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## **Connected Literacy: Engaging Parents as Partners**

For the Education Stabilization Fund Rethink K-12 Education Models (ESF-REM) grant opportunity, Tennessee has identified *Absolute Priority 1 – Continued Learning Parent Microgrants* as an opportunity to address the literacy needs of our youngest learners as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and to engage parents differently as partners and supporters of this critical work. As illustrated in the project Logic Model (see Appendix 6a), Tennessee intends to address the challenges of its persistent low proficiency in early-grades literacy by providing new learning options to its most vulnerable students: students living in poverty, students with disabilities, English learners, and those academically at-risk.

The primary focus of the Connected Literacy project is to provide vital early grades literacy support to Tennessee’s most vulnerable students, resulting in more students becoming proficient readers over the next three years. The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) will offer microgrants to over 13,000 students and their families to access instruction and tutoring grounded in Tennessee’s Foundational Skills Curriculum. Families in rural, suburban, and urban communities across our state will be empowered to select a TDOE-approved provider for remote summer, after-school, and weekend learning supports, along with the technology, access, and supplemental instructional materials needed for students to be successful.

### **CORONAVIRUS BURDEN**

#### **State Burden**

Based on the four indicators in the U.S. Department of Education’s Coronavirus Burden table, Tennessee’s coronavirus burden ranked in the 61st to 80th percentile relative to that of other states.

#### **Significance of Impact of COVID-19 on Students, Parents, and Schools (Application**

### Requirements 3 & 4)

To understand fully how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted our state's students, parents, and schools, it is important first to frame the current state of education in Tennessee. In November 2019, TDOE Commissioner Penny Schwinn released the department's new strategic plan. The "Best for All," plan set priorities for the department in serving Tennessee students, teachers, administrators, and families. The strategic plan was informed by feedback from multiple stakeholders; the commissioner traveled the state throughout 2019, visiting over 75 school districts across Tennessee. "We want to ensure that every student is on a path to success," Schwinn said. "This strategic plan prioritizes the three key areas of providing quality academic programs, serving the whole child, and developing and supporting our teachers and leaders."

In support of this comprehensive strategic plan, on February 3, 2020, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee unveiled in his State of the State address his priorities and proposed budget for the coming year, which provided an additional \$650 million investment in education, including \$68 million investment to help improve early literacy rates. With this budget proposal, Tennessee was poised to address the plateau of student achievement that the state had faced since 2013, when the state had the largest academic growth on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), making Tennessee the fastest improving state in the nation.

Then, in early March, Tennessee experienced seven EF3 and EF4 tornadoes, which destroyed numerous homes, schools, and lives—the second deadliest tornado outbreak in Tennessee history. On March 3, Governor Lee declared a state of emergency for this natural disaster. While in this state of emergency, an increasing number of school districts suspended classes as the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 continuing to increase daily. On March 16, Governor Lee announced that all public schools in Tennessee would close through the end of

month, a decision that would be continuously reevaluated and extended throughout the spring, so that schools would remain closed for the rest of the 2019-20 school year.

As schools closed, Tennesseans began to feel the economic effects of the pandemic. Approximately one half of the state's \$40 billion budget is funded with state dollars; Tennessee does not have a general income tax and, as such, nearly 57% of Tennessee's revenue comes from state sales tax, the second-highest proportion of revenue from sales in the country (Tax Foundation, 2020). Tennessee also has the fifth highest percentage of the workforce (20.3%) working in high-risk industries (Moody's Analytics, 2020). Furthermore, according to data from the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (2020), Tennessee's unemployment rate in April reached 14.7 percent, up from 3.3 percent in March. This staggering drop in labor force is nearly twice the size of the loss from the Recession of 2007 to 2009, affecting jobs in some of Tennessee's largest economic sectors, and disproportionately hurting sectors with lower wages (see Appendix 6b).

As a result, on March 18, Governor Lee presented a revised budget plan that cut most of the education initiatives he announced prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in order to reallocate funds to health and safety issues. On June 4, the Tennessee Senate passed a revised state budget that called for cutting funding by another \$284 million and using millions in reserve funds to help make up for an expected \$1 billion shortfall. Additionally, at the end of May, all state agencies were instructed to identify and plan to implement reductions totaling 12 percent of their general fund state appropriation budget.

Tennessee has had to quickly pivot from intently pursuing an ambitious, new strategic plan, to focusing on meeting the basic needs of districts, teachers, schools, and students and their families. Some of the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic are new, specifically

the ways in which both educators and families have had to adapt to large-scale full-time remote learning. Tennessee educators in both public and private schools have had to fundamentally alter how they do their jobs—providing instruction in new and different ways—while families have faced significant challenges in learning how best to support their students at home. According to surveys administered by the TDOE in early April, both Tennessee educators and families clearly expressed the need for training on virtual learning and guidance for supporting special education students and English learners in these contexts.

While some challenges are new, many of the current needs of Tennessee students are a result of existing issues that have been exacerbated by school closures and a transition to remote learning. As noted in the State Coronavirus Burden table, 14.3% of Tennesseans are without broadband access, above the national average of 12.52%. Indeed, in response to stakeholder surveys Tennessee released in April, an overwhelming number of superintendents (87%) identified connectivity as the primary need for students while 46% of respondents identified device access as a top concern. In alignment with these findings, more than three-quarters of teachers said that technological supports for remote learning (e.g., Internet access and suitable devices) were the most helpful supports needed to promote educational access, noting that access to technology in rural areas was a major concern prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly one-third of our students are in rural school districts, and of Tennessee’s 147 local education agencies, 97 (65.9%) serve fewer than 5,000 students each; in these communities, schools are the hub not only for academics, but also for cultural, social, and health supports for students and families. With schools closed, students and families are unable to access these critical resources. Similarly, the percentage of students aged 5-17 in Tennessee who live in poverty is 19.64%, above the average of 16.5%; Tennessee is ranked 12<sup>th</sup> in the nation for student poverty rates. We

know that students living in poverty experience greater achievement and opportunity gaps than their peers, and students in poverty are also more likely to have parents working lower-wage job that cannot be performed remotely, such as supermarket clerks, warehouse workers, and delivery drivers. Students in poverty are also more likely to have strong, frequent, or prolonged exposure to major traumatic events—namely, a global pandemic that impacts the health and safety of families and causes some to lose their jobs or, conversely, work longer hours more than ever. For some, school is the safest place, providing meals, routine, predictability, and social connectedness (Morsy & Rothstein, 2019; Rothstein, 2020).

With a high percentage of Tennessee students living in poverty, in rural districts, and without broadband internet access; a global pandemic is exceptionally disruptive to student learning. While Tennessee has focused for ten years on literacy initiatives designed to improve outcomes, literacy rates have remained stagnant, even with students in desks in classrooms. On the 2019 NAEP, just 35% of Tennessee’s fourth-graders and 32% of its eighth-graders were proficient in reading, with no significant reading gains since 2013. More troubling, the massive achievement gaps between economically disadvantaged students and their peers have persisted since 1992 in both grade 4 (25 percentage points) and grade 8 (20 percentage points). To estimate the effects of non-classroom based instruction that has taken place since March, the TDOE used Tennessee-specific data to create econometric models; we estimated that proficiency rates in both ELA and math would shrink by 15% and 29% respectively, had the state assessment been administered at the end of the school year. Our models predicted that rural students and younger students would be more severely impacted, a result which matches the predictions made by a recent NWEA study on learning losses, highlighting increased risk for younger students in the area of literacy (Appendix 6c).

Tennessee remains firmly committed to the goals and priorities we identified in November 2019 and to setting all students on the path to success, particularly our most vulnerable students—even in the midst of a global pandemic. What we know, however, is that we now must focus on how to support districts, schools, and students differently in this unprecedented time.

### Actions Taken to Date

In the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the TDOE recognized the need for a landscape survey to understand the needs and priorities of districts, educators, and families. As a result, the TDOE launched a superintendent and public survey on April 3. These surveys received a combined 78,556 responses from both district leaders and Tennessee stakeholders—families, public officials, community members, etc.—about the early effects of the pandemic. Further, the department’s 2020 Tennessee Educator Survey was updated to include additional questions for teachers and school leaders to report on their experiences during this unprecedented time. Over 25,000 educators responded to more detailed questions, and over 10,000 teachers and school leaders provided open-ended comments on the most important resources needed to support students and provide remote learning. This survey data clarified local needs and informed many of the actions taken to date, including Tennessee’s plans for CARES Act funding and how to prioritize other state resources. Since March, the TDOE has utilized new communications strategies, developed resources and trainings, and pursued new grant funding opportunities.

### *Communications*

Beginning in mid-March, the TDOE began hosting superintendent update calls every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday to inform district and charter leaders of critical updates and to

share best practices and guidance on a variety of topics. Three superintendent engagement groups were established and met monthly to give feedback on TDOE priorities, guide the development of COVID-focused resources, and share their regional conversations in the following areas: academics, whole child supports, and educators. In addition, weekly emails were sent, and bi-weekly calls were held with non-public and charter leaders to provide focused support and updates for non-traditional schools.

### *Resources and Trainings*

To date, the TDOE's COVID-19 resources webpage houses 20 toolkits, numerous guidance, and protocols for district and school leaders that are available in English and Spanish. Currently, these tools have over 250,000 views since launching in mid-March. The resources include guidance documents and updates on preparation and planning, closure guidance and FAQ's, school closure toolkits, press releases, federal waiver requests, stakeholder archives, and additional resources.

In June, the TDOE launched a series of reopening guidance, the "Overview Guide for LEAs," a high-level guidance document for local districts. Shortly after, the TDOE released 26 role-specific toolkits focused to assist Tennessee's district and school leaders as they make local reopening plans. The TDOE has continued to update all toolkits after release to reflect updated guidance, district models, and additional protocols. Most recently, the State Board of Education passed an emergency policy and rule on Continuous Learning Plans, and the TDOE has developed the template, rubric, and resources for these plans to ensure that as school reopens this fall in various models, districts are prepared to provide instruction should additional closures become necessary.

To address concerns regarding the number of students who had internet access, district

leaders asked the TDOE to find a way to provide content in distance learning formats. In late March, the TDOE collaborated with teachers throughout Tennessee to create 30-minute ELA and math lessons in grades one through eight. In April and May, Tennessee's six PBS stations began providing learning video content and met a critical need to ensure all students had access to high-quality learning opportunities, regardless of whether or not their home had internet connectivity or capable devices. The video series provided 320 hours of content, and it is estimated that lessons were viewed by over 200,000 students.

The TDOE also partnered with a nonprofit organization, the Governor's Early Literacy Foundation, to provide access to an early learning app, ReadyRosie. The app focuses on delivering modeled moment videos to families, caregivers, and educators through their phones. Modeled moment videos provide sample activities that families can do with children. While just over 10,000 families subscribed, the videos have received significant praise from rural families and caregivers.

The Governor's Early Literacy Foundation also launched a K-3 Summer Reading Program to support 33 rural and distressed counties and includes support for 30,000 students. This program provides six summer books through Dolly Parton's Summer Collection for all rising first, second, and third graders. In addition, some participating districts will also receive book packs delivered to student homes in June. The Scholastic Summer Packs contain 10 fiction and nonfiction books, in addition to title-specific activity sheets to reinforce reading comprehension, as well as family guides with strategies and tips to help parents and caretakers support literacy at home.

