

Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I am Dr. Candice McQueen, and I serve as the education commissioner for the great state of Tennessee. I am honored to be here to testify with my colleagues from Louisiana and New Mexico about how states are leading to improve education across the country.

I have had the opportunity to oversee both the extensive stakeholder engagement on our plan to implement the Every Student Succeeds Act and the ultimate development of what I believe is one of the best ESSA plans in the country because of the way it empowers our schools to serve all of our students and meet their individual needs.

I want to first start by commending your leadership in establishing a law that empowers states and keeps a strong focus on equity. ESSA will ensure that all students have a chance to receive a world-class education from their neighborhood public school. The bipartisan leadership of Tennessee's own Sen. Alexander and Sen. Patty Murray on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is an excellent example of how all of us can collaborate on making our public systems better for those we serve.

In Tennessee, ESSA has allowed us to build on what is working in our schools and provided the opportunity to maximize our efforts. Through this new law, we believe we have the flexibility we need to work with stakeholders at the state and local levels to do what is best for the kids in Tennessee, and it holds us accountable for the outcomes in our schools and how we spend every federal dollar to achieve an equitable education for every child.

Shortly before you passed ESSA, we announced our new strategic plan, which we call *Tennessee Succeeds*, which set a vision and framework for strategic planning within our districts, so they are aligned to the goals of the state. We used the flexibility provided in ESSA as an opportunity to continue to solidify the work in *Tennessee Succeeds* and go even deeper. Now that we have an approved ESSA plan, that deeper work begins. With this background, I want to share with you four ways that Tennessee's ESSA plan is empowering innovation and equity for our 1 million students.

- First, we are empowering families and expanding students' opportunities through our accountability systems, in particular through ensuring all students are ready for their next steps when they graduate.
- Second, we are building on what we have learned about school improvement and have created a multi-tiered continuum that allows us to tailor the intervention based on the unique needs of that school.
- Third, we are affirming what has shown success in Tennessee while innovating on what we have learned so we can go deeper in key areas – like better supporting teacher leaders and principals and recruiting a diverse workforce.
- And finally, we are continuing the conversation with Tennesseans and with our stakeholder communities so they are championing our students and collaborating with our schools on implementation.

Let me share more on each of these.

1. First, we are empowering families and expanding students' opportunities through our accountability systems, in particular through ensuring all students are ready for their next steps when they graduate.

We are providing families and community members with easy-to-understand and transparent information about their neighborhood public school, which helps everyone play a role in ensuring we are providing a high-quality education for every student that equips them to choose their path in life. We are doing that through a dashboard that will provide an A-F letter grade on several metrics that capture the fuller picture of what is happening at a school. In addition to students' achievement and growth, we are looking at their access to and success in courses like dual enrollment, dual credit, AP and IB, as well as their opportunities to earn job-ready, high-quality industry certifications. Because of ESSA, we can now provide a more complete picture of students' performance and look beyond a single test score. We are also looking at students' opportunity to learn by sharing more about chronic absenteeism and out-of-school suspensions. And, we are highlighting our English learners' performance. All of those metrics – and student subgroups' performance on those metrics – encompass the overall accountability system for each school.

Today, I want to talk about one of these metrics in particular. While we have always focused on the whole child and rewarded both achievement and growth, our new accountability system allows us for the first time to put an innovative, new emphasis on the opportunities students have to prepare for their next step after high school. We call this the Ready Graduate indicator, and it is already changing the conversations at the district and school level. We want every school to offer a diverse portfolio of early postsecondary opportunities, including dual enrollment, dual credit, AP, IB, CLEP, Cambridge International Exams, and industry certifications. Early postsecondary opportunities allow students to earn college credits while in high school, become familiar with postsecondary and industry expectations, develop confidence and skills for success after high school, make informed postsecondary and career decisions, and decrease the time and cost of completing a certificate or degree. Specifically, our data in Tennessee shows us that students who have access to these opportunities are more likely to be successful after graduation. Our data highlights that students who complete at least four early postsecondary opportunities look similar to the students who earn at least a 21 on the ACT – meaning, they have at least a 50 percent chance of earning at least a B in credit-bearing course work in college – and this means less remediation, less time to postsecondary completion, and a stronger likelihood of success.

The Ready Graduate indicator captures what it means to equip students for life after high school. Students can be deemed “ready” by meeting any one of four criteria: earning a 21 or higher on the ACT, taking four early postsecondary courses, taking two early postsecondary courses and earning an industry credential, or taking two early postsecondary courses and earning Tennessee's designated score on the military entrance exam. Because the Ready Graduate indicator puts a focus on ensuring all students have access to a variety of opportunities, our district and school leaders are now examining and expanding their offerings – and having deeper conversations about which students are taking these courses and how to ensure every student has access. I believe this will dramatically – and rapidly – create more opportunities and more pathways for students in high school.

