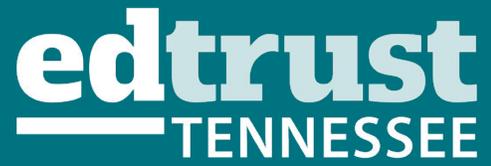


The Undercount: Tennessee's Narrow Poverty Definition Shortchanges Schools and Students



Who Are We





Today's Goal

Unpack how Tennessee identifies students from low-income backgrounds, why it matters for students and schools, and how advocates can take action this legislative session

- 1 Unpacking how Tennessee Measures Students from Low-Income Backgrounds
- 2 Legislative Updates
- 3 Partner Spotlight: STRONG ACC
- 4 Q&A, Resources, and Next Steps

EdTrust-Tennessee Speakers



**Jenny Mills
McFerron**

Director, P-16
Policy & Research



**Emily
Bengyak**

Higher Education
Policy Fellow



Jeff Strand

Assistant
Director,
Government
Relations



**Meili
Powell**

Assistant
Director,
Advocacy &
Engagement

Guest Speakers



Rep. Chris Hurt

R-Halls

House Education Committee

Education Administration and Education
Instruction Subcommittees



Mark Cruise

Director

STRONG Accountable Care Community



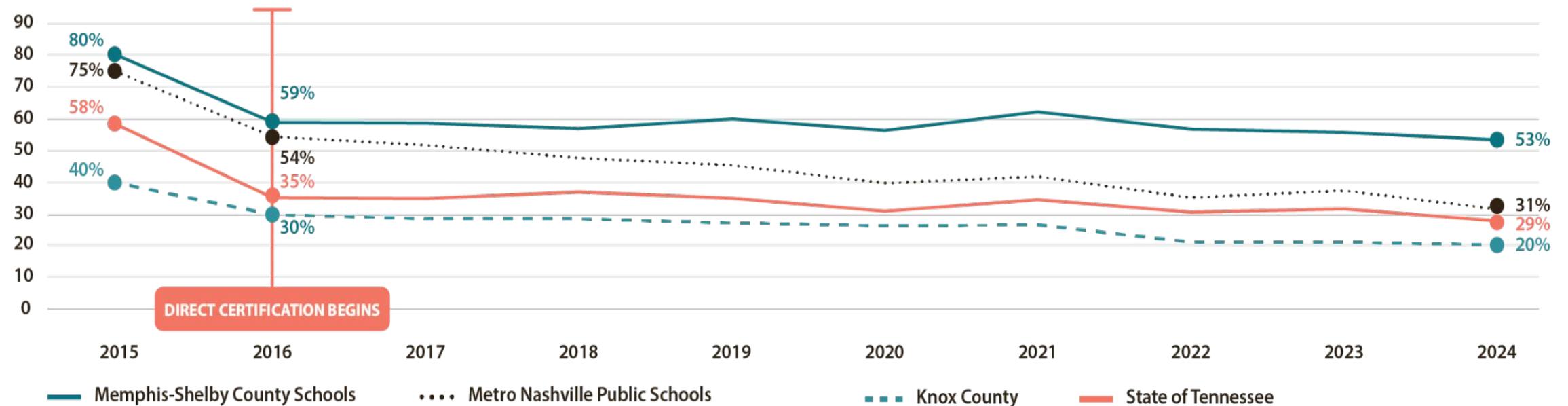
The Undercount: Why the Economically Disadvantaged Definition Matters for Students and Schools

Why Tennessee Identifies Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

- Federal law **requires states** to identify students from low-income backgrounds for two primary purposes:
 - **Accountability**
 - **Funding and Resource Allocation**
- This student group is called **“economically disadvantaged”** in Tennessee
- States have **flexibility to choose** what data sources they use to identify students
- The Every Student Succeeds Act (**ESSA**) is the most recent iteration of federal law governing these processes

How Tennessee Has Identified Students Over Time

- Historically, Tennessee used participation in the Free and Reduced Price Lunch program
 - Changes to this program necessitated a **shift starting in 2016**
- Since 2016, Tennessee has used participation in **SNAP and TANF** programs to identify students using a process called direct certification



TISA ties the Economically Disadvantaged Definition to Funding

- Tennessee changed the way we fund public K-12 schools in 2022
- TISA allocates funding based on **individual student needs**
- Economically disadvantaged students generate a **25% weight** in the TISA formula
 - \$1,823.75 per student for the 2025-26 school year ([TDOE, 2025](#))

