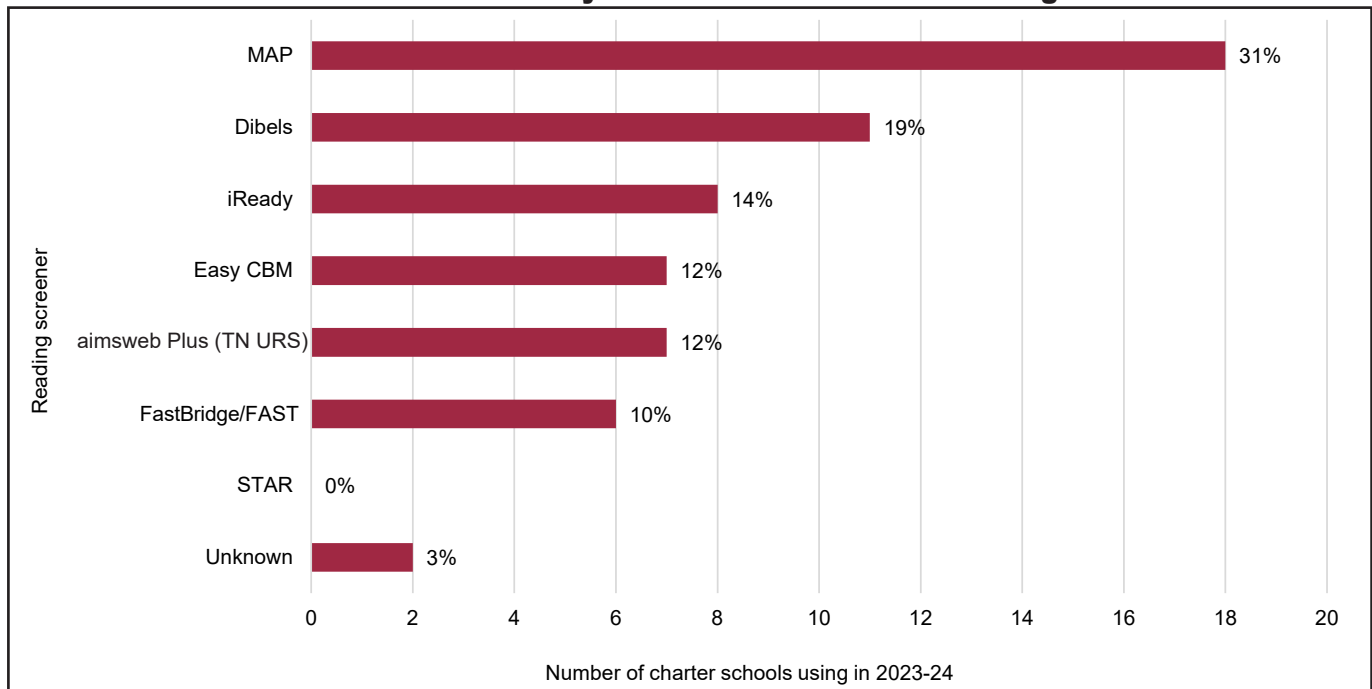
Note: The K-3 reading screener choices of the 140 districts shown here include 154 screeners. Typically, districts using more than one screener use different screeners for different grade levels.

Source: OREA review of districts' foundational literacy skills plans through August 2023.

One likely reason for the increase in districts using the TN URS in conjunction with other screeners is the 2023 revision to the state's 3rd grade retention and promotion law (*TCA 49-6-3115*). The revision (Public Chapter 338, 2023) allows 3rd grade students scoring within at least the 50th percentile of their most recent “state-provided benchmark assessment” – the TN URS, in other words – to be eligible for promotion to the 4th grade if the district or charter school agrees to provide tutoring. Seven districts changed their adopted reading screeners for the 2023-24 school year to include administration of the TN URS (aimswebPlus) specifically for their 3rd graders.

The number of charter schools using TN URS will slightly increase in the 2023-24 school year, though charter schools are much less likely to use TN URS than school districts. The reading screener most commonly used by the 56 charter schools that serve K-3 students remains the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP), with 16 schools using it as their only K-3 reading screener and two schools using it in conjunction with another screener. Dibels is the second most commonly used screener among charters.

Exhibit 3: Charter schools are less likely to use TN URS as their reading screener



Note: The K-3 reading screener choices of the 56 charter schools shown here include 59 screeners. Typically, schools using more than one screener use different screeners for different grade levels. Two charter schools that opened in 2022-23 have not submitted foundational literacy skills plans as required and are marked as “unknown.”
 Source: OREA review of charter schools’ foundational literacy skills plans through August 2023.

Screener results

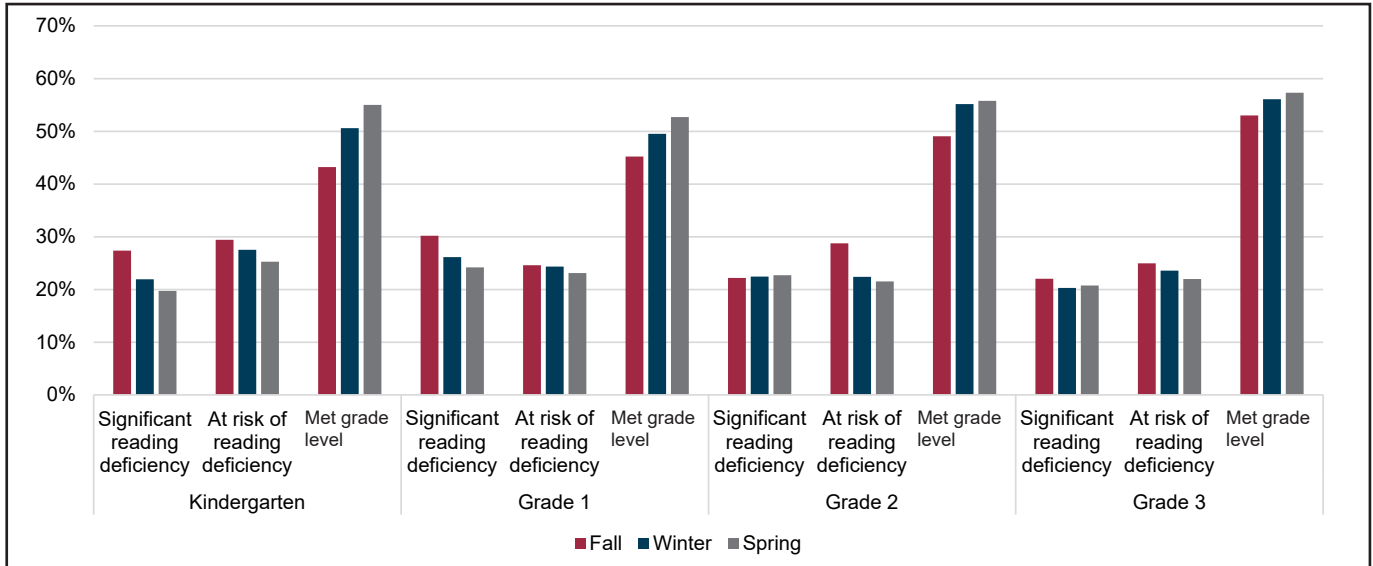
Districts and schools are required to administer reading screeners to K-3 students three times per academic year (fall, winter, and spring) during state-determined test windows. Results must be reported to TDOE. The State Board of Education (SBE) adopted TDOE’s recommended scoring levels for identifying deficiencies on the nationally normed screeners as required by the TLSA:

- Students scoring at the 15th percentile or below are determined to have a significant reading deficiency.
- Students scoring at the 16th through the 40th percentile are determined to be at risk for a significant reading deficiency.³
- Students scoring at the 41st percentile and above are not considered to be at risk of having a significant reading deficiency. These students are considered to be meeting the grade level expectations for the reading skills assessed on each screener. The reading screeners approved by SBE are nationally normed with the average at the 50th percentile.^F

The results for 2022-23 universal screener assessments are shown in Exhibit 4. In each screener administration in grades K-3, the percentage of students scoring at or above grade level expectations increased as the school year progressed. Additionally, the percentage of students who scored at risk of a reading deficiency decreased in all grades with each screener administration. The fall administration for 1st graders had the highest percentage of students with a significant reading deficiency in the 2022-23 school year, when 30.2 percent of students demonstrated a significant reading deficiency. In the spring administration, kindergarten had the lowest percentage of students with significant reading deficiencies, at 19.7 percent.

^F In a 2023 revision to the state’s 3rd grade retention and promotion law (TCA 49-6-3115), the General Assembly provided that students who did not score high enough on their TCAP tests to be promoted to 4th grade without other interventions could demonstrate proficiency in English language arts standards by scoring in the 50th percentile on their most recent state-provided universal reading screener.

Exhibit 4: The percentage of students whose scores met grade level expectations on universal reading screener assessments increased with each screener administration throughout 2022-23 for all grades K-3

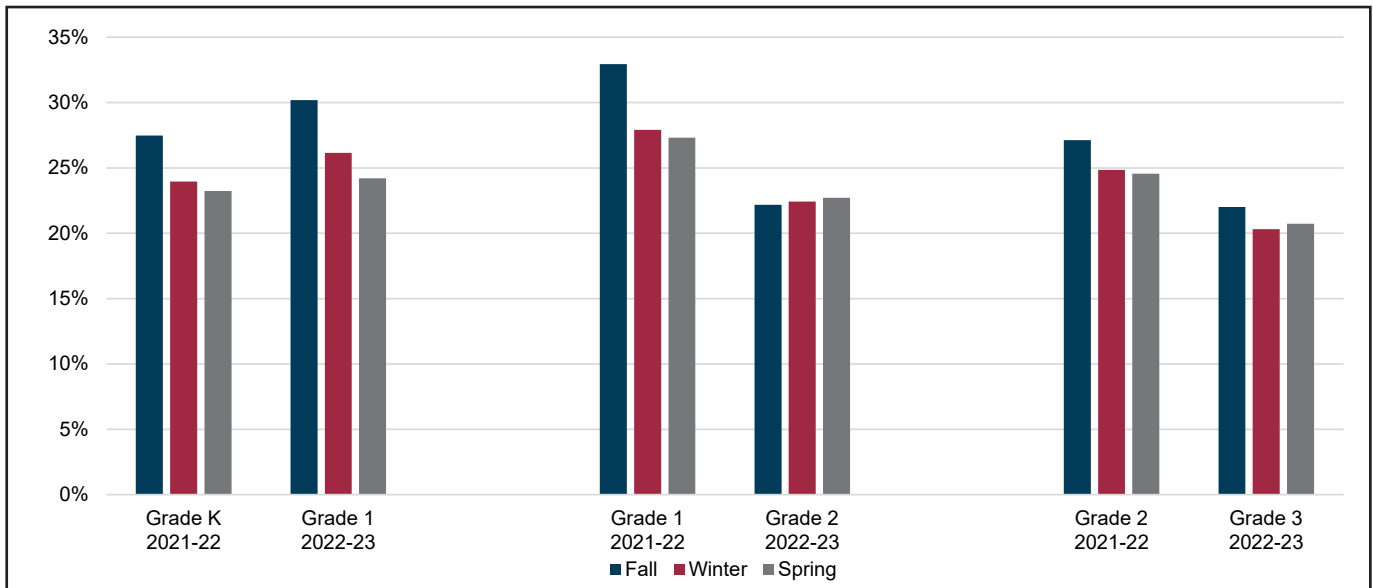


Source: Tennessee Department of Education data.

In addition to the 2022-23 data, OREA analyzed universal reading screener assessment data from all three 2021-22 administrations in grades K-3. Using the 2021-22 and 2022-23 data, students were tracked over the two school years to compare changes in each of the three scoring categories for reading screeners: significant reading deficiency, at risk of a significant reading deficiency, and met grade level. First grade scores from 2021-22 are displayed next to 2nd grade scores for 2022-23 for each scoring category because the data largely captures the same group of students.

The graph below shows class comparisons between 2021-22 and 2022-23 for students determined to have a significant reading deficiency (i.e., scored at the 15th percentile or below on a universal reading screener).

