

THRIVE

THRIVING TOGETHER TENNESSEE

Discovering Innovative Pathways for College Success in Tennessee



The Education Trust
IN TENNESSEE

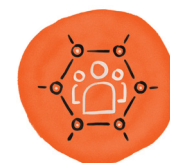
THRIVE



The Education Trust in Tennessee: Thrive Network

In the face of increasing college attainment disparities, The Education Trust in Tennessee launched a new initiative, the Thrive Network, to address college access issues impacting students of color and low-income students. The Thrive Network is a year-long project that aims to equip Black and Latino students as well as community organizations serving these students with tools and resources to identify and advance proven strategies to increase the number of students progressing to postsecondary education.

The Thrive Network leverages three key strategies that provide support to students, educators, and community advocates:



Thrive Community of Practice

Organizations working directly with students on post-secondary access or success receive funding to develop or expand strategies that ensure more students of color are making it to and through college.



Thrive College Access Learning Series

Monthly series and workshops designed to help practitioners, counselors, teachers, parents, students, and advocates understand the current college access landscape in Tennessee.



Thrive Fellowship

A year-long program with the goal of equipping a network of college students with the knowledge to connect their personal experiences to concrete data, policies, and practices related to the journey from high school to college completion.

Our educators and community members are working together to identify best practices and strategies to improve their students' transition from high school to college. We know that early exposure to postsecondary exploration impacts students' postsecondary trajectory.¹ Our goal is to highlight best practices that can be implemented with Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds that can equip districts with the tools and skills to increase the odds that every student is prepared for postsecondary education.

Tennessee has a historic opportunity to maximize ESSER funds to invest in postsecondary pathways and improve college attainment for Tennessee's students. This report, **Thriving Together Tennessee**, aims to equip advocates with best practices and recommendations for utilizing ESSER funds to reimagine the future of postsecondary pathways.

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The Numbers: Why Does This Matter?

