TENNESSEE: STATE STRATEGY BRIEF

Ed Trust-Midwest fact sheet about lessons from leading education states

By no means has Tennessee yet reached the heights of a national education leader like Massachusetts. But its recent and dramatic improvement signals the beginning of a turnaround for the state. Ten years ago, Tennessee ranked well below Michigan in fourth-grade math. In 2013, Tennessee ranked 37th compared to Michigan’s 42nd. Today it is leading the nation for the highest student improvement in some key subjects. Tennessee’s strategies are similar to Massachusetts’ early efforts to improve its teaching and learning. For more information, please see ETM’s 2014 State of Michigan Education report.

TENNESSEE – STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Ask Tennessee leaders what they have done to turn around the state, and its leaders attribute the progress to:

- Strong state leadership;
- A research-based, comprehensive statewide reform effort with a focus on improving teaching quality;
- Sustained investment in implementation through multiple years;
- Input from educators, particularly from the field.
- Alignment between key stakeholders, from educators to student advocacy groups and the business community.

EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Tennessee has put a laser-like focus on effective teaching and school leadership. In particular, it has made educator evaluation and improvement a major priority.

- The state created an educator evaluation system. All teachers are evaluated based on classroom observations and student learning data. Tennessee has trained 5,000 evaluators in the system.
- Tennessee developed one of the nation’s first value-added data systems. Data are released to educators to help educators analyze the results and use the information to inform their instruction and target professional development.
- Tennessee also established smart policies, including: kept individual evaluation results private, required multiple observations of classroom practice, and surveyed tens of thousands of educators on how implementation of the new system was going.

CAREER- AND COLLEGE-READY EXPECTATIONS FOR ALL K-16 STUDENTS

Tennessee state leaders have taken numerous steps to raise academic standards for all students in all grades and to ensure that state assessments are aligned to those standards.

- Tennessee adopted the Common Core State Standards and stronger graduation requirements, including additional math credits and capstone projects determined by local school boards.
- Tennessee phased in the Common Core standards over multiple years, starting with math in grades 3-8 and a pilot of English standards in 60 school districts. The state invested $15 million to train teachers and develop content aligned to the standards.

- The state also engaged higher education institutions to create a statewide master plan aimed at increasing educational attainment for all Tennessee residents. The plan addressed workforce & economic development needs, increased college attainment and access. It also promoted higher education collaboration across institutions.
- The Tennessee Stem Innovation Network worked to improve STEM education.

SUPPORT FOR ALL TEACHERS

Both accountability and support are central to the state’s strategy on effective teaching.

- Instead of leaving training on new standards to local districts, Tennessee spearheaded state-led efforts to ensure that teachers understood the instructional shifts required of career- and college-ready standards.
- The state identified more than 700 teachers with strong learning gains and trained them to be Common Core coaches who work with teachers across the state. More than 70,000 educators have received training.
- Tennessee was a leader in building data systems to track and inform teaching and learning. A pilot early warning data system has enabled educators to see real-time indicators of at-risk student progress.
- The state also developed a Pre-K through higher education (P-20) longitudinal student data system.

CHARTER SCHOOL LANDSCAPE

- In Tennessee, where less than 2 percent of students are enrolled in charter schools, local school boards and the achievement school district may authorize charter schools. The authorizing power of the achievement school district can be revoked by the legislature and governor. The state board of education may authorize charter school applications sponsored by local school boards.
- For-profit school operators have been outlawed in Tennessee.
- An interim review of a charter school must be conducted by its authorizer in the fifth year of a charter school’s initial period of operation and also in the fifth year following any renewal (10 year total contract agreement). Guidelines require progress in achieving goals and pupil performance standards.
**ENDNOTES**