

# TN25



## MAPPING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER



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## ABOUT US

### The Tennessee Alliance for Equity in Education

The Tennessee Alliance for Equity in Education (TAEE or the Alliance) is a collective effort of civil rights, social justice, and education organizations and advocates working to promote educational equity for underserved students. Our network is a diverse set of allies from across Tennessee who share a unifying belief that we must achieve more for students across our state. We work alongside students, families, educators, and communities – especially those whose needs and potential have been overlooked for too long, including Latino and Black students, students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, students with disabilities, and students in rural schools.

The Alliance will build a network of education advocates from across Tennessee to advance meaningful solutions to longstanding gaps in opportunities and achievement for students. Through engagement, research, and collective action, the Alliance works to expand excellence and equity in education from preschool through college, increase college access and completion, engage diverse communities dedicated to education equity, and increase political and public will to act on equity issues.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## SECTION

# 1

## CASTING OUR VISION FOR 2025

COVID-19 has certainly interrupted teaching and learning, particularly for students of color and those from low-income backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> Overall, the pandemic has exacerbated and illuminated longstanding inequities within our schools and institutions to a broader audience.<sup>2</sup> Federal stimulus dollars are essential on the path to recovery.

In March 2020, the United States Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which includes the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund.<sup>3</sup> “Across three federal relief packages passed by the United States Congress between March 2020 and March 2021, Tennessee has received over \$4.5 billion in federal relief funding to use between spring 2020 and fall 2024.<sup>4</sup> For context, Tennessee’s ESSER funding allocation is nine times larger than our historic \$500 million Race to the Top (RTT) grant in 2010.<sup>5</sup> Money matters, but it’s not just about how much, but also how well we allocate funds toward data and research-driven investments that sustain long term and to students and families who would most benefit from its support. At least 90% of ESSER funding must be distributed directly to school districts, but otherwise, the funds are highly flexible.<sup>6</sup> This requirement supports local communities to tailor investments to their students’ needs and local context. Advocates can support districts to invest in evidence-based and comprehensive interventions, including the recommendations within this report, to maximize ESSER’s impact.

Tennessee has a critical opportunity to reassess and redesign systems and policies that work for all students. This report, *TN25: Mapping our Future Together*, aims to equip advocates with research, data, and bright spots to create their vision for education in 2025.

# SECTION 2 THE "HOW" BEHIND TN25

The Tennessee Alliance for Equity in Education believes that a coalition of diverse stakeholders who care about civil rights, social justice, and equity in education create the most informed and comprehensive policy solutions. Consequently, this report centers feedback from students, families, educators, advocacy groups, and other education stakeholders to address some of Tennessee’s most pressing education policy issues highlighted during COVID. This report leverages three different data sources to elevate the voices and perspectives of stakeholders from different backgrounds, including:

### TN25 Focus and Survey

During July and August 2021, 108 students, families, educators, and advocates participated in 12 different hourlong focus groups co-facilitated by the staff of the Education Trust in Tennessee. The central question of each focus group was “What do you hope to be true about education in Tennessee by 2025?” Additionally, participants ranked and gave feedback on different education priority areas and how to best use district-level ESSR funding. In addition to focus groups, the Alliance led a stakeholder survey in English and Spanish across Tennessee. The survey questions mirrored those of the focus groups, but through a different format to reach other stakeholders.

**FOCUS GROUPS BY TYPE:**

- Region**  
(West, Middle, and East TN)
- Stakeholders**  
(students, parents, and teachers)
- Rural Areas**
- Resource Equity**

### Focus Group Representation by Region



### Mass Inc. Polling Group

During August 2021, Mass Inc. Polling Group, a non-partisan research and civic engagement firm, conducted online polling and phone calls with 916 Tennessee parents and caregivers to capture their education priorities.<sup>7</sup> Mass Inc. intentionally oversampled 250 Black and 100 Latino parents and caregivers to capture nuances within each community but weighted both groups based on their percentage of Tennessee’s population in the summative findings to reflect accurate representation.<sup>8</sup> Conversations took 12 minutes on average to complete.

### Possip

Possip works with districts to survey parents and caregivers across 103 languages. They partner with 221 schools that represent over 110,000 students across Tennessee.<sup>9</sup> They use pulse checks, including emails and text messages, to collect rapid-response feedback across a comprehensive portfolio of education topics. Possip provided the Education Trust in Tennessee with 2019-20 and 2020-21 qualitative and quantitative data with 208,005 parent responses and conducted a keyword analysis to identify trends across our five priority areas.

SECTION  
3

## THEN AND NOW

## 1900 - 1940s

## 1901

The Tennessee General Assembly (TNGA) passes a law that bans teachers from instructing students from a different race.<sup>10</sup>

## 1909

TNGA passes the **General Education Act** that sets aside 1/4 of the state's gross revenue for public education. 39% of the total education budget went to an equalization fund to ensure that counties could have an 8-month school year, regardless of their ability to collect taxes.<sup>11</sup>

## 1950 - 1990s

## 1954

In **Brown v. Board of Education I**, the U.S. Supreme Court concludes that "separate, but equal" in public education violated the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause.<sup>12</sup> In **Brown II**, the Court demands that schools desegregate "with all deliberate speed" after many states delay or oppose desegregation.<sup>13</sup>

## 1963

**Goss v. Board of Education of Knoxville, Tennessee**, examines the school board's policy to allow students in the minority of their desegregated school to return to their previous school, reinforcing segregation. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled the plan was unconstitutional and did not meet Brown's mandate of "good faith compliance" or "all deliberate speed."<sup>14</sup>

## 1965

In response to the Civil Rights Movement, **the federal government passes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)**, which allocated federal funding to states to support students from low-income backgrounds and other groups.<sup>15</sup>

## 1988

Tennessee implements the TN Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP), our annual student standardized testing system.<sup>16</sup>

## 1992

TNGA adopts a Basic Education Program (BEP) funding formula to address inequities in the previous school funding formula highlighted by the state Supreme Court.<sup>17</sup>

## 2000s

## 2002

President George Bush signs an updated version of ESEA, the **No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)**. Overall, NCLB introduced nationwide accountability requirements, called for all teachers to be "highly qualified," and other policy shifts. Tennessee already used TCAP, but applied for a three-year waiver to meet other federal requirements.<sup>18</sup>

## 2003

Tennessee establishes the HOPE Scholarship, which funds eligible Tennessee high school students' postsecondary education using state lottery proceeds.<sup>19</sup> Since 2018, 144,717 students have received TN HOPE.<sup>20</sup>

## 2005

TNGA passes legislation for the Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) for Tennessee Act of 2005. During 2016-17, it had 934 classrooms, serving 18,680 4-year-olds across the state.<sup>21</sup>

## 2007

The U.S. Chamber assigns Tennessee 3 F's in its Leaders and Laggards Report Card, including in "truth in advertising about student proficiency."<sup>22</sup> In response, Governor Phil Bredesen gave a speech in May that called to increase state academic standards' rigor and graduation rates.<sup>23</sup>

TNGA revises the BEP formula ("BEP 2.0") to narrow the gap between the state's highest- and low-paid teachers.<sup>24</sup>



## 2010s

## 2010

Tennessee was one of the first states to receive funding through the federal **Race to the Top (RTT) Grant Program** and used its \$500 million to revise the accountability system and launch other key initiatives, such as the Achievement School District and an overhaul of our teacher evaluation system.<sup>25</sup>

## 2013

Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam **launches the "Drive to 55" initiative**, aiming for 55% or more of Tennesseans to earn a postsecondary degree or certificate by 2025.<sup>26</sup>

## 2015

**The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) passes**, reauthorizing ESEA. ESSA allows more state and local flexibility compared to NCLB.<sup>27</sup>

Shelby County and Metro Nashville Public Schools file a lawsuit against the State on the adequacy of public education funding.<sup>28</sup>

Tennessee becomes the first state to offer free community college to its residents through the Tennessee Promise program. Since 2018, 48,056 students have received TN Promise.<sup>29</sup>

## 2018

TNGA passes legislation to hold both teachers and students harmless from TNReady state-standardized scores due to technical and administrative issues.<sup>30</sup>

## 2019

TNGA passes school voucher legislation, allowing eligible Shelby County Schools and Metro Nashville Public Schools' families to use public funding toward private school tuition and other expenses.<sup>31</sup>

## 2020s

## 2020

In March, Tennessee moves to remote instruction due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

U.S. Congress passes federal legislation (e.g., CARES, CRRSA, ARP) to mitigate the pandemic's impact and address unfinished learning. As of October 2021, Tennessee has received over \$4.5 billion in federal funding.<sup>32</sup>

U.S. Department of Education and Tennessee waive accountability (i.e., "hold harmless") for districts, teachers, and students for the 2020-2021 academic year under certain conditions, which all districts met.<sup>33</sup>

## 2021

TNGA conducts the 2021 Special Session and passes three bills to address unfinished learning across the state.<sup>34</sup>

The Tennessee State Board of Education approves a policy that requires school districts to actively plan and monitor progress on increasing educator diversity.<sup>35</sup>

Tennessee Governor Bill Lee signs a law that prohibits certain topics in classroom instruction.<sup>36</sup>

The Education Law Center finds **Tennessee is 44th in the nation in K-12 education funding**.<sup>37</sup> Governor Lee and Commissioner Schwinn call for review of the BEP funding formula.<sup>38</sup>

## Tennessee's Education Landscape Pre- and "Post"-COVID

The graphs below reflect the impact of the pandemic on student enrollment, attendance, achievement, and funding, and provide important context as districts recover and address unfinished learning.