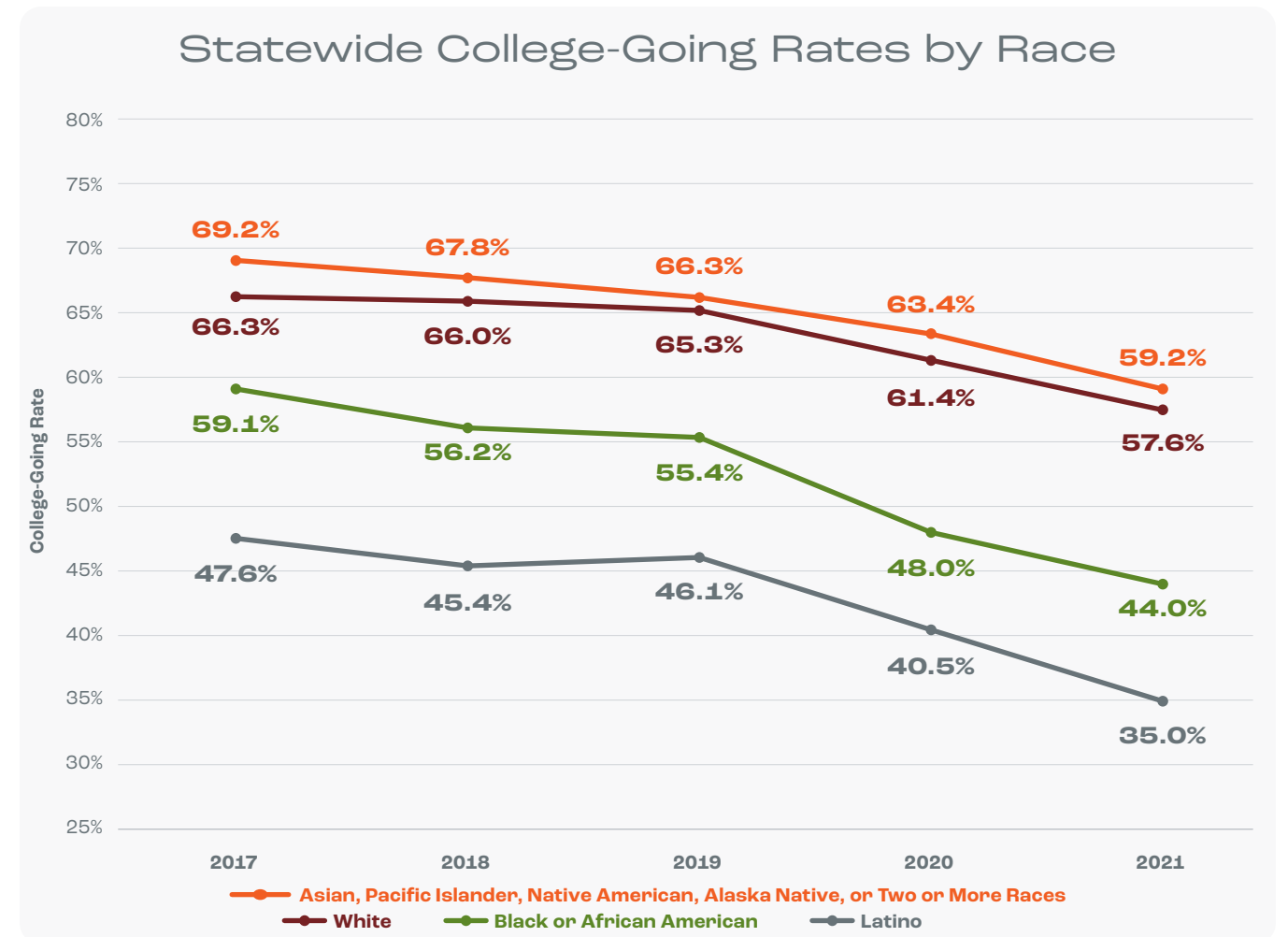
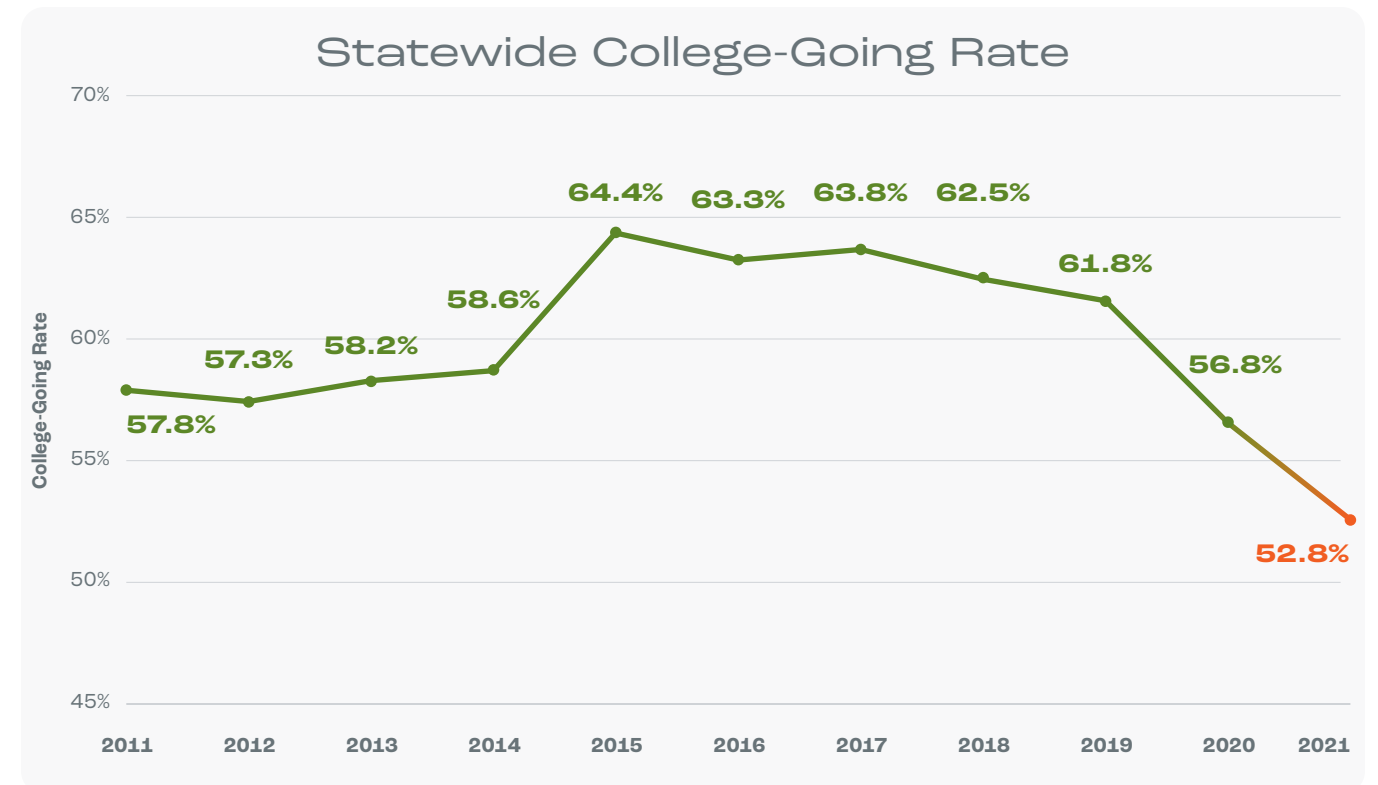
During the past decade, Tennessee has made strides to improve its college attainment rate by implementing new initiatives that support students in postsecondary pathways. In 2013, the Drive to 55 Alliance was created with the goal of ensuring that 55% of Tennesseans obtain a college degree or certificate by the year 2025. Since its implementation, and with the creation of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship and Tennessee Reconnect Program, the state saw record application, enrollment, and retention numbers, especially amongst first-generation students.² The college-going rate jumped from 58.6% in 2014 to 64.4% in 2015. These programs are examples of how strategic initiatives can change the postsecondary trajectory of our students.