Exhibit 5: The percentage of students who demonstrated a significant reading deficiency decreased between fall of 2021-22 to spring of 2022-23 in all grade comparisons

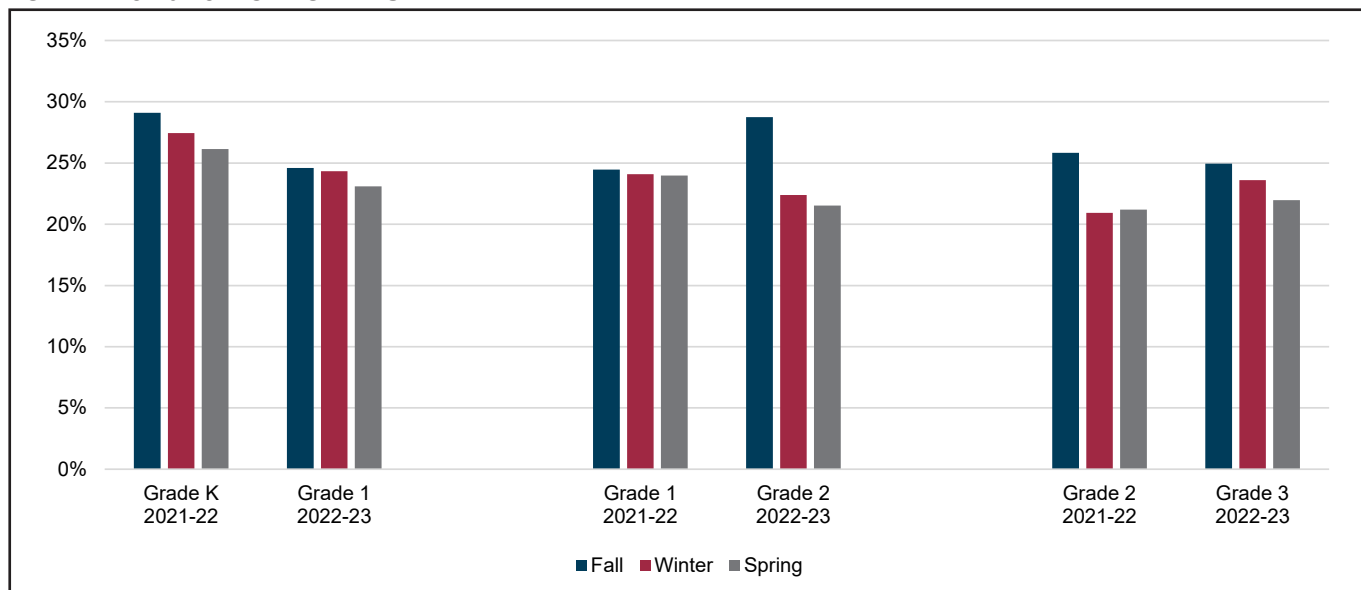


Source: Tennessee Department of Education data.

The percentage of students who demonstrated a significant reading deficiency between the end of one school year and the beginning of the next varied by grade level. Between kindergarten and 1st grade, the percentage of students who demonstrated a significant reading deficiency increased over the summer (from 23.2 percent in spring of 2021-22 to 30.2 percent in fall of 2022-23). The percentages decreased for students going from 1st grade to 2nd grade, as well as for those going from 2nd grade to 3rd grade (from 27.3 percent to 22.2 percent and 24.6 percent to 22.0 percent, respectively).

The graph below shows the class comparisons for students whose scores demonstrated they were at risk of a significant reading deficiency. Students who have scores at the 16th through the 40th percentiles are determined to be at risk of a significant reading deficiency.

Exhibit 6: Students transitioning from kindergarten to 1st grade were the only class to show a decrease in the percentage of students at risk of a reading deficiency between spring of 2021-22 and fall of 2022-23

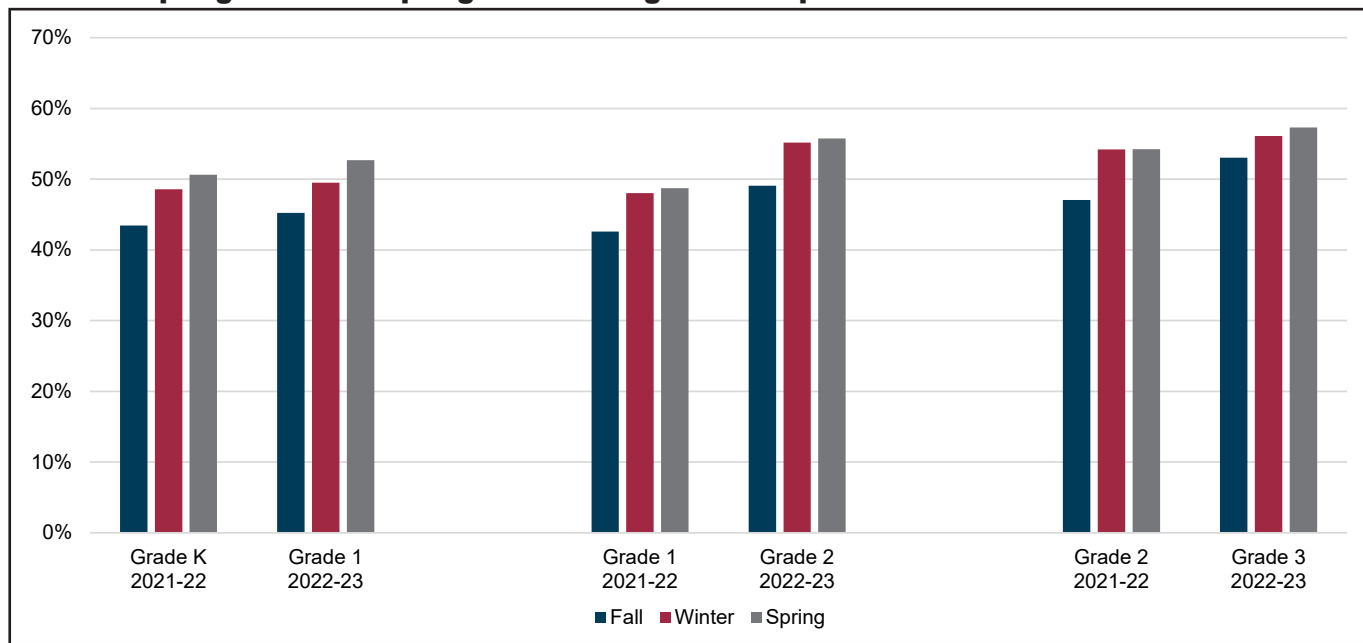


Source: Tennessee Department of Education data.