Regarding meal services, the TDOE partnered with Hoonuit to provide families with an up-to-date resource to locate the closest meal service sites as schools closed in mid-March. Using

a combination of data from the school nutrition data management systems and other district reported information, the Hoonuit website offered a geo-mapping search function for families to enter their addresses and find all meal service sites in their vicinity, including information on meals being served, times of service, and start/end date of service. The site included 1,591 distribution sites across every region statewide. The site was updated daily during the spring of 2020 and is currently being updated weekly as schools transition to summer feeding sites.

To support school leaders and teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, the TDOE and the University of Tennessee's Center for Educational Leadership collaborated to offer free sessions on topics such as best practices in digital learning, whole child needs, and leading remotely, as well as transforming schools to address student learning needs in the coming academic year. Over 550 principals from across the state have participated in the Tennessee Principal Learning Series, and the ongoing series continues through summer 2020. Similarly, the TDOE partnered with Trevecca Nazarene University to provide free training on digital learning and teaching to all Tennessee teachers via self-paced, online training. This free resource is available June 1 through August 1 and is designed to help teachers develop skills for digital learning in the 2020-21 school year, including how to design classes for remote instruction and use technology to enhance learning outcomes for all students.

Finally, the TDOE has invested \$7 million through three IDEA funding opportunities to address the needs of students with disabilities during the pandemic. First, the IDEA technology partnership uses federal IDEA discretionary funds to support districts in purchasing additional assistive technology and other tools to increase access to services and instruction for students with disabilities during school closures. Second, additional funds to support the provision of compensatory services will also be disbursed to districts July 1 to support the anticipated need

for compensatory services as schools reopen in the coming months. Third, the IDEA innovation grant makes \$1 million available to support Tennessee school districts in implementing innovative ways to remediate for the loss of instruction during school closures for students with disabilities.

### *Grant Funding Opportunities*

Tennessee has also been proactive in seeking grant opportunities to support the state's early grades literacy priority. The TDOE applied for the CSLD grant to support the Tennessee Comprehensive Literacy Plan (TCLP), intended to create sustainable improvements in district and school leader capacity, teacher practice, and pre-K-12 student achievement through regional instructional networks (see Appendix 6d).

## **QUALITY OF PROJECT SERVICES AND PROJECT PLAN**

### Needs to be Addressed by Project (Application Requirement 2)

Over the past several months, the TDOE has taken a number of steps and developed a suite of resources and opportunities to support Tennessee schools and district leaders; the reality, however, is that several significant challenges still exist. The lost learning time due to technology and access issues across our state, especially with our most vulnerable students, will have a lasting impact if technological resources and additional instruction and remediation in reading are not provided to our youngest learners. National and state research identifies third grade reading as a key predictor of later life outcomes (TDOE, 2018; AECF, 2013). As Tennessee's assessment and outcomes data illustrate, if students do not develop strong reading skills in the primary grades, they will most likely continue to have difficulty reading throughout school (Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz, & Fletcher, 1996; Juel, 1988; McNamara, Scissons, & Gutknetch, 2011; Stanovich, 1986).

Tennessee has focused for ten years on literacy initiatives designed to improve outcomes; however, literacy rates have remained stagnant. Historically, initiatives have focused on isolated components of literacy improvement. Through recent comprehensive efforts including the statewide Strategic Plan, the Tennessee Early Literacy Supports Framework, and proposed state legislation, there has been a reinvigorated, statewide effort to improve reading scores. In February 2020, Governor Bill Lee’s State of the State Address announced Tennessee’s Comprehensive Literacy Plan (TCLP), which was intended to create sustainable improvements in district and school leader capacity, teacher practice, and pre-K–12 student achievement. However, the TDOE rightfully had to adjust priorities to meet the emergent needs of schools and districts, leaving many of the state’s literacy goals and plans unmet.

Currently, Tennessee’s Grade 2 assessment is voluntary at the district level; therefore, overall ELA achievement in second grade can vary year to year based on participation. However, since the assessment has been adopted, we have consistently seen that less than one-third of second graders are proficient in ELA by the end of the year: 30.3% in 2017, 27.5% in 2018, and 32.9% in 2019. Only 18% of second graders who were not proficient in 2018 were able to move up to ELA proficiency in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. For economically disadvantaged students, the odds were even lower, with fewer than 14% advancing to proficiency.

Assessment data also show gaps between overall performance and that of several student groups, including Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans; English learners; and students with disabilities (see table below).

<i>Tennessee ELA Proficiency Rates, 2019</i>				
<b>Student Group</b>	<b>Grade 3</b>	<b>Grade 5</b>	<b>Grade 8</b>	<b>High School</b>
All students	36.9%	35.2%	27.1%	32.7%

Black/Hispanic/Native American students	23.1%	21.5%	14.0%	18.4%
English learners	9.5%	19.2%	6.1%	7.2%
Students with disabilities	12.4%	7.7%	3.1%	4.4%

As stated earlier, Tennessee’s performance on the NAEP confirms these trends. The 2019 NAEP found that only 35% of the state’s fourth-graders and 32% of its eighth-graders are proficient in reading, with no significant reading gains since 2013. More troubling, the massive achievement gaps between economically disadvantaged students and their peers have persisted since 1992 in both grade 4 (25 percentage points) and grade 8 (20 percentage points).

The Connected Literacy initiative is designed to focus on Tennessee’s most underserved students, remedy learning loss due to COVID-19, narrow persistent achievement gaps, engage families in early literacy, and provide technology and broadband access necessary to engage young learners.

