






What Education Advocates Need to Know About the 2025 Tennessee Legislative Session

EdTrust-Tennessee convenes the [Tennessee Alliance for Equity in Education](#), a coalition of about 90 organizations across the state committed to advancing policies that ensure all students can thrive. We have a [shared policy agenda](#) that Alliance partners advocate for and that drives our work.

As we reflect on the 2025 legislative session, the first year of the two-year 114th General Assembly, we want to uplift specific policies and budget priorities, aligned to our agenda, that advocates need to know about. This document is organized around our five policy priorities. For more on what happened to the 250+ of education bills proposed this year, see our [2025 TN Legislative Bill Tracker](#).

Figure 1: At a Glance: Key Changes to Education in Tennessee

Policy Agenda Priority	⚠ Warning	★ Bright Spot
 Priority 1 Promote accessible, rigorous, and affirming learning experiences	Support and accountability for Tennessee's lowest-performing schools was transformed, winding down the Achievement School District and giving the state the ability to close consistently low-performing schools	An English Learner working group will develop recommendations designed to improve academic achievement for Tennessee's English Learner students
 Priority 2 Address funding and resource equity	In a special legislative session, Tennessee implemented a statewide voucher program, directing public funds to private schools	Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA) funding was increased in the state budget, continuing an annual increase trend of roughly 3%

Policy Agenda Priority	⚠ Warning	★ Bright Spot
 Priority 3 Increase educator diversity and quality	An Innovation in Education task force will convene to examine a wide range of issues in education policy, including teacher evaluation, licensure, and statewide assessments	Changes to the Tennessee Future Teacher Scholarship will make the program more accessible to students pursuing non-traditional educator training pathways
 Priority 4 Support students' social, emotional, and academic development	The bill endangering undocumented student access to public K-12 education can continue to move when the legislature reconvenes in January	Bills to address student food insecurity in K-12 and higher education can continue to move when the legislature reconvenes in January
 Priority 5 Expand access and success in higher education	State officials are projecting that declining lottery revenues will result in a deficit of funds to meet Tennessee's state financial aid commitments in future years	A \$12M expansion to the Tennessee Student Assistance Award was passed in the budget, benefitting 6,400 more students from low-income backgrounds

LEGISLATIVE WINS, LOSSES, AND WHAT'S NEXT FOR TENNESSEE STUDENTS

Priority 1: Promote Accessible, Rigorous, and Affirming Learning Experiences

Transformative Changes to Tennessee's School Turnaround Model

[Public Chapter 464](#)

End of the Achievement School District

The Achievement School District (ASD) will be wound down by the start of the 2026-27 school year. Right now, only three schools remain in the ASD and all are located in Memphis.

3-Tiered System for Priority Schools

The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) will implement a 3-tiered system for priority schools starting in the 2025-26 school year, detailed in Table 2. These schools are in the bottom 5% for student achievement, graduate 1/3 or less of their students, or schools with chronically low-performing subgroups who have not improved after being provided additional support.

Table 2: Selected Features of New Accountability Structure for Priority Schools

Tier	Which Schools	What Happens
Tier 1	Schools on the priority list for the first time	<p>The district does one of these:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implements an approved school turnaround intervention plan • Contracts with an approved school turnaround contractor • One of the Tier 2 or 3 options
Tier 2	Schools who have been on the priority list for multiple years; schools placed at the discretion of TDOE	<p>The district does one of these:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implements an intervention plan developed by an approved school turnaround contractor in collaboration with an intervention committee composed of school board members, school employees, and school parents • Replaces some of all of the school's leadership and specific instructional staff • Transfers operation of the school to an approved public institution of higher education • Converts the school to a public charter school operated by an approved entity • One of the Tier 3 options
Tier 3		<p>TDOE will select one of these:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The district will close the school and reassign all students to a higher performing school • If closure is not feasible, the district will replace some or all of the school's leadership and specific instructional staff

The 2023-24 priority schools, the most recent data available, reflect just 11 districts, including the ASD, although the group of schools identified for 2025-26 will be the first group to participate in the new system. To view the most recent list of priority schools, view [Appendix 1](#).

