

# DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

## TOP-TO-BOTTOM REVIEW - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### OVERVIEW:

The Department of Education's Top-to-Bottom Review examined the department's existing structure, responsibilities, and methods of operating to determine the efficiency and effectiveness of its work, and to recommend changes to enhance the department's ability to lead and support increased student achievement across the state.

With the help of a dedicated transition team, department officials spent the summer gathering information on the department's current activities, and reviewed best practices from high-performing states, districts and schools. From that research, and visits with 50 school district leaders statewide, Commissioner Kevin Huffman created an ambitious strategic plan to guide the department toward greater support of school districts, and ultimately, higher student achievement in Tennessee.

The strategic plan lays out four key priorities for the department, including: expanding kids' access to effective teachers and leaders; expanding families' access to good schools; expanding educators' access to great resources and best practices; and expanding the public's access to information and data. These priorities are undergirded by three core beliefs: we must be an effective state agency that serves as a delivery system to local school districts; we must have policies that remove bureaucracy and unleash innovation; and we must operate with an ethos of continuous improvement through measurement at every level.

We have recently reorganized the department to ensure our organizational structure is designed to carry out these key priorities and operate according to the core beliefs. Under our new structure, the main divisions of the department are: an Academic Division comprised of three subdivisions, Career and Technical Education, Curriculum and Instruction, and Special Education and Special Populations; Data and Communications; District Support, including an Office of School Innovation; Policy and Legislation, including State Operations; Teachers and Leaders; and the Achievement School District.

### HIGHLIGHTS:

- Fully staff the Field Service Centers and shift their focus to leading student achievement for the districts in their region, as well as continuing the traditional functions of support and monitoring compliance.
- Ensure we are fully prepared for Common Core assessments in 2014-15, by engaging deeply in the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Governing Board and launching gradual implementation of Common Core standards and assessments over the next few years.
- Work with businesses to understand the core academic and technical training they need in their future employees; partner with industry, universities, and professional organizations to create and deliver strong content in Career and Technical Education (CTE) coursework; and align CTE coursework with Common Core standards.
- Ensure all staff members at the department have clearly-defined job descriptions as well as team- and individual-level goals aligned to our top-line goals and strategic priorities. All employees will be evaluated annually, in part based on state-wide student achievement data.

# TOP-TO-BOTTOM REVIEW

## DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

### INTRODUCTION:

The Department of Education (TDOE) is charged with dramatically raising the level of student achievement across the state of Tennessee. The department is directly responsible for the education of students in pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade across the state's 136 school districts and 1700 schools. Our vision is to be the fastest improving state in the nation in outcomes for students.

We have recently reorganized the department to ensure our organizational structure is designed to carry out the key priorities and operate according to the core beliefs generated through our Top-to-Bottom Review process. Under our new structure, the main divisions of the department are: an Academic Division comprised of three subdivisions, Career and Technical Education, Curriculum and Instruction, and Special Education and Special Populations; Data and Communications; District Support, including an Office of School Innovation; Policy and Legislation, including State Operations; Teachers and Leaders; and the Achievement School District.

### APPROACH/METHODOLOGY:

The Department of Education's Top-to-Bottom Review examined the department's existing structure, responsibilities, and methods of operating to determine the efficiency and effectiveness of its work, and to recommend changes to enhance the department's ability to lead and support increased student achievement across the state.

After Commissioner Kevin Huffman was appointed in April, 2011, he formed a 12-member transition team to assist him in quickly getting up to speed on the work taking place across the state. Members of the transition team conducted substantial research into the current state of education in Tennessee; interviewed staff members across the department; engaged in discussions with 50 of 136 local school districts to learn about the department's ongoing activities; and conducted a comprehensive assessment of current and planned Race to the Top initiatives and projects. Finally, the transition team synthesized findings into a comprehensive strategic plan to guide our work for the next several years, culminating in four key priorities for the department: expanding kids' access to effective teachers and leaders; expanding families' access to good schools; expanding educators' access to great resources and best practices; and expanding the public's access to information and data. These priorities are undergirded by three core beliefs: we must be an effective state agency that serves as a delivery system to local school districts; we must have policies that remove bureaucracy and unleash innovation; and we must operate with an ethos of continuous improvement through measurement at every level.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

**Recommendation 1:** Support districts in hiring great teachers by offering tools and data.

**Discussion:** Teacher quality plays a critically important role in student achievement. We want to be able to support districts in hiring great teachers, particularly smaller systems that may not have dedicated staff capacity for this function. We will support districts by offering interviewing tools and best practices, and sharing data reported by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission on the quality of different teacher preparation programs.

