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OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY

## TENNESSEE SCHOOL NURSES: SALARIES AND BENEFITS



**FEBRUARY 2020**



**TARA BERGFELD**  
*Principal Research Analyst*

**CASSIE STINSON**  
*Legislative Research Analyst*



**JUSTIN P. WILSON**  
*Comptroller of the Treasury*

# Introduction

In May 2019, Senate Education Committee Chair Gresham and Representative Kumar requested that OREA determine the practice and frequency of local education agencies (or school districts) categorizing school nurses as “classified” or “certified” employees, as well as, if possible, the costs to districts and the state to categorize school nurses as certified employees.

The premise of the request, based on testimony heard in the House Education K-12 Subcommittee in February 2019, is that districts compensate school nurses, both in salary and in benefits, at inconsistent or disparate rates compared to other district positions that require a professional license, such as teachers.

Some school districts include registered school nurses in their salary schedules and benefits structures as certified instructional employees (like teachers), while some districts designate school nurses as classified employees, meaning their pay and benefits structures are grouped with non-licensed support staff. Additionally, some districts choose to place school nurses on a salary schedule for nurses only. Because this designation is determined at the local level and varies by district, OREA surveyed districts to determine how many designate school nurses in either the “certified,” “classified,” or “nurse schedule” categories.

OREA received pay scale details from 90 school districts and detailed salary information on 612 nurses from 56 districts. OREA also reviewed state law, State Board of Education (SBE) rules, and Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) policies concerning school nurses, and interviewed stakeholders at both the state and local level, including school district officials and school nurses. For the purposes of this report, OREA analyzed salary schedules and pay for school nurses that hold at least a registered nurse (RN) license or higher.

The Basic Education Program (BEP), the state’s education funding formula, provides funding for one full-time school nurse position for each district and generates additional funding for nurse positions based on a ratio of one school nurse position for every 3,000 students.

In 2018-19, the BEP generated funding for 355.02 school nurse positions. That same school year, Tennessee school districts employed 1,734 school nurses. Districts are responsible for funding 100 percent of the salaries, health insurance premiums, and retirement contributions for positions beyond the number generated by the BEP.

The BEP formula funds salaries for school nurses based on the same instructional salary unit cost used for teachers – \$48,330 for fiscal year 2020.<sup>A</sup> Unlike teachers, which are in the Instructional category of the BEP, school nurses are included in the Classroom category of the BEP with classified support positions, such as assistants. On average, the state pays 70 percent toward instructional positions, like teachers, and 75 percent toward classroom positions, like nurses. This affects state funding for districts as shown in Exhibit 1 – i.e., the Classroom category generates a higher percentage of state funding per position than the Instructional category.

**Certified employees** maintain an educational license through the Tennessee Department of Education – e.g., teachers, principals, guidance counselors, librarians.

**Classified employees** are typically support-type positions in a school district – e.g., central office staff without educational licenses, educational assistants, bus drivers, custodial and food service employees.

For salary and insurance purposes, districts determine whether school nurses are categorized as “certified” or “classified” or placed into a nurses-only category.

## Staffing ratios for school nurses

After previously recommending a certain staffing ratio for nurses (one for every 750 students), the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Association of School Nurses now recommend a nurse for every school based on the more complex health needs of today’s students.

In 2018-19, 60 percent of Tennessee’s public schools employed a nurse full time in their school.

<sup>A</sup> The instructional salary unit cost is a dollar figure in the state’s annual appropriations act that drives the amount of funding provided for positions (classroom teachers and others) in the BEP.

**Exhibit 1: State funding for instructional and classroom positions in the BEP**

<b>Teachers and other instructional positions:</b>	
Instructional category: \$48,330 x .70 = \$33,831 state funding per position	
<b>School nurses:</b>	
Classroom category: \$48,330 x .75 = \$36,247.50 state funding per position	
<b>Instructional category</b>	<b>Classroom category</b>
<b>State average 70 percent</b>	<b>State average 75 percent</b>
Regular teachers (K-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12) CTE teachers Special education teachers English learner teachers Translators K-6 Art K-6 Music Physical education (K-4, 5-6) Librarians (K-8, 9-12) Counselors (K-6, 7-12) Supervisors (Regular, special education, and CTE) Special education assessment Principals Assistant principals (K-8, 9-12) Social workers Psychologists Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI)	Nurses Assistants (K-6) Special education assistants (5, 7, 8) Library assistants At-risk Substitute teachers Alternative schools (K-12, 7-12 + CTE) Duty-free lunch Textbooks Classroom materials and supplies Instructional equipment Classroom-related travel College readiness exams CTE Transportation Technology