Approach to Absolute Priority 1 (Application Requirement 1)

The TDOE proposes offering new learning supports through microgrants to over 13,000 students and their families to access instruction and tutoring grounded in Tennessee’s Foundational Skills Curriculum. Families in rural, suburban, and urban communities across our state will be empowered to select a TDOE-approved provider for remote summer, after-school, and weekend learning supports, along with the technology, access, and supplemental instructional materials needed for students to be successful.

*Strategy: Generate approved list of providers meeting standards of instructional quality.*

The TDOE will increase access to high-quality, digital literacy instruction by holding a Request for Proposals (RFP) process to identify program providers who meet specific standards of instructional quality in literacy and who are equipped to offer intervention programs to

increase word recognition, including phonological awareness (syllables, phonemes, etc.) and/or decoding (alphabetic principle, spelling-sound correspondence). In addition, selected program providers will be expected to meet student safety, accessibility, and technology requirements, as well as submit a family engagement strategy as a required element, acknowledging the importance of meaningful engagement and partnership with families. This engagement strategy will include providing resources and supports for parents in phonological awareness decoding, as well as an opportunity to participate in learning with their child—accessible to all parents.

In response to the solicitation, providers must outline program duration, dosage, curriculum, training/qualifications of instructional personnel, technology required for the program (minimum specifications), software required for program participation, grade levels served, objectives, accessibility, and approach to differentiation for students with disabilities and English learners. A program rating guide (akin to a textbook approval rubric) will be utilized to score provider programs, and providers who score at the highest levels will be invited to participate in the Connected Literacy initiative.

Providers will be asked to develop a program that can be offered to children for a flat fee of \$700 during the summer, fall, and/or spring. The flat fee will include the costs of any consumable workbooks or other hard-copy instructional materials that must be mailed to participants, as well as any software needed to participate in the program. Providers may elect to offer fall and spring courses after school or on weekends in synchronous and asynchronous formats to enable greater accessibility. Remote learning options will be provided for small groups of students in 12-week intervals, with cohorts in summer, fall, and spring. We anticipate that each student will complete 36 hours of additional early-grades literacy instruction or remediation across the 12-week sprint, but some programs may meet more or less frequently

during the program implementation windows depending on their cost to implement. In total, we expect the project to result in 493,968 additional hours of learning for our most vulnerable students in recovering and accelerating learning in early-grades literacy.

The TDOE will ensure that all approved providers complete the appropriate training in the state's Foundational Skills Curriculum, as well as develop student eligibility and parent-friendly operational structures to support the instructional program. Providers must agree to proctor a common pre-test for all participating students and a common post-test with all participating students who attended at least 60% of their program. Test results will be submitted to the TDOE within one week of test administration. The TDOE is currently working to select a universal diagnostic through required state procurement processes. This diagnostic will be administered online, and the TDOE will provide explicit training on test administration prior to program initiation. The TDOE will also execute a contract for a Provider Liaison to engage with approved providers on a regular basis to ensure fidelity of implementation of the grant. This liaison will be the primary point of contact for approved providers and will oversee the annual kickoff; train providers on pre- and post- common assessments; ensure TDOE-required trainings are complete; review and recommend program adjustments based on feedback from the provider surveys; and support the Grant Manager on the annual provider renewal process.

We anticipate that, in partnership with providers, the TDOE will be able to offer 25 new remote learning options in Year 1, 30 in Year 2, and 35 in Year 3, including the following types (Application Requirement 1):

- Timeframe: After School, Weekend, Summer
- Grouping: One-on-One, Small Group, Parent-Child

- Content: Focus on Phonological Awareness (e.g., syllables, phonemes), Focus on Decoding (e.g., alphabetic principle, spelling-sound correspondences), Focus on Word Recognition, Focus on Applying Skills within Text
- Mode: Live Video, Interactive Software, Multi-Modal

Various types of providers are eligible to apply, including for-profit businesses; non-profit organizations; institutions of higher education; public, public charter, and non-public schools; and community agencies. Individuals are not eligible to apply. If a family wishes to nominate a provider for the microgrant, they may contact the Family Liaison directly. (The role of the Family Liaison is described in the [Management Plan section](#)). Outreach will be conducted to invite that provider to submit a proposal in response to the next RFP. The TDOE will provide families with written responses to their requests within 30 days. Due to procurement regulations, the TDOE is not able to provide a list of providers who are expected to apply and be approved at this time.

*Strategy: Provide additional learning time for youngest, most vulnerable learners.*

We propose utilizing microgrants to serve children in grades 1-3 in public and non-public schools who have been identified as performing below grade level on literacy assessments and who either (a) attend a Title I or Title I eligible school, or (b) are considered economically disadvantaged through direct certification or free/reduced-price lunch eligibility. Direct certification is the process under which LEAs certify children who are members of households receiving assistance under government assistance programs or who are categorically eligible under homeless, migrant, runaway, foster, or Head Start/Even Start provisions.

Eligible families will be invited to participate each year of the grant, beginning in late February or early March 2021. Families will have four weeks to enroll in the program, either

through an online portal, by calling the Family Liaison, or by mailing or faxing forms (available in multiple languages). When necessary, the TDOE will modify existing operational systems and structures to accommodate microgrants for Connected Literacy. Families will also, using the same format in which they registered, complete a survey regarding their current ability to access technology and broadband and their desired type of program (especially noting their preference for weekday/after school or weekend). Based on this survey, families will have a separate technology award, and the TDOE will offer laptops and internet hotspots to students based on need.

If more families enroll than the program has capacity to serve, a lottery will be held within seven days after the end of the open enrollment period. Each enrolled family will be randomly assigned a number, and numbers will be drawn and announced on YouTube Live so that families may observe the impartial process by smartphone or computer. The lottery will comply with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, codified in 20 U.S.C. § 1232g, with respect to the publication of any list of students' names before, during, or after the enrollment and lottery process.