As students transitioned from 1st grade to 2nd grade, there was an increase of students who were at risk of a reading deficiency. The increase is seen by comparing the spring screener administration of 2021-22 data to the fall screener administration of 2022-23 data (24.0 percent to 28.7 percent). The same is true for students who transitioned from 2nd grade to 3rd grade, where rates increased from 21.2 percent in spring 2021-22 to 25.0 percent in fall 2022-23. Even though rates of students at risk of a reading deficiency increased for two classes over summer break, all classes showed an overall decrease in the rate of students at risk of a reading deficiency between the first fall screener administration in 2021-22 and the most recent spring screener administration in 2022-23.

Students scoring at the 41st percentile or above are considered to be meeting grade-level expectations for the reading skills tested. The graph below shows the class comparisons for these students. The increasing percentages across all three screener administrations in a school year indicate more students are meeting expectations for their grade level.

Exhibit 7: The percentage of students whose scores met grade-level expectations increased between spring 2022 and spring 2023 in all grade comparisons



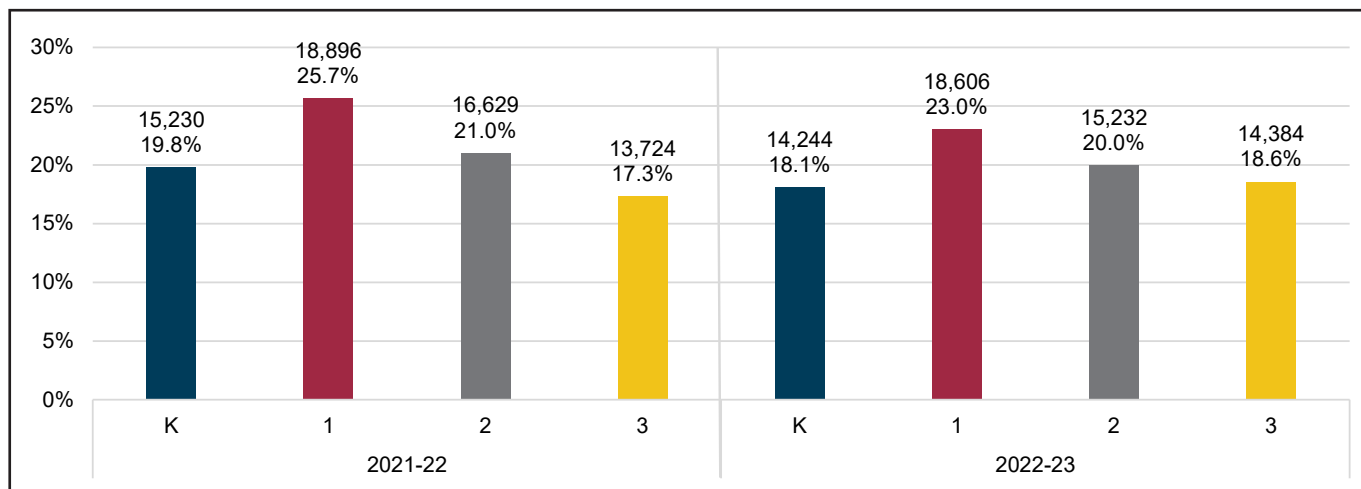
Source: Tennessee Department of Education data.

The rate of students meeting expectations followed the same trend for each screener administration across every grade for the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years. Each class improved on their spring scores of the previous year. For example, the spring 2022 percentage of kindergartners meeting expectations was 50.6 percent. The rate for 1st graders one year later (spring 2023) was 52.7 percent. Similarly, the percentage increased from 1st grade to 2nd grade (48.7 to 55.8 percent) and from 2nd grade to 3rd grade (54.3 to 57.3 percent).

Between the 2021-22 spring administration and 2022-23 fall administration, the percentage of students who scored at the meeting expectations level decreased for students transitioning to 1st and 3rd grades. The percentage of students meeting expectations decreased over the summer between kindergarten and 1st grade from 50.1 in the spring to 45.2 percent in the following fall. However, the percentage of students meeting expectations increased for those going from 1st grade to 2nd, where 48.1 percent of students met expectations in spring of 1st grade and 49.0 percent did likewise in the fall of 2nd grade.

Exhibit 8 shows how many students in each grade (K-3) demonstrated a significant reading deficiency on more than one screener administration in 2021-22 and 2022-23. Students with multiple periods of deficiency scored at the 15th percentile or below in at least two assessments throughout the school year. Students who have more than one screener score at the significantly deficient level are those likely to need the most intensive supports and interventions.

Exhibit 8: Students with more than one significant deficiency score were most common among 1st graders in 2021-22 and 2022-23



Source: Tennessee Department of Education data.

Note: The percentage of students in the graph was calculated from the total number of unique students who participated in any of the three universal reading screener administration windows.

Parent notification

The Literacy Success Act requires that parents of K-3 students be notified through “home literacy reports” after each administration of the universal reading screener – given to students three times per year – if their child’s results indicate a significant reading deficiency.⁴ The law specifies certain information to be included in parent notifications for K-3 students determined to have a significant reading deficiency:

- information about the importance of a student being able to read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade,
- reading activities the parents may use at home to help improve their child’s reading proficiency,
- information about the reading interventions and supports that the district/charter school recommends for their students, and
- information about mandatory retention for students in 3rd grade with an achievement level of approaching or below on the English language arts portion of the student’s most recent TCAP test.

On OREA’s survey, nearly 100 percent of districts serving grades K-3 indicated they send home literacy reports to parents of students with a significant reading deficiency. Out of 16 charter school responses, 14 serve grades K-3. These 14 charter schools reported sending home literacy reports to parents of students with a significant reading deficiency in all grades served.