Outcomes Funding:

Incentivizes achievement on academic priorities

Direct Funding:

Supports learning opportunities in priority areas like early literacy, career and technical education (CTE), and postsecondary readiness

Weights:

Provides additional, stackable funds for students from low-income backgrounds or schools with concentrated poverty, English Learners, students with disabilities, and students in sparse or small districts

Base:

Covers the essentials each student needs for a K-12 education

Identifying Economically Disadvantaged Students in Tennessee

- The switch to direct certification caused a sudden drop in the number of students considered economically disadvantaged.
- Relying solely on data from the SNAP and TANF programs overlooks low-income students who do not participate in the program.
- Today, this has significant implications for the amount of funding that is allocated to districts due to the adoption of the TISA formula.

Prior to 2016

Student eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) is used as the standard measure of student poverty.

2016

Tennessee begins using direct certification to identify economically disadvantaged students.

2022

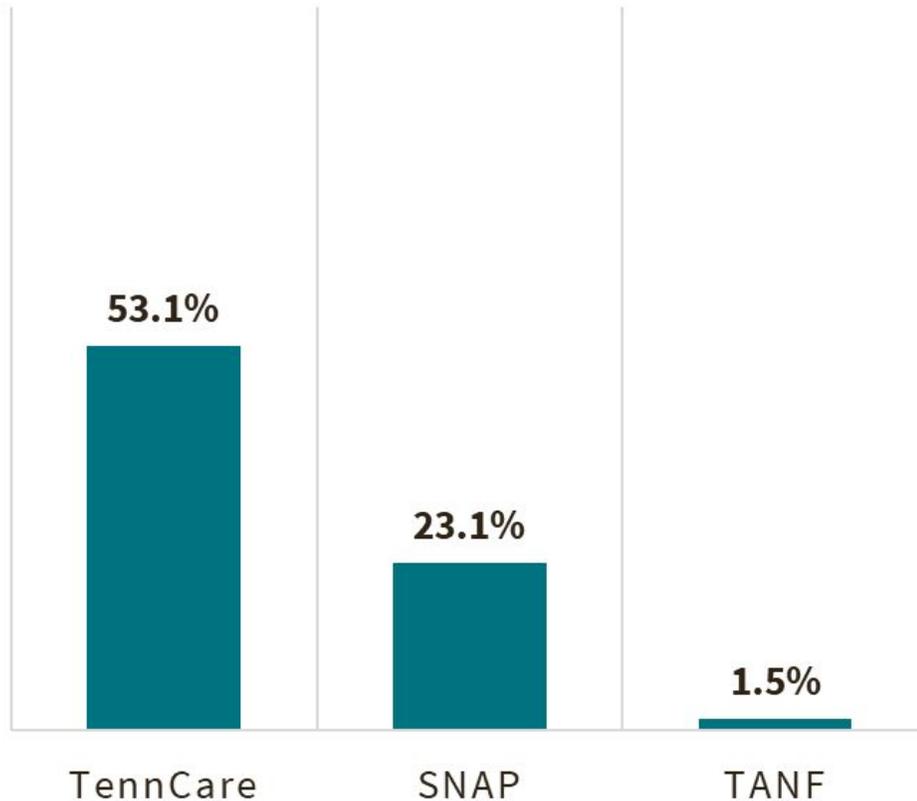
Tennessee adopts the student-weighted TISA formula, making accurate identification of economically disadvantaged students more critical.

2025

Tennessee is falling behind in the methods used in its direct certification process by failing to include additional data sources in the process.

Strengthening Direct Certification: How the Use of Medicaid Data Improves Direct Certification

Percent of Tennessee children receiving public assistance by program (2023)

