

# Count Every Student

## Messaging Guidance and Key Talking Points for [HB 2485/SB 2385](#)

### How to Use This Messaging Guide

The overview section explains what the bill does and provides the core pitch. This is the foundation advocates should use when talking about this legislation. The following sections provide additional talking points you can mix in based on what resonates with you as an advocate, what matters most to the policymaker you're speaking with, or specific concerns or priorities that come up in conversation with community members.

### Overview

#### What Does the Bill Do?

Every student deserves access to a high-quality education and the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their background, zip code, or family income. Delivering on that promise requires education systems to accurately identify which students need additional support in the first place. Who we count determines who gets support, and right now, Tennessee is undercounting and shortchanging low-income students.

[HB 2485/SB 2385](#) ensures that students who need support are counted. If Tennessee fails to act, we risk widening district funding gaps, not because conditions improved but because our measurement systems failed to keep up.

Beginning in the 2027-28 school year, this legislation would update Tennessee’s economically disadvantaged student definition to include students enrolled in Medicaid, strengthening the way Tennessee’s accountability and funding systems direct resources and support for student needs.

This update does not change income limits on which students are counted as economically disadvantaged. It makes sure the students who are already identified through Medicaid, called TennCare in Tennessee, aren’t overlooked. Fixing the undercounting problem makes sure schools have the resources they need to boost academic achievement and student success. The bill also protects districts during this definition shift, ensuring no district will lose funding for economically disadvantaged student weights.

When we ensure funding reflects the needs of students in our classrooms, Tennessee can deliver on the promise of opportunity for all and build a future where every student has what they need to succeed.

## Shared Values

### Why should you care about this?

- **Every Tennessee student deserves access to a high-quality education and the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their background, zip code, or family income.** This isn’t just about individual students — it’s about whole communities.
- **Every student is different, and we need to fund schools based on students’ unique needs.** Students from low-income backgrounds often come to school needing healthy meals, counselors, or extra academic support. If we want every child to reach their full potential, we need to fund schools based on their unique needs.
- **Education is one of the state’s most important investments in its future workforce.** When schools get the funding they need, more students graduate, secure good jobs, and live healthier lives. These investments strengthen communities across Tennessee.
- **Public education is one of the strongest commitments we make to our communities, and one of the state’s most important investments.** Families across Tennessee expect their schools to offer strong teaching, safe facilities, and the opportunities students need to succeed. Delivering on that commitment benefits the entire state.
- **When schools are fairly and accurately funded, students thrive and communities benefit.** When Tennessee’s school funding system doesn’t align with today’s classrooms, schools lose the resources they need to deliver on that promise.

## Define the Problem

### What’s the issue we’re facing, and why does it matter now?

Decades of research show that poverty on individual and community levels are among the **strongest predictors** of educational outcomes. Yet Tennessee currently uses one of the most restrictive methods in the country to identify economically disadvantaged students. By relying primarily on SNAP, TANF, and homelessness status, the state misses thousands of students in our schools who are eligible for support. This means students who need support may not be counted, and funding gaps could widen.

- **Students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to need academic support, meals, health care, and other wraparound services.** When students are not captured under the economically disadvantaged definition, districts receive less funding for teachers, student services, and academic

programs. Over time, this creates a gap between what schools are expected to deliver and the resources they receive to do it.

- **Upcoming federal policy changes will make this problem more severe.** As eligibility rules shift, even fewer students will be identified under the current definition, further reducing funding in districts across the state.
- **If Tennessee wants school funding to function as a true investment in its workforce and economy, the state must modernize how it identifies student need.** Otherwise, education dollars will continue to be distributed based on incomplete information. Updating the definition to better reflect today's student needs, we can ensure existing education dollars are going where they are needed most to deliver stronger academic outcomes for students.

## Impact

### How does this impact students and local communities, and why does it matter?

- **When schools get the funding they need, more students graduate, secure good jobs, and live healthier lives.** When schools don't get the right amount of funding, students and community members can see the consequences in their local schools. There may not be enough teachers, classes may be too full, buildings may be old or in poor condition, and schools may have to cut back on classes, clubs, and activities. All learning tools that make the biggest difference for student success — both for economically disadvantaged students and entire school communities.
- **This is not a short-term budget challenge. It is a structural issue in how Tennessee allocates education dollars.** Districts are already facing rising costs and the expiration of federal pandemic relief funds. By making this investment, Tennessee can strengthen communities across the state.

## Solution

### What can we do about this? The good news is that there's a clear solution — passing HB 2485/SB 2385 into law.

- **Tennessee already uses TennCare to identify students eligible for free and reduced-price meals.** Including TennCare in the definition of economically disadvantaged builds on the existing system and provides a more accurate picture of who is in our classrooms.
- **Research shows that directing funding based on accurate measures of student need leads to stronger academic outcomes and long-term benefits for communities.** This update does not change income limits on which students are counted as economically disadvantaged. It makes sure the students who are already identified through Medicaid, called TennCare in Tennessee, aren't overlooked. Updating the definition helps stabilize funding, improve planning, and give districts the flexibility to invest in teachers, student supports, learning tools, and safe, modern facilities.
- **How states define student poverty is a policy choice, and state leaders are in the driver's seat.** When students who need support are not counted, district funding gaps could widen — not because conditions improved, but because measurement systems failed to keep up. With this legislation, we have an opportunity to fix that.

## Call to Action

### What can you do to help?

#### For Legislators

We urge you to support HB 2485/SB 2385 to modernize Tennessee's economically disadvantaged definition and fix a funding system that is no longer aligned with today's classrooms.

**This bill is about accuracy, fairness, and responsible stewardship of education dollars.** When funding reflects real enrollment and real need, schools are better equipped to deliver strong results for students, families, and communities across Tennessee.

#### For Advocates

Together, we can fix a funding system that no longer reflects today's classrooms.

- **Talk to your legislator:** Urge your state lawmaker to support [bill number] so Tennessee can modernize how it identifies economically disadvantaged students and ensure education dollars reach the schools they are intended to support.
- **Spread the word and engage your network:** Rising costs of housing, food, and childcare and changing federal rules mean Tennessee must update its funding system now. Share about how accurate and fair school funding strengthens your local schools and community, and encourage friends, neighbors, and community groups to speak up in support of this bill.