Bright Spot: English Learner Working Group

[Public Chapter 419](#)

Recommendations Developed by End of 2025

The bill creates a working group on English learners that will “study and develop best practices, strategies, and programming for English language learner (EL) educators” to improve educational outcomes for English learners. The composition of the working group is captured in Table 3. The working group will release a report to education committees in the House and Senate by January 1, 2026.

Table 3: English Learner Working Group Members and Appointing Individuals

Member Type	Appointing Authority
Directors of English Learner programs in Tennessee K-12 public schools	Commissioner of Education: Lizzette Gonzalez Reynolds
Representatives of the Department of Education	
Individuals with significant experience working with English Learner students and educators	
Members of the State Board of Education	Executive Director, State Board of Education: Dr. Sara Heyburn Morrison
Members of the House of Representatives	Speaker of the House: Rep. Cameron Sexton
Members of the Senate	Speaker of the Senate: Lt. Gov. Randy McNally

Student Impact

The working group has the potential to positively impact educational outcomes for English Learners, a growing student population in Tennessee comprising 9% of all public school students. Achievement gaps between English Learner and all students have been widening, growing to an over 20 percentage point gap in proficiency rates for the 2023-24 Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP), our statewide standardized assessment.



Priority 2: Address Funding and Resource Equity

New Statewide Voucher Program Adopted

During the Special Legislative Session in January, 2025, Tennessee passed [a statewide voucher program](#). That program is being enacted and will be fully implemented starting in Fall 2025.

EdTrust-Tennessee Opposes Public Funds for Private Schools

EdTrust-Tennessee has consistently advocated against limited or statewide voucher programs like the Education Freedom Scholarship program enacted this year. We believe public funds should support public schools, and that Tennessee should increase per-student spending to the national average, which is currently \$16,645 ([Education Law Center, 2024](#)). We will periodically monitor the implementation of the new program and illuminate instances where information can reduce the harm from the program.

Immigrant Students, Students with Disabilities Face Civil Rights Challenges

Access to the voucher program is limited by immigration status and undocumented Tennesseans are ineligible for the program. Students with disabilities must waive some of their rights to participate in the program, and private schools do not need to comply with federal accessibility requirements unless they receive federal funding. For more information about what students and parents need to know, check out our recent resource, [Tennessee Vouchers: Important Things Students and Families Need to Know Before Applying for a TN Education Freedom Scholarship \(EFS\)](#).

Bright Spot: Public School Funding Increases for the Second Consecutive Year

The final budget includes a funding increase for the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA), Tennessee's public school funding formula.

Predictable Annual Increases are Essential

For the second year in a row, Tennessee's approved budget includes a spending increase to TISA, which is currently in its second year of implementation. The law does not require TISA funding to increase each year to account for inflation, so the General Assembly must appropriate funding for the per-student funding amount to increase each year. The TISA base amount increased from \$7,075 in the current school year to \$7,295 for the 2025-26 school year. Predictable annual increases are critical for sustainable district budgeting. For more information about TISA, check out our [TISA in Action: What Tennessee Advocates and Policymakers Need to Know](#) resource.

Student Impact

Money matters for student outcomes - academic research indicates a correlation between overall funding and student achievement ([Learning Policy Institute, 2025](#)). Increases to the base student funding amount affect every student, school, and district in Tennessee. The state's investment in increasing the TISA base will increase dollars for the more than 971,000 K-12 public school students in Tennessee. Because TISA provides "weights" - additional funds for unique student needs as percentages of the base amount - increasing the base amount will also increase funding for students from low-income backgrounds, English Learners, students with disabilities, and others.