We are particularly well-positioned to do this because of the strong vision Tennessee has set on having 55 percent of Tennesseans equipped with a degree or certificate by 2025. Over the past few years, there has been tremendous enthusiasm and alignment across the state to help us attain that goal – through nationally celebrated programs that expand access to college like Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect, and through deeper connections to industry and the workforce. Now, ESSA provides us with an opportunity to further that alignment through K-12 – so we can make sure that students not only have access, but that they also achieve success in postsecondary because of the education they have received throughout elementary, middle, and high school. The flexibility that ESSA provides allowed us to tailor our approach to this goal so we could fully align to our state’s vision.

2. Second, we are building on what we have learned about school improvement and have created a multi-tiered continuum that allows us to tailor the intervention based on the unique needs of that school.

A key change under ESSA is that Congress has empowered state and local leaders to find and use the best evidence-based practices for each unique school and community context.

Tennessee has been at the forefront of school improvement for some time, which has created a unique opportunity to learn about what turnaround efforts are most successful in our schools. With our First to the Top state legislation and support from subsequent federal grants, we created both the state-run Achievement School District and district-led Innovation Zones, which allowed for systemic changes to how we support our lowest-performing schools. Tennessee-specific case studies have shown us that our most successful turnaround schools have a high-performing leader, deep and daily focus on aligning instruction to our rigorous academic standards, and attention to school-specific wrap-around services that support the variety of students’ non-academic needs.

Five years later, the overall performance of our Priority schools (those in the bottom 5 percent) has improved, the Shelby County iZone and Achievement School District both show bright spots, and the Achievement School District this year had the third largest gains in the state in its graduation rate. But we also know we have more room for improvement, and through our ESSA plan, we are doubling down on our focus in this area.

We are establishing a new office of school improvement that will oversee a continuum of various turnaround options and supports. Every school in the bottom 5 percent will receive an evidence-based intervention, which we are able to uniquely support thanks to the Tennessee Department of Education’s in-house research team and our partnership with Vanderbilt University to create the Tennessee Educational Research Alliance. The school improvement continuum also provides clear criteria for entrance and exit for each intervention track. Depending on a school’s unique circumstances and performance, as well as the results of our analysis about the root causes and issues at play, a school will be placed in an intervention that best meets its students’ needs. Our ESSA work has created a renewed focus on our lowest performing schools across the state, and just simply reinvesting time and focus on school improvement over the past year and a half has spurred districts to action – even when we are talking about schools that have been in need of improvement for over 15 years.

Additionally, under ESSA, we are taking a more nuanced approach in how we identify targeted support schools, which we call Focus schools, given that these schools are to be identified specifically because they have consistently underperforming student groups. We will identify Focus schools based on the individual performance of all six federally recognized racial and ethnic groups present in Tennessee, including Asian, Black, Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Native American, and White students, provided the student count for the specific racial/ethnic group meets the n-size of 30. Additionally, we will also analyze the performance of a combined racial/ethnic student group that allows us to capture an additional 43,000 students who would otherwise not be included in our accountability system given their low population at their school. We will also look to see how well each school serves English learners, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students. If they are not serving any one of these student groups well, they will receive the most intense, tailored support from our office of school improvement.

It is important to us that we hold our schools accountable for the performance of their historically underserved student groups. We have included a combined racial/ethnic group given that we have number of schools that do not have a sufficient number of students within an individual racial/ethnic category to be held accountable for the performance of that group alone – but the school still serves a significant number of historically underserved students if we look across all racial/ethnic groups.

An example is Camden Junior High in Benton County. There are 31 total students across three individual racial/ethnic groups, so it can be held accountable for all 31 students under the combined group. But it only has 19 Black/African-American students, 11 Hispanic students, and one Native American student – none of which are high enough counts to be included in our accountability system. Because of the combined racial/ethnic group, Camden Junior High is now held accountable for the performance of these students.

Overall, there are 212 schools in Tennessee that can be held accountable for their Black/African-American students as part of a combined racial/ethnic student group but which do not have sufficient numbers of students to be eligible for a Black/African-American-*only* subgroup. Additionally, 460 schools can be held accountable for Hispanic students as part of a combined group but do not have sufficient numbers of students to be eligible for a Hispanic-*only* subgroup. However, we recognize the power that comes in unmasking the performance of individual racial/ethnic groups. In addition to disaggregating for each racial/ethnic group in identifying targeted support schools, we will also publicly report the performance of every individual racial/ethnic student group, provided it meets an n-count of 10. This will equip educators, parents, community members, and advocates to hold each school accountable for how they serve every child.

We believe all of these approaches will help to shine a spotlight on all students' performance and drive a conversation about the needs of individual students, which is our goal, and we are doing more than ever to ensure that ALL students, particularly historically underserved students, are making progress.

3. Third, we are affirming what has shown success in Tennessee while innovating on what we have learned so we can go deeper in key areas – like better supporting teacher leaders and principals and recruiting a diverse workforce.