### Enrollment

Tennessee's districts receive funding through the Basic Education Program (BEP), the state's current funding formula.<sup>40</sup> It uses average daily membership (ADM) to measure student enrollment. Based on the graph below, the loss of over 23,000 students in Tennessee public schools means approximately \$230 million in lost funding that districts have to adjust to. In light of the pandemic, districts were "held harmless" and did not lose State funds in the 2021-2022 school year if their enrollment declined.<sup>41</sup> However, if enrollment continues to fall after ESSER money runs out in 2024, Tennessee and its districts may face a fiscal cliff that requires them to make budget cuts or use reserves if they did not account for sustainability in their ESSER plans.<sup>42</sup>

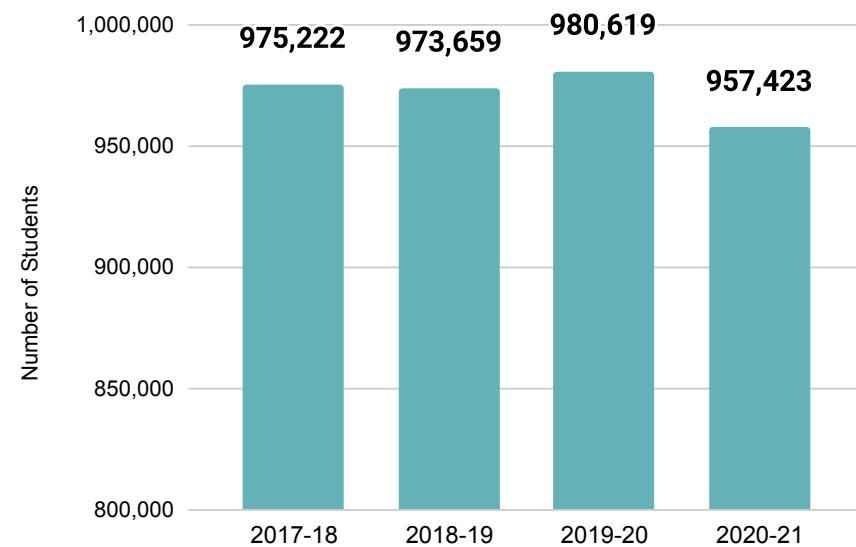
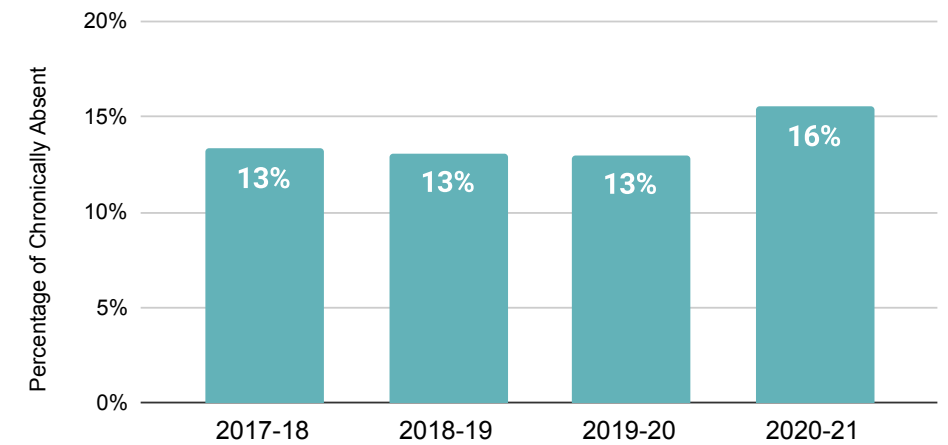


Figure 1: Since the start of the pandemic, statewide public student enrollment has decreased.<sup>39</sup>

### Attendance

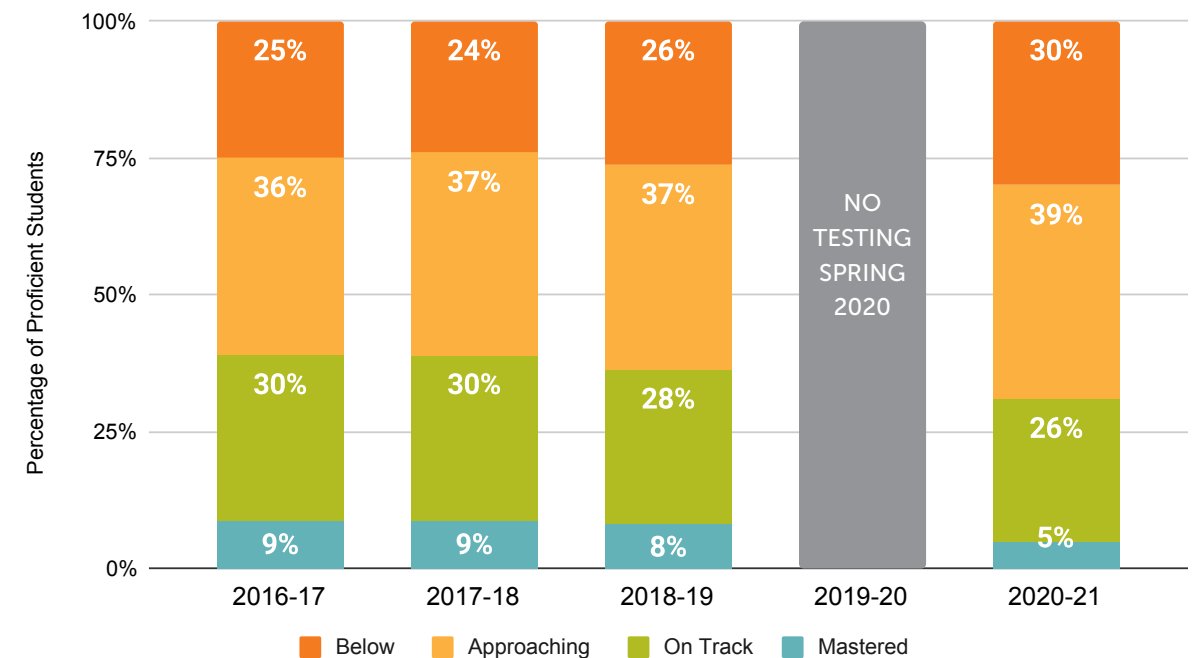
Chronic absenteeism is defined as when a student misses 10% or more school days, either excused or unexcused.<sup>44</sup> During the 2020-2021 school year, chronic absenteeism increased by 2.5 percentage points. However, attendance was measured differently based on the learning model (e.g., hybrid, in-person, remote). Within Section 4 of this report, Priority 5: Support Students' Social-Emotional and Academic Development will delve into how students from different backgrounds were affected by chronic absenteeism.

Figure 2: Chronic absenteeism increased dramatically in the 2020-21 school year.<sup>40</sup>



### Student Achievement

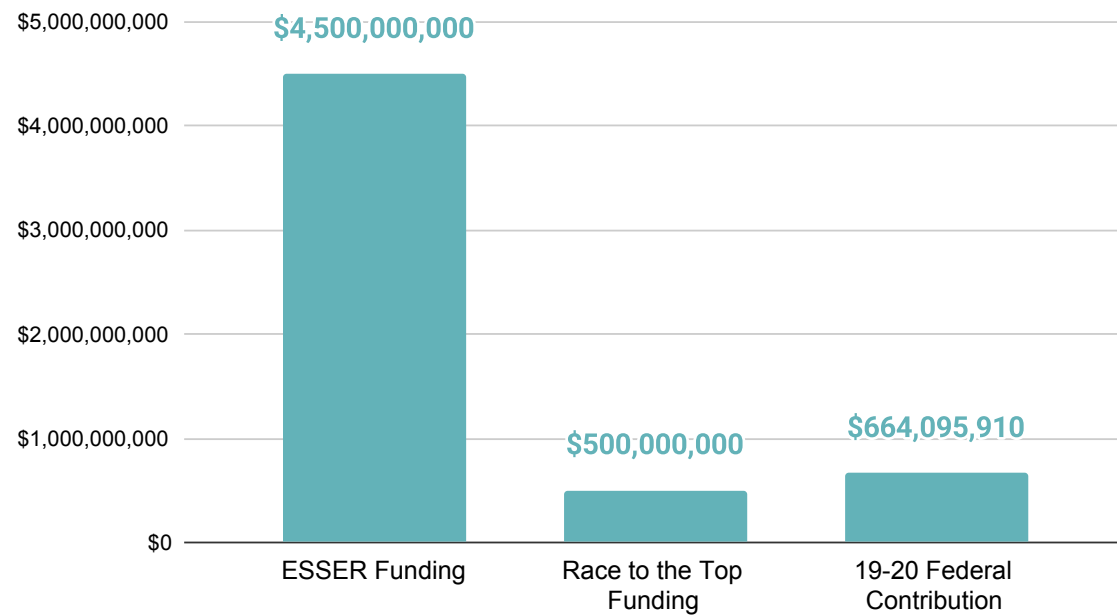
Figure 3: Since the start of the pandemic, the percent of students who scored proficient (on track or mastered) on the TCAP decreased when averaged across all students in tested grades and subjects.<sup>45</sup>



Overall, the percentage of students scoring proficient, including mastered and on track, decreased and students scoring in the approaching and below categories increased. These data confirm the need to leverage ESSER funding with context-dependent, evidence-based practices to support unfinished learning, including the recommendations within this report. Within Section 4 of this report, Priority 1: Close Achievement and Opportunity Gaps in P-12 and Beyond will delve into how students from different backgrounds scored on the TCAP.

## Funding

Figure 4: Tennessee’s ESSER funding is nine times larger than our historic \$500 million Race to the Top (RTT) grant in 2010.<sup>46</sup>



Additionally, ESSER, allocated over two years and can be spent until 2024, is almost seven times larger than our 2019-2020 annual federal funding. This funding allocation represents a historic opportunity for our state and its districts to serve all students better.

# SECTION 4 FINDINGS BY PRIORITY AREA

This section provides an overview of national research, Tennessee-specific data, stakeholder feedback, bright spots across the state, and offers equity actions. The equity actions, all aligned to the Alliance’s policy agenda, will guide our work for the next year, and we will revisit them annually to measure progress.





## PRIORITY 1 CLOSE ACHIEVEMENT AND OPPORTUNITY GAPS IN P-12 AND BEYOND

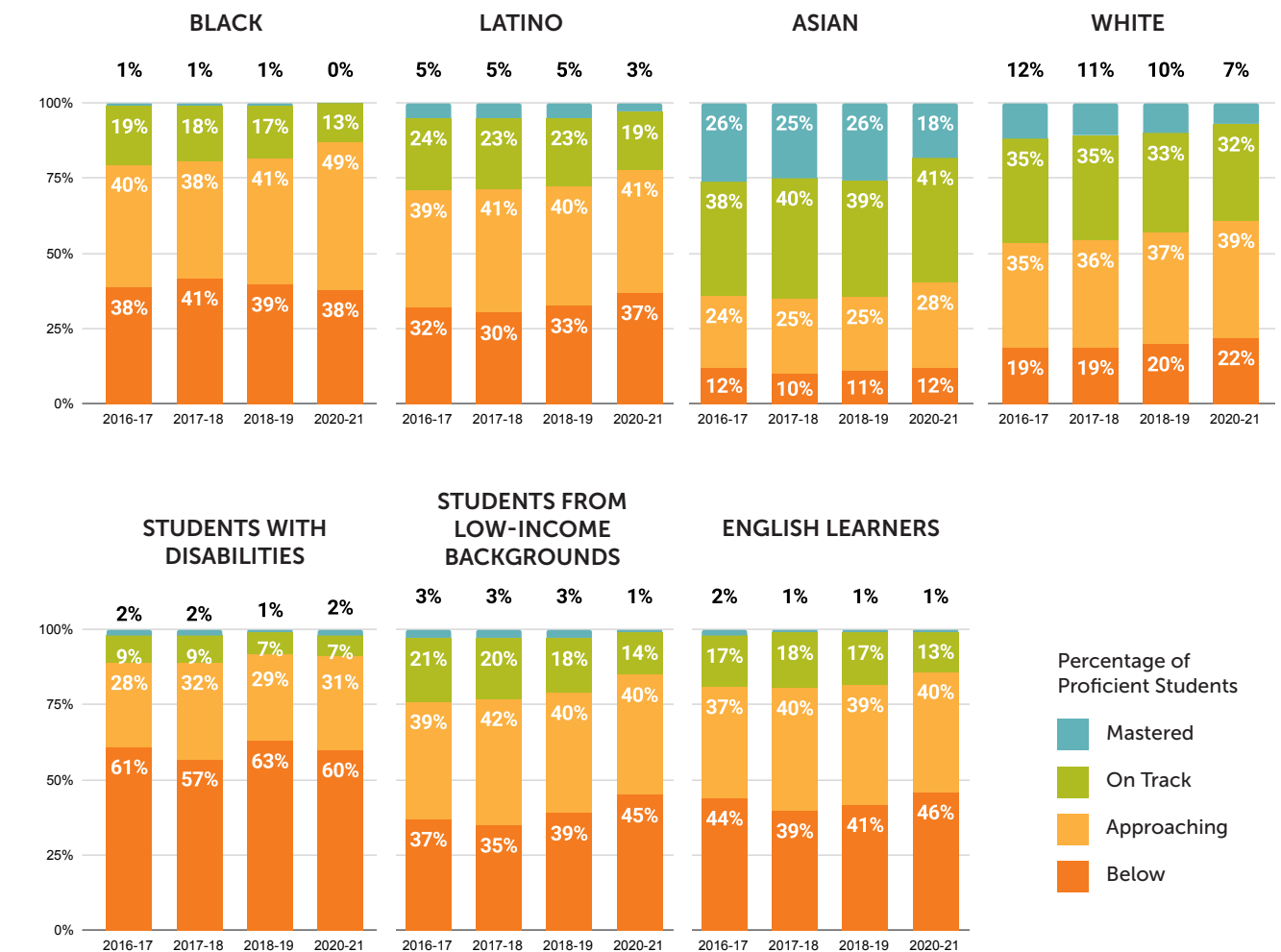
### What does the research say?

The achievement gap refers to the disparities in standardized test scores and other measures between advantaged and disadvantaged groups across identities like race and socioeconomic status.<sup>47</sup> Research shows that achievement gaps are the result of an opportunity gap, including inequitable access to resources and evidence-based practices.<sup>48</sup> The pandemic has exacerbated and illuminated longstanding inequities within our schools and institutions to a broader audience.<sup>49</sup> Achievement and opportunity gaps are well documented in the research.<sup>50</sup> The economic impact of the U.S. achievement gap equates to a “permanent national recession.”<sup>51</sup> Researchers estimate closing the racial achievement gap would increase the country’s GDP by \$310 billion to \$525 billion.<sup>52</sup> Even before the pandemic, Black and Latino students, English learners, and students from low-income backgrounds were less likely to be on track academically. However, we know all students can achieve when supported with resources and supportive environments. As a result, Tennessee and its schools and districts can become engines of opportunity through their funding, policymaking, and practices to close achievement and opportunity gaps in P-12.

### What does the data say?

The next graph demonstrates Tennessee’s achievement gaps in performance on standardized tests when averaged across all tested grades and subjects. Across different groups, Black and Latino students, English learners, and students from low-income backgrounds were most negatively impacted by the pandemic; but these inequities existed before 2020. Schools and districts with high percentages of the aforementioned student groups will need comprehensive resources and support to accelerate student learning.