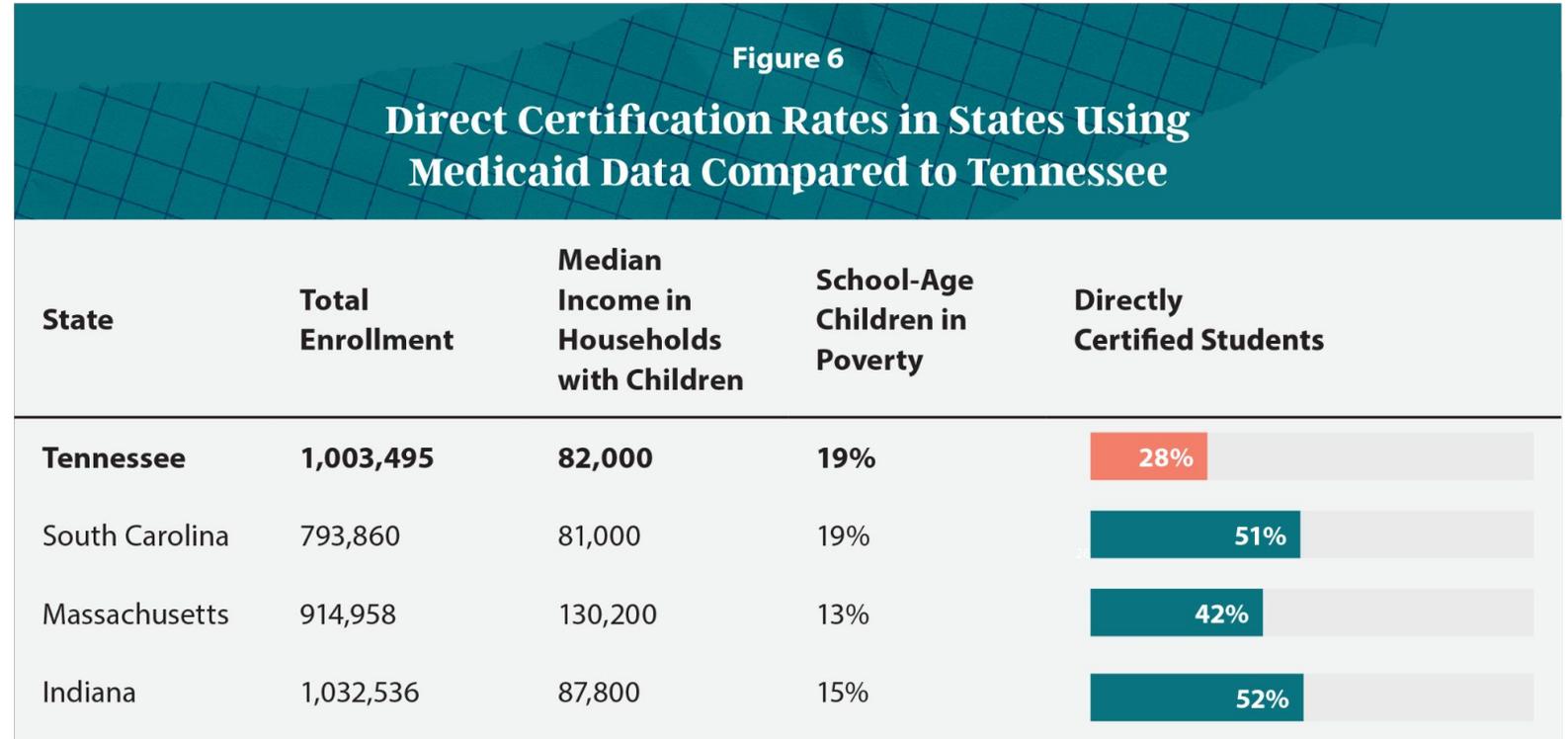


- TennCare (Medicaid) reaches more than twice as many children than SNAP.
- Including TennCare data would identify students that would otherwise be overlooked.
- TennCare data is used to identify students eligible for meal benefits, but these students are not considered economically disadvantaged.

Source: Tennessee Commission on Children & Youth. (2025). FUTURE Data Dashboard. <https://www.tn.gov/tccy-future.html>

The Limitations of Tennessee's Direct Certification in Measuring Student Economic Hardship

Including Medicaid data in direct certification identifies students who would otherwise be overlooked.



Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2024) [Common Core Data](#); Kids Count Data Center. (2024). [Median family income among households with children in United States](#); Kids Count Data Center (2024). [Children in poverty by age group in United States](#)

Tennessee's Economically Disadvantaged Student Definition Carries Greater Weight Under TISA

Select a District	
Bradley County	
Number of Students	
9,966	
Percentage of Economically Disadvantaged Students via SNAP & TANF	Percentage of Students Approved for Free Meals via SNAP, TANF, & Medicaid
25%	44%
TISA Funding via Economically Disadvantaged Students	Potential Funding by Including Students Approved for Free Meals via SNAP, TANF, & Medicaid
\$4,287,120.00	\$7,557,869.48
Estimate of How Much More Your District Could Receive	
\$3,270,712.48	

- Undercounting economically disadvantaged students results in the underfunding of our schools.
- Due to recent federal changes, Tennessee urgently needs to expand the definition of economically disadvantaged students.
- Including Medicaid data ensures that more students are identified as economically disadvantaged and drives additional funding to districts.