Many of these improvements in college success were adversely impacted by COVID-19. The pandemic exacerbated the attainment gap between students of color and their White peers. SCORE's latest report, "College-Going and the Class of 2021", highlights the drastic decline in college-going rates, especially amongst Black and Latino students. In 2019, the college-going rate for Black students was 55.4%, 46.1% for Latino students, and 65.3% for White students. As of 2021, the college-going rate for Black students was 44%, 35% for Latino students, and 57.6% for White students – with each racial group declining by at least 8 percentage points. In 2019, the overall statewide college-going rate was 61.8% and has fallen by approximately 9 percentage points to 52.8% in 2021.³

These numbers are jarring and demonstrate that too many students are struggling to obtain postsecondary success. All students should be supported with the resources and tools in high school to ensure they are equipped with college and career-going skills upon graduation. With 2025 quickly approaching, districts must invest in college readiness to ensure our students, and particularly students disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, are prepared to earn degrees or certificates that will ultimately support their economic growth and development. The strategic deployment of ESSER funds can help districts improve their college readiness strategies and create equitable and sustainable resources for all students.

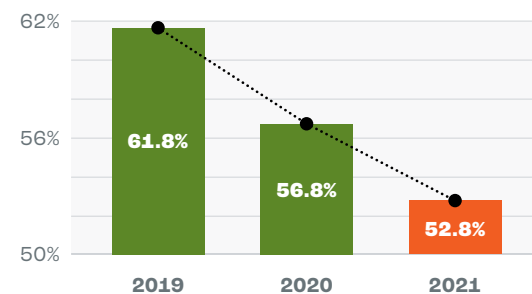
College-Going Rates

College-going rates are the portion of public high school graduates who seamlessly enroll (i.e., immediately after high school) in postsecondary education.



TN College-Going Report Highlights

The college-going rate for the class of 2021 is **52.8%**, down four percentage points from the college-going rate for the class of 2020, **56.8%**, and 9 points from the 2019 rate, **61.8%**.



ESSER Overview

In March 2020, the United States Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which included the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund. Over 13 billion dollars were allocated towards ESSER to address the impact of COVID-19 on students in K-12. ESSER II, the second phase of funds, was passed in December 2020 and allocated an additional 54.2 billion dollars. The American Rescue plan was signed on March 11, 2021, and the last round of funding, ESSER III, allocated an additional 122 billion dollars. Within the past two years, Congress has allocated approximately 190.5 billion dollars to ESSER funds.⁴ State ESSER funds are based on the proportion of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Title I funds received annually and legislation mandates states allocate at least ninety percent to districts in proportion with their Title I allocations.⁵

Tennessee public schools have received over \$4.5 billion in federal relief funding that is to be spent between spring 2020 and fall 2024.⁶ The funding allocations are as follows:

- Over \$150M in Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF), including PPE
- Over \$45M in competitive federal grants for literacy, College Career & Technical Education, and mental health resources
- Over \$126M in GEER (Governor's discretionary relief funding)
- Over \$385M in ESSER (State Educational Agency discretionary relief funding)
- Over \$3.58 billion passed directly to Local Education Agencies to decide how to spend

In May 2021, The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) announced its spending strategy for the state's ten percent set-aside portion of the federal funds. TDOE outlined three areas of planned strategic investments:



Academics

All TN students will have access to a high-quality education by learning to read and reading to learn with high-quality materials.

- \$120.7M for the Tennessee Literacy Success Act and Reading 360
- \$170.5M for the Tennessee Learning Loss and Student Acceleration Act, including the statewide TN ALL Corps tutoring initiative as well as summer learning camps and bridge camps
- \$35M to support the statewide 2022-2023 math textbook adoption process
- \$32M for teaching and learning online resources and improvements for school districts



Student Readiness

TN schools will be equipped to serve the academic and non-academic needs of all students by developing robust career pathway opportunities and connecting students to real-time support.

- \$32.6M for [Innovate High Schools Grant](#) and [Advanced Courses Program](#)
- \$17.8M for mental health supports
- \$56.5M for K-12 open source readiness coursework and statewide professional development



Educators

TN will set a new path for the education profession by becoming a teacher for free

- \$21M in programs to support the educator pipeline, including the department's [Grow Your Own program](#)



In January 2022, Tennessee Department of Education announced that it had approved all Tennessee school district ESSER plans. Over \$3.5 billion dollars flowed directly to school districts to address education recovery and all districts were required to develop plans that outlined their allocations. District plans included a section for Student Readiness, which TDOE outlined as academic and non-academic support to help students prepare for college and careers. The Student Readiness categories are:

- AP & Dual Enrollment Opportunities
- High School Innovation
- Academic Advising
- Special Populations
- Other student readiness, including Career & Technical Education investments

The Student Readiness category was the least funded category, representing approximately 10 percent of districts' total allocations. Tennessee is witnessing a drastic drop in college attainment numbers, leading the Thrive Network to advocate for strategic investments in postsecondary pathways. We recognize that Student Readiness can also be improved by supporting efforts in the Academics category, such as tutoring and literacy, as Tennessee has also witnessed a decline in student proficiency rates.⁷ Learning supports, such as academic tutoring, can help more Tennessee students get or stay on track and in turn, prepare them for their postsecondary pathways. Districts have two more years to spend the remaining ESSER funds and have a historic opportunity to change the trajectory of their students' futures by prioritizing student readiness and postsecondary exploration. The remainder of this report will outline Tennessee's ESSER spending allocations, and best practices to support postsecondary pathways and highlight innovative initiatives implemented across the state of Tennessee.

“This amount of funding is historic, and after significant community feedback, the investments the department has made and will continue to make are reflective of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do the life-changing work that will set all students on a path to success.”