Figure 5: Across different student groups, Black and Latino students, English learners, and students from low-income backgrounds were most negatively impacted by the pandemic when averaged across all students in tested grades and subjects.<sup>53</sup>



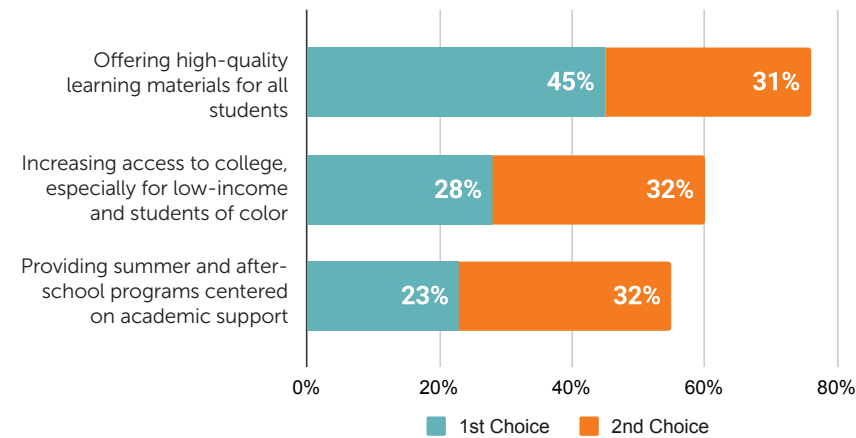
Note: TDOE uses economically disadvantaged to identify low-income students, Black or African American to identify Black students, and Hispanic to identify Latino students.

### What did we hear from stakeholders?

To address achievement gaps, TN25 Focus Groups prefer prioritizing additional academic supports for students and high-quality instructional materials to address achievement and opportunity gaps.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, Tennessee’s districts and schools should prioritize these interventions through ESSER planning and allocation.



**Figure 6: Nearly half of Tennessee caregivers and parents say high-quality learning materials would have the biggest impact on closing achievement gaps.<sup>54</sup>**



### Bright Spots

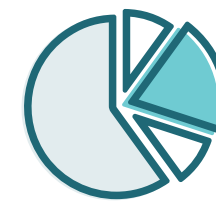
In alignment with the federal requirements in ESSA, states are required to publicly identify the bottom 5% of schools as identified by performance on multiple measures, including student test scores, graduation rates, English language proficiency, and chronic absenteeism.<sup>56</sup> Even though no new priority schools were named due to hold harmless protections, schools could still exit priority status.<sup>57</sup> Five elementary schools exited priority status, including Jellico in Campbell County, Rosebank in Davidson County, Clifton Hills and Woodmore in Hamilton County, and Sheffield in Shelby County.<sup>58</sup> This is a tremendous accomplishment in light of the pandemic, where student achievement declined across most subjects and student groups, including those from low-income backgrounds and English learners.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, 74% of Woodmore Elementary’s student population are from low-income backgrounds, and 50% of Clifton Hills Elementary are English learners.<sup>60</sup>

## EQUITY ACTIONS

- Promote high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials to support every student**
- Increase access to and success in advanced coursework by equitably identifying, enrolling, and supporting students in advanced courses and programs**
- Increase access, affordability, and success in higher education for students**
- Increase consistent access to high-quality, affordable, and universal preschool education**



Scan this QR Code to watch Venita Doggett, Director of Advocacy at the Memphis Education Fund, share her vision for education in Tennessee by the year 2025.



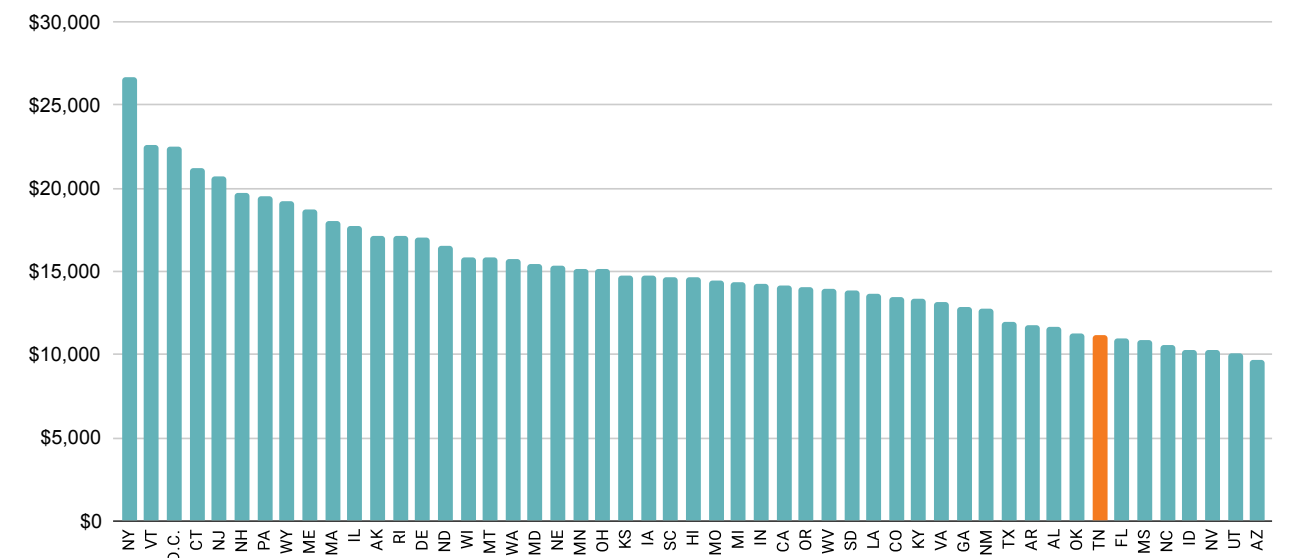
## PRIORITY 2 ADDRESS FUNDING AND RESOURCE EQUITY

### What does the research say?

Recent research illuminates how money matters in schools, particularly for students facing barriers to resources. Increasing school funding can lead to positive student, district, and family outcomes. School finance reforms have increased graduation and college-going rates, particularly for Black students and women, and raised annual earnings.<sup>61</sup> Also, increasing funding for students with disabilities can lead to higher student outcomes for students with and without disabilities.<sup>62</sup> More school funding also can lead to higher student achievement in low-income districts and increase low-income families’ educational attainment and wages.<sup>63</sup>

### What does the data say?

**Figure 7: According to the Education Law Center, Tennessee ranks 44th in the nation in K-12 education funding.<sup>64</sup>**



Our formula, the Basic Education Program (BEP), is nearly 30 years old and was designed to fund a different education system and set of students than we have today.<sup>65</sup> The BEP does not provide enough funding to meet students’ needs. According to the Education Law Center, Tennessee is 44th in the nation in K–12 education funding, spending an average of \$11,139 per student each year, well below the national

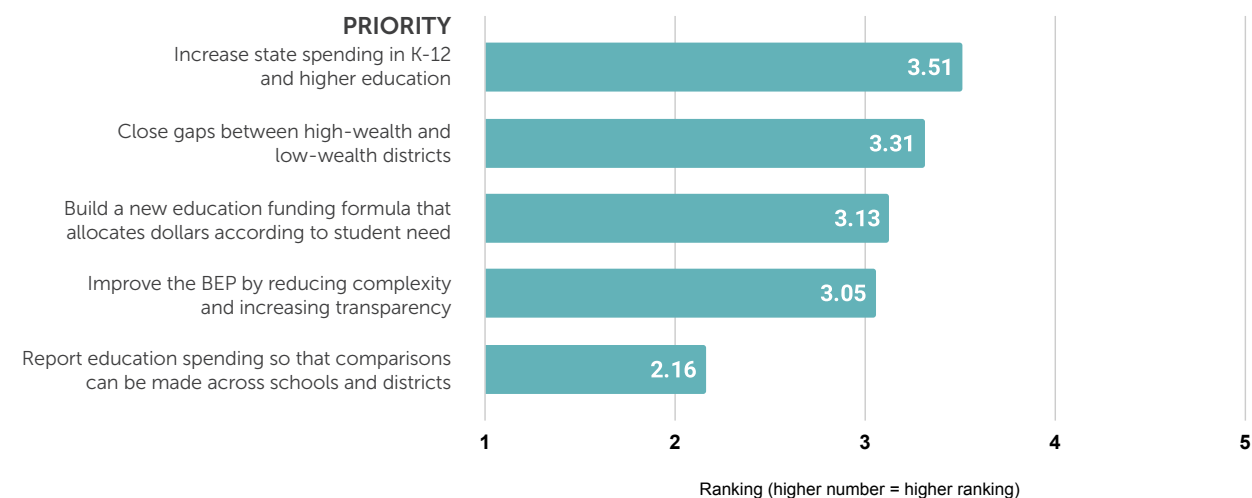
average of \$15,114.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, the BEP underfunds critical positions like school counselors, social workers, and nurses. See Figure 11 for more details. In order to receive funds, districts are required to contribute a local match to receive BEP funds. SIBER and TACIR calculate a district’s fiscal capacity using two highly complex models, but they often reinforce inequities between high-wealth and low-wealth districts.