All districts must employ at least one school nurse and, if applicable, must also meet a staffing ratio of one school nurse for every 3,000 students. In 2018-19, all but one school system met the requirement for the 1:3,000 nurse to student ratio. Districts determine whether to employ any additional school nurses and how many. Districts also determine the salary amount paid to school nurses; state law does not set a minimum salary amount for school nurses as it does for teachers.<sup>B</sup>

**Exhibit 2: School nurses degree types and training**

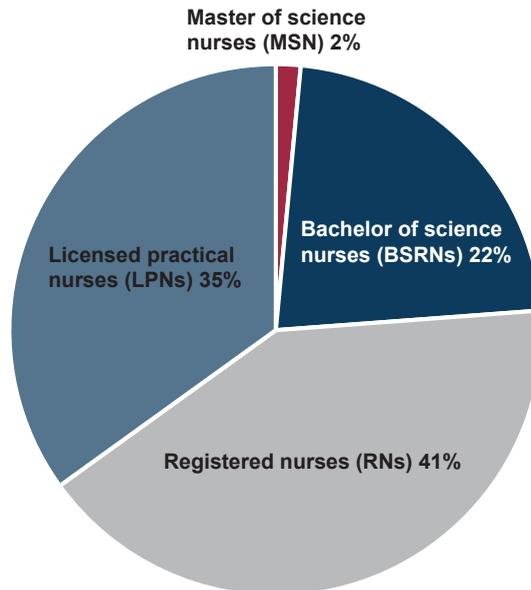
School nurses must retain a professional nursing license through the Tennessee Department of Health but are not required to obtain a separate educator’s license through the Tennessee Department of Education.	
There are four different degree types held by school nurses.	
<b>Degree type</b>	<b>Training</b>
<b>Licensed practical nurse (LPN)</b>	One-year diploma for an LPN license from an accredited practical nursing school, such as a community college or TCAT
<b>Registered nurse (ASRN or RN)</b>	Associate degree from an accredited Nursing RN program, such as a community college
<b>Bachelor of Nursing (BSRN)</b>	Four-year bachelor’s degree from an accredited Nursing RN program at a university
<b>Master of Science in nursing (MSN)</b>	Additional 2+ years for a master’s degree from an accredited nursing program at a university

<sup>B</sup> State law requires the State Board of Education (SBE) to set a minimum salary amount for teachers – \$36,000 for starting teachers for the 2019-20 school year.

### Tennessee school nurses by degree type, 2018-19

State law does not require school nurses to hold a certain degree (e.g., RN, BSN, etc.), but TDOE’s Guidelines for Healthcare in a School Setting describes several activities that must be performed by RNs, who must at least hold an associate degree in nursing from an accredited nursing RN program.<sup>1</sup> Such activities include triaging, assessing students, interpreting clinical student data, developing individual health plans, and making decisions regarding the nursing care provided to students.<sup>2</sup>

In 2018-19, about 65 percent of school nurses held at least an RN license, while 35 percent were licensed practical nurses (LPNs).



Source: Tennessee Department of Education, email, Oct. 30, 2019

School nurse RNs are also responsible for supervising and delegating appropriate tasks to any licensed practical nurses (LPNs) employed by the district.<sup>3</sup> The scope of practice for RNs and LPNs is not interchangeable; LPNs do not have as much training as RNs and are not allowed to write an individualized health care plan for students, though LPNs can assist RNs with specific health tasks.<sup>4</sup> LPNs must receive appropriate annual training and demonstrate competency on the specific tasks they perform.<sup>5</sup> State law also permits school nurse RNs to delegate some tasks under certain conditions to other school personnel, such as a teacher, principal, or school secretary.<sup>6</sup>