TDOE recommends that K-3 home literacy reports also be sent to parents of students identified as “at risk” of a significant reading deficiency. Over 97 percent of districts serving grades K-3 indicated they send home literacy reports to parents of students whose score places them in the “at risk of a significant reading deficiency” category. Thirteen of the 14 charter schools serving K-3 that responded to OREA’s survey reported sending home literacy reports to parents of students at risk of a reading deficiency in all grades served.

The law also requires parents of 4th and 5th graders to be notified once per year through home literacy reports if their child’s scores on the English language arts portion of TCAP are “below proficient,” the lowest performance level. Over 97 percent of districts serving grades 4-5 indicated they send home TCAP results to parents if the student scores in the category of “approaching expectations” or “below expectations” on the English language arts portion of the TCAP assessment. Fifteen charter schools reported serving grades 4-5. The 15 charter schools that responded to OREA’s survey reported sending results to parents of 4th and 5th grade students who score in the category of “approaching expectations” or “below expectations” on the ELA portion of the TCAP.

Although most districts responded to the survey that they have no plans to change their home literacy reports for parent notification during the 2023-24 school year, a few districts updated their foundational literacy skills plans for this school year to reflect various other changes to parent notifications, such as:

- adding information about student reading intervention progress,
- posting information about which literacy skills students are learning at various points in time during the school year, and
- providing links to free books designed to help children use beginning phonics to sound out words.

While charter school responses to survey questions about parent notification were low, several schools reported that assessment results are sent home regularly, including bimonthly or quarterly reports about student performance on the state-approved reading screener used by the charter school.

Districts and charter schools update foundational literacy skills plans

TLSA requires that all districts and public charter schools submit foundational literacy skills plans (FLSPs) detailing literacy instruction for grades K-5 to TDOE for approval every three years.⁵ Although 2023 was not a required submission year, 49 districts and charter schools (or schools' charter management organizations) submitted revised FLSPs for the 2023-24 school year.

An FLSP details how a district or charter school plans to provide foundational literacy skills instruction, reading intervention, and supports to students identified as having a significant reading deficiency. The plans must be posted on TDOE's website as well as the district or charter school website. Two charter schools that opened in the 2022-23 school year had not submitted FLSPs as of October 2, 2023.

Each district and charter school plan must cover grades K-5 and include the following six sections:

- the amount of **daily time** devoted to foundational literacy skills instruction and how that time is used,
- ELA **textbooks** and instructional materials adopted,
- the **universal reading screener** selected by the district or charter school,
- a description of **reading interventions** and supports available to students with a significant reading deficiency,
- how the district or charter school intends to **notify and engage parents** in the student literacy process, and
- how the district or charter school will provide **professional development** in foundational literacy skills to K-5 teachers.

Districts and charter schools are required to keep their FLSPs updated. Updates were submitted by 42 districts and seven charter schools or charter management organizations for the 2023-24 school year. Of these 49 revised FLSPs, the most common reason for an update was a change to the universal reading screener.

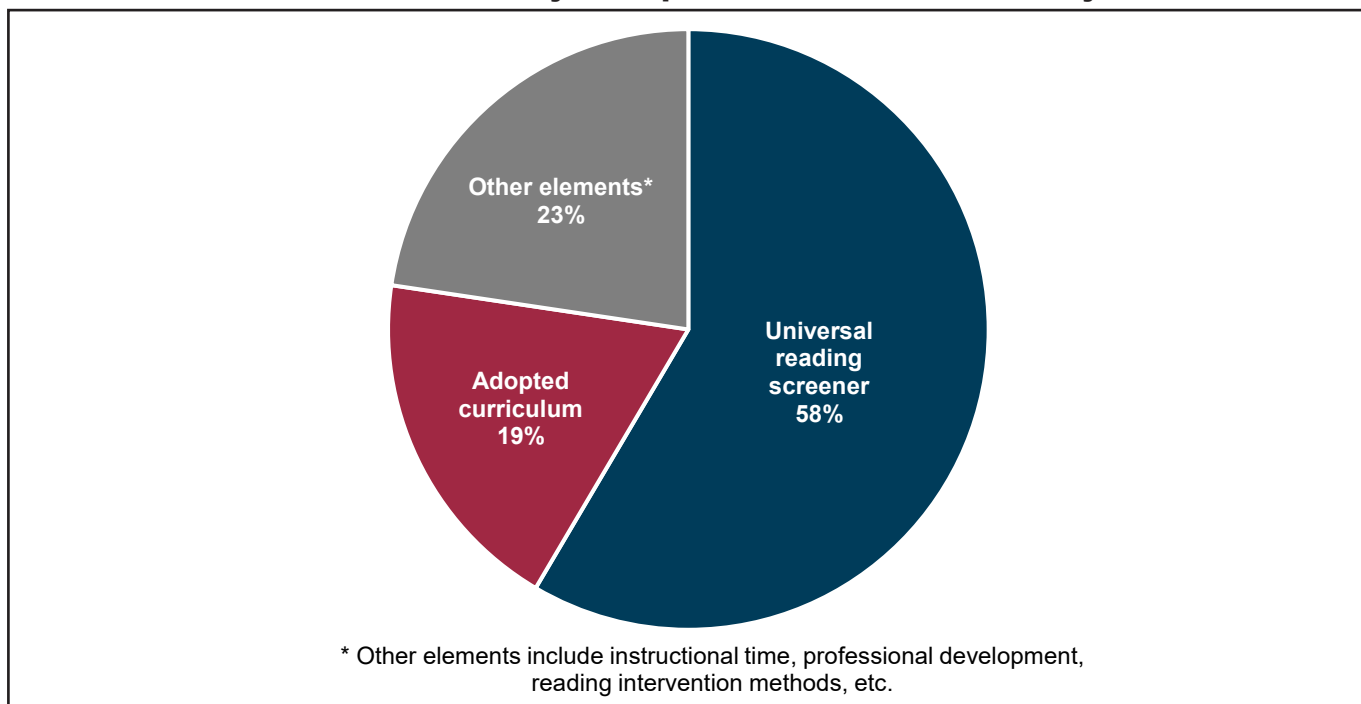
Comptroller review of FLSPs

Tennessee's Literacy Success Act requires districts and charter schools to submit foundational literacy skills plans to TDOE for approval every three years. Districts and charter schools can update their plans more frequently than every three years, however. Updated plans must be submitted to TDOE for approval.