— Commissioner Penny Schwinn

ESSER Timeline

- **March 2020** | CARES Act, ESSER I
- **December 2020** | ESSER II
- **March 2021** | American Rescue Plan, ESSER III
- **August 2022** | District Plan Revisions
- **September 2024** | ESSER Spending Ends

Tennessee ESSER Data

We analyzed the ESSER spending plans data provided by Tennessee State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) to assess how districts proposed to spend their ESSER funds to support student readiness. Seventy-three of 147 districts in the state plan to invest in student readiness through Academic Advising, AP & Dual Enrollment, ACT, and High School Innovation. Several districts plan to invest in multiple categories within student readiness. In this section, you will find a high-level overview of ESSER spending plans and their role in supporting college pathways throughout Tennessee school districts.

40
147 DISTRICTS planned to invest in **Academic Advising** to support student readiness

36
147 DISTRICTS planned to invest in **High School Innovation** to support student readiness

28
147 DISTRICTS planned to invest in **AP & Dual Enrollment**

20
147 DISTRICTS planned to invest in **ACT preparation** to support student readiness⁸

As Tennessee witnessed a drastic decline in college attainment, especially amongst students of color, districts need to reevaluate their ESSER plans and allocate more funds to support student readiness. Tennessee had hopes of driving 55% of its population to attain college degrees by 2025. Below, you will find recommendations for districts to support their college-going students in hopes of reaching that goal and to invest in the future of Tennessee students.

“High schools can be the only place students of color have time and access to resources to prepare for college, and there are two ways to ensure more students make it. First, inform students of the process before their senior year. Second, high schools can prioritize helping students create a transition plan to college. Many students of color still do not have family to help them navigate the college process, so their high schools need to be that support system. Many students do not find out about resources until it is too late, and they are not met with open arms at colleges and universities. The drops in college enrollment for students of color speak to how little proactive support and the unwelcoming environment these institutions are providing to their students of color.”

—Brea Hinds, Thrive Fellow

What Works: The Thrive Five

As COVID-19 has disrupted teaching and learning, The Education Trust in Tennessee prioritized addressing the impact the pandemic has on student learning and well-being. In our Tennessee Alliance for Equity in Education 2022 report, [TN25 Mapping Our Future Together](#), we urged districts to focus their ESSER plans on using equity-focused and evidence-based practices to address COVID-19’s impact on education.⁹ With historic funds, Tennessee has a chance to reimagine student readiness and implement practices that advance postsecondary pathways.

Research has shown that implementing early postsecondary opportunities such as high-quality advising, career pathways, and work-based learning increase the likelihood of postsecondary success.¹⁰ We want all students, especially those from historically underserved populations, to have access to targeted support and resources to realize their future goals after high school.

As college attainment in the United States declined during COVID-19, The Education Strategy Group (ESG) collaborated with over 20 organizations to create [Invest Forward: Pathways Investment Strategies](#). Invest Forward released more than 20 potential postsecondary pathways investment strategies, developed in consultation with leading education experts throughout the United States.¹¹ Black, Hispanic, low-income, and first-generation students have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and historically have lacked resources and connections to help them understand the college landscape.¹² Implementing new postsecondary strategies can help Tennessee students understand the college landscape in high school and better prepare for their college journey. From their playbook, we selected 5 strategies that Tennessee districts can implement to prioritize student readiness in their ESSER plans:



Expand postsecondary advising during the day



Communicate about key milestones on students’ pathways



Expand equitable access to advanced courses



Implement 12th grade transition course



Develop near-peer advising support

While the overall college-going rate in Tennessee has dropped, the college-going rate for Black & Latino students is significantly lower than their White peers. College attainment is vital to increasing social mobility, tackling poverty, and reducing racial and income inequality.¹³ As the pandemic continues to shed light on the disparities between students of color, low-income students, and their peers, district leaders need to invest in postsecondary pathways that will support Tennessee students most impacted by the pandemic. With these strategies, districts can prioritize providing an array of resources to help guide students from college exploration to college enrollment. From surveys to outreach, districts can ensure their high school students are receiving targeted support for their postsecondary goals. In the next section, College Access Bright Spots, you will find innovative approaches in Tennessee and across the nation that support students on their postsecondary journey.

Student Voice

“During my years in high school, I probably had one conversation with my advisor about college — any other meeting would be to choose classes for my next school year. We never had time to talk thoroughly about my college options, scholarships, or grants that a first-generation American and college student Latina from a low-income family could apply to.”