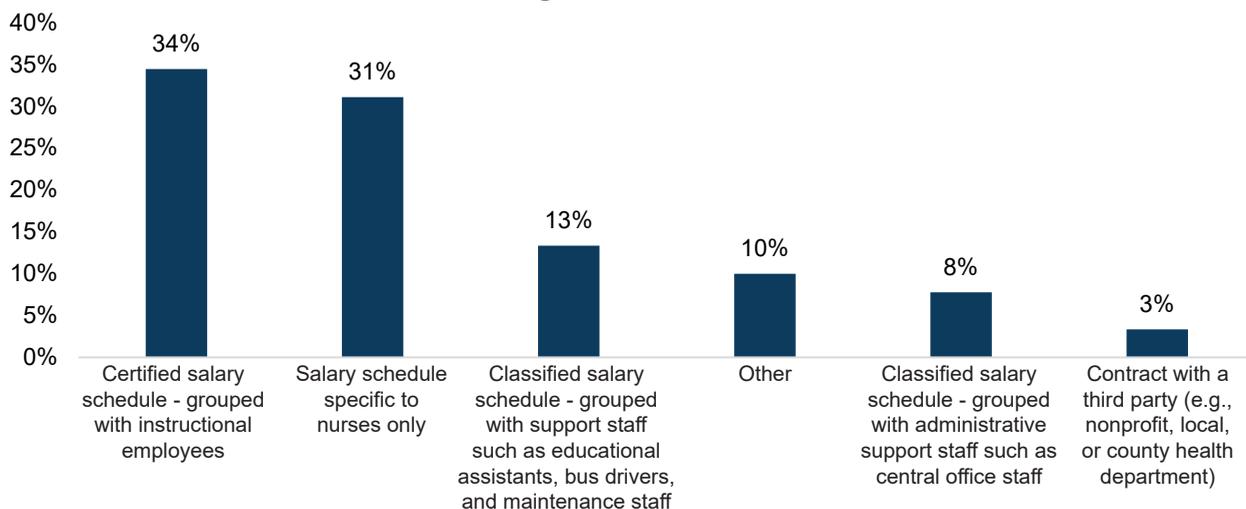
BEP funding is generated for “school nurses” and does not account for degree level.

## School districts determine how school nurses are categorized for salary purposes. The cost to categorize school nurses as certified employees for salary purposes varies by district.

Approximately one-third of districts (31 districts) that responded to a 2019 OREA survey indicated school nurses are already categorized as certified employees. Employees on a certified salary schedule, like teachers, are paid based on years of experience and degree level (known as “steps and lanes”), and/or performance evaluations.

Around one-fifth of responding districts (19 districts) categorize school nurses as classified employees, either grouping them with support staff such as bus drivers and maintenance staff or with administrative support positions like central office staff. Approximately one-third of responding districts (28 districts) do not categorize school nurses as certified or classified. These districts instead use a salary schedule specific to school nurses.<sup>C</sup>

**Exhibit 3: District classifications of registered school nurse salaries**



Note: Percentages do not equal 100% due to rounding.  
Source: OREA school district survey, summer 2019.

Depending on the availability of funding each year, certified employees have traditionally been able to anticipate an annual salary increase based on their district’s approved salary schedule. Employees on a classified schedule or a schedule specific to nurses only may or may not follow the same progression for increased pay with each year of service.<sup>D</sup>

For example, in Exhibit 4, District A uses a traditional salary schedule for its certified employees and a separate, classified schedule for its school nurses and other medical personnel. The pay schedule for teachers increases gradually with each year of experience, while the nurses schedule provides the current year’s pay schedule but not a projection for future years based on experience.

<sup>C</sup> The category of “Other” was used for districts with unclear responses; 10 percent of responding districts fell into this category. Three percent of districts indicated they contract with a third party (e.g., nonprofit, local health department) to provide nursing services in schools.

<sup>D</sup> Whatever the salary schedule, the projections for increased pay with years of experience are dependent on available funding and district budget decisions.

**Exhibit 4: Traditional teacher salary schedule and classified schedule for school nurses in sample Tennessee School District A**

<b>Traditional salary schedule for certified instructional employees</b>							
<b>Years of experience</b>	<b>Bachelor's degree</b>			<b>Master's degree</b>			
0	\$36,000			\$39,605			
1	\$37,206			\$39,766			
2	\$37,307			\$39,867			
3	\$37,428			\$39,976			
<b>Classified schedule for school nurses</b>							
<b>Job title</b>	<b>Hours per day</b>	<b>Days per year</b>	<b>Gross pay per</b>				<b>Eligible for benefits</b>
			<b>Hour</b>	<b>Day</b>	<b>Paycheck</b>	<b>Year</b>	
Nurse/medical	7.00	185	\$13.79	\$96.54	\$893.01	\$17,860.25	Yes

Exhibit 5 displays the classified schedule used in a different sample district. District B's schedule for nurses includes a projection for increased pay by years of experience, but, unlike the certified schedule used for teachers, the schedule maxes out at the fifth year while the certified schedule goes to step 20.