Even with the funding Tennessee has, it is not allocated equitably. Tennessee’s districts serving the most students from low-income families receive about the same funding as those serving the fewest.<sup>67</sup> However, in addition to our over \$4.5 billion ESSER funding, Tennessee has a projected extra \$3 billion to budget for next year, the largest surplus of funds in our history.<sup>68</sup> As a result, we are financially poised to make significant changes to our funding formula and ensure districts do not lose funding in the process.

Tennessee experts note it is one of the most complex and least-understood formulas in the country, making it hard for stakeholders to know where the money comes from and how it’s allocated to districts and schools.<sup>69</sup> This is partly because the BEP is a resource-based formula that is not driven by students’ specific needs.<sup>70</sup> Instead, Tennessee assigns funding to districts based on 47 components that represent an outdated list of resources that are not adequate to meet the needs of students today. For example, Tennessee provides resource-based funding to rural districts through transportation.<sup>71</sup> Transportation funding is distributed according to a formula set by the Commissioner of Education that considers miles transported and the density of pupils per mile traveled, but transportation also increases the cost of food and other necessities. The BEP funding formula is an allocation formula and not a spending plan. Thus, district expenses may still far exceed what the state provides.

### What did we hear from stakeholders?

**Figure 8: Tennessee families prioritize increasing overall funding, closing funding gaps between high- and low-wealth districts, and adopting a new student-based funding formula.<sup>72</sup>**



Despite differences in resources, funding is a high priority across all income levels and racial backgrounds.<sup>73</sup> Our polling found 37% of parents ranked their top priority as ensuring schools receive the funding and resources they need. When asked about the best strategies to address school funding across the state, Tennesseans favored increases in state spending across K-12 and higher education, closing gaps between high-wealth and low-wealth districts, and a complete overhaul of the state’s education funding formula to allocate dollars based on student need. Numerous voices at the fall 2021 school funding town halls as well as a broad group of Tennessee-based education advocacy organizations have shared a desire for a student-driven funding formula.<sup>74</sup> Given its wide approval across the education policy landscape, Tennessee should join 34 other states in prioritizing comprehensively funding schools with specific additional weights based on student characteristics and their individual needs.

### Bright Spots

Some 34 states across the U.S., including Florida, Kentucky, and Louisiana, use a student-based funding formula.<sup>75</sup> Tennessee already has a blueprint to implement a student-weighted funding formula because our two largest districts, Shelby County Schools (SCS) and Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS), use student-based budgeting (SBB), which is a component of a student-weighted funding formula (SWFF).<sup>76</sup> A student-weighted funding formula allocates funding based on need to ensure schools and districts have the resources to support their students. For example, many states include weights across multiple categories with different tiers to differentiate support.



Scan this QR Code to watch Betsy Jimenez Hurst, Executive Director at Hola Lakeway, share her vision for education in Tennessee by the year 2025.

## EQUITY ACTIONS

- 1. Increase the level of funding through the state funding formula**
- 2. Adopt a simplified, student-weighted funding formula that is guided by students’ different levels of need with weights robust enough to support student needs**
- 3. Ensure fairness by providing funding to districts with low property wealth to make up the difference between what the district needs and can contribute based on fiscal capacity**
- 4. Ensure that dollars are used well to improve student learning outcomes while providing flexibility to allow districts to respond to their local needs and context**
- 5. Report school-level and district-level spending data in clear and accessible ways, including comparative spending data and contextual information**



### PRIORITY 3 INCREASE EDUCATOR DIVERSITY AND QUALITY

#### What does the research say?

Research consistently shows that the most important in-school factor for increasing student achievement is teacher quality.<sup>77</sup> School and district leaders realize that increasing teacher diversity can support students of color, teachers of color, and school-level goals. When students are assigned to teachers who look like them, they frequently see them as a role model and rise to their high expectations.<sup>78</sup> As a result, students of color paired with teachers of color experience increased student achievement and graduation rates.<sup>79</sup> There are also non-academic benefits like decreased chronic absenteeism and increased parental engagement.<sup>80</sup> The positive benefits persist beyond P-12. Students of color with P-12 teachers who match their race are more likely to take college entrance exams and enroll in postsecondary education.<sup>81</sup>

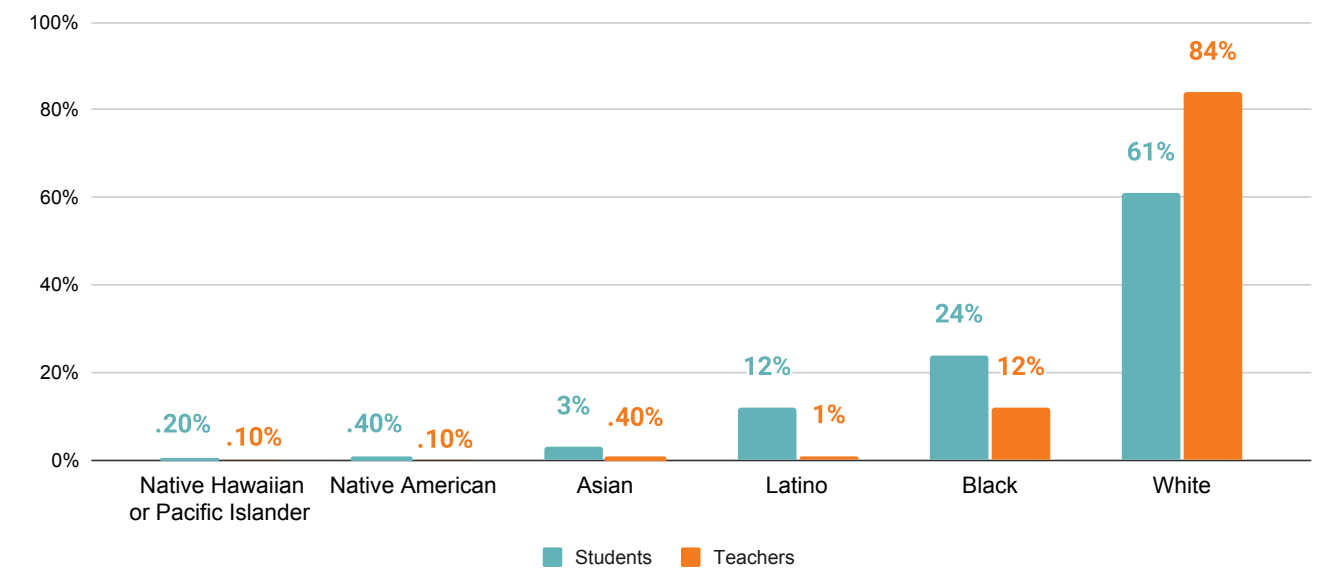
There are also positive impacts for teachers and schools, including increasing teacher diversity helps fill hard-to-staff positions.<sup>82</sup> Supporting diverse teachers also addresses teacher turnover. Three out of four teachers of color work in the schools that serve a majority of students of color.<sup>83</sup> Since schools that serve majority students of color also experience higher teacher turnover, supporting diverse teachers can also mitigate challenges with attrition.<sup>84</sup> Educators of color have a wealth of knowledge and experiences to contribute to the classroom environment, but frequently are not provided with the training, compensation, or working conditions to persist. For example, teachers who enter the field with inadequate preparation are two to three times more likely to leave their schools than those who had comprehensive preparation.<sup>85</sup> Simply increasing the number of teachers of color without adequate and continued support is unlikely to result in a sustained increase in teachers of color in the classrooms.

#### What does the data say?

Despite the numerous benefits of increasing teacher diversity, Tennessee has a long way to go. The next graph represents the percent of students versus teachers across different race categories in Tennessee during the 2019-2020 school year. For example, Black students represented 24% of the overall student population, but only 12% of the teacher population, which is a 12 percentage point gap in representation. Additionally, even though more than one out of every three students are Black or Latino in Tennessee, Black and Latino teachers represent just over one out of every 10 teachers.