The Comptroller's Office is required to review the plans – and TDOE's approval of the plans – annually. This section of the review constitutes the Comptroller's third annual review of FLSPs.

Source: TCA 49-1-905 (g)(1) and (6).

Exhibit 9: A change to the universal screener was the most common reason for districts and schools to revise foundational literacy skills plans for the 2023-24 school year



Note: Five FLSP updates revised items in more than one category.
Source: OREA review of 2023-24 FLSP updates provided by TDOE.

TDOE uses the same rubric to review FLSP updates and initial FLSP submissions. If a plan does not meet the criteria in the rubric, TDOE works with the district or charter school until the criteria are met. After TDOE approval, the plan is posted to the TDOE website as well as the website of the school district or charter school.

Districts and charter schools were required to submit their first foundational literacy skills plans to TDOE by June 1, 2021. OREA’s review of those plans’ alignment with state guidelines can be found in [Review of Foundational Literacy Skills Plans](#). OREA’s review of FLSPs revised by districts and charter schools through July 2022 is covered in [Review of Literacy Success Act: First Year Implementation](#).

The FLSP is next required to be submitted in 2024. All districts and charter schools must submit their FLSPs for TDOE review no later than July 1, 2024. Districts and charter schools with high growth on the English language arts portion of the 4th grade TCAP are exempt from this requirement, however. The district or charter school must meet certain TVAAS (Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System) criteria based on spring 2022 and spring 2023 TCAP results. As of early October 2023, TDOE was working to identify schools and districts that meet the exemption criteria for submitting a 2024 FLSP.

TDOE can require districts and charter schools to submit a revised FLSP more often than every three years if 4th grade TVAAS growth scores show low growth. TDOE reports that no districts or charter schools were required to provide fully revised FLSPs for the 2023-24 school year under this provision of the TLSA.

Approved textbooks and instructional materials

One of the elements that districts and charter schools must include in their FLSPs is the ELA textbooks and instructional materials they have adopted for classroom use. TLSA required that all districts and charter schools must use ELA textbooks and instructional materials aligned with Tennessee’s academic standards by January 1, 2023. Specifically, this means that the textbooks and instructional materials in use must be from the SBE-approved list unless:

- the district was granted a waiver from SBE, or
- the charter school was granted a waiver by the Commissioner of Education or by the charter school authorizer.

In its 2023 statutorily required review, OREA found that all school districts and most charter schools were in compliance with this provision at the grade K-5 level. In some cases, charter school compliance could not be confirmed due to missing or conflicting data. (See OREA’s report [English Language Arts \(ELA\) Textbooks in School Districts and Charter Schools](#).)

Educator preparation programs continue emphasis on foundational literacy instruction

The 2021 law that created the Tennessee Literacy Success Act also included some new requirements for educator preparation programs (EPPs). EPPs prepare students to become teachers and may also provide additional coursework for teachers seeking to advance their licenses or gain additional endorsements. Most EPPs are operated by institutions of higher education, while others are operated by other organizations, such as Teach for America and the Memphis Teacher Residency. The law required EPPs to provide training on reading instruction that focused primarily on the new foundational literacy skills standards adopted by the state in 2021.

TDOE provides a new Tennessee reading instruction test for EPP candidates

Provisions in the same statute that included TLSA require that a new Tennessee reading instruction test, developed or identified by TDOE and approved by the State Board of Education (SBE), be made available to EPP programs and candidates at no cost. In June 2023, SBE approved the new Tennessee reading instruction test which designated EPP candidates may use to document their knowledge of foundational literacy skills instruction. Designated EPP candidates include those who

- are seeking an initial teaching license or endorsement relevant to teaching K-3 students,
- are seeking an initial instructional leader license, or
- have an initial teaching license and are enrolled in a graduate EPP program.

These EPP candidates must either pass the new reading instruction test or complete one of the state-approved foundational literacy skills instruction courses that active teachers were required to take as part of their professional development under TLSA. (See page 4 for more about teacher literacy skills instruction training requirements.)

The new test – the Tennessee Early Literacy Assessment – is a 25-item online test that assesses knowledge of evidence-based literacy instruction (including sounds first instruction, decoding, phonics, and vocabulary) and the use of high-quality instructional materials. TDOE partnered with the nonprofit ANet to develop a comprehensive bank of test questions, in a variety of formats, to allow for different subsets of questions to display each time the assessment is accessed.^G The assessment question content is based on questions already used in the Early Reading Training Course I assessment that teachers could take to meet TLSA’s professional development requirement.

Development of the Tennessee Early Literacy Assessment

TDOE was approved for a \$40,000 mini-grant in January 2023 from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), a nonprofit organization of K-12 education state leaders, to be used to develop the early literacy assessment. CCSSO managed the agreement with the nonprofit ANet (Achievement Network) to work with TDOE to design a comprehensive set of questions to assess teachers’ proficiency in key reading instruction skills. ANet completed its work in March 2023, apparently under budget, as it has only billed \$20,000 under the grant agreement as of October 2023.

Sources: TDOE, January 2023 CCSSO letter to ANet.

^G ANet (Achievement Network) is a Boston-based nonprofit that provides assessment and data tools, among other supports for schools and districts.

SBE approved a passing score of 80 percent or above on the assessment. Candidates are allowed multiple retakes but are presented with a different version of the test each time. Those who pass are certified with a “badge” that cannot be shared and that can be uploaded to their individual TN Compass account.^H More than 200 candidates had registered to take the new test and almost 100 had passed it as of the beginning of August 2023.

The designated EPP candidates must still pass the relevant Praxis exam for reading instruction. (Praxis exams are teacher licensing exams administered by the Educational Testing Service that measure knowledge and skills in a variety of instructional content areas.) TDOE had initially planned for the new Tennessee reading test to replace relevant Praxis exams for reading instruction.