**Recommendation 2:** Expand recruitment and support for district hiring of effective principals.

**Discussion:** We know that some districts are interested in additional support in this area and have limited capacity to recruit and hire school leaders. We will support them by conducting a leader supply and demand study to understand the landscape across the state and by creating statewide principal candidate database. Interested teacher leaders and assistant principals could opt into the database, providing them with additional opportunities for school leadership and providing directors with much more information about potential candidates than they currently have.

**Recommendation 3:** Expand reach of effective teachers and leaders by leveraging technology.

**Discussion:** Currently, great teachers and less effective ones are likely to reach the same number of students over the course of their careers. We want to ensure that the most effective teachers can reach more students by leveraging promising pilots such as the distance learning initiatives taking place in northeast Tennessee.

**Recommendation 4:** Fund up to six STEM Platform schools across the state to enhance science, math, and technology education.

**Discussion:** Science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) are critically important areas for jobs of the future. We will enhance STEM education and problem-solving skills by funding up to six platform schools across the state that will serve as models of quality instruction and innovation.

**Recommendation 5:** Create the STEM Innovation Network in partnership with Battelle Memorial Institute.

**Discussion:** The STEM Innovation Network is modeled after a similar initiative in Ohio and will help ensure that we can spread the learning and best practices of the STEM platform schools to other schools across the state. The Innovation Network will consist of six regional hubs, co-located with the six platform schools.

**Recommendation 6:** Create and execute a comprehensive plan to transition to Common Core standards, led by a new Curriculum and Instruction Division within the department.

**Discussion:** Common Core standards represent the next crucial step in ensuring students in Tennessee are learning material at the level of rigor needed to compete regionally and nationally. The new division of Curriculum and Instruction is planning and designing training, tools, and best practices to support educators through this transition.

**Recommendation 7:** Ensure Tennessee is prepared for the transition to Common Core assessments in 2014-15 by deeply engaging in the PARCC governing board.

**Discussion:** The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) is a consortium of states working together to create assessments aligned to the Common Core standards. These new assessments will be fully implemented in 2014-15. Commissioner Huffman is a member of the PARCC governing board, and through our deep engagement, we will ensure we are prepared for the transition to these new assessments.

**Recommendation 8:** Ensure strong content in Career and Technical Education (CTE) coursework that reflects future employment opportunities and is aligned with common core standards.

**Discussion:** We believe deeply in the importance and potential of CTE, and want to ensure that CTE programs consistently prepare students for future endeavors, both academic and professional. To do so, we will work with businesses to understand the core academic and technical training they need in their employees, partner with industry, universities, and professional organizations to create and deliver strong content, and will ensure CTE coursework is aligned with Common Core standards.

**Recommendation 9:** Provide real-time student performance data for teachers by building an early warning data system.

**Discussion:** The early warning data system will use several research-based indicators to provide teachers and school leaders with detailed data on students at risk of falling behind academically or dropping out of school. The system is based on data already collected by the state, with future plans to add additional pieces of data.

**Recommendation 10:** Create and disseminate training module on use of value-added growth data to modify/improve classroom instruction.

**Discussion:** Data is an essential tool for continually increasing effectiveness in education. Tennessee is fortunate to have a very strong value-added growth data system (the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System, or TVAAS), but value-added data is complex and can be challenging to understand. We have created a training module to help ensure teachers can access and effectively use their data to improve classroom practice, and plan to distribute the module broadly.

**Recommendation 11:** Build and continue to grow a strong Electronic Learning Center.

**Discussion:** The Electronic Learning Center is a powerful, virtual source of professional development that can be accessed by teachers from any location with internet access and at their own convenience. The Electronic Learning Center already includes many materials and we are continuing to add to and develop its resources.

**Recommendation 12:** Build and use a P-20 data system to inform policy decisions in education and across state government.