Additionally, while new teachers are necessary and welcomed members of the profession, it is important to analyze whether some students are disproportionately likely to have novice teachers, or those with

Figure 9: Black, Latino, Asian, Native American, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander teachers have been underrepresented relative to Tennessee’s student population.<sup>86</sup>



two or less years of experience. In Tennessee, students of color are more likely to have novice teachers. State data show that the schools serving the most Black students have many more novice teachers (18%) compared to the schools serving the fewest Black teachers (11%).<sup>87</sup> Also, more than one in four Black students in Tennessee attends a school with a high percentage of novice teachers, and nearly one in three Black students attends a school with a high percentage of uncertified teachers.

Tennessee spent a decade building and using a multiple-measure evaluation system to identify effective teachers. Based on the data above, we must layer on a priority around diverse educators so that students have access to diverse and effective educators. Additionally, the Education Trust in Tennessee has partnered with Tennessee Educators of Color Alliance (TECA) to increase teachers of color by 20% in Tennessee by 2025.

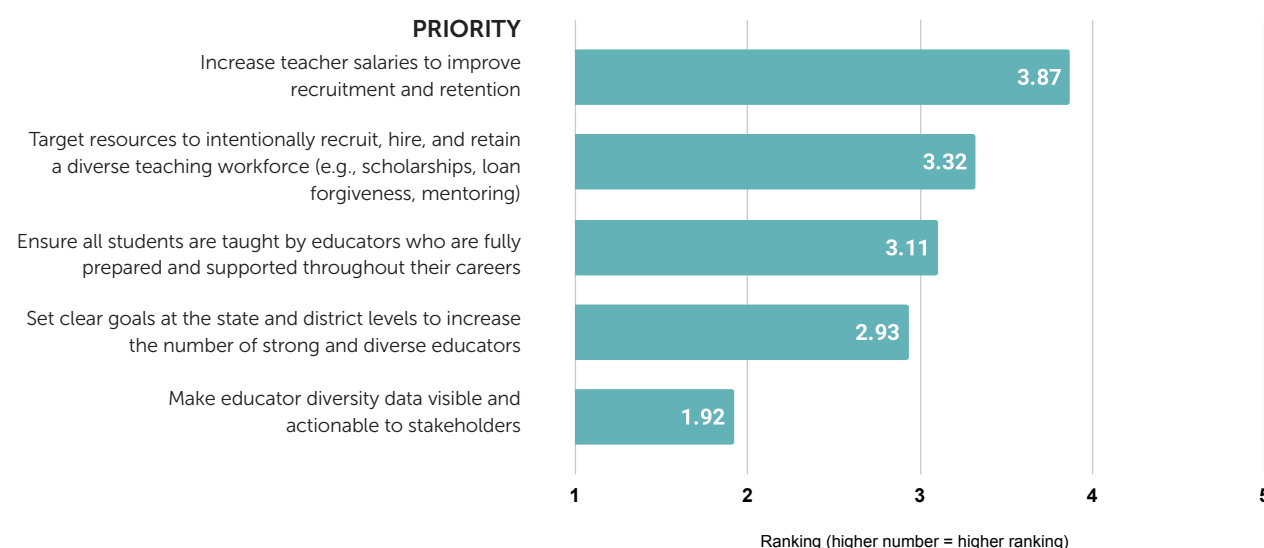
“One thing that stood out to us as parents [in the virtual learning environment] was how diverse the student population was. Unfortunately, the teaching staff does not match or reflect the diversity of the student population. As a black parent, I think it is critical for minority students to see a resemblance of themselves in their teachers. Schools should make this a priority going forward.”

- Tennessee Parent, Possip Survey

### What did we hear from stakeholders?

Tennesseans understand additional investments are required to recruit and retain high-quality, diverse teachers. Parents and caregivers are most supportive of increasing teacher salaries and target resources to recruit, hire, and retain a diverse teaching workforce. Similarly, 48% of parents and caregivers from the Mass Inc. polling believe that increasing teachers salaries would be the top way to improve educator quality, suggesting increasing teacher salaries can support teacher quality and diversity.<sup>89</sup> Additionally, the Tennessee BEP Review Committee has recommended increasing teacher compensation in their annual report recommendations for at least the last nine years.<sup>90</sup> In alignment with national research and state teacher diversity data, Tennessee should prioritize comprehensively funding educators during the upcoming school funding formula revisions.

**Figure 10: Tennessee parents and caregivers are committed to providing diverse educators with incentives and resources to join and persist as teachers.<sup>88</sup>**



### Bright Spots

In February 2021, the Tennessee State Board of Education, after collaborating with stakeholders like the Education Trust in Tennessee and TECA, unanimously passed the Educator Diversity Policy.<sup>91</sup> Within this policy, every LEA is required to set goals to increase teacher diversity across the state and select recruitment and retention strategies to increase educators of color. These reports are due annually with updated progress toward goals. The inaugural reporting was due to TDOE on Nov. 1, 2021. Within the policy, TDOE must develop tools and resources to support LEAs to meet their goals, provide technical assistance to educator diversity working groups, and provide funding as available. Additionally, they must report annually on the percentage of educators and students of color by LEA and biennially on educator diversity in Tennessee.



Scan this QR Code to watch Seth Thorpe, a student at Pearl Cohn High School in Metro Nashville Public Schools, share his vision for education in Tennessee by the year 2025.

### EQUITY ACTIONS

1. Increase students' access to educators who are fully prepared and supported throughout their career through increased professional development and other means
2. Support and incentivize educator preparation programs to recruit and prepare teachers of color
3. Target resources to intentionally recruit, hire, and retain a diverse educator workforce
4. Report educator diversity data in accessible and actionable ways



### PRIORITY 4 SUPPORT STUDENTS' SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

#### What does the research say?

Many factors influence a students' social-emotional and academic development (SEAD), including staff to meet students' social, emotional, and mental health needs, opportunities for student voice, and supportive school environments.

Counselors, social workers, and other health professionals play a critical role to ensure students' well-being, particularly for low-income and academically struggling students.<sup>92</sup> However, Tennessee's current funding formula does not allocate enough money to meet the national recommendations for staff to student ratios or support staff caseloads. Essential staff, such as counselors, social workers, and nurses, allow schools to meet student needs and to address barriers to student learning, which often manifest as student disengagement. For example, fully funding school counselors and providing them with anti-bias training can reduce the frequency of disciplinary incidents, giving teachers and students more time in class to focus on learning.<sup>93</sup>

Authentic student voice opportunities prepare students to engage in school and beyond. In the long term, student voice enables future citizens to participate in democracy and civic life, one of the core tenets of America’s public education system.<sup>96</sup> Providing students with authentic opportunities to participate in decision-making can increase their civic efficacy or belief their democratic participation is meaningful and contributes to society.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, student voice can reengage students in the school community and increase youth belonging.<sup>98</sup>

However, when students are barred from the classroom or physically punished for their actions, the consequences are dire. Corporal punishment is legal in 19 U.S. states, including Tennessee.<sup>99</sup> Not only does corporal punishment raise ethical questions, but it is also associated with a host of negative impacts like increased depression symptoms, lower GPA, and a continued cycle of violence both at school and at home.<sup>100</sup> Further, students of color and students with disabilities

are more likely to experience disproportionate and more harsh discipline. Researchers found that Black students are two to almost four times more likely to be referred for discipline than white students. In addition to psychological harm, some researchers posit that exclusionary discipline contributes to the achievement gap.<sup>101</sup> Others find that school suspensions account for approximately one-fifth of the difference between Black and white standardized test scores.<sup>102</sup>

