

Threats to Education Access in Tennessee: Student Impact and Fiscal Considerations

Background

The Tennessee General Assembly is considering multiple bills that threaten access to K–12 public education for all students, regardless of immigration status. Amid legislative debate, misinformation and false narratives have spread. This resource is intended to provide advocates and policymakers with key facts to inform the discussion. For more information about the specific legislation proposed, [view this resource](#).

Projected Student Impact

How many undocumented students are enrolled in school in Tennessee?

It is impossible to know the size of the undocumented population in K–12 schools. An estimated 22,000 students enrolled in K–12 public and private school in Tennessee are unauthorized immigrants ([Migration Policy Institute](#)), about 2% of Tennessee’s overall public student population of 970,302 students ([TN Department of Education](#)). It’s important to note that this student number reflects students with statuses like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals ([DACA](#)), Temporary Protected Status ([TPS](#)), or pending asylum application.

Are undocumented students and English Learner students the same?

No. English Learners are a much larger population of students, comprising 11% of Tennessee’s student population, or about 106,700 students ([TN Department of Education](#)). An EdTrust analysis of US Census data found that the majority of English Learner students in Tennessee are US citizens ([ACS 2023](#)). Not all undocumented students are English Learners. For example, some arrive in the US at an early age or grew up in an English-speaking context.

Identifying students as English Learners is a requirement under federal law ([NCELA](#)). Tennessee utilizes the WIDA English Language Development standards to assess English Learner students annually, and federal funding flows from the United States Department of Education to the Tennessee Department of Education to support English Learner students in Tennessee ([OREA](#)). The Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA) public school funding formula provides additional funding for students who are classified as English Learners ([TN Department of Education](#)).

Potential impacts on other student groups

Policies that restrict education access, including by requiring data collection, would impact many groups of students beyond undocumented students.

Students in Foster Care, Experiencing Homelessness, and Recovering from Natural Disasters

There are many groups of students who are unlikely to have access to documentation on their immigration status because they have experienced instability. For example, students in foster care (less than 1% of Tennessee's public school population) and who experience homelessness (2% of Tennessee's public school population), are less likely to have access to documents needed to provide their immigration status. Students who recently experienced natural disasters may have also lost access to documents needed to attend school under this policy.

Students with Disabilities

Federal law requires local school districts to seek out, locate, and deliver services to students with disabilities, regardless of their immigration status. Students with disabilities have a guaranteed right to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ([TN Dept. of Education](#)). Additional legal protections under civil rights laws, including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, are also in place for students with disabilities ([TN Dept. of Education](#)). IDEA requires that school districts not just provide services to enrolled students with disabilities, but also identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities ([TN Dept. of Education](#)). The passage of a policy affecting undocumented students could create conflict for districts between federal and state law.

Academic research indicates students with disabilities particularly experience worsened school climate and safety following increased immigration enforcement activity, likely due to an increased sense of fear and anxiety in the school ([Kirksey & Sattin-Bajaj, 2021](#)).

US Citizen Students with Undocumented Family Members

Policies that restrict education access based on immigration status often cause students who have legal status to not attend school out of confusion and fear. In Tennessee, 83,700 US citizen children live with at least one undocumented family member and 72,800 live with at least one undocumented parent ([American Immigration Council](#)). These children, who are citizens, are likely to experience a chilling effect and stay home from school out of fear of immigration enforcement that could affect their parents and family members. Children in the same family may not have the same access to school based on their immigration status.

Impacts on Student Outcomes

How would restricting education access affect academic achievement?

Increased deportations and immigration enforcement have been followed by declines in academic achievement in both reading and math ([Figlio & Özek, 2025](#); [Kirksey, 2023](#); [Kirksey & Sattin-Bajaj, 2023](#)). Negative effects on academic achievement impact both US-born and foreign-born students ([Figlio & Özek, 2025](#)).

There are documented increases to chronic absenteeism and dropout that occur following immigration enforcement ([Amuedo-Dorantes & Lopez, 2015](#); [Dee, 2025](#); [Kirksey & Sattin-Bajaj, 2021](#)). Increased absenteeism has negative spillover effects on the achievement of students with regular attendance ([Gottfried, 2019](#)).

How would restricting education access impact student engagement and wellbeing?

Multiple studies have documented that experiences or threats of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention and deportation invoke fear, stress, and trauma for students ([Gandara & Ee, 2021](#)). These effects contribute to increased absenteeism and dropout rates, decreased student achievement, and worsened school climate and parent disengagement ([Amuedo-Dorantes & Lopez, 2015](#); [Dee, 2025](#); [Kirksey, 2023](#); [Kirksey & Sattin-Bajaj, 2021](#)). These effects are magnified in poorly funded districts, low-income schools, and among immigrant, English Learner, and Latino students.

Negative effects are felt by children throughout school communities, not just immigrant or undocumented students. Classes experience “grief as though a classmate has died when all of a sudden the student is no longer there and no one knows what has happened to him or her” ([Ee, 2020](#)). School climate suffers for all students, and teachers struggle to cope with stressed and distracted students as they attempt to teach lessons ([Ee, 2020](#)).

Information on Fiscal Impact

Do immigrant families contribute financially to public schools?

Yes, immigrant families, including families with undocumented family members, pay taxes that go toward public education. Tennessee is reliant on sales tax and property taxes to fund public school, and undocumented Tennesseans pay these taxes through everyday purchases and paying for housing, including through rent. Undocumented Tennesseans paid \$915.6M in state, local, and federal taxes in 2023 ([American Immigration Council](#)).

What would the fiscal impact of denying education access based on immigration status be for public schools in Tennessee?

The cost to educate undocumented students is less than has been implied. Any savings will be minimal, or potentially nonexistent.

Weighted funds for English Learners (\$330M) made up only 3.6% of all TISA funding for FY25. It’s important to note that districts can decide how to spend their TISA funds, including weights ([TDOE](#)), so funds generated by undocumented students are likely wrapped up in programs or staff that serve all students.

Denying education access to students based on their immigration status would not result in a cost savings to Tennessee taxpayers due to the funding floor provision passed as part of the statewide voucher program in 2025. Under this provision, any district who experiences a loss of TISA funding and a loss of enrollment for any reason can receive additional state funding to make up the gap. As a result, the state will keep paying for empty seats, which will be unequally distributed across the state.

In addition to state costs, this bill threatens \$1.1B in federal education funding for Tennessee’s schools.

What additional responsibilities and costs would data collection on immigration status place on schools?

Schools should be safe, welcoming spaces focused on learning. Collecting immigration status information for students will involve substantial district costs that include:

- **Staff time:** More than 970,000 students attend public school in Tennessee, and verifying immigration status correctly, logging information accurately, and following up with families who fail to provide it will cost significant staff time, taking away from the instructional role schools should be serving.
- **Legal services:** The American immigration system is complex, with nuanced legal status definitions and an array of official documents involved. Schools will need to seek legal counsel to ensure they are collecting information accurately and could face legal action if they fail to do so.
- **Data systems and secure storage:** Schools will have to implement data collection systems to systematically store information on student immigration status. Since this information is protected as Personally Identifiable Information (PII), schools will have to ensure secure compliance and handling of data in accordance with federal law.

Beyond these tangible costs, this proposed policy puts schools into positions at the front lines of immigration enforcement that go against their missions of providing excellent teaching and learning for students. Schools are not, nor should they be, acting in this enforcement capacity in their local communities. To explore more about the administrative burden this policy places on schools, check out [our resources](#).

Questions about our data or this resource?

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