



TENNESSEE ALLIANCE FOR  
**EQUITY IN  
EDUCATION**  
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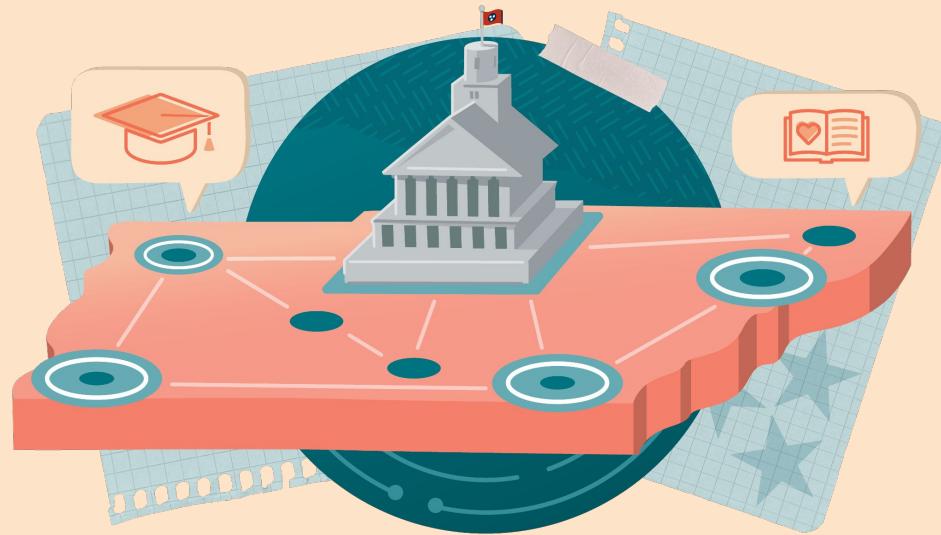
# Knoxville Regional Roundtable

December 5, 2025



# Welcome!

- Sit at a table with someone new
- Introduce yourself:
  - *Organization or School?*
  - *What is one thing you're working on right now?*
  - *What is one thing giving you hope in this moment?*



# Welcome!

Alexza Barajas Clark, PhD  
EdTrust TN Executive Director





**Reverend Reneé Kesler  
President  
Beck Cultural Exchange  
Center**

# Meet the East Tennessee Co-Hosts



# Meet the Statewide Co-Hosts



# Bridging Policy & Community



# Federal Focus, Tennessee Lens



**Meili Powell**  
*Assistant Director of Advocacy & Engagement*

# Federal Focus, Tennessee Lens

# Education Department outsources program management to other agencies

The interagency agreements will shift management of six of the department's programs, including elementary and secondary education, to other agencies.

Published Nov. 18, 2025

# Education Department tells states to seek waivers from ESEA

Some states have already requested flexibility through block grants, giving a glimpse into what more state autonomy might entail.

Published July 30, 2025

## TN lawmakers prepare for potential loss of federal education funding

State leaders established the Federal Education Deregulation Cooperation Task Force during the most recent legislative session.



### EDUCATION

## Trump administration grant cuts hit UT agriculture projects hardest

The university faces a multi-million-dollar loss after the Trump administration cut federal grants.

### EDUCATION

## What schools stand to lose in the battle over the next federal education budget

SEPTEMBER 26, 2025 · 5:00 AM ET

 Cory Turner

# Where are we?

2026 is a **massive** year for public education - the ground is shifting constantly, and it will be imperative that public school advocates are prepared to meet the moment

## What's happening this year:

- 2026 election - Governor's race, all 99 House members, and 17 Senate members
  - Local elections - mayoral races, commissions, school boards
- The role of the federal Department of Education, and its relationship with Tennessee, is changing profoundly
  - This includes potential changes to our federal accountability and funding system
- Budgets across the country are getting tight, including here in Tennessee
- An opportunity: who will build the education system we want to see in Tennessee and across the country?

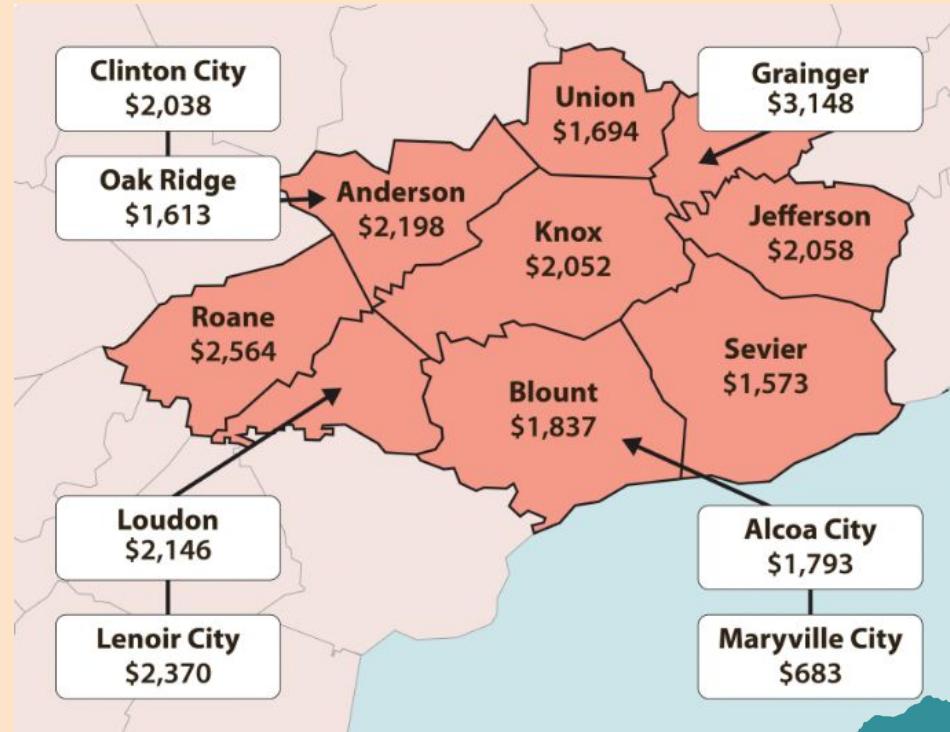
# Audience Poll



**TRUE or FALSE**

Federal education funding is a smaller amount of funding than K-12 school districts get from state and local funding sources.

# Federal Education Funding Provides Critical Resources and Specific Support



Source: TN Dept. of Education, 2023-24

# Public Funds Should Fund Public Schools Exclusively

## Opportunities for advocates:

- Stay ready to engage on which organizations can receive the federal voucher
- Mitigate harm from Tennessee's new voucher program by advocating for improved transparency and limits to future expansion



Jenny Mills McFerron  
Assistant Director of Policy and Research

# Audience Poll



**YES or I'M NOT SURE**

The way Tennessee is holding K-12 schools accountable for student outcomes is working well in my school or community

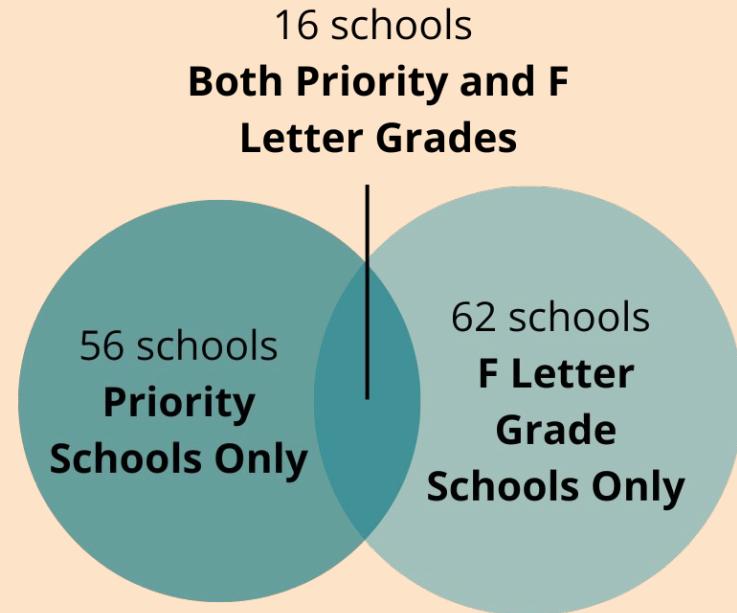
# Audience Poll



**YES or I'M NOT SURE**

I'm pretty familiar with the way Tennessee holds K-12 schools accountable for student outcomes

# Tennessee Has Two Different School Accountability Systems



Source: EdTrust analysis of TN Dept. of Education data, 2023-24 school year

# Tennessee Should Have One Accountability System Aligned to Our Values and Goals

## Opportunities for advocates:

- Learn more about what ESSA is and why accountability matters
- Participate in the public comment process to shape what Tennessee's future accountability system will look like

# Audience Poll



**YES or I'M NOT SURE**

The way postsecondary is held accountable for student outcomes is working well in my school or community

# Postsecondary Accountability at a More Granular Level

A new Earnings Premium framework will impact if students can access federal student loans based on their program or major.

	<b>Which Programs</b>	<b>Earning Requirement</b>
<b>Undergraduate Programs</b>	Associate and Bachelor's Degree Programs	Higher than median earnings of 25-34 year olds in the state with only a high school diploma in 2 of the last 3 years
<b>Graduate Programs</b>	Master's, doctoral, professional programs, certificates	Higher than median earnings of 25-34 year olds with a bachelor's degree in the state in 2 of the last 3 years

# Tennessee Should Ensure Students Are Protected and Supported

## Opportunities for advocates:

- Help connect students to high-quality advising and navigation supports
- Advocate for high-quality experiences like work-based learning that lead to better career and wage outcomes
- Advocate for stronger public state data access

# Audience Poll



**YES or I'M NOT SURE**

I have seen stories within the last week about people not having access to food

# Students Rely on Public Benefits to Meet Basic Needs

Changes made as part of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBA) will limit access to public benefits programs and shift costs to states

## How many Tennesseans participate in federal food assistance (SNAP):

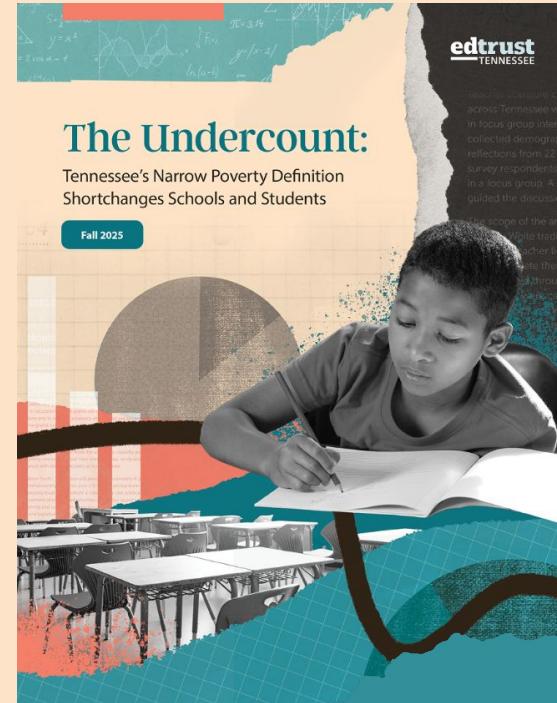
- About one in ten Tennesseans overall
- Almost one in four Tennessee children
- More than 75,000 Tennesseans in the Knoxville region

Source: Sycamore Institute (Sept. 2025), Annie E. Casey Foundation KidsCount Data (2023)

# Who We Count Determines Who Gets Support

## Opportunities for advocates:

- Learn more about this issue in [The Undercount](#) report
- Follow along with the review committee for Tennessee's school funding formula when it convenes in January
- Stay ready to advocate for a new way to identify and allocate resources to students from low-income backgrounds





## Jeff Strand

### *Assistant Director of Government Relations*

# What Matters in this Moment

Things are changing rapidly – we MUST be ready to coalesce around protecting what matters while casting a vision of a better, more equitable public education system.

## What matters:

- Knowing, and being knowledgeable about, what matters
- Being willing and able to work in coalition
- Understanding these times as both crisis AND opportunity

# What Matters in this Moment

## 2026 Ed Trust-Tennessee Policy Agenda:

1. Every student has access to accessible, rigorous and affirming learning experiences in Tennessee public schools
2. Every student attends a school with robust, stable and fair funding that meets the needs of their community
3. Every student has a great, well-paid and well-resourced teacher
4. Every student attends a school where they feel like they can belong and thrive
5. Every student has access to an affordable, high-quality postsecondary experience that sets them up for economic prosperity

# Accessible, rigorous and affirming learning experiences

## This looks like:

- Balancing growth and achievement in school accountability
- Students having access to a broad array of books and materials
- High-quality early childhood education being accessible and affordable
- Knowing which career pathways are producing for Tennessee students

**\*\*Raise a  if you ever read a book at school that made an impact on you\*\***

# Robust, stable and fair funding

## This looks like:

- Ensuring that TISA is working for the students who need it most
- Knowing how school funds are being spent at the local level
- Funding each student at a rate at least equal to the national average
- TISA comprehensively and accurately identifying which students live in poverty



**\*\*Did you know the TISA Review Committee begins convening in January?\*\***

# Great, well-paid and well-resourced teachers

## This looks like:

- Transparency around teacher retention, turnover and vacancies
- Building a low-cost, low-barrier teacher pipeline
- Providing resources to districts so they can keep their best teachers
- A teacher workforce that reflects the diversity of our state

\*\*Raise a  if your local school currently has teacher vacancies\*\*

# Students can belong and thrive

**This looks like:**

- Eliminating our reliance on corporal punishment and exclusionary discipline
- Training our teachers to implement culturally competent behavior management in their classrooms
- Ensuring that every student has access to the types of holistic supports they need to show up to school every day
- Reflecting the voice and leadership of students in school- and state-level decision-making

**\*\*Raise a  if you ever had a great teacher give you a sense of belonging\*\***

# Affordable, high-quality postsecondary experiences

This looks like:

- Simplifying and streamlining access to the state's financial aid programs
- Reducing the achievement gaps in higher education
- Making sure that every student has access to great post-secondary counseling to help them enter and succeed in postsecondary education
- Keeping the door open for all students, regardless of who they are

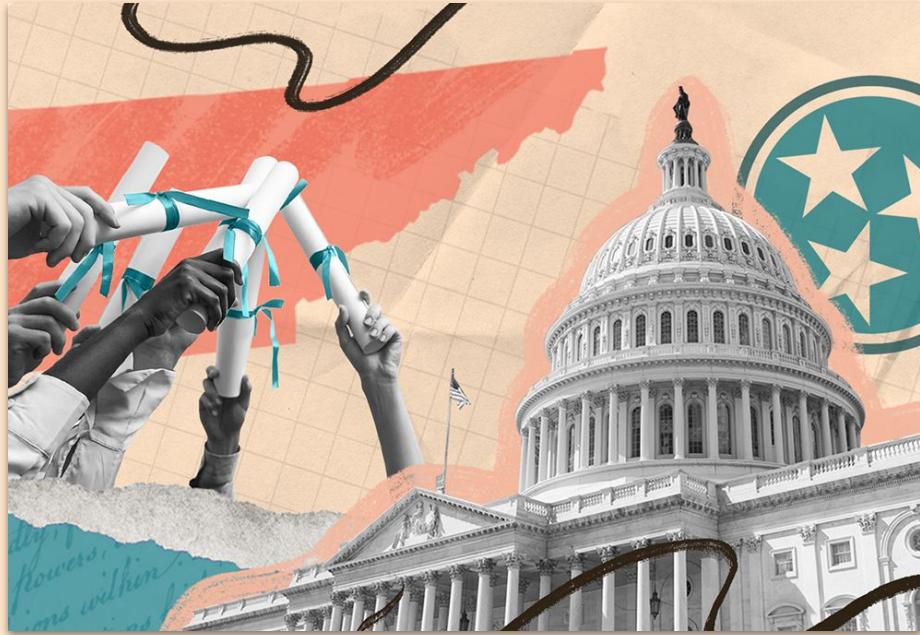
**\*\*Raise a  if state financial aid has helped you get a post-secondary education\*\***

# Turn and Talk

- What is resonating with you?
- What education issues are top of mind in your community?

# Federal Focus, Tennessee Lens

A set of resources from partners and webinars from EdTrust-Tennessee equipping advocates with information on important federal shifts.



# What Now?: Advancing Education Progress in a Shifting Landscape

# Partner Spotlight



**Ben Flowers**  
*Program Coordinator*  
The Shora Foundation



## Overview

- The Shora Foundation, founded in 2008, exists to build up, safeguard, and showcase the value of under resources communities in the Knoxville area. We accomplish this by offering pathways to success. Our Academic Center gives youth a space to belong and have their strengths nurtured and developed while our entrepreneurial pathway, The Roots Collective creates space for start-up and growing businesses to thrive. We surround our community with a culture rooted in love and respect for self in order to equip them and bring out the very best versions of themselves.

## Impact

- **Academic Achievement:** We have been able to track and see how our scholars are meeting and/or exceeding the state's academic goals year after year.
- **Mental Health:** Partnering with UTK to provide mental health groups for the scholars and their families have been life changing. We are equipping them with language and the emotional regulation skills needed to navigate the challenges they are faced with everyday.



- **Food Sustainability:** Safe Place Grocery is our healthy choice meal options pantry for the scholars and their families and the community.
- **Economic Equity:** The Roots Collective walks alongside of leaders and business owners to give them a space to learn, network, and get access capital to build a sustainable business that can be transferred to future generations.

## Opportunities for Community Engagement

- The Shora Foundation is always looking within the community and outward not just to build up Shora, but to bring the community together for the betterment of the whole. We value all of our partnerships and are always looking for more opportunities and innovative ways to engage our community.
- Going on the website and filling out an interest form or direct contact is always the best ways to start the conversation of community engagement opportunities.

# Partner Spotlight



**Adam Fritts**  
*Chair*  
TN Community Schools Network

# Tennessee Community Schools Network

## Overview of Community Schools

- Site Coordinator
- Site Steering Committee
- Asset & Needs Assessment
- Community Schools Pillars (Integrated Systems of Support, Expanded Learning Opportunities, Active Family & Community Engagement, and Collaborative Leadership & Practices)

## Across the State

- **158** Community Schools
- **Over 100,000** students
- **10** Providers
- **Metro** (Bristol, Knoxville, Chattanooga, Nashville, Memphis)
- **Rural** (Bledsoe, Clay, Cocke, Davidson, Fentress, Hamilton, Hancock, Hardeman, Jackson, Knox, Lake, Lauderdale, McNairy, Morgan, Scott, Shelby, Van Buren, Wayne)



TCSSN

# TN Community Schools Network Campaign

## Overview HB 0225/SB0364

- Administered by the University of Tennessee Knoxville (UTK), the Full-Service Community Schools Grant Program creates a strong, statewide framework for schools that partner with local organizations to support students and families beyond academics.

## Impact

- **Stronger student outcomes** through coordinated academic, health, and family supports that improve achievement, attendance, and behavior.
- **More stable and supportive school environments** by reducing non-instructional burdens on teachers and creating consistent systems for early intervention.
- **Deeper family and community involvement** with structured roles for partners and families, leading to better alignment between school needs and local resources.



**TCSSN**

# TN Community Schools Network Campaign

## Opportunities for Community Engagement

- Community members, parents, educators, and local organizations can contact Senate Education Committee members to share why stronger school-community partnerships matter in their area, using local stories and clear examples of unmet needs.
- Advocacy groups, nonprofits, and civic leaders can coordinate outreach efforts such as informational sessions, call-in days, joint letters of support, and social media campaigns to build broad visibility and momentum for SB 0364 before the committee vote.



# Partner Announcements



*everychild. onevoice.®*



The banner for "The Future of Possibilities Conference" features a dark blue background with colorful, stylized confetti-like shapes in yellow, green, and purple. On the right side, there is a close-up photograph of a young girl with freckles, looking upwards and to the right with a thoughtful expression. The text "The Future of Possibilities Conference" is centered at the top in a white, sans-serif font. Below it, a paragraph of text invites systems change leaders to connect, present, discuss, and learn. The date "APRIL 22, 2026 • MOREHEAD, KENTUCKY" is listed. At the bottom, there are three QR codes and two calls to action: "Submit a Proposal" with links to "See FAQ" and "Submit", and "Notify Me When Registration Opens". The "Notify Me" button is accompanied by a small lightbulb icon. The "Registration Opens" text is preceded by a small exclamation mark icon. The Tennessee For America logo is in the bottom right corner.

The Future of Possibilities Conference

Join systems change leaders from across different sectors & industries to connect, present, discuss and learn from one another

APRIL 22, 2026 • MOREHEAD, KENTUCKY

Submit a Proposal  
[See FAQ](#) • [Submit](#)

Notify Me When Registration Opens

Tennessee For America

# Alliance Policy Agenda Activation



**Alan Miramontes Flores**  
*Postsecondary Access Coordinator*  
Centro Hispano de East TN



**Dustin Park**  
*Public School Strong TN Steering  
Committee Member*  
Statewide Organizing for  
Community eMpowerment

## Turn and Talk

- What did you hear during this panel, or throughout tonight's event, that is sparking a new idea or action you hope to take?
- What is a takeaway from today that connects to your work and/or interests?



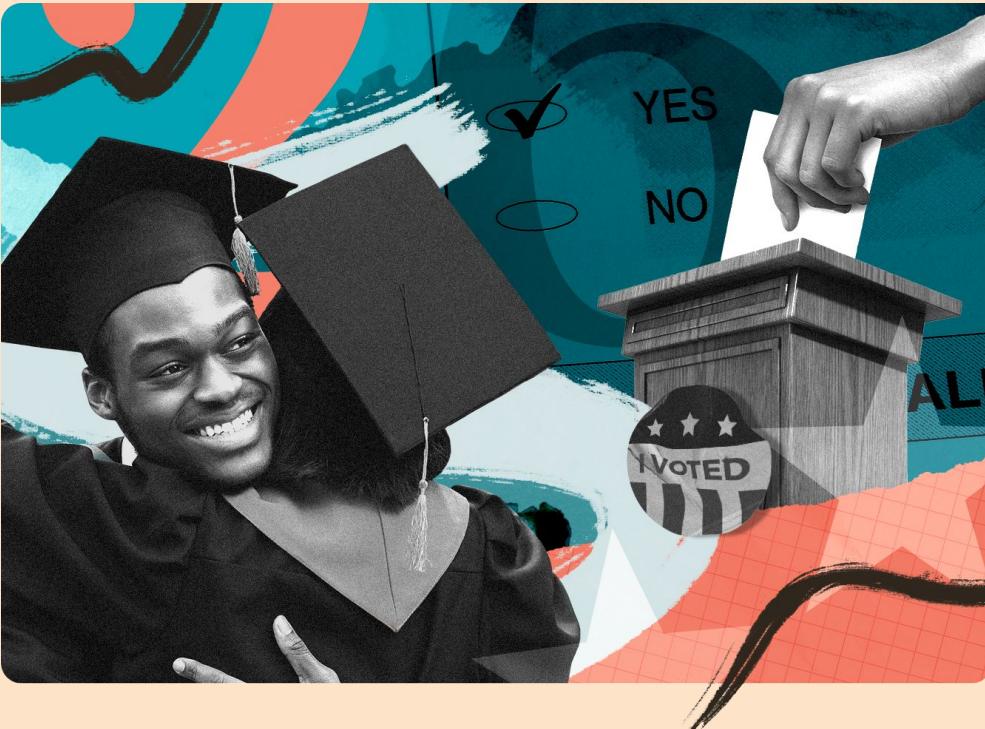
**Breana Staten**  
*Assistant Director of Communications*

# What's Next?

Things will move quickly, and here is what to keep on your radar.

- The 2026 General Assembly session gavels in on **January 13th, 2026**
- **EdTrust-Tennessee Legislative Engagement Opportunities:**
  - Legislative kick-off webinar
  - 2026 Ten for Tennessee Bills
  - 2027 Budget Breakdown
  - State of the State watch party
- **TISA Review Committee:** Quarterly meetings start in January
- **Changes to Accountability Systems:** Anticipated updates and opportunities for public comment begins in December.

# Call to Action



# Every Student Matters, Every Vote Counts

The decisions made at the ballot box in 2026 will shape our classrooms for years to come – from funding and resources to the policies that determine whether every child gets a fair shot at success.



# Pledge to Commit to Education in 2026



Show Up



Spread the Word



Stay Informed



Put Students First



Advocate for Fair Education Policies



# Survey: Our Vision for Public Education

# Roundtable Resources Guide

- Regional PowerPoints
- Regional Data Walk Slides
- Report: The Undercount
- Federal Focus, TN Lens
- Advocacy Resource Hub
- Meet Our Co-hosts
  - Website, Social Media, Upcoming Events

# Stay Connected: Weekly Legislative Updates



<https://edtrusttn.org>



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# Thank you!