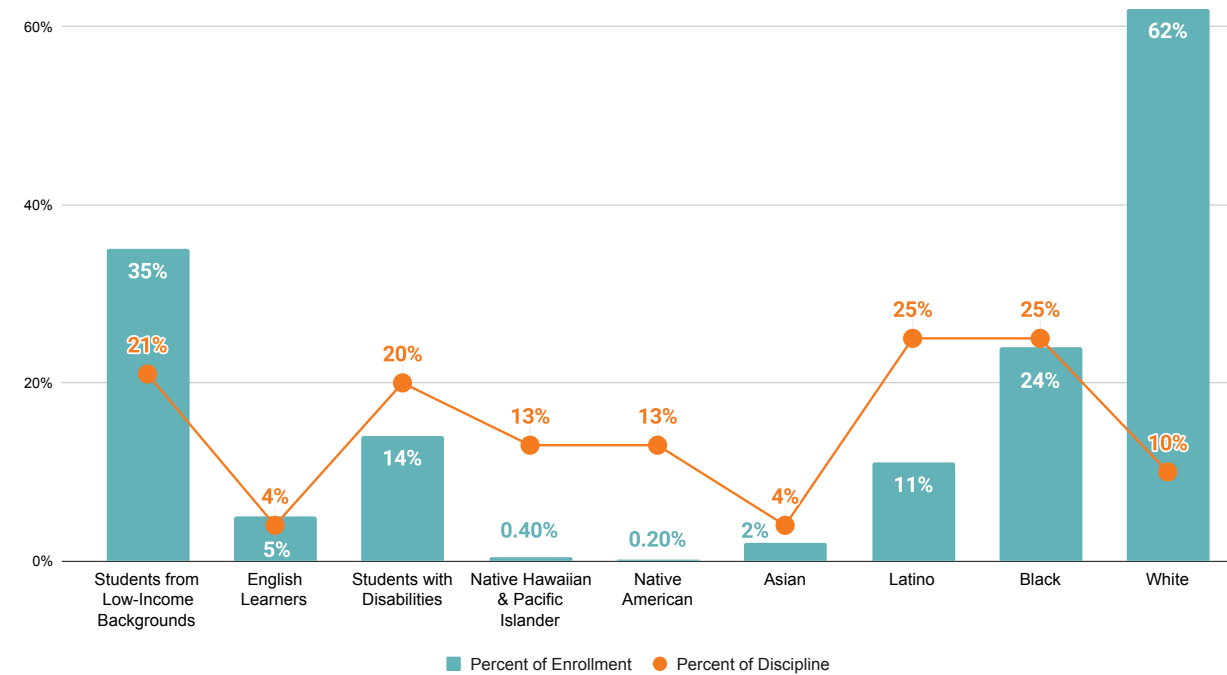
### What does the data say?

The next graph represents the percentage of student discipline occurrences relative to the percentage of student enrollment during the 2018-19 school year. Discipline occurrences included students placed in alternative schools, in-school suspension (ISS), suspended, expelled, or for zero-tolerance offenses. For example, Latino students represented 11% of the overall student population and 25% of student discipline occurrences, which yields a 14 point differential on the graph above. As a result, schools with disproportionate discipline outcomes should reflect on their data and work to remedy it through anti-bias training and other steps. Additionally, the Alliance and the Education Trust in Tennessee is excited to share Education Trust National’s Social Emotional and Academic Development (SEAD) Scans, including a Tennessee-specific scan, that will be released in January 2022.

**Figure 11: Tennessee’s BEP funding formula does not allocate funding aligned with national best practices.**

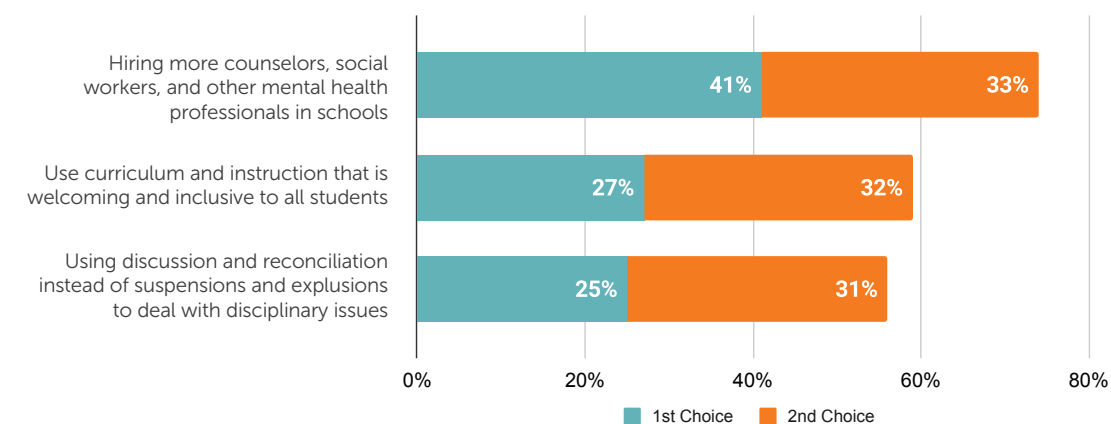
	TN’s BEP Funding Formula <sup>94</sup>	National Recommendation <sup>95</sup>
<b>Counselors</b>	K-6: 1:500 7-12: 1:350	1:250
<b>Social Workers</b>	1:2,000	1:250
<b>Nurses</b>	1:3,000	1:750

**Figure 12: Prior to the pandemic, students with disabilities, Black, Latino, Asian, Native American, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students were disproportionately likely to be disciplined.<sup>103</sup>**



### What did we hear from stakeholders?

**Figure 13: Tennessee parents and caregivers believe hiring more counselors and other mental health staff will have the most significant impact on supporting student mental and emotional development.<sup>104</sup>**



Almost one-third of parents and caregivers ranked their top priority as supporting students’ mental and emotional development.<sup>105</sup> In alignment with the Tennessee BEP Review Committee and national best practices, Tennessee parents and caregivers agree hiring more counselors, social workers, and other mental health professionals in schools will have the most significant impact on supporting students’ mental and

**“Why does [an outside organization] have to pay for 25% of the salary of the one counselor? Shouldn't that be taken out of the school budget?”**

- Tennessee Parent, Possip Survey

emotional development.<sup>106</sup> Specifically, Latino parents and those from lower-income households were especially likely to prioritize student mental and emotional development compared to other parent groups.<sup>107</sup> Additionally, during the 2021 Tennessee Funding Review Mid-Cumberland Public Town Hall, multiple speakers shared their desire for more support staff funding, including nurses and counselors.<sup>108</sup> Given its wide approval across the education policy landscape, Tennessee should prioritize comprehensively funding school-based health professionals during the upcoming school funding formula revisions.

### Bright Spots

In October 2020, the Metro Nashville Public Schools passed a policy to create the inaugural student board of education members and onboarded one junior and senior student this fall.<sup>109</sup> To guide their recommendations, they collected and analyzed qualitative and quantitative data on nationwide peer districts with various student board member models to identify trends and policy feasibility. Additionally, they synthesized student voice research and held expert interviews.

## EQUITY ACTIONS

1. Provide additional funding for counselors, social workers, and other health professionals
2. Increase opportunities for student voice and leadership in decision-making
3. Prohibit the use of suspensions and expulsions for minor offenses and ban the use of corporal punishment
4. Invest in and build structures for integrated student supports and wraparound services
5. Provide professional development and materials for adults on using trauma-responsive and restorative practices, developing and cultivating asset-based and anti-racist mindsets, and developing the skills to integrate social-emotional supports into academics



Scan this QR Code to watch Ruby Aguilar, a teacher at Metro Nashville Public Schools, share her vision for education in Tennessee by the year 2025.



### PRIORITY 5

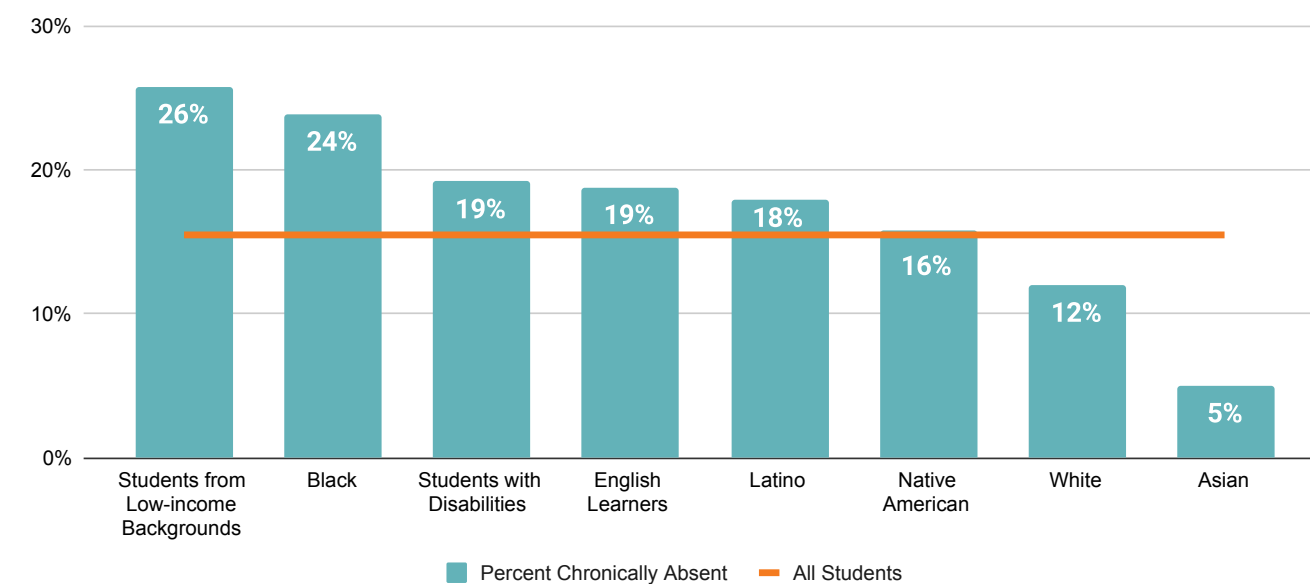
## ADDRESS THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON STUDENT LEARNING AND WELL-BEING