Diana Medina (Expand postsecondary advising during the day)

“Expanding equitable access to advanced courses would strengthen the academic foundation students need to excel in college. As a pre-med student that did not have an advanced chemistry or biology class in high school, transitioning into college was more challenging for me than many of my peers.”

Soziema Dauda (Expand equitable access to advanced courses)

College Access Bright Spots

This section highlights innovative programs and initiatives that Tennessee implemented to support postsecondary success. District leaders need to ensure their students and families are aware of these opportunities through targeted outreach. Below are examples of programs and initiatives reinventing postsecondary pathways that align with Invest Forward strategies:



Expand postsecondary advising during the day

Advise TN: Advise TN is a college advising and capacity building program that aims to increase the number of Tennessee students accessing higher education. Advise TN will partner with high schools to provide college advising services to up to 10,000 juniors and seniors in Tennessee. Advise TN is currently partnering with 33 high schools in 28 districts.



Expand equitable access to advanced courses

Advanced Placement Access for All program: Advanced Placement Access for All provides Tennessee students with virtual Advancement Placement (AP) courses. This program aims to eliminate financial barriers to AP courses and serve students who don't have access to AP courses at their home high school.



Communicate about key milestones on students' pathways

GEAR UP TN: Tennessee Higher Education Commission currently serves 15 districts and provides educators, parents, and students with resources and information on the college-going process.



Implement 12th grade transition course

Polk County Schools hired a Capstone teacher to lead a student success course to support students' transition to postsecondary.



Develop near-peer advising support

FUTURO: FUTURO is an inclusive college-success and professional-development organization that supports Latino students by promoting leadership, career-growth, and civic engagement. FUTURO developed a near-peer project and recruited Latino college students to serve as mentors for high school students. Near-peer mentors advised students on college selection and college success.

These programs and initiatives aim to expand the college-going culture in Tennessee and address inequities in college attainment. Districts have two more years to spend their ESSER funds and should examine current college access programs, their impact on college readiness, and expand their reach to support more students in Tennessee. We celebrate the programs and initiatives that are creating more postsecondary pathways.



Moving Forward Together

As we move forward to address the college-going landscape, we encourage district leaders and stakeholders to examine their current college-going data. District leaders need to engage with their local community organizations, students, and families to understand how the pandemic has impacted students in their district and tailor resources and support to their needs. In May 2021, The Education Trust released the article: [5 Questions to Ask Districts About How They Will Use New Federal Funding to Support Students](#) to provide advocates with a set of questions to ask district leaders on how they were allocating ESSER funds to support students. These five questions can help district leaders reevaluate their plans to equitable support students in their district:

- 1 How is the district meaningfully engaging a diverse and representative set of stakeholders – including students, families, educators, and the broader community – in developing a plan to use these funds and implementing that plan?
- 2 What data will the district use to identify student needs – including needs that were unmet prior to the pandemic – and monitor how students are progressing?
- 3 How will the district ensure funding is targeted to the students who need it the most?
- 4 How will the district target additional resources, including federal stimulus funding, to create safe and equitable learning environments and provide whole child supports, particularly for vulnerable and systematically neglected students?
- 5 How will the district implement evidence-based strategies to address unfinished instruction, accelerate learning, and respond to students’ academic, social, and emotional needs?

In June 2022, Education Resource Strategies released “*It’s Time for ESSER Half-Time Review*”, a resource that helps district leaders “understand what is working about their ESSER spending strategy and make strategic decisions about where to refocus efforts for better outcomes.”¹⁴ Without directing our attention to Tennessee’s most vulnerable and impacted students, we will not reverse the damage of the pandemic or fix the historical inequities amongst our student populations. Our students’ futures can be changed if districts capitalize on this historic funding to reimagine postsecondary pathways support for all students in Tennessee.

Acknowledgments

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- Diana Medina, Thrive Fellow
- Soziema Dauda, Thrive Fellow
- Brea Hinds, Thrive Fellow

Endnotes

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