Tennessee voucher school students registered lower scores and performed worse on state tests in 2026 than their public school peers. So, what is the Tennessee legislature's solution? Drop the test requirement.

Four years into the Tennessee voucher program, voucher students performed worse on state tests in 2026 than their public school peers. The legislature perfected a solution. The testing requirement for voucher students was discontinued.

Years ago, it was generally believed that there was a private school advantage (i.e) private schools outperformed public schools. Research has shown that when demographics are inserted into the equation, public schools outperform private schools.

The Tennessee voucher project outcomes seem to support that conclusion.

Political officials throughout the nation have the mindset that private is better, even in view of the facts to the contrary.

TN voucher students lag in ELA, math proficiency

- Knoxville News Sentinel
- 20 Aug 2026
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When the Tennessee House approved the state's Education Savings Accounts program by a single vote in 2019, some Republican lawmakers supported the program on the condition that students be required to take the state TCAP exam — so the state could exercise oversight.

The ESA program offers low-income students taxpayer-funded scholarships to attend private schools. Advocates said voucher students coming out of public schools might lag behind academically, but in time their achievement would take off.

Four years in, that hasn't happened. Tennessee students who attended private schools through the state's Education Savings Accounts voucher program performed worse on state tests in 2026 than their public school peers. Fewer voucher students were proficient in math and English this year than were last year, new state data shows.

Just 17% of ESA voucher students met or exceeded math proficiency expectations on the TCAP this year, while 24% met or exceeded expectations in English, according to new state TCAP data obtained by The Tennessean through a public records request.

In public schools, 40% of students — more than twice as many — met or exceeded proficiency expectations in math, while 42% achieved proficiency in English.

Tennessee sorts student achievement levels in four categories, measuring a student's proficiency as "below," "approaching," "meets" or "exceeds" expectations. Under Tennessee's third grade retention law, public school students are required to "meet" or "exceed" reading expectations by third grade, or face retention.

Over the past three school years, the achievement gap between state-funded students attending public schools and private schools gradually widened.

In Hamilton County, ESA students' ELA proficiency has dropped seven percentage points in three years, from 32.2% proficiency to 25.2% proficiency. Public school students there grew slightly, from 39% to 40.3% proficiency this year.

In past years, Shelby has been the only county where ESA students have outperformed their public school peers. But this year, nearly 3% fewer Shelby County ESA participants met or exceeded English proficiency compared to last year.

In a statement to The Tennessean, Education Commissioner Lizzette Reynolds pointed to a 14.6-point reduction in the number of ESA students performing “below expectations” as a sign of the program’s efficacy.

“Students enrolled in the program continue to make meaningful gains on TCAP,” Reynolds said in a statement to The Tennessean. “For example, in 202223, 51.6% of ESA students were performing below expectations in math, compared to 37% performing below expectations in 2024-25.”

Education Savings Accounts participants get about $10,100 to attend private schools in Nashville, Memphis and Chattanooga. To qualify for a scholarship, students must be previously enrolled in public school or entering kindergarten, and their family must have an income of less than $83,590 for a family of four.

Another, statewide school voucher program, Education Freedom Scholarships, offers $7,300 state-funded scholarships for students to attend private schools. EFS recipients have never been required to take the TCAP, though some schools have done so voluntarily.

Test scores aren’t everything. While voucher students have consistently underperformed on the TCAP, parents have said the choice has offered lifechanging opportunities for their children to get out of bullying situations, or access academic opportunities that would otherwise not be financially possible.

This is the last year we’ll have this data.

Lawmakers voted to end required TCAP testing for voucher students this year after a scathing audit of the program.

Josh Cowen, a professor of education policy at Michigan State University, studies school voucher policies and accountability across the country. He said it’s common for school voucher participants to score lower on standardized tests than their counterparts in public schools.

But instead of working to improve achievement results, he said other states have opted to stop requiring state achievement tests for voucher students – just as Tennessee has.

“States have basically done what your state just did – which is stop testing,” Cowen said.

After this year, Tennessee voucher recipients will be able to take any national standard test to measure their academic achievement – but there will be no apples-to-apples comparison to track the voucher recipients’ academic growth.

“When they stop administering the state exam, then the lobby groups and the voucher supporters can just yell about how great it is for everyone and no one calls them out on it anymore,” Cowen said.

Reynolds said that the TCAP is not the only measure of the student’s academic success.

“TCAP provides valuable information about student academic performance, but it is one measure of student learning and program outcomes,” Reynolds said, noting that in the future, other testing options will be available for voucher students.

“The department will continue to evaluate student outcomes and other measures of program success to ensure Tennessee families have access to educational options that are meeting their students’ needs,” Reynolds said.

In her campaign for the Tennessee governor's mansion, U.S. Sen. Marsha Blackburn has pledged to work to expand Tennessee's school voucher programs "until no parent has to win the lottery to have a say in their child's education." Republican legislative leaders have echoed similar commitments.

But without a universal testing requirement, Cowen said, effective state oversight of the taxpayer-funded program will be virtually impossible.

"If these results showed good things, they'd be the first out there in the press conference yelling 'scoreboard!' " Cowen said. "The reason they aren't testing is because they don't want to see the answer."

As lawmakers debated ending TCAP requirement for voucher students this spring, Sen. Jack Johnson, R-Franklin, said requiring the TCAP for the original voucher program was "a mistake." He said the TCAP is "not an accurate assessment for some private schools," because they are not required to follow state standards.

Democrats who opposed the idea said Tennessee should not hold public and private students to different standards.

While nationally normed tests differ, Cowen said all are aimed at testing students' mastery of the subject fundamentals.

"[If] a private school takes a decent nationally normed exam that tests basic arithmetic, you're not going to see a kid perform really poorly on that and then ace the TCAP – or vice versa," Cowen said.

Choosing not to have a like comparison, he said, definitely stifles oversight, but wouldn't necessarily test what students are learning more closely.

A better way to measure a student's academic growth would be to compare students' TCAP scores while in the ESA program to their TCAP scores from prior public school enrollment, Cowen said.

But when that's been done in other states, the results have shown a gap. In 2023, just 14% of students in Louisiana's voucher program met state achievement targets, compared with 24% of low-income students in public schools.

Voucher advocates frequently point to parent satisfaction as the "ultimate metric" of the program's success. Reynolds said 99% of ESA families surveyed by the Department of Education this year reported being satisfied with the program.

Sen. Raumesh Akbari, D-Memphis, who opposed ending the TCAP requirement, pushed back.

"While I do agree parent satisfaction is important," Akbari said, "parent satisfaction doesn't get a child into college or help them get a job: achievement does."

Article Name:**TN voucher students lag in ELA, math proficiency**

Publication:**Knoxville News Sentinel**

Section:**FRONT**

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