### What does the research say?

COVID-19 has certainly interrupted teaching and learning, particularly for Black and Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds.<sup>110</sup> Overall, the pandemic has exacerbated and illuminated longstanding inequities within our schools and institutions to a broader audience.<sup>111</sup> Nationally, high-wealth districts were more than twice as likely than low-wealth districts to provide at least some live, real-time instruction during the pandemic.<sup>112</sup> During remote instruction, 29% of adolescents did not feel connected to an adult at school, and motivation and engagement varied by student grade level, socioeconomic level, and race.<sup>113</sup> As a result, Tennessee's districts and schools will need to allocate ESSER and other resources equitably to address unfinished learning and other barriers to expedite pandemic recovery.

### What does the data say?

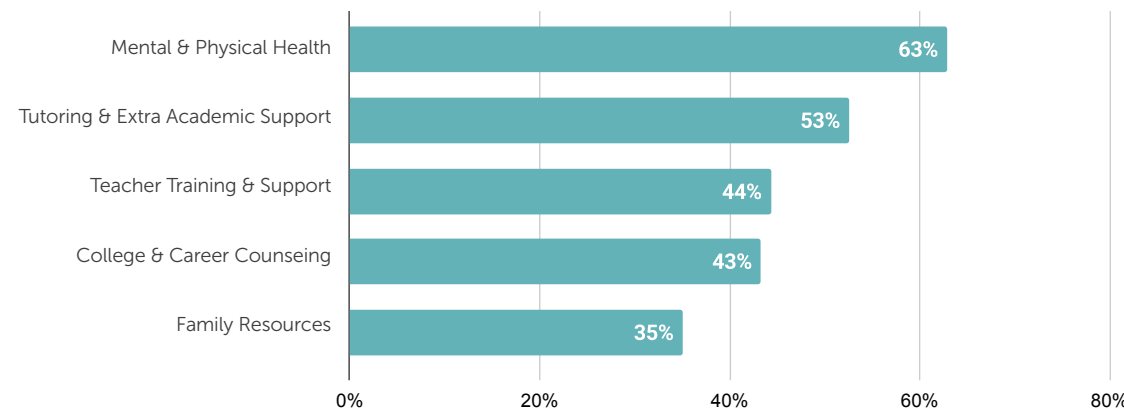
Figure 14: During the 2020-2021 school year, students from low-income backgrounds and Black students were most likely to be chronically absent.<sup>114</sup>



Additionally, the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) found that about two out of every three teachers identified missing instructional time as the top concern for students during the 2020-21 school year.<sup>115</sup> Based on these results and previously shared student assessment data, schools and districts with high percentages of low-income, Black students and other groups with higher than average chronic absenteeism rates, in particular, will need to leverage ESSER resources to provide comprehensive wraparound services that address barriers to attendance.

### What did we hear from stakeholders?

Figure 15: Tennessee parents and caregivers want ESSER money allocated to mental and physical health and tutoring and additional academic supports.<sup>116</sup>



In alignment with Priority 4, Tennessee parents and caregivers understand that students' social-emotional and academic development will be key to recovering from the pandemic. Tennessee's districts and schools can leverage ESSER dollars to provide mental, physical, and academic support to students, and the State can evaluate ESSER plans based on those goals.

### Bright Spots

Community organizations are essential partners on the road to COVID-19 recovery. HOLA Lakeway is a grassroots, community-based nonprofit that works to meet the needs and improve the quality of life for the immigrant population in East Tennessee's Lakeway region across six counties. In fall 2020, HOLA Lakeway launched an Academic Support Center to assist students and families during virtual learning.<sup>117</sup> The center features access to public computers, internet, and tutoring services. Additionally, they planned the opening with Hamblen County Schools to prepare students for the new school year.

### EQUITY ACTIONS

1. Evaluate ESSER Plans to ensure that districts use evidence-based practices, allocate resources based on student need, and have a clear monitoring plan to ensure that dollars are well spent
2. Expand access to mental health services to students in need
3. Provide professional learning and high-quality materials to teachers to accelerate student learning and address unfinished instruction
4. Incentivize districts to implement additional academic support to students while maintaining access to grade-level content, such as high-dosage, low-ratio tutoring
5. Monitor data on student learning and participation in school, identifying trends and deploying resources to address issues that inhibit student success



Scan this QR Code to watch Tequila Cornelious, an Instructional Literacy Coach at Freedom Middle School share her vision for education in Tennessee by the year 2025.

## SECTION

## 5

# MAPPING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER: NEXT STEPS AND CONCLUSIONS

The Education Trust in Tennessee and the Tennessee Alliance for Equity in Education are committed to education stakeholders and Tennesseans by advocating for students. Over the next year, we can and should expect to see Tennessee make considerable progress on each of the Alliance's five priority areas. The Education Trust in Tennessee will continue to analyze research, data, and policy to share trends, highlight promising practices, and advocate for change. Additionally, we commit to revisiting our five priority areas every year. Our students and our state depend on it.

## SUMMATIVE EQUITY ACTIONS

### PRIORITY 1: Close Achievement and Opportunity Gaps in P-12 and Beyond

- Promote high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials to support every student
- Increase access to and success in advanced coursework by equitably identifying, enrolling, and supporting students in advanced courses and programs
- Increase access, affordability, and success in higher education for students
- Increase consistent access to high-quality, affordable, and universal preschool education

### PRIORITY 2: Address Funding and Resource Equity

- Increase the level of funding through the state funding formula
- Adopt a simplified, student-weighted funding formula that is guided by students' different levels of need with weights robust enough to support student needs
- Ensure fairness by providing funding to districts with low property wealth to make up the difference between what the district needs and can contribute based on fiscal capacity
- Ensure that dollars are used well to improve student learning outcomes while providing flexibility to allow districts to respond to their local needs and context
- Report school-level and district-level spending data in clear and accessible ways, including comparative spending data and contextual information

### PRIORITY 3: Increase Educator Diversity and Quality

- Increase students' access to educators who are fully prepared and supported throughout their career through professional development and other means
- Support and incentivize educator preparation programs to recruit and prepare teachers of color
- Target resources to intentionally recruit, hire, and retain a diverse educator workforce
- Report educator diversity data in accessible and actionable ways

### PRIORITY 4: Support Students' Social-Emotional and Academic Development

- Provide additional funding for counselors, social workers, and other health professionals
- Increase opportunities for student voice and leadership in decision-making
- Prohibit the use of suspensions and expulsions for minor offenses and ban the use of corporal punishment
- Invest in and build structures for integrated student supports and wraparound services
- Provide professional development and materials for adults on using trauma-responsive and restorative practices, developing and cultivating asset-based and anti-racist mindsets, and developing the skills to integrate social-emotional supports into academics

### PRIORITY 5: Address the Impact of COVID-19 on Student Learning and Well-Being

- Evaluate ESSER Plans to ensure that districts use evidence-based practices, allocate resources based on student need, and have a clear monitoring plan to ensure that dollars are well spent
- Expand access to mental health services to students in need
- Provide professional learning and high-quality materials to teachers to accelerate student learning and address unfinished instruction
- Incentivize districts to implement additional academic support to students while maintaining access to grade-level content, such as high-dosage, low-ratio tutoring
- Monitor data on student learning and participation in school, identifying trends and deploying resources to address issues that inhibit student success



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