**Discussion:** The P-20 data system is an opportunity to link important databases across agencies in order to inform policy decisions. TDOE is already partnering with the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) to build the system, to ensure that we can connect academic achievement data from pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade with data on post-secondary education as well. We are also in ongoing conversations with other agencies to consider the birth

through pre-Kindergarten data that might affect academic achievement and also consider workforce trends and how they relate to achievement data.

**Recommendation 13:** Design and publish more useful report cards on schools, and help distribute report cards regarding teacher and principal preparation programs.

**Discussion:** We have applied for a waiver from certain provisions of No Child Left Behind with the U.S. Department of Education. If approved, we would seek to redesign our report card to ensure the data we provide is better aligned to our ultimate goals of ensuring growth in academic achievement each year, and closing achievement gaps for groups of students who are furthest behind. We also want to help disseminate useful data on teacher and principal preparation programs, including the report card that THEC already produces on the quality of teacher preparation programs. At all levels, we want to ensure that data is easily understandable and accessible, and therefore can be used to facilitate decision-making among all constituents.

**Recommendation 14:** Support principals evaluating teachers through the statewide teacher evaluation model in implementing the model with fidelity and providing teachers with the resources to improve.

**Discussion:** For principals and district leaders using the statewide Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM), as opposed to an alternative model, we are supporting them in implementing the model with fidelity by providing access to data, providing consultants who are available to co-observe with school leaders and otherwise assist them, and ensuring they have professional development resources to provide teachers, including an online portal and the Electronic Learning Center.

**Recommendation 15:** Support districts interested in using strategic compensation to attract and retain effective teachers.

**Discussion:** Some districts in Tennessee have already begun implementing strategic compensation models as a way of recruiting and retaining effective teachers, and others are interested in doing so. Each district currently implementing strategic compensation is using a different model based on local needs. We will continue to study the most effective elements of the diverse models, support implementation, and coordinate with external researchers to ensure we can learn best practices to be shared with other districts interested in using strategic compensation.

**Recommendation 16:** Create a statewide principal training academy

**Discussion:** There are approximately 200 principals hired annually across the state. The training academy would allow new school leaders to receive training and professional development to quickly get up to speed in this critical role.

**Recommendation 17:** Partner with Colorado to examine and streamline paperwork and rules and regulations required of teachers and schools at the federal, state, and local levels.

**Discussion:** Spearheaded by Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee and Senator Michael Bennet of Colorado, this initiative will study the paperwork, rules, and regulations required of teachers and schools, and trace these back to their original sources to determine if they are really

necessary and if they can be consolidated or streamlined. The ultimate goal would be to reduce unnecessary bureaucratic burden on teachers and schools.

**Recommendation 18:** Consolidate teacher and principal preparation program approval, licensure, and evaluation into one team focused on teacher and leader quality.

**Discussion:** We have established a new division dedicated to Teachers and Leaders, which will focus on all elements related to attracting, developing, and retaining effective educators. The Teachers and Leaders division will ensure that previously disparate functions will be better connected and aligned towards this goal of ensuring high-quality teachers and leaders.

**Recommendation 19:** Establish a research and evaluation team to analyze data, study what works, and surface best practices.

**Discussion:** We believe that we must continue to improve at every level of the education system each year, and that this continuous improvement will be driven by measurement and data analysis. The research and evaluation team within the department would coordinate with external researchers to ensure we can learn as much as possible from their studies, and also would conduct research internally to ensure we are using data to inform all of our decisions and identify best practices.

**Recommendation 20:** Fully staff the Field Service Centers and shift their focus to leading student achievement for the districts in their region, while also continuing traditional functions.

**Discussion:** The nine regional Field Service Centers across the state have traditionally focused on monitoring compliance and providing support for district leaders. We want to shift their focus to leading student achievement for the districts in their region, while also continuing these important traditional functions, and will fully staff them for this dual purpose.

**Recommendation 21:** Ensure all staff members at the department have clearly-defined job descriptions and goals, and are evaluated annually, in part based on student achievement results.

**Discussion:** In order to be an effective organization, we will ensure that every staff member has a clearly defined job description reflecting current responsibilities, and has team-wide and individual goals that are aligned to the department's top-line goals and strategic priorities. In addition, we believe that the ultimate measure of success of our efforts as a state education agency is improvement in student achievement results. Therefore, all staff members will be evaluated annually, in part based on state-wide student achievement results.