Awards will be determined, and families will be notified of their microgrant amount (typically \$700 per session, plus up to a \$335 stipend for technology/hotspots). For all seven sessions held during the grant period, the microgrant account will be established within the project period of the grant, and parents will be able to view how much is in their account. Families will use this information to make their program and technology selections. Each program will be described in detail to allow families to make an informed choice. Funds will be transferred directly from the state to the selected service provider. Over the grant period, the TDOE will evaluate data and seek multiple providers for each type of service offering to meet

the needs of families and making appropriate adjustments for subsequent sessions. Families whose children have completed a 12-week session in the program will be asked to write reviews of the program to assist selection for other families.

*Strategy: Facilitate continuous improvement processes in response to student data and family feedback.*

The Connected Literacy project “year” will include three sessions (summer, fall, and spring), enabling approved providers to offer courses during each of the three sessions each year. There will be a provider kickoff and training on the Tennessee Foundational Skills Curriculum prior to the summer 2021 session. The provider training, developed by a vendor selected through an RFP process, will design a virtual training series to allow for participants to complete the training in an “on-demand” format. The modules emphasize phonological awareness theory, how phonics instruction should build from phonological awareness, and the application to text-based practice using decodables. Each video course is 35 minutes to an hour and allows for a provider to require certificates to demonstrate proficiency of its instructors. The training will ensure that all instructors understand and know how to teach the five components of reading science: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Potential providers will be required to pass a performance task to be eligible as a provider.

At the conclusion of the summer, fall, and spring sessions, providers will be required to submit to the TDOE their attendance/usage, student engagement records, student pre/post test scores. After the third session (spring) each year, the TDOE will send providers their data, including student pre- and post-test data, family satisfaction data from surveys administered monthly during each session, and attendance/engagement trends. Providers will be expected to utilize these data to reflect on and improve their program. In order to be renewed for the

following year, providers must submit an action plan addressing any areas deemed underperforming. Approved and renewed providers will be asked to “opt-in” to participate in microgrants each year before the March open enrollment period.

*Strategy: Cultivate feedback loops to ensure family satisfaction.*

The TDOE will develop an annual provider guide/manual that will be made available to teachers statewide at the beginning of each grant year in order to strengthen the alignment between the microgrant supports and classroom instruction, as well as to increase family awareness of the program. The TDOE will release guidance to LEAs to help with communication to families and to guide any enrollment recommendations made at the school level. In addition, social media will be utilized by the Project Leadership Team to help disseminate program information to as many families as possible.

The TDOE will administer family surveys on a monthly basis during program sessions through the approved providers. The providers will support TDOE’s dissemination of the survey to families, and results will go directly to the TDOE. Providers with fewer than 60% of families responding to at least one survey will be required to include an action plan for improving family feedback rates in order to be renewed. TDOE will also conduct quarterly advisory committee meetings with a representative group of families and educators (see [Management Plan Section](#) for details). Finally, providers will be asked to offer feedback on the strengths of the Connected Literacy program as well as areas for improvement through an anonymous survey at the end of each spring session. Further detail on the project activities and timeline is included in the Gantt Chart in Appendix 6e.

#### Strategies for Ensuring Equal Access and Treatment

The TDOE is committed to ensuring equitable access to program participation for

families from traditionally underserved populations; families who are economically disadvantaged; children who are homeless, migrant, runaway, in foster care, or participants in Head Start/Even Start; and who meet one or more of these criteria from non-public schools. To ensure equitable participation, it is important to assess the potential barriers and proactively eliminate and/or mitigate those barriers. One such barrier to participation is a lack of knowledge about the program. Families from underserved populations must receive information in an accessible format and from a trusted source in order to take advantage of the opportunities available. Information will be mailed to student homes in multiple languages to inform families of the opportunity for additional literacy supports. In addition, the project will utilize parent groups to spread the word and involve teachers in communicating about the opportunity with families of eligible children. Another potential barrier is the accessibility of the resources provided. If the technology and resources are not accessible to students with diverse needs, families will be less inclined to pursue them. Finally, it is important to monitor participation and refine approaches to ensure families from traditionally underserved populations in public and non-public schools have equitable access to the program. To address these potential barriers to participation, the TDOE will focus on concerted outreach efforts in its communication and outreach strategy, the inclusion of accessibility features, and regular reviews of program representation.

The TDOE will leverage existing partnerships with community outreach agencies such as Conexión Américas and the ARC of Tennessee to ensure families in the Latino and disability communities are aware of the opportunities provided through this program. In addition, the TDOE will provide informational resources and brochures to be shared with Individual Education Program (IEP) teams and participants in the Individual Education Account (IEA)

program. Further, the TDOE has established advisory committees that can be utilized to disseminate program information. All resources, parent surveys, and enrollment/registration materials will be translated into Spanish, posted to the TDOE's website, and shared through social media platforms.

To ensure students from traditionally underserved populations are able to participate in the opportunities provided through this program, the TDOE will require that all providers, resources, and technology include accessibility features, including but not limited to, text to speech and translation capabilities. Providers must demonstrate ways in which they will implement needed accommodations as outlined in students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and Individual Learning Plans (ILPs). All provided technology devices will be pre-loaded with accessibility applications.

Finally, to ensure these efforts are successful, the TDOE will conduct regular reviews of monthly parent survey results as well as minutes from advisory group meetings to ensure representative participation from families of traditionally underserved populations. Outreach efforts and strategies to increase participation will be reviewed and refined based on this regular review.

#### Expanding Access to Remote Learning and Improving Student Outcomes

The Connected Literacy project will address the technological and accessibility barriers that exist across our state in rural, suburban, and urban areas. We anticipate that over 13,721 students will be served, with access to the remote learning options offered by 70 diverse providers in this project, yielding potentially 493,968 additional hours of literacy support for students.

We believe that as a result of these additional remote learning opportunities and the

technology to access these opportunities, the number of participating students who make gains from pre- to post-assessment will improve by three percentage points per year, for a total of six percentage points over the three-year grant period.

### Evidence Basis for Project

#### *Why Foundational Literacy Skills?*

An abundance of cognitive research demonstrates that students' reading instruction must focus on how sounds are represented in print and how these sound-symbol correspondences build into word construction and eventually into reading of text (McCardle & Chhabra, 2004; Moats, 1999; Stanovich & Stanovich, 2003). Adams (2011) asserted the importance of phonics instruction for all learners but explained that phonics understanding is essential for at-risk learners.

In addition, the What Works Clearinghouse studied the *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade* in 2016, and their report had two recommendations that received a rating of strong evidence; one recommendation advise that students “develop awareness of the segments of sounds in speech and how they link to letters,” and the other emphasized the importance of “teach(ing) student to decode words, analyze word parts, and write and recognize words” (Foorman et al., 2016).

#### *Tennessee Foundational Skills Curriculum*

The Tennessee Foundational Skills Curriculum is rooted in the simple view of reading defined by the seminal research of Hoover and Gough (1990), which has two major structures: decoding and comprehension (Scarborough, 2001; Vellutino et al., 2007). This model emphasizes decoding and listening comprehension in early grades; therefore the Tennessee Foundational Skills Curriculum focuses on ensuring students can read fluently in early grades to

ensure all students have access to reading comprehension. The Tennessee Foundational Skills Curriculum also incorporates recent research on phonemic awareness (PA) and advanced phonemic awareness (APA) in particular (e.g., Kilpatrick, 2016, 2019; Liben & Paige, 2017).

Research reveals the urgent truth that early intervention is key to helping struggling readers in both the short- and long-term, and that increasing intervention time can accelerate student learning (Wanzek et al., 2018). TDOE’s remote reading interventions will give our youngest learners the tools and support needed to improve now, which ultimately will impact their long-term success in both school and life.

#### *Why Parents as Partners?*

Research shows that especially among our youngest learners, students need adults to serve as their reading role models and that “parent involvement is the number one predictor of early literacy success and future academic achievement” (Burton, 2013). Since literacy instruction begins at home, “many educators and district leaders are actively looking for ways to further engage and empower families to be partners in literacy” (McGraw Hill, 2019). “Students of involved parents get better grades, score higher on standardized tests, have better attendance records, drop out less often, and have higher aspirations and more positive attitudes toward work and homework,” and these findings have been noted among all young children, regardless of ethnic and socioeconomic background (FACE, 2013). As such, the value of engaging families in the literacy instruction—and overall education—of their children cannot be underestimated as a component of program success.

#### *Why Distance Learning?*

While there has previously been a lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of online learning programs, in a recent study of elementary literacy instruction in a Title I urban

elementary school that included 18% English learners, student progress in the online component of the program was found to be a significant predictor of growth in reading performance on a standardized reading assessment, with students in kindergarten through Grade 2 making the most substantial gains (Prescott et al., 2018). Given the efficacy of online literacy interventions, TDOE will provide access to vetted programs, aligned with Tennessee’s Foundational Skills Curriculum, in order to reduce the learning gaps that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **QUALITY OF THE MANAGEMENT PLAN AND ADEQUACY OF RESOURCES**

### **Management Plan (Application Requirement 1)**

#### *Project Leadership Team*

The Project Leadership Team (see resumes in Appendix 2) will represent a cross-section of the TDOE in order to support the entire scope of this initiative. The Project Director will be TDOE’s Chief of Districts and Schools, Dr. Eve Carney. In her role, Carney coordinates the divisions of federal programs and oversight, school models and programs, special populations, school turnaround, and the state special schools. For Connected Literacy, Carney will provide direction to the project, lead Project Leadership Team meetings, and coordinate with ED as needed. Carney’s extensive and diverse professional background will ensure the project is implemented with fidelity. More information on the additional members of the Project Leadership Team can be found in Appendix 6f.

The Project Leadership Team will meet on a monthly basis, with bi-weekly meetings during periods leading up to important milestones as indicated in the Gantt chart (see Appendix 6e). Other members of the organization and external stakeholders will rotate into meetings as needed.

Two positions will be staffed during the grant period: a Grant Manager and a Family Liaison. The grant manager will develop the project plan for the initiative that will be integrated into the TDOE's project management process, including regular performance routines and updates to the project management dashboard in SharePoint and through Microsoft Teams. The Grant Manager will work closely with the TDOE's communications team to develop messaging and materials for districts and schools and will utilize the TDOE's social media platforms. Further, the Grant Manager will supervise the Family Liaison, a full-time position responsible for assisting families with the enrollment and registration process, facilitating family nomination of new providers, and troubleshooting any difficulties with the monthly family survey. The Family Liaison will also work with the Advisory Committee (consisting of families and educators) to collect input on services provided in the initial creation of the list of approved providers and throughout the project.

The TDOE will also execute a contract for a Provider Liaison to engage with approved providers on a regular basis to ensure fidelity of implementation. This liaison will be the primary point of contact for approved providers and will oversee the annual kickoff, train providers on pre- and post- common assessments, ensure TDOE-required trainings are complete, review and recommend program adjustments based on feedback from the provider surveys, and support the Grant Manager on the annual provider renewal process.

#### *Timeline, Responsibilities and Milestones*

Below is an overview; please see Appendix 6e for a Gantt chart which outlines the phase-in of each strategy and identifies the person responsible and essential milestones.

- October-February of Year 1: Develop infrastructure necessary for microgrant program; Beta test system prior to open enrollment in March; Select providers; Develop

communication strategy.

- March of Year 1: Launch first open enrollment period.
- June of Year 1: Programs begin.

Annually, the program will follow the schedule below, with courses being offered three times per year, in the summer, fall and spring.

	<b>Summer Program</b>	<b>Fall Program</b>	<b>Spring Program</b>
Open Enrollment	March	June	September
Microgrant Awards Offered	April	July	October
Program Selection/Pre-Test Window	April-May	July-August	October-November
Technology Preparation & Delivery	May	August	November
Program Delivery	June-August	September-November	January-March

### *Feedback and Continuous Improvement*

An advisory committee composed of grassroots community leaders and families will inform the TDOE’s outreach to qualified families and the overall direction of the project. Victoria Robinson and the Family Liaison will engage with this group on a quarterly basis. As previously noted, the TDOE will implement a monthly survey of participating families, as well as a survey for providers at the end of each spring session. Kevin Schaaf will oversee survey development and implementation. Data sharing and review will be a regular agenda item at monthly Project Leadership Team meetings and quarterly meetings with the advisory committee, ensuring that feedback loops are properly closed and used to inform project implementation.

Progress on the Connected Literacy project will be formally communicated on an annual

basis to the TDOE's Cabinet, who will help problem-solve any challenges or roadblocks; on a bi-annual basis to the general public through a project-specific page of the TDOE website; and through immediate updates shared externally on TDOE social media accounts. In addition, lessons learned documentation will be developed through a formal lessons learned session with the Project Leadership Team at the conclusion of the project, and TDOE Commissioner, Penny Schwinn, will share this information with national partners so that other states may benefit from the experiences of Tennessee.

#### Proposed Use of Funds

To implement the Connected Literacy initiative, Tennessee is requesting grant funding of \$20 million to be utilized over the three-year grant period. This initiative is structured to maximize funding available for extending microgrants to parents and providing the technology (hardware, software, connectivity) to students while maintaining sound data collection, administrative, and program procedures and practices. We anticipate that 93% of the award will fund microgrants to parents and provide technology and other instructional materials to students participating in the program. Tennessee is requesting \$5,667,927 in year 1; \$8,653,195 in year 2; and \$5,678,878 in year 3 of the grant.

#### *Administrative*

The TDOE is committed to limiting its administrative costs to maximize services to parents and students. However, we also understand that sound foundational supports (administrative and operational) are essential in ensuring the program is implemented with fidelity. This will require the TDOE to utilize existing capacity, as well as additional supports dedicated to the program.

Tennessee proposes funding two full-time equivalent (FTE) positions for this grant, as

described above. In addition to the salaries, benefits, supplies (limited), and technology for the 2 FTEs detailed above, Tennessee will also budget funds to adapt a current payment management platform for the microgrants. This will limit the administrative cost for the payment platform for the timely payment to providers. Finally, the TDOE proposes budgeting funds for outreach and communication as a portion of its budget for supplies.

The Connected Literacy initiative has multiple stakeholder groups, and successful implementation will require outreach to parents, teachers, school/district leaders across multiple mediums and the development and publication of materials on the initiative via a well-developed communication plan. Specifically, the communication with teachers is especially critical and will strengthen the alignment between the classroom and the additional learning opportunities afforded by the Connected Literacy initiative. Please see additional detail in the Budget Narrative.

#### Significance of Expected Outcomes (Application Requirement 5)

##### *Strategies, Objectives, and Performance Measures*

The overarching goal of the Connected Literacy project is to increase the number of students reading on grade level through additional instruction for our youngest learners. To accomplish this goal, there are objectives and outcomes to correspond with each of the strategies pursued by the initiative. Each of these is outlined in the Strategies, Objectives, and Performance Measures chart in Appendix 6g which provides the project's overarching goal, strategies, outcomes, outputs, data sources, instruments/methodology, and completion dates. Data for performance targets will be collected throughout the grant period and finalized for the project year each July.

The proposed performance measures have been designed to assess the effectiveness of

the project by focusing on the areas of students and families served, the choices they are provided, and the services which they receive, student outcomes, family involvement and satisfaction, and provider accountability. These measures are consistent with the performance measures established for the ESF-REM grant competition.

Because this is a new project and nothing of its type exists in Tennessee, baseline data do not exist for any of the above measures. In all cases but one, we have set targets for Year 1 based on our reasoning about what is both ambitious and achievable. With 54 possible remote learning options, we believe it is reasonable to expect 25 unique combinations in Year 1, with an increase of 5 per year for Year 2 and Year 3. Given the number of current early literacy providers practicing in Tennessee, we believe we will be able to select 50 who meet our rigorous requirements in Year 1 and grow that number by 10 providers per year. We have estimated the number of families who will be provided with hot spots and devices based on survey results from the spring 2020 closures, with 50% of participating students estimated to need hotspots and 65% estimated to need laptops. The target number of hours of learning to be provided has been calculated by multiplying the number of students served by an anticipated average of 36 hours of direct service per session. We have estimated that the number of students who make gains from pre- to post-assessment will improve by three percentage points per year based on past experiences with program design that indicate that more students show improvement as a program is refined over time. For this particular measure, we will have to set a baseline during the first session, offered in Year 1 of the grant.

The number of students served is limited only by funding, and at the current federal request, TDOE will be able to serve 1,960 students in each of 7 sessions for a total of 13,721 students. As a result of compliance experience, we anticipate that 80% of providers in Year 2 and

90% in Year 3 will be successful in completing their action plans and being renewed. Currently, not many providers offer programs that are aligned with Tennessee's Foundational Skills Curriculum, but we believe that with clear requirements laid out in the provider solicitation, 70% of selected providers will be able to implement aligned programs in Year 1 and that this number will improve with training, resulting in 80% in alignment in Year 2 and 85% in Year 3.

