

State Data Use Strategies: Tennessee

Challenge: How do we identify meaningful alternative student outcome measures for State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) Phase III reporting to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the absence of grade 3–8 testing results?

Without the availability of 2015–16 school year state assessment data to establish a baseline, the Tennessee Department of Education (TDE) faces significant challenges in evaluating and reporting the effects of its first year of SSIP implementation. This state spotlight presents two potential options proposed by TDE to address the challenge.

State Context

The state-identified measurable result (SiMR) for Tennessee Part B focuses on increasing the English language arts (ELA) achievement of students with specific learning disabilities in grades 3–8 as measured by the annual state assessment. Beginning in the 2015-16 school year, TDE planned to implement a new state test for mathematics and ELA that assessed different content and skills (e.g., problem solving, critical thinking skills) and used a different testing platform than in previous years. The results were intended to serve as the baseline for the SSIP as the 2014–15 school year test results would not be comparable to results of the new assessment. Unfortunately, issues with the vendor responsible for supplying the state assessments forced TDE to suspend all student testing in grades 3–8 during initial implementation.

Public School Facts: Tennessee

Districts: 144
Schools: 1811
Students: 995,982
Students with individualized education programs: 14%

TDE recently announced that Questar Assessment, a national vendor for large-scale assessments, will develop and administer the new 2016–17 school year Tennessee state assessment. Improved results on statewide ELA and mathematics assessments is a cornerstone of the Tennessee State Strategic Plan and work in

other divisions across TDE. Performance on the state assessment also is the evaluation metric outlined in the State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG), which is being used to supplement the work outlined in the SSIP. Implementation of the SPDG is set to begin in the 2016–17 school year. TDE considered delaying SSIP-related activities until the 2017–18 school year to establish a baseline using the 2016–17 school year data. However, TDE does not believe in delaying activities that can improve outcomes for students, especially when the issue is related to the evaluation of, not the access or implementation of, the SSIP coherent improvement strategies.

Potential Strategies

Given its alignment with department-wide outcomes outlined in the state's strategic plan, TDE chose not to change the source of data outlined in the SiMR. As a result, TDE is considering two possible options for collecting data and establishing a baseline that accurately captures ELA achievement for students with learning disabilities in grades 3–8.

Option 1: Create a crosswalk between all progress monitoring data collected by districts participating in the first cohort and develop baseline measures that could be akin to statewide assessment results. This would require developing (1) a unified measure of progress across all progress monitoring tools used by the participating districts and (2) a way to calculate improvement across the school year. Currently, districts are able to select any available progress monitoring tool. However, if districts use one of these TDE-approved tools—easyCBM, AIMSweb, and DIBELS—they will be fully reimbursed for the cost of the subscription. Although this approach would not provide baseline data for a new state assessment, it would provide formative data that would allow TDE to evaluate whether initial implementation of the SSIP coherent improvement strategies resulted in improved student outcomes, as measured by the progress monitoring tool chosen by the district.

Option 2: Utilize the 2016–17 school year assessment results as the baseline data. For this option, TDE would implement one of the two phases of its SSIP coherent improvement strategy and collect baseline data in the same year. Although easier than Option 1, it would not provide an initial baseline, which would prevent TDE from evaluating the initial impact of Year 1 activities. It would, however, align with the state strategic plan and SPDG evaluation activities. Full implementation of SSIP coherent improvement strategies would not take place until the 2017–18 school year.

Both of these strategies connect to the state context in that they provide solutions to baseline data issues while not overhauling the data points stated in their SiMR. Indeed, this is something TDE wants to avoid in light of the importance that

statewide assessment results play in the state's overall plan. In addition, these strategies encourage work on the SSIP to continue despite the barriers related to assessment results. TDE wants to ensure that support to districts that can yield positive results and outcomes for students is not delayed due to the aforementioned challenges.

During September 2016, TDE surveyed district personnel, advisory councils, parents, and other stakeholder organizations to gather feedback about the two approaches. Based on responses from 39 stakeholders, TDE selected Option 2 as the best option and will use the 2016–17 statewide assessment data to establish the baseline. In addition, TDE will continue to use progress monitoring data provided by districts to monitor short-term and intermediate outcomes.

Considerations for States Facing Similar Challenges

- Understand the need to address problems related to data in a manner that does not delay opportunities to implement coherent improvement strategies designed to support districts, educators, and students.
- Remember that the SSIP is a working document; therefore, it is allowable to make modifications to the plan as long as they are justifiable and reasonable.
- Engage invested stakeholders who are directly impacted by the work. Stakeholder groups offer a unique perspective and may have significant contributions regarding potential pitfalls related to suggested solutions.
- Be honest with all stakeholders about the situation and transparent in the work being done.

Available Resources:

- National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI), Technical Assistance State Facilitators
- NCSI Data Use Team Technical Assistance Support
- IDEA Data Center State Liaison
- IDEA Data Center Interactive Institute (<https://ideadata.org/ii2015/>)

About this Resource: This resource was developed by members of the NCSI Data Use Service Area Team, including Tessie Bailey (AIR), Kristin Ruedel (AIR), Laura Kuchle (AIR), and Lou Danielson (AIR) in collaboration with Rachel Wilkinson, Director of Data Services, Tennessee Department of Education. The content was developed under cooperative agreement number #H326R140006 (NCSI) from the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government. Project Officers: Perry Williams and Shedeh Hajghassemali.