Strengthening Direct Certification in Tennessee

[HB2485](#) / [SB2385](#)

- Ensures that students identified as eligible for free school meals via Medicaid (TennCare) participation data are considered economically disadvantaged.
- Includes a hold harmless until 2030 to ensure no districts experience a sudden drop in funding.
- Requires the state's accountability plan to be adjusted to align accountability and funding systems.
- Want to see how this change could impact your local district? View EdTrust-TN's dashboard [Undercounting of Economically Disadvantaged Students by District](#)

Political Context

EdTrust-TN Past Engagement on School Funding



Priority 2: Secure Fair Funding and Resource Equity

Equity Principle: Every public school student in Tennessee attends a school that receives robust and stable funding and resources based on student needs through a flexible, fair, and transparent funding system.

- [ET-TN Dollars and Sense Learning Series](#)
- [School Funding Advocacy Guides](#)
- [TISA Evaluation and Advocacy](#)
- [TISA Advocacy Guide](#)
- [Alliance Policy Agenda - Priority 2](#)

Political Context

Key Takeaway:

- **Why now?**
 - Federal changes to SNAP and Medicaid
 - Final year of the Lee administration
 - Tightening state budget
 - TISA review committee
- **Why this bill?**
 - This definition more comprehensively identifies economically disadvantaged students
 - This change keeps state funding and federal accountability aligned
 - The bill provides districts with more stable, predictable funding levels

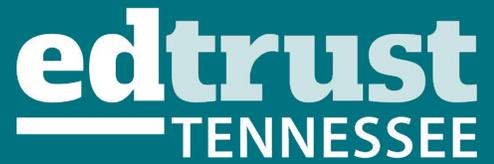


Legislator Perspective: Representative Chris Hurt



Representative Chris Hurt

Halls



Partner Spotlight: STRONG ACC



Mark Cruise

Director



About STRONG ACC

We are a multi-sector, cradle-to-career coalition serving the 23-county region of Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia. Comprised of over 400 partner organizations and with backbone support from Ballad Health and UVA Wise, the STRONG ACC brings partners together to improve systems, scale successful strategies, and improve public policies that create brighter futures for children and youth.



Regional Collective Impact Strategies

- Family Education & Support
- Early Care & Education System
- Community School Model
- Achievable Futures
- Supported & Second-Chance Employment

Key Metrics for Measuring Progress

- Kindergarten Readiness
- 3rd Grade Reading & Math Proficiency
- K-12 Chronic Absenteeism
- Young Adults Meeting \$45k Wage Benchmark



Why This Bill Matters

Why It Matters

- Undercounting students in poverty = fewer resources where need is greatest
- An additional \$25M would come to our 17 school districts annually if this bill passed

What Resonates with Our Work

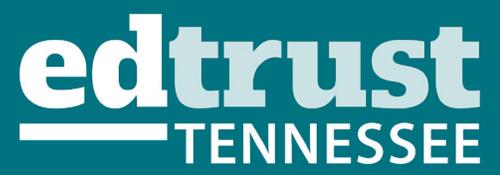
- Poverty affects performance - our metrics focus on economically disadvantaged students, many of whom under-perform compared to all students
- Accurate counts are essential to funding critical supports that students & schools need – e.g., better teacher pay, smaller classrooms, literacy coaches, high-dosage tutoring, community schools, mental and behavioral healthcare, coordinated school health, career coaches, and more

What We've Learned

- Poverty is not binary; it exists along a continuum
- Near-poor and working families are frequently invisible in school funding formulas

Why This Moment Matters

- Changes to Medicaid and SNAP due to OBBB will likely reduce program participation
- As safety-net access narrows, schools become the last universal touchpoint for children



Q&A

Survey



What's Next

- How to Take Action:
 - Uplift the Undercount Report and webinar resource across your networks
 - Use the Tableau to identify the estimated increase of funding in your county and contact your legislators about the positive impact passing this bill could have in your school community
 - Share ET-TN social media (@edtrusttn) graphics to spread awareness
 - Watch & share Advocacy Alerts on movement of the bill (Fridays starting in Feb)
 - Follow weekly legislative update from EdTrust-Tennessee

Weekly Legislative Update

- Updates on the current week
- What to expect next week
- Bills to watch
- News
- Resources
- Every Friday throughout session



Bill Tracker



EdTrust-TN Position	Priority Area	House Bill	Senate Bill	House Sponsor	Senate Sponsor	Summary	Latest House Action	Latest Senate Action	Additional Tabs
Oppose	Funding & Resource Equity	1	1	Lamberth	Johnson	As introduced, enacts the "Education Freedom Act of 2025."	Assigned to s/c K-12 Subcommittee	Passed on Second Consideration, refer to Senate Education Committee	
Support	Social-Emotional & Academic Development (SEAD)	7	172	Hale	Massey	As introduced, establishes the hunger-free campus grant program; provides grants to higher education institutions to address student hunger.	Sponsor(s) Added.	Placed on Senate Finance, Ways, and Means Committee calendar for 4/21/2025	
-	Other Education Issue	8	478	Hale	Bowling	As introduced, requires an annual training pay bonus supplement for eligible campus police officers and public safety officers in the amount of \$800.	Placed on s/c cal Finance, Ways, and Means Subcommittee for 4/14/2025	Placed on Senate Finance, Ways, and Means Committee calendar for 4/21/2025	
-	Other Education Issue	16	141	Clemmons	Kyle	As introduced, requires the department of transportation to establish and administer a student pedestrian protection grant program; under certain conditions, authorizes grants to be awarded to local governments for designing, constructing, and repairing sidewalk infrastructure around public schools.	Placed on s/c cal Finance, Ways, and Means Subcommittee for 4/14/2025	Rcvd. from S., held on H. desk.	
-	Other Education Issue	25	16	Cepicky	Lowe	As introduced, prohibits a public school from using public funds to have a membership with an association that regulates interscholastic athletics and prohibits a student from participating in an interscholastic athletic competition due to the student transferring no more than once from a school at which the student previously participated in an interscholastic athletic competition regulated by the association.	Sponsor(s) Added.	Reset on first calendar for February 2026	
Support	Rigorous & Affirming Learning Experiences	30	1213	Clemmons	Oliver	As introduced, empowers a student who is an English language learner and who received language assistance services in the classroom during the school year to receive the same language assistance services while taking a Tennessee comprehensive assessment program test or an end-of-course assessment, as long as the receipt of language assistance services does not invalidate the assessment.	Taken off notice for cal in s/c K-12 Subcommittee of Education Committee	Passed on Second Consideration, refer to Senate Education Committee	

TN Education Advocacy Hub



How a Bill Becomes a Law in Tennessee

Knowledge is power and to be an effective advocate, we must first understand the political ecosystem, where the power lies and the policy levers at play. This resource provides an overview of the legislative process in Tennessee and highlights the important role of advocacy each step along the way.

[Learn the Process](#)



Guide to Building Your Advocacy Strategy

Sometimes the hardest part of advocacy is knowing where to start. This resource, adapted from the Center for Evaluation Innovation's Advocacy Strategy Framework, provides a simple way to identify effective advocacy tactics for your organization's desired outcomes.

[Advocate Like a Pro](#)



Guide to Public Offices in Tennessee

Ever wonder how decisions related to K-12 and postsecondary education are made? From the Governor's office to local school boards, public offices play a major role in shaping education in Tennessee. This resource will help deepen advocates' understanding of the Tennessee public offices that impact our state's education budget, operations, and decision-making.

[Get the Guide](#)



Education Committee Legislative Directory

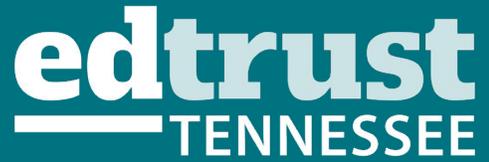
Now that you've learned about advocacy tactics and how the Tennessee general assembly members impact education, you are ready to reach out to your legislators! This resource is a one-stop-shop for the contact information of each member of education committees.

[Start Your Outreach](#)

Future Webinars and Trainings

- Budget Webinar w/ The Sycamore Institute
 - March 2nd - 3pm CST
- Action Alert Webinars
 - Fridays beginning in late February





Thank you!

✉ abarajasclark@edtrust.org

✉ jmillsmcferron@edtrust.org

✉ jstrand@edtrust.org

✉ mpowell@edtrust.org

✉ ebengyak@edtrust.org

✉ mark.cruise@strongacc.org

🖱 edtrusttn.org

📷 [@edtrusttn](https://www.instagram.com/edtrusttn)

🌐 [EdTrust-Tennessee](https://www.linkedin.com/company/edtrust-tennessee)