Priority 3: Increase Educator Diversity and Quality

Advisory Committee Has Wide Purview

[Public Chapter 426](#)

Broad Focus Encompasses Many Foundational Education Policies

The charge of the advisory committee is to, with support from the Department of Education, conduct a study on a range of foundational educational policies listed below. The advisory committee can request information and feedback from one or more third parties with specialized knowledge or experience with each of these topics.

- Evaluation processes for teachers and principals: determine appropriate process, frequency, and content of teacher and principal evaluations and effectiveness of the current system
- State and locally mandated assessments: determine appropriate scope and frequency of assessments and how to use assessments for student, teacher, school, and district accountability and other purposes
- Instructional hours: Whether shifting from instructional days to instructional hours would be beneficial to students and the community
- Academic standards for high school grades and subjects: whether students completing a Career and Technical Education (CTE) elective focus should be allowed to substitute CTE courses for courses required for high school graduation “that are designed to assist students in pursuing a baccalaureate degree at a four-year postsecondary institution, as opposed to students pursuing a CTE credential or pathway.”
- Educational, licensure, and training requirements for educators and future educators: determine the utility of each requirement and determine how to develop and maintain high-performing educators

Primarily Legislative Group Will Be Fast-Moving

The advisory committee members must be appointed by July 1, 2025 and meet for the first time no later than August 1, 2025. The advisory committee must submit a report with recommendations for legislation or modification of existing rules and policies, by December 31, 2025.

Table 4: Advisory Committee on Innovations in K-12 Education Members and Appointing Individuals

Member Type	Appointing Authority
4 members of the Senate	Speaker of the Senate: Lt. Gov. Randy McNally
4 members of the House of Representatives	Speaker of the House: Rep. Cameron Sexton
1 representative of the State Board of Education	Governor: Bill Lee
1 representative of the Department of Education	

Bright Spot: Modernizing the Tennessee Future Teacher Scholarship

[HB 504/SB 682](#) (Rep. White/Sen. White) passed both chambers and, of May 9, 2025, is headed to the Governor for signature

Non-Traditional Teacher Candidates Now Benefit

Changes to the Tennessee Future Teacher Scholarship pilot program make the program more accessible to students from a wide range of backgrounds and pathways into teaching. While previously the scholarship required students to be enrolled in a traditional undergraduate teaching program, the new requirements expand access to programs that serve students after they have already completed a bachelor's degree. This is important because the number of teachers coming into the profession via non-traditional pipelines has nearly doubled in the five-year period between 2017 and 2022 ([TERA, 2024](#)). Additional changes make the award amount more transparent and reduce the teaching commitment to further expand access.

Student Impact

Teachers matter more for student outcomes than any other aspect of school ([RAND, 2019](#)). However, Tennessee is facing a worsening teacher shortage that saw 10% of all teaching positions vacant or emergency credentials for the 2023-24 school year, the most recent year of data available ([TDOE, 2024](#)). Vacancies and underprepared teachers tend to be concentrated in schools with high enrollments of students of color ([Learning Policy Institute, 2020](#)). To learn more about teacher vacancies in Tennessee, check out our new resource, [#5Things Advocates Should Know About the State of Tennessee's Teacher Workforce in 2023-24](#).



Priority 4: Support Students' Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

Access to Education for Undocumented Students Still Under Threat

[HB 793/SB 836](#) (Rep. Lamberth/Sen. Watson) passed the Senate, but was not heard in the House Finance, Ways, and Means Subcommittee. The bill can be heard and resume the process of legislative approval when the legislature reconvenes in January, 2026.

Bill's Goal is to Challenge Supreme Court Precedent

The bill's sponsors have stated their intent to overturn a long-standing legal precedent, enshrined in the *Plyler v. Doe* ruling, that all children living in the United States have access to a free public education regardless of their immigration status. The House and Senate amended the original bill in different ways, captured in Table 5 below. For more detailed analysis of the bill and research on this topic, check out our [Protecting Undocumented Student Access to K-12 Public School](#) resource.

Table 5: Different Versions of HB 793

Things Districts and Charter Schools Can Do	House Version (Amendment 1)	Senate Version (Adopted)
Collect information on immigration status as part of enrolling in school	Allowed	Required
Charge tuition for public school	Allowed	Allowed
Deny enrollment	Allowed to deny outright or after attempting to charge tuition	Allowed after attempting to charge tuition

Continued Advocacy Needed

Stopping the passage of HB 793/SB 836 and defeating the other two bills challenging *Plyler* was a major victory. It was only possible through the continued advocacy of a diverse cross-sector of Tennesseans, including thousands activated through the [Education for All Tennessee](#) campaign. Stay tuned this summer and fall for additional actions advocates can take to keep fighting back.

Bright Spot: Food Security Bills Still Alive

[HB 1153/SB 740](#), which addresses costs for reduced price school meals in K-12, and [HB 7/SB 172](#), the Hunger Free Campus Act for higher education, were both placed behind the budget in 2025. When the legislature reconvenes in January, both bills can move through each Chamber's finance committee and on to a floor vote.

Student Impact - K-12

An estimated 1 in 6 children face hunger in Tennessee ([Feeding America](#)), and school meals are a key way that kids who are food insecure get access to the food they need. The bill's effect of removing the reduced price category would benefit over 32,000 K-12 students in Tennessee. Students of color, rural students, and students from low-income backgrounds experience higher rates of food insecurity than the overall student population.

Student Impact - Higher Education

A recent report conducted by THEC estimates 30% of Tennessee postsecondary students are food insecure ([THEC, 2023](#)). National data indicate postsecondary students who are Black and Indigenous or from low-income backgrounds are more likely to face food insecurity by 20 percentage points and 17 percentage points respectively.

Priority 5: Expand Access and Success in Higher Education

Lottery Revenues in Trouble, Endangering State Scholarship Programs

Fiscal presentations show an expected revenue decline for the Tennessee Lottery, which funds many of Tennessee's state financial aid programs.

Lottery Proceeds, Reserves are Down

Tennessee Lottery proceeds are used to fund education initiatives, including 13 different scholarship programs for higher education and K-12 after school programs. This year, the lottery reported a 10% decline in revenue, largely due to the growth of sports betting and the lack of a large jackpot this year. There are growing concerns that lottery proceeds will not be sufficient to meet scholarship funding needs in future years; the education lottery reserve fund is expected to have a \$37.1M shortfall by FY2029. Proposed expansions to the state financial aid portfolio, such as this year's Tennessee WORKS proposal, could risk straining available funds further. Advocates need to pay close attention when the legislature takes up the Lottery Calendar, which was rolled in its entirety to next year.

Changes to Sports Betting Funding Part of Voucher Bill

In addition to the projected declines facing the lottery in the coming years, sports betting revenues that were supporting scholarship programs can now be used for school facilities funding due to a change passed as part of the bill establishing the new statewide voucher program. Under the new law, any sports betting revenue not needed to cover scholarship costs can be placed in a K-12 school facilities fund. Districts can apply for funding with priority given to districts that are at risk or distressed, high performing, or fast growth. This change, coupled with the lottery reserve challenge, could endanger the fiscal health of state scholarship programs.

Bright Spot: Tennessee's Only Income-Based Scholarship Expanded

A \$12M increase for the Tennessee Student Assistance Award was included in [this year's budget](#).

Change Streamlines Financial Aid Eligibility for Students from Low Income Backgrounds

The [Tennessee Student Assistance Award](#) (TSAA) is Tennessee's only state financial aid program awarded to students based on financial need. Unlike many of Tennessee's other financial aid programs, TSAA is funded out of the General Fund of the budget, not the lottery. The budget increase will cover the costs of changing the eligibility threshold for the program, aligning it to Pell grant eligibility. Previously, TSAA used a measure of income that did not change based on cost of living, so moving eligibility to align to the Pell grant streamlines the eligibility and ties it to a measure that can increase annually to reflect current costs. To apply for TSAA, students must complete the FAFSA; the grant is awarded on a first-come, first-served basis.

Student Impact

In 2023-24, over 63,000 Tennessee postsecondary students received TSAA. The allocated funds will serve an additional 6,400 students in Tennessee. It's important to note that TSAA may not be fully funded from year to year. When this happens, students are awarded the funds based on the order in which they complete the FAFSA and not all students who qualify receive funding. THEC estimates an additional 19,000 students qualify for TSAA based on the new streamlined eligibility criteria. Continued advocacy to fully fund TSAA is critical to ensure the eligible students can receive funding to support their postsecondary aspirations.

Looking Ahead

2025 has already been an enormously important year for education across the country, and Tennessee has experienced monumental policy changes that will have wide-ranging effects on students from Pre-K through postsecondary. As we celebrate our wins, closely monitor policy implementation, and gear up for 2026, we remain focused on our core mission - ensuring all students can thrive in an education system that creates pathways to a more just Tennessee.

Appendix 1: 2023-24 Priority Schools and Districts

District	School(s)
Achievement School District <i>Many of the schools that were part of the ASD in 2023-2024 have reverted back to their original district, closed, or are under the authority of the Tennessee Charter School Commission.</i>	Brick Church: A LEAD Public School Cornerstone Prep - Lester Campus Fairley High School Hillcrest High School Humes Preparatory Academy Middle School Journey Coleman School Kirby Middle School MLK Preparatory High School Memphis Scholars Caldwell-Guthrie Memphis Scholars Florida Kansas Memphis Scholars Raleigh-Egypt Westside Middle School Wooddale Middle School
Fayette County Schools	East Jr. High School

District	School(s)
Hamilton County Schools	Chattanooga Charter School of Excellence Middle School Dalewood Middle School Hardy Elementary School Orchard Knob Elementary School Orchard Knob Middle School
Haywood County Schools	Haywood High School Haywood Middle School Sunny Hill Intermediate School
Humboldt City Schools	Humboldt Junior & Senior High School
Jackson-Madison County Schools	Alexander Elementary School Isaac Lane Technology Magnet Elementary Jackson Career Technology Magnet Elementary School Jackson Central Merry High School Lincoln Elementary School North Side High School
Knox County Schools	Austin-East Magnet High School Lonsdale Elementary School Maynard Elementary School Northwest Middle School Sarah Moore Greene Magnet Technology Academy Vine Middle Magnet School
Maury County Schools	E.A. Cox Middle School Virtual Academy of Maury County

District	School(s)
Memphis Shelby County Schools	A.B. Hill Elementary School Alcy Elementary School American Way Middle School Chickasaw Middle School Double Tree Elementary School Douglass Elementary/Middle School Ford Road Elementary School Frayser-Corning Elementary School Freedom Prep Elementary - Parkrose Geeter School Georgian Hills Elementary School Hamilton High School Hamilton School Hanley K8 Holmes Road Elementary School Kingsbury Middle School Larose Elementary School Levi Elementary School Lucie E. Campbell Elementary School Lucy Elementary School Melrose High School Memphis Delta Preparatory School Memphis Virtual School Mitchell High School Oakhaven Middle School Power Center Academy Middle-Southeast Raleigh Egypt Middle School Riverview Elementary/Middle School

District	School(s)
Memphis Shelby County Schools Cont...	Scenic Hills Elementary School Sheffield High School Sherwood Middle School Soulsville Charter School Treadwell Middle School Winchester Elementary School Wooddale High School Woodstock Middle School
Metro Nashville Public Schools	Antioch Middle School Apollo Middle School Bellshire Elementary School Cane Ridge High School Cockrill Elementary School Glenclyff High School Haynes Middle School Jere Baxter Middle School John Early Middle School Jones Elementary School Maplewood High School Margaret Allen Middle School McGavock High School Moses McKissack Middle School Park Avenue Elementary School Pearl-Cohn High School Robert Churchwell Elementary School Wright Middle School
Sevier County Schools	Gary Hardin Academy