Active instructional leaders and teachers (with the qualifying endorsements) seeking to renew or advance their existing licenses can also take and pass the Early Literacy Assessment as an alternative to passing an approved foundational literacy course. TDOE has noted that out-of-state license candidates can benefit from the testing option as they can demonstrate their skills in teaching developing readers without having to take an additional course.

TDOE has authority to review alignment of EPP’s curriculum with new reading instruction standards

New foundational literacy standards for EPP programs were approved by the State Board of Education in July 2021. To ensure the EPPs’ curriculum on reading instruction aligns with the standards, TDOE may review courses in relevant EPP programs as part of the comprehensive EPP reviews that occur every seven years. A revised SBE rule authorizes TDOE to take corrective action in cases of misalignment, including not approving EPP specialty area programs.

To assist EPPs in revising their instruction and curriculum to align with foundational literacy standards, TDOE contracted with the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and a nonprofit organization to develop coursework units aligned with the state’s new foundational literacy standards. The Tennessee Reading Research Center – established in 2022 at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, in partnership with TDOE – is completing research on the implementation of these units across EPPs. TDOE reports that 32 out of 40 EPPs with relevant programs used the coursework units during the 2022-23 school year.

Existing statutory requirements incorporated into the TLSA

When Public Chapter 3 was signed into law after the 2021 1st Extraordinary Session, it designated Title 49, Chapter 1, Part 9 of the *Tennessee Code* as the Tennessee Literacy Success Act. While most of Part 9 was new or revised with the 2021 public chapter, two existing provisions in law remained unchanged and were incorporated into the TLSA.

Low reading scores to be addressed in school improvement plans

The first, *TCA 49-1-904*, requires TDOE to identify schools with consistently low reading scores in kindergarten through 12th grade and assure that steps to improve these scores are addressed in the schools’ improvement plans. Districts are required to submit district improvement plans for TDOE approval each year. TDOE also approves school-level improvement plans for the lowest performing schools, designated as priority schools.

State guidelines require that all district and school plans address student learning improvements for all student groups as well as discipline, safe and healthy school environments, technology in the classroom, family engagement, professional development for teachers, and more. Districts and schools are required to align

^H TN Compass is an online system managed by TDOE that collects a wide array of training, licensures, experience, evaluation, and compensation data for pre-service candidates and active service educators.

school improvement plans with the specific needs of each school, including any needed improvements in English language arts performance based on assessment data. Districts and schools that need assistance with school improvement plans can contact TDOE for help. Priority and focus schools – those that are lowest performing overall or by student subgroups – are provided direct support by TDOE.

The TLSA provision requiring districts and schools to submit foundation literacy skills plans (FLSPs), which are focused specifically on K-5 literacy instruction, ensure a concentrated focus on reading and literacy by both districts and schools, as well as TDOE’s monitoring of reading improvement methods in early grades. (See page 12 for more about FLSPs.)

Early grades reading report

A 2019 requirement for TDOE to annually submit an “early grades reading report” to the General Assembly’s education committees remained part of the law when the 2021 Literacy Success Act revamped much of the Tennessee law that deals with early grades literacy (*TCA 49-1-901 et seq.*).

Since 2019, the law has required the annual reports to include:

- statewide 3rd grade reading scores,
- testing procedures used to evaluate reading proficiency,
- number of students retained in grades K-3,
- number of reading specialists in each school district,
- types of reading intervention or enrichment programs offered in each district, and
- information on statewide reading initiatives.

TDOE presented an early grades reading report to SBE’s Literacy Study Committee in May 2023. It is not known if it was also submitted to the General Assembly’s education committees as required by law. It does not appear that TDOE produced these annual early grades literacy reports in previous years.

Some of the required information is provided by TDOE in other locations and formats, such as 3rd grade reading TCAP scores, but other information is not reported publicly, such as the number of students retained in grades K-3 or the types of reading intervention or enrichment programs offered in each district. The TLSA requirement for districts and charter schools to submit their FLSPs for TDOE approval and the requirement that they be posted on district, charter school, and TDOE websites may provide the type of information originally sought by the General Assembly when it required early grades reading reports.

Relevant information on early grades reading can be found at the following locations:

- All approved FLSPs - <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/instruction/foundational-literacy-skills-plan.html>
- Reading 360 Initiative - <https://www.tn.gov/education/reading-360.html>
- 2023 Tennessee Early Grades Reading Report
 - PowerPoint, slides 56-71 - https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/stateboardofeducation/documents/subcommittees/literacy/05-15-23/20230515_Literacy%20Study%20Committee%20Presentation%20FINAL.pdf
 - Video, timestamp 1:08:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUuljWP8zKY>

Conclusions and Policy Options

In summary, TDOE and local districts and charter schools continue to implement the major directives of the Tennessee Literacy Success Act and, overall, are in compliance with its requirements. While this review of TLSA did not include an analysis of causation, more 3rd graders scored proficient on TCAP's English language arts assessment in 2022-23 than they have in the last six years.