**Exhibit 5: Traditional teacher salary schedule and classified schedule for school nurses in sample Tennessee School District B**

<b>Traditional salary schedule for certified instructional employees</b>					
<b>Years of experience</b>	<b>Bachelor's degree</b>			<b>Master's degree</b>	
0	\$37,429			\$40,113	
1	\$38,585			\$41,311	
2	\$38,595			\$41,319	
3	\$38,684			\$41,411	
<b>[Additional years between 3 and 20 not shown]</b>					
20	\$47,223			\$52,551	
<b>Classified schedule for school nurses</b>					
	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Registered nurse</b>	<b>\$26,106</b>	<b>\$27,201</b>	<b>\$28,330</b>	<b>\$29,444</b>	<b>\$30,573</b>

In Exhibit 6, District C uses a salary schedule specific to RNs. The annual salary growth for RNs is scheduled to increase about 8 percent from year zero to 22 years of experience. By comparison, licensed instructional positions, such as teachers, have a growth potential of about 40 percent from year zero to 22 years of experience.

**Exhibit 6: Traditional teacher salary schedule and classified schedule for school nurses in sample Tennessee School District C**

Years of experience	Nurse (RN) schedule	Certified schedule for licensed instructional with a bachelor's degree	Annual difference
0	\$34,906	\$39,371	13%
1	\$34,998	\$41,147	18%
2	\$35,088	\$41,560	18%
3	\$35,180	\$41,974	19%
22+	\$37,776	\$55,145	46%
<b>Percent increase</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>40%</b>	

Other districts include limited “steps” for pay increases by years of experience for their nurses. For example, District D in Exhibit 7 uses a salary schedule specific to nurses that does not schedule a raise for nurses with more than six years of experience.<sup>E</sup>

**Exhibit 7: Limited steps for nurse salary schedule in sample Tennessee School District D**

Licensed Practical Nurse			Registered Nurse (BSRN)		
Step	Annual	FY20 Hourly	Step	Annual	FY20 Hourly
0	\$29,526	\$17.83	0	\$41,218	\$24.89
1	\$30,222	\$18.25	1	\$42,874	\$25.89
<b>Step 0:</b> 0-5 years of school nurse experience <b>Step 1:</b> 6 years or more of school nurse experience					

The legislative request for this OREA study specified that the costs to districts and the state to categorize school nurses as certified LEA employees should be addressed, if possible. Salary information provided by districts to OREA in summer 2019 shows cost factors to consider relative to categorizing school nurses as certified employees.

<sup>E</sup> Nurses may be eligible, based on district discretion, for other pay increases such as cost of living raises or merit-based pay increases.

## Districts already paying school nurses on a certified schedule

Approximately one-third of the 90 districts that responded to OREA’s 2019 survey reported that they already pay their RN school nurses on a certified instructional salary schedule.

**Exhibit 8: Sample districts that pay school nurses using a certified instructional salary schedule**

Positions	Years of experience	Annual nurse salary	District’s pay on the certified salary schedule for BS degree	Difference
<b>District E</b>				
<b>Nurse 1</b>	15	\$48,663	\$46,663	\$2,000
<b>Nurse 2</b>	16	\$49,196	\$47,196	\$2,000
<b>District F</b>				
<b>Nurse 1</b>	19	\$49,715	\$48,715	\$1,000
<b>Nurse 2</b>	22	\$51,305	\$51,305	\$0
<b>Nurse 3</b>	25	\$52,990	\$52,990	\$0
<b>Nurse 4</b>	30	\$54,945	\$54,945	\$0
<b>Nurse 5</b>	30	\$54,945	\$54,945	\$0
<b>Nurse 6</b>	33	\$56,260	\$56,260	\$0
<b>District G</b>				
<b>Nurse 1</b>	3	\$40,192	\$40,192	\$0
<b>Nurse 2</b>	12	\$46,155	\$46,155	\$0

Source: OREA school district survey, summer 2019.

## Districts paying school nurses on a classified or nurse-only schedule

Approximately 52 percent of responding districts group school nurses with classified employees or on a nurses-only salary schedule. For most of the nurses included in Exhibit 9, the change to a certified salary schedule would mean an increase in pay. For example, the cost to increase pay for the nurses employed in District H to match the published rates on the district’s certified salary schedule would be approximately \$10,000, while in District I it would be \$35,000, and in District J it would total about \$3,000.

**Exhibit 9: Comparison between actual nurse pay and districts' certified salary schedules for sample districts**

<b>Positions</b>	<b>Years of experience</b>	<b>Annual nurse salary</b>	<b>District's pay on the certified salary schedule for BS degree</b>	<b>Difference</b>
<b>District H – salary schedule specific to nurses</b>				
<b>Nurse 1</b>	2	\$35,938	\$37,039	(\$1,101)
<b>Nurse 2</b>	9	\$36,739	\$41,183	(\$4,444)
<b>Nurse 3</b>	14	\$37,511	\$44,114	(\$6,603)
<b>Nurse 4</b>	14	\$43,647	\$44,114	(\$467)
<b>Nurse 5</b>	15	\$43,647	\$44,759	(\$1,112)
<b>Nurse 6</b>	17	\$48,913	\$45,174	\$3,739
<b>Total</b>				<b>(\$9,988)</b>
<b>District I – salary schedule specific to nurses</b>				
<b>Nurse 1</b>	5	\$27,481	\$44,855	(\$17,374)
<b>Nurse 2</b>	6	\$27,481	\$45,530	(\$18,049)
<b>Total</b>				<b>(\$35,423)</b>
<b>District J – classified schedule grouped with support staff</b>				
<b>Nurse 1</b>	22	\$46,352	\$49,740	(\$3,388)
<b>Nurse 2</b>	24	\$50,987	\$50,740	\$247
<b>Total</b>				<b>(\$3,141)</b>

Source: OREA school district survey, summer 2019.

Districts receive the same amount of state funding for school nurse salaries regardless of how school nurses are categorized at the local level. The BEP formula funds salaries for school nurses based on the same instructional salary unit cost used for teachers – \$48,330 for fiscal year 2020.<sup>F</sup>

Costs associated with a recategorization of school nurses as certified employees would vary by district based on numerous factors. Such factors include the number of school nurses employed by the district and the difference between scheduled salaries for certified employees and the actual salaries for school nurses in each district. The licensure level of a district's school nurses (e.g., whether they possess a bachelor's degree) and whether they are full-time or part-time employees are still other cost factors for districts to consider. LPNs and ASRNs (RNs with associate degrees) do not have the same level of education as certified instructional positions, and certified salary schedules have traditionally been used for full-time employees on a 180-day or 200-day contract.<sup>G</sup>

<sup>F</sup> The instructional salary unit cost is a dollar figure in the state's annual appropriations act that drives the amount of funding provided for each instructional position (classroom teachers and others) in the BEP.

<sup>G</sup> For the purposes of this report, OREA analyzed salary schedules and pay for school nurses that hold at least a registered nurse (RN) license or higher. This report examines the difference between school nurse salaries and the pay rate listed on districts' certified salary schedules. A comparison of the pay disparity between individual nurses and individual teachers with the same years of experience in the same district would require additional data and analysis.

Funding to cover increased costs resulting from districts' recategorizing school nurses as certified employees could come from the state (e.g., changing the nurse funding ratio in the BEP formula to generate additional funding for school nurses) and through increased local funding, or both.

## **School districts determine how school nurses are categorized for health insurance purposes. The cost to categorize school nurses as certified employees for health insurance purposes varies by district.**

State law does not specify how districts should categorize school nurses for health insurance purposes. Little statewide data is available on how each district categorizes school nurses for health insurance purposes, and how much districts contribute toward school nurse health insurance premiums. A 2019 OREA report on teacher salaries found that the amount a district contributes toward its employees' health insurance premiums varies greatly from one district to another.<sup>7</sup> The Tennessee Education Association (TEA) collected district/employee cost sharing data in the past, which TDOE used to inform the annual calculation of insurance costs for each district. TEA was unable to collect this data for the 2018-19 school year, however.

A portion of the 31 districts that indicated school nurses are categorized as certified employees for salary purposes may also classify school nurses as certified employees for health insurance purposes. Districts that do not classify school nurses as certified employees for salary purposes are unlikely to do so for health insurance purposes.

Regardless of how school nurses are classified at the local level, districts receive the same amount of state funding for insurance. The BEP funds the state share of insurance premiums for all nurse positions generated through the formula at 45 percent, the certified rate. Districts receive the same amount of state funding for health insurance for school nurse positions as for classroom teachers – \$5,065.38 per position in fiscal year 2020.

