



TENNESSEE EDUCATION COMMISSIONER PENNY SCHWINN: "When we are able to measure student growth and learning through statewide assessments, we are able to best focus our efforts and student supports."

A Q&A on the Value of Student Assessments This School Year

In a follow-up to an [interview](#) with Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey on the importance of collecting statewide summative student assessment data this spring, the Collaborative for Student Success reached out to other state officials who have been leading on data collection to guide efforts to accelerate learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tennessee Education Commissioner Penny Schwinn agreed to share her department's rationale on moving forward with state assessment this year – and how the state plans to use the data to benefit schools, parents, and students. This discussion comes after Tennessee lawmakers [passed legislation](#) pausing much of the state's test-based accountability system, and after Schwinn defended the administration of tests, saying "It's important to know how our kids are doing, and it's important for our families to know."

Collaborative: Why are you committed to the administration of statewide testing this year and the use of collected data to help guide educational recovery efforts in Tennessee schools?

Commissioner Schwinn: *We know student assessments help families and educators get an accurate picture of what our students know, where there are opportunities for growth, and how they can best support students. Moreover, we owe that level of honesty and transparency to our families to ensure they can better partner and support their child's growth and progress.*

Simply put, when we are able to measure student growth and learning through statewide assessments, we are able to best focus our efforts and student supports. We're tremendously grateful to share that priority and understanding with both the Governor and Tennessee General Assembly, and as we support districts in their strategic ESSER [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund] spending, we want to ensure we have that critical roadmap for responsible investments.

Collaborative: How do you envision your staff and the Tennessee Department of Education using the data you collect this year to make decisions about what's next for public schools in Tennessee?

Commissioner Schwinn: *Tennessee's accountability system is central to the academic progress made in the state over the last decade and provides a critical view of how well educators, schools, and districts are serving all students. Our team relies on the data to support strategy, best practices, and implementation across all our districts. Only with that information can we strategically invest money, time, and energy that our students and communities deserve. Understanding where our students are at this year will continue to provide critical insights to our state, districts, and educators as we tackle those learning gaps head-on.*

Collaborative: How were you, other education leaders, and advocacy organizations in Tennessee able to reach broad agreement on the importance of statewide testing this year?

Commissioner Schwinn: *Tennessee is fortunate to have an active, committed group of education stakeholders who share the same belief of the importance of statewide testing this year. We know those honest conversations about data and growth are essential to move the needle further, farther, and faster than has occurred before.*

Collaborative: Some of your counterparts had sought to seek a blanket testing waiver from the Education Department, which the Biden administration has said it won't do. Do you believe that would have been good policy? Would such waivers have led to increased pressure on you and your counterparts to suspend testing?

Commissioner Schwinn: *Regardless of USDoE action, Tennessee will hold the line on assessments because we owe that level of reporting and transparency to our taxpayers and communities. Districts and educators need a roadmap for strategic, responsive supports. Moreover, parents deserve clear, easy-to-understand information about how their child and their child's school is performing.*

That being said, we also know the COVID-19 pandemic has created the need for common-sense flexibilities regarding student grades, educator evaluations, and school and district accountability. Tennessee's hold harmless legislation ensures we can maintain priorities for honest reporting while also recognizing this year has been anything but normal, and our education community has been impacted as result.

Collaborative: Should the federal government be offering waivers for state accountability systems while requiring that the tests are still administered to every student? Do we need the data if not for accountability?

Commissioner Schwinn: *In Tennessee, we appreciate the Governor and General Assembly's commitment to hold harmless for the 2020-21 school year, removing any negative consequences associated with evaluations and accountability, when districts meaningfully participate in state assessments. On Jan. 21, the Tennessee General Assembly took action by passing the Accountability Hold Harmless Law (SB7001/HB7003) to hold schools, teachers, and students harmless from negative consequences resulting from the 2020-21 TCAP assessments. This law excludes student growth data generated from this year's TCAP assessments from a teacher's evaluation unless such inclusion results in a higher overall final evaluation score for the teacher. In turn, that means assessment scores would only be incorporated into evaluations or accountability measures if it benefited the teacher, school, or district. We want to reward the tremendous work of our educators, districts, and students who grew despite the challenges and disruptions of the year. Further, we want to have an accurate roadmap for the 2021-2022 school year.*

Collaborative: Should districts simply be able to decide which test to administer this year, rather than the TCAP? Why is it important that the statewide test be administered on top of any local testing?

Commissioner Schwinn: *Statewide tests are essential for that continuity and understanding of growth over time. Though we value that local decision-making, we can't compare dissimilar tests and varied assessments district to district. TCAP provides us the accurate picture of where Tennessee students are and what supports are needed to offset any learning loss. Further, it gives the state a clearer sense of the areas of opportunity and growth we can foster and support across regions.*



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