

The 2026 Legislative Session:

What Education Advocates Need to Know

EdTrust-Tennessee convenes the [Tennessee Alliance for Equity in Education](#) (the Alliance), a coalition of 90+ organizations across the state committed to advancing policies that ensure all students can thrive. Together, we are guided by [a shared policy agenda](#) that drives our collective advocacy.

As EdTrust-Tennessee reflects on the 2026 legislative session, the last year of the 114th General Assembly, here are some of the pressing education policies advocates should know about.

This document is organized around the Alliance's five policy priorities. For more information on what happened to the education bills proposed this year, see the [2026 TN Legislative Bill Tracker](#).

BRIGHT SPOTS, CHALLENGES, AND WHAT'S NEXT FOR TENNESSEE STUDENTS

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

Oversight Board for Memphis-Shelby County Schools

[HB 662/SB 714](#) was signed into law by Governor Lee requiring the appointment of an oversight board that would meet for the first time before July 2026.

Accountability Changes and a State-Appointed Oversight Board

Coming on the coattails of the end of the Achievement School District and a redesigned school accountability yet to be implemented is new legislation that further changes school improvement. The new law identifies underperformance through five qualifying criteria for districts, some of which do not relate to academic performance or student achievement. While districts can be selected for meeting three of the five criteria, the only district in the state who meets all is Memphis-Shelby County Schools. A nine-member oversight board with the power to control the district including Superintendent appointment, budget, and school closures will be appointed by the Governor and Speakers from the House and Senate. Memphis-Shelby County is the largest school district serving over 100,000 students, 74% of whom are Black, 20% Latino, almost 60% from low-income backgrounds, and 15% English learners. The district has navigated years of access and opportunity disparities along racial and socioeconomic lines while also experiencing four consecutive years of growth by receiving the highest overall composite score

of five on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (Tennessee Department of Education, 2025). Accountability systems must consider the full picture of performance before seeking to punish districts determined as underperforming, while also providing meaningful supports for improvements and clear and transparent exit criteria. The absence of these core accountability components could jeopardize school improvement momentum and trap students and schools under a state-run system for years.

Bright Spot: English Learner Testing Supports

[Public Chapter 685](#)

The legislation will establish in state code the current policy that students who are English learners who have received language assistance services during the school year are allowed to continue to receive those services when taking an End of Course (EOC) or Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) assessment, given that the assistance does not invalidate the test.

Student Impact

Eleven percent of Tennessee's growing English learner public school population will directly benefit from this legislation by enshrining these support services and ensuring they are not interrupted during testing. Not only will formalizing this policy affirm the learning experience for these students, but it will also help to accurately assess student mastery of subjects. This is all the more important given that in 2025, on average, only 21% of English learners were proficient on TCAP subject tests.

Priority 2: Address Funding and Resource Equity

Federal Voucher Program Opt-In Adopted

Governor Lee signed the bill into law requiring Tennessee to participate in the Federal Voucher Tax Credit (FVTC) Program and establishing oversight for the program at the Tennessee Department of Education.

Federal Voucher Expansion Raises Serious Equity Concerns

EdTrust-Tennessee believes public funds should fund public schools exclusively. The FVTC program is a tax credit designed to benefit private schools, but funds can also be used for public schools. This law establishes a loose regulatory framework for the program in Tennessee, and is often vaguely worded, since the US Department of Treasury is still finalizing regulations for this new program. EdTrust-Tennessee is concerned the FVTC program will further disinvestment in public schools, but also wants to ensure any available funding can benefit public school students, especially students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. As the FVTC regulations are finalized, we'll be watching closely. To learn more about the FVTC please review our initial [Public Funds for Private School memo](#), and stay tuned for future resources unpacking the regulations and the opportunities for resource equity in Tennessee.

Bright Spot: Adequately Funding Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

[HB 2485/SB 2385](#) — the Undercount bill — was signed into law.

This year, EdTrust-Tennessee brought forth a bill to refine how Tennessee measures students from low-income backgrounds. Passage of the amended version marks the culmination of a collaborative, statewide, and bipartisan effort to ensure that schools and students have the resources they need to thrive. With help from 45 Alliance organizations and school district leaders across the state, the passed legislation directs the TISA Review Committee to study the definition of economically disadvantaged in the TISA formula and make recommendations to the General Assembly.

Student Impact

Schools need adequate funding to address their unique needs. Tennessee is currently undercounting and underfunding students from low-income backgrounds through a constrained definition of economically disadvantaged students. By relying primarily on SNAP and TANF, the state misses thousands of students from low-income backgrounds and thus contributes to funding gaps. Through the TISA Review Committee's recommendations, Tennessee has an opportunity to update the definition to better recognize students from low-income backgrounds and ensure students have the resources they need to thrive.

Priority 3: Increase Educator Diversity and Quality

Stagnant Teacher Professionalization

[HB 1977/ SB 2156](#), [HB 1888/SB 2109](#), and [HB 912/SB 1025](#) failed.

This year, little progress was made to advance educator diversity and quality. However, several bills that would harm this endeavor were also halted. Still, despite any major changes to law, it is important to know what was brought forth as we continue to monitor the policy landscape for educator diversity and professionalization. For instance, the Tennessee Teacher Residency Program Act, [HB 1977/SB 2156](#), sought to fiscally support teacher residency programs that combine a full year of coursework with a guided clinical apprenticeship under trained mentors but did not make it out of committee. While this bill that would have strengthened educator pipelines and quality did not advance, neither did two that would have had adverse effects. [HB 1888/SB 2109](#) is one such bill that would have waived the educator licensure requirement for individuals without a bachelor's degree but five years of experience at a private or church-related school. [HB 912/SB 1025](#) would have similarly weakened educator quality and professionalization by creating an associate degree pathway for educators thus undermining the traditional four years for teaching.

What's next

Although none of these pieces of legislation passed before the close of the 114th General Assembly, it is important to note the occasion as an indication of policy that could reemerge and change the teacher-preparation landscape. The educator policy landscape that has emerged has only deepened EdTrust-Tennessee's commitment to ensuring students have access to diverse and high-quality educators.

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

Expanding DEI Restrictions Increases Risk of Over Compliance and Threatens Student Support Services

[HB 1664/SB 1713](#) was signed into law by Governor Lee.

The bill requires higher education institutions to submit an annual attestation that they do not use a “discriminatory preference” in an effort to increase diversity, equity, or inclusion on campus. As a result of state restrictions on diversity, equity, and inclusion, institutions have [already reduced or eliminated](#) campus-based services that support student belonging, engagement, and success.

Implications for Student Support Services

Due to the vague nature of the existing ban on these practices, institutions may feel pressure to eliminate more student services to comply with state law, which could end the use of student services that are legally permissible, depriving students of critical resources that support credential attainment.

Bright Spot: Defeated Legislation Attempting to Challenge Plyler

Starