



SNAPSHOT

TN Ready Test Development: Process and Costs

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Several legislators have expressed interest in understanding more about how test questions are developed for Tennessee's annual state standardized tests, known as TN Ready, which are the most recent version of the state's general education assessments under the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP). Areas of specific interest included the public release of test questions and answers after each year's testing is completed and the role universities might play in test development, as well as the costs of developing test questions.

States typically manage statewide standardized testing through contracted vendors. In recent years, Tennessee has contracted with two primary vendors for separate testing responsibilities. In 2019-20, the state contracted with NCS Pearson, Inc. (Pearson) for test administration, which includes scoring and reporting results, and with Educational Testing Service (ETS) for test development. With the expiration of the ETS contract in September 2020, both Tennessee's test development and test administration are now handled by a single vendor, Pearson.

Test development is a collaborative effort by the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) and its contracted vendor, with input from local educators. Although Tennessee's contracts for test development would not prevent a state university from serving as a primary vendor or subcontractor, three states that do contract with public universities for their statewide assessments (Iowa, Kansas, and North Carolina) depend primarily on elementary and secondary educators, rather than university faculty, to develop and review test items.

During school years 2018-19 and 2019-20, more than 900 Tennessee teachers and other educators were involved in some aspect of TN Ready's test development or post-development process. Local educators, representing at least three-fourths of local districts over the past two years, have reviewed test items and reading passages, helped develop scoring criteria for essay responses, assisted in standard setting for new or revised tests, and served as TCAP Ambassadors, who communicate with other local educators and advise on state testing.

In 2018-19, test development expenditures totaled about \$9.2 million, or about one-fourth of the state's total testing program expenditures. Test development costs can vary based on factors such as the number of tested grades and subjects, the frequency and scope of changes in academic standards and test specifications, and the availability of test items for reuse. Of the \$37.6 million total TCAP expenditures in 2018-19, test administration functions accounted for almost three-fourths of the total, and state oversight and administrative expenses accounted for the remaining 3 percent of total spending that year.

Tennessee released 38 percent of operational test items from the achievement tests (grades 3 through 8) and approximately 25 percent of operational test items from high school end-of-course tests in 2018-19. Operational test items are those included in students' final scores and do not include field test items. Test items that have been released cannot be reused in future tests. TDOE has a goal of increasing the percentage of items released, but that goal depends on a robust test item bank of approved, field-tested, standards-aligned items, as well as a budget to create enough replacement items.

A complete discussion of these issues can be found in the full report at tncot.cc/orea.