

Tennessee is taking bold steps to improve VPK quality.

A 2015 Vanderbilt University study found that the disadvantaged children who attended Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) were significantly better prepared for kindergarten than those who did not attend. However, that same study also identified inconsistent quality in VPK classrooms across Tennessee, suggesting that VPK student gains could be significantly more impressive with program quality improvement.

The 2016 TN PreK Quality Act was the Tennessee General Assembly's wise response to the Vanderbilt study findings on the need to strengthen the quality of VPK. The Tennessee Department of Education has responded with an impressive effort to begin shoring up that quality. Success will ultimately depend on significantly improved instructional quality, better data and parent engagement.

- ★ *Pre-k funding is now dependent on quality.* Districts must apply for funds to administer a VPK program. Prior to 2016-17, districts received funds based on formulas that had not changed for years. In 2016-17, the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) instituted a competitive grant process based on quality benchmarks. Districts must now apply for money through this competitive grant process aligned to program quality standards.
- ★ *Pre-k and kindergarten teachers now have a way to measure student growth, aligned to academic standards.* Prior to 2017-18, pre-k and kindergarten teachers' evaluation growth scores were based on whole school or district outcomes. In 2017-18 the TDOE instituted a new pre-k and kindergarten student growth portfolio model. This model helps teachers demonstrate student learning, aligned to priority literacy and math standards, and generates an individual teacher growth score as part of their summative evaluation.
- ★ *Curriculum is being transformed.* The TDOE is updating and significantly revising the state-approved pre-k curriculum list to include only evidence-based high-quality curriculum aligned to early learning and literacy standards. The department is investing in training, materials, and support for VPK districts to implement high-quality curriculum.
- ★ *An evaluation of program quality is in development.* The TDOE is working to implement a valid and reliable assessment tool that will be used to assess pre-k quality improvement efforts beginning in 2018-19. This data is essential for real-time improvement efforts on the quality of programs and child outcomes.
- ★ *School and district leaders are being trained on specific steps they must take to improve quality.* The TDOE is working with partners to deliver a professional development program that helps leaders and coaches in early childhood programs develop the skills they need to lead and support the continuous improvement of teaching quality. The design of the program is specific to Tennessee and is based on district needs and strengths as identified in the new competitive grant application and program assessments.