Implementation from September 2022 through September 2023

- Local districts and charter schools continue to administer universal reading screeners three times per year to K-3 students. The majority of districts (59 percent) use the free, state-provided Tennessee Universal Reading Screener. Charter schools that serve grades K-3 are more likely to use one of the six other State Board-approved screeners; 12 percent use the TN URS. The state's federally funded contract for TN URS with Pearson expires in June 2024. TDOE anticipates that because it is in the state's best interest to ensure that districts have the needed resources to improve literacy instruction, the cost to continue to provide a free reading screener will shift from the current federal sources to state funding sources.
- Screener results from school year 2022-23 show improvement in each scoring category throughout the year. Students scoring at or above grade level expectations increased and those scoring at a significant deficiency level, as well as those scoring in the at risk level, decreased. Linking results from one grade level in 2021-22 with the next year's grade level in 2022-23 show that most of the student cohorts demonstrated improved performance from the 2021-22 to the 2022-23 school year.
- At the end of the 2023-24 school year, 3rd graders' TN URS scores can be used as a pathway to promotion to 4th grade in combination with tutoring for the entirety of the student's 4th grade year. A score at the 50th percentile or higher on the TN URS is required. Interventions during the summer months between 3rd and 4th grade will not be required for students promoted under this measure, but such students must participate in tutoring throughout 4th grade. Students who score below the 50th percentile on the TN URS do not qualify. These students fall into three groups:
 - those at the 41st to 49th percentile, who are determined to not be at risk of a significant reading deficiency;
 - those at the 16th through the 40th percentile, who are determined to be at risk of a significant reading deficiency; and
 - those at the 15th percentile or below, who are determined to have a significant reading deficiency.
- A total of 49,664 licensed educators (or about two-thirds of all licensed instructional staff in Tennessee schools) received foundational literacy skills instruction from summer 2021 through summer 2023. TDOE began offering the literacy skills instruction courses as part of its Reading 360 initiative in 2021 and approved two courses for educators to fulfill the professional development requirement of TLSA after its passage in February 2021. Over 84 percent of the K-5 classroom teachers in the 106 school districts that responded to an OREA survey had met this TLSA professional development requirement. Those who had not met the requirement in these districts were primarily newly hired teachers, and many districts had set plans for these teachers to complete the training. Seventy-eight percent of K-5 classroom teachers in the 16 charter schools that responded to an OREA survey had met the professional development requirement.
- TDOE developed the *Tennessee Early Literacy Assessment* to fulfill the new state requirement of a reading test for active or pre-service candidates who are seeking to obtain, renew, or advance teaching licenses with endorsements relevant to K-3 instruction or instructional leader licenses. The new reading test, with a passing score set at 80 percent, was approved by SBE on June 22, 2023. TDOE partnered with the nonprofit ANet, using grant funds awarded through CCSSO, to develop the 25-item assessment, which TLSA requires to be provided at no cost to candidates or EPPs.

- Although 2023 was not a required FLSP submission year, 42 local districts and seven charter schools (or their charter management organizations) submitted updates to their FLSPs. The majority of changes were to revise their universal reading screener choice for 2023-24.
- TDOE and charter authorizers should ensure that all newly opened charter schools, serving any grades K-5, submit an FLSP for state approval and post the approved FLSP on their website.
- The TLSA requirement for all districts and charter schools to use state-approved textbooks and instructional materials was assessed in a separate Comptroller review, released in May 2023. That review found that all school districts and most charter schools were in compliance with the TLSA requirement at the grade K-5 level. Compliance for some charter schools could not be confirmed due to missing or conflicting data.
- Two separate evaluations of the TLSA's implementation are due in 2024. TDOE, SBE, and THEC are required to conduct a joint study of TLSA and report the results by July 1, 2024. The Comptroller's Office is required to conduct its next annual evaluation of TLSA implementation and report its results by November 1, 2024.

Issues noted in last year's TLSA Implementation Review

- The Tennessee Literacy Success Act (TLSA) requires the TN URS to be appropriate for preK students in addition those in grades K-3. The current TN URS has a preK screener, but it does not have national norms for preK, which are used to compare students' reading skills with their peers who took the same screener at the same time during the school year. The state's current TN URS is aimswebPlus by Pearson. SBE rules require national norms for all state-approved screeners.

Under TLSA, districts and charter schools may allow teachers of preK through 2nd grade to use universal reading screener results in their teacher evaluations as their alternative growth measure. Given that the TN URS does not have national norms for preK, kindergarten national norms are used for preK instead. TDOE guidance states the use of kindergarten norms for preK "may limit the equity of using [the current TN URS] for an alternative growth measure."

TDOE reported that two other state-approved reading screeners (FAST earlyReading and Star Early Literacy) would have national norms for preK beginning with the 2022-23 school year.

- It does not appear that the early grades reading reports have been prepared annually by TDOE and submitted to House and Senate education committees as required by statute since 2019.⁶ However, TDOE did present an early grades reading report to the SBE's Literacy Study Committee in May 2023. (See PowerPoint at https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/stateboardofeducation/documents/subcommittees/literacy/05-15-23/20230515_Literacy%20Study%20Committee%20Presentation%20FINAL.pdf)

The statutory requirement for the early grades reading reports remained part of the law when the 2021 Literacy Success Act revamped much of the Tennessee law that deals with early grades literacy (*TCA* 49-1-901 et seq.). Since 2019, the law has required the annual reports to include:

- statewide 3rd grade reading scores,
- testing procedures used to evaluate reading proficiency,
- number of students retained in grades K-3,
- number of reading specialists in each LEA,
- types of reading intervention or enrichment programs offered in each LEA, and
- information on statewide reading initiatives.

Some of this information is provided by TDOE in other locations and formats, such as 3rd grade reading TCAP scores, but other information has not been reported, such as the number of students retained in kindergarten through 3rd grade or the types of reading intervention or enrichment programs offered in each district. Given the newer requirements under the TLSA and the passage of other requirements impacting literacy, the General Assembly may have sufficient information on early grades literacy efforts across the state and may no longer need the type of report envisioned in the 2019 amendment. Additional literacy-related actions include:

- the 2021 passage of the Literacy Success Act and its requirements for districts to submit literacy skills plans detailing their literacy curriculum and intervention efforts and its requirement for the state to produce landscape analyses on the status of several elements of literacy instruction across the state,
- the 2014 implementation of the Response to Instruction and Intervention framework for students who are struggling in reading or math, and
- the 3rd grade retention and promotion law based on TCAP reading scores that became effective in 2022-23.

The General Assembly may wish to either eliminate the early grades literacy report required in *TCA 49-1-907* or clarify when it would like its education committees to receive such a report.

Endnotes

¹ Public Chapter 3, 2021 1st Extraordinary Session. Sections 1 through 3 have been incorporated into *Tennessee Code Annotated* at 49-1-901 through 49-1-909, revising the Tennessee Literacy Initiative Act of 1999. Other sections of Public Chapter 3 were codified as 49-5-5619 and 49-1-302(d)(2)(B).

² Public Chapter 717, 2022, codified as *TCA* 49-1-910.

³ State Board of Education Rule 0520-01-03-.15(1).

⁴ *Tennessee Code Annotated* 49-1-905(d) and (e).

⁵ *Tennessee Code Annotated* 49-1-905(f).

⁶ *Tennessee Code Annotated* 49-1-907.

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