Our ESSA plan allows us to affirm the importance of the foundation of our K-12 education system: high standards, aligned assessments, and accountability ensure every student receives a world-class education – and these are the areas of work that have made Tennessee the fastest improving state in the nation. By doing so, we can unleash our schools’ creativity and innovation to go further. Under ESSA, districts have more funding flexibilities, and we are equipping them with a coordinated spending guide to think about how they can maximize their resources to invest in their priorities and most effective programs. ESSA empowers them to explore blended learning and competency-based learning models that will allow them to further personalize learning for students, as well as micro-credentials that will allow them to personalize learning for educators. Our ESSA plan allows high-performing districts additional opportunities for innovation through our earned autonomy model, which will include incentive grants for exemplary districts that would promote expansion of promising practices at the local level.

Additionally, Tennessee’s ESSA plan notes how we intend to better support our teachers and leaders in new ways, especially through our Title II resources. This fall, we announced we will use Title II, Part A funds to create principal residency models that establish more pipelines for aspiring school leaders to become equipped to effectively take the helm. We have also invested in grants for districts to think creatively about targeting efforts to recruit and educate teachers in high need licensure areas and efforts to improve educator diversity and how they will better ensure students have opportunities to learn from teachers with a variety of backgrounds, including those like theirs. All of this is possible because we have a strong foundation from which to build. Ensuring that Title II is fully funded is also critical for Tennessee’s ESSA plan to be successful, and I am appreciative that the Senate Appropriations Committee agreed to maintain funding for Title II next year.

4. Finally, we are continuing the conversation with Tennesseans and with our stakeholder communities so they are championing our students and collaborating with our schools on implementation.

In developing our ESSA plan, we built on what is working in Tennessee and across the country: taking the best ideas from the field, utilizing ESSA’s new autonomy and flexibility where appropriate, and demonstrating how we will move forward in key policy areas. Our overarching goal was to develop a state plan through robust stakeholder engagement that reflects the great gains made in Tennessee and that outlines the path forward under the new law, so there is momentum and buy-in across the community that can ensure strong, successful implementation.

Because of the flexibility provided under ESSA, Tennesseans were able to provide feedback that could be incorporated into the plan. Over the course of a year, we conducted multiple feedback loops with dozens of stakeholder groups and thousands of community members, ranging from the Governor, the Tennessee State Board of Education, legislators, school districts, educators (including district and school administrators, principals and school leaders, charter representatives, specialized instructional personnel, classroom teachers, librarians, special education teachers, and other staff), advocates, state department staff, city and county officials, business leaders, parents, students, and the public at-large on specific policies.

We crisscrossed the state to hold dozens of in-person opportunities to learn more and share ideas, we established several working groups with representatives from every education community to help

determine the content for key sections, and we provided online webinars and surveys – including surveys in other languages – to gather more feedback. More than 1,000 community members attended our town halls, and 2,000 comments were shared online. Representatives from every school district provided feedback. We also partnered with key community-based and advocacy organizations, like the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE), Conexion Americas, and the Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition, to ensure we conducted outreach with those communities who have historically been underserved. National organizations like the Council of Chief State School Officers and Chiefs for Change provided opportunities for us to share our experiences and learn from other states, and those forums have allowed us to model our successes and highlight Tennessee at the national level.

We continually provided public updates as we revised and refined our plan based on thousands of comments, including through creating status reports, social media moments, graphics, videos, and handouts, and we specifically pointed out how stakeholder feedback was driving our plan. And, both our stakeholders and department officials conducted dozens of interviews with media outlets, so outlets ranging from the Tennessean to the Maryville Daily Times were constantly sharing what Tennessee is doing through ESSA and highlighting a variety of voices in the process.

Ultimately, we have an education stakeholder community that is uniquely engaged, informed, and excited about our ESSA plan. Our expectation is for this engagement to continue, and the department is actively planning for future opportunities to continue the conversation and developing additional resources that will support strong implementation. This will be particularly important as we now move forward on all of the work I just highlighted – rolling out a new school accountability system that provides a clear A-F grade on a variety of metrics, providing more early postsecondary opportunities for students, turning around our persistently low performing schools, highlighting the performance of our student subgroups so we can support them better, and empowering districts to go further – and much more. Even better: our stakeholders see this as their plan based on their ideas – because it is.

Thank you again for crafting a law that recognizes the important role that all of us play in supporting our students. I ask you to continue to support the federal government’s role in ensuring that states hold high standards for all students, which is critically important to ensuring every student receives an equitable education, while also allowing states to have the autonomy to determine what that looks like. We have embraced the innovation that ESSA offers us in Tennessee – and we have used it as an opportunity to ensure that we are doing more than ever for every child.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our ESSA plan and describe how we will use it to continue to build on the success we have experienced in Tennessee while never settling but always learning, growing, and innovating.