Tennessee Department of Education Names 2018 Reward, Priority Schools
School designations are first to be released under new accountability plan; 20% of schools earn Reward status

NASHVILLE—Education Commissioner Candice McQueen announced today the 2018 Reward and Priority schools, which are two key designations under Tennessee's school accountability system. This was the first year Tennessee implemented its new school accountability model, which was developed with educators and stakeholders across the state and which looks at multiple measures of success.

Reward status is the top distinction a school can earn in Tennessee. Reward schools are those that are improving overall student academic achievement and student growth for both all students and for student groups, and they are identified annually. In 2018, 318 schools in 85 school districts – about 20 percent of schools in the state – earned Reward status.

Priority schools are identified at least every three years, and they are the schools most in need of support and improvement. Priority schools fall into the bottom 5 percent of schools in the state test scores over the past three years and have low graduation rates. Following legislation passed this spring, 2017-18 TNReady data was not used to identify Priority schools. The 2018 Priority list includes 82 schools across eight districts, and these schools are now eligible for additional funding and will be supported by the department in developing a plan to improve.

"In this first year with our new system, it is incredibly encouraging to see more than 300 of our schools are earning Reward status for how they are supporting our students' academic achievement and growth," Commissioner McQueen said. "At the same time, we see a number of places where we need to improve. Our new school improvement model takes a student-focused, evidence-based approach to tailor interventions for our Priority schools, and we will be working closely with these schools over the coming year to improve academic outcomes and strengthen whole-child services that support student success."

Tennessee's new school accountability system was developed through a 16-month process of gathering feedback and hearing input from students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. Tennessee has designated Reward and Priority schools since 2012, but this was the first year with an updated methodology as required by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. As part of federal requirements, the plan was submitted to and approved by the U.S. Department of Education.

The new accountability framework is based on principles that all schools can be successful and all Tennessee students must be served well. It includes a variety of measures, including chronic absenteeism and discipline, ACT performance, and TNReady scores, to make a determination, and all schools are rated both on how they serve the full student population and how they are specifically serving student groups that have historically been underserved: students with disabilities, English learners, economically disadvantaged students, and black, Hispanic, and Native American students. This fall, the department will publish more information about how all schools perform on these measures as part of a new school dashboard.

As part of Tennessee's new accountability plan, all Priority schools will move into an evidence-based school improvement model, ranging from district-led plans to intervention by the state's Achievement School District. Further, to support Tennessee's lowest performing schools, the state has invested $20 million into school improvement over the last two years. This funding is specifically devoted for Priority schools.

To view the full list of 2018 Reward and Priority schools, visit the department's website (here).

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