TDOE typically strives for high response rates from surveys, but family surveys have traditionally had low response rates. Our target of 5,763 families providing input or feedback through surveys is a 42% response rate which is 16 percentage points higher than the average online survey response rate (PeoplePulse, n.d.). For survey-related items, we have set targets at 70% in Year 1, 75%, in Year 2, and 80% in Year 3. We hope to be able to exceed these targets but know that satisfaction with new programs is especially difficult to achieve at the outset. We anticipate that by involving families, listening carefully to their concerns, and responding in a timely and conscientious manner, we will be able to achieve widespread satisfaction and involvement by Year 3.

Project costs in relation to the performance measures are as follows and can be found in Appendix 6h: providing students with hotspots for a 3-month period costs \$90 per student, and providing students with laptops costs \$275 per student. At 493,968 hours of learning provided through microgrants, the total project cost is only \$31.75 per hour of direct service provided. At that cost, 35 new remote learning options will be provided by approximately 70 providers, reaching 13,721 students and their families, and a system for administering microgrants within the state will become operational. While no dollar value can be set for the worth of family involvement and support, we do believe establishing cooperative efforts with families in grades 1-3 will persist into the upper grades, providing long-term value that far exceeds requested

funding.

In addition to measuring the targets established in the above table, TDOE's Project Director has made an assurance (see Appendix 5) to cooperate with any evaluation that the Secretary may elect to conduct with the grant (Application Requirement 5). TDOE has a strong track record as a federal grantee, and the TDOE has successfully collected and reported reliable, valid, and meaningful performance data for the U.S. Department of Education, as exemplified through its Race to the Top grant. Tennessee was awarded \$501.8 million and achieved success through grant activities, becoming the fastest improving state on NAEP in 2013 (USED, 2015). As in the past, TDOE will share lessons learned from Connected Literacy with national partners.

### *Significance*

Current levels of achievement and conditions in Tennessee indicate substantial need for expanded literacy supports, especially in the state's rural areas. Assessment data also show gaps between overall performance and that of several student groups, including Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans; English learners; and students with disabilities. While nearly two-thirds of our elementary students have been rated below proficient in ELA for the past two years, TDOE endeavors to reduce this number by focusing on our youngest, most vulnerable learners. By providing remote intervention, access, and increased learning time now, TDOE will enable students to develop a solid foundation of reading comprehension that is essential for future success.

In addition to providing our students with more time to engage with high-quality literacy materials online, TDOE aims to equip families with increased knowledge and tools that will help them become better advocates for their children's literacy development.

With such low proficiency, students will likely experience continued difficulty decoding

the large number of new words encountered as they progress through school. People who struggle with reading are more likely to drop out of high school, to end up in the criminal justice system, and to live in poverty (Hanford, 2018). Evidencing the long-term impact of low literacy scores in early grades, only 35% of Tennessee students met the ACT college readiness benchmark for reading in 2019 (a decrease of 4 percentage points since 2017). Moreover, 62% of 2019 Tennessee graduates were Below Proficient in understanding complex texts.

#### Anticipated Results and Benefits (Application Requirement 1 & 6)

The Connected Literacy project, implemented with fidelity, has the opportunity to yield long-term, positive impacts to students across the 147 districts in our state. The Connected Literacy project will serve 13,721 students and families at a total project rate of \$1,457 per family, a cost which has relative benefits and results. Student participation will be calculated through registration data and verified through provider-supplied engagement information. In addition to the individual literacy gains that we anticipate from students participating in the program, TDOE anticipates additional benefits in the following: an increase in the number of providers trained in Tennessee's Foundational Skills Curriculum, an increase in the overall awareness of the need for early-grades literacy support, and an increase in the number of students who will be empowered long-term to access curriculum (early postsecondary, enrichment, etc.) that may not otherwise be available. This will require addressing organizational, financial, and the political factors for this program to have lasting benefits.

As previously noted, the Connected Literacy project aligns with and supports the literacy initiatives and priorities in Tennessee, including the Governor's Literacy Foundation. This grant provides the opportunity to partner with parents explicitly, understanding that true reform requires partnerships well beyond the classroom. The TDOE is also utilizing existing

infrastructure in the parent platform to ensure the payment portal previously funded with state funds is utilized for this project as well. The Connected Literacy project will capitalize on internal capacity and expertise to ensure the project is administered by and integrated with other work at the TDOE—especially as we shift to more remote learning opportunities.

While it is not feasible to ensure funding to sustain the project beyond the grant in the current financial climate, implementation that yields expected literacy gains and other ancillary benefits has a greater likelihood of gaining political and financial support. The connected Literacy project, with common pre- and post-tests, as well as the normalizing across providers, will yield actionable data to support subsequent legislative and philanthropic asks for sustainability. Much of the infrastructure needed to sustain the project is included in the grant, and utilizing some internal capacity will also aid in making sustainability more feasible.

Over the three-year grant period, 13,721 students and families will have access to additional learning supports in early-grades literacy, resulting in over 493,968 additional hours of learning for Tennessee’s most vulnerable students. We expect the number of participating students who make gains from pre- to post-assessment on reading proficiency will improve by three percentage points per year, for a total of six percentage points over the three-year grant period. Throughout implementation, the TDOE will be engaging families and responding to feedback to strengthen parent and community partnerships via surveys and through the advisory board. Please see Appendix 1 for letters of support from Governor Bill Lee and other partners and advocates. These letters of support represent Tennessee’s commitment to support its youngest learners in becoming proficient readers—setting each on a path to success.