Whether a district categorizes school nurses as certified employees may have implications for the local share paid toward health insurance premiums. The state's annual appropriations act sets the percentage that districts are required to pay toward instructional and support staff employees' health insurance premiums each year. Districts must pay at least 45 percent of the monthly premium for instructional employees and at least 10 percent of the monthly premium for classified employees.<sup>8</sup> Recategorizing school nurses as certified employees would mean an increase in the local contribution rate in those districts currently paying less than 45 percent toward school nurses' health insurance premiums.

The costs associated with a recategorization of school nurses as certified employees for health insurance purposes would vary by district based on numerous factors. Such factors include the number of school nurses employed by the district and the difference between the amount currently contributed by a district toward health insurance premiums for school nurses and what the contribution rate would be after recategorizing school nurses as certified employees. How to account for part-time school nurses should also be considered. Districts that responded to OREA's 2019 survey indicated that all full-time school nurses, regardless of salary schedule, are eligible for health insurance benefits while less than 20 percent of part-time school nurses are eligible.

## Districts must categorize school nurses as certified employees for retirement contribution purposes.

State law and the BEP consider school nurses to be certified positions in terms of district and state contributions for retirement; thus, the discretion districts have regarding school nurses' salaries and health insurance premiums does not extend to their retirement benefits.

In 2014, officials with the Tennessee Consolidated Retirement System (TCRS) noticed inconsistencies across districts in how nurses were categorized for retirement contribution purposes. Some districts paid retirement contributions for nurses at the certified rate, like teachers, while others paid at the classified rate, like support staff. TCRS notified districts that state law requires nurses to be categorized as teachers for retirement funding purposes.<sup>1</sup> TCRS instructed districts to enroll all new nurses in the retirement system as teachers and encouraged districts to begin reporting existing nurses as teachers if not already doing so.<sup>1</sup>

Until fiscal year 2020, the BEP formula calculated state funding for nurses' retirement for TCRS as non-certified positions. In FY 2020, the Department of Education changed the BEP formula so that state funding for nurses' retirement would be calculated at the certified rate going forward, consistent with TCRS's definition of nurses as teachers.

### Exhibit 10: Retirement rates for certified and non-certified personnel in the FY 2020 BEP

Certified Personnel		Non-Certified (Classified) Personnel	
FICA	7.65%	FICA	7.65%
TCRS	10.30%	TCRS	7.54%
<b>Total</b>	<b>17.95%</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>15.19%</b>

Source: OREA, FY2020 BEP Calculator.

The cost to fund retirement at the 10.30 certified rate for the 355.41 school nurse positions generated by the BEP for fiscal year 2020 was \$307,000 in state dollars and approximately \$168,000 in required local match dollars.

<sup>1</sup> *Tennessee Code Annotated* 8-34-101(49)(a) defines a teacher as any person employed in a public school, as a teacher, librarian, principal, superintendent, or chief administrative officer of a public school system, administrative officer of a department of education, a supervisor of teachers, a reserve officer training corps (ROTC) instructor, or any other position whereby the state requires the employee to be certificated as a teacher, or licensed as a nurse, physical therapist, or occupational therapist in a public school; provided, that any teacher who has taught in the public schools for a period of at least one year who transfers to a position within the Tennessee public school system that does not require a teacher's certificate shall continue participation in the retirement system as a teacher.

<sup>1</sup> School nurses were given the option to remain on their local school district's retirement plan for classified employees following the clarification from TCRS that nurses should be classified as teachers for retirement purposes. Some districts reported to OREA in 2019 that a number of their nurses chose to remain on the local district retirement plan, though the total number statewide is not known. In addition, state law allows part-time employees to choose whether to participate in TCRS. Approximately 20 percent of the 612 nurses included in OREA's 2019 salary survey are considered part-time employees, but OREA was unable to determine how many of these part-time nurses have chosen to receive retirement benefits through TCRS.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Tennessee Department of Education, *Guidelines for Health Care in a School Setting*, April 2019, pp. 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Office of Research and Education Accountability, *Teacher Salaries in Tennessee, 2015-2018*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



**Office of Research and Education Accountability**

**Russell Moore** | *Director*

425 Fifth Avenue North

Nashville, Tennessee 37243

**615.401.7866**

**[www.comptroller.tn.gov/OREA/](http://www.comptroller.tn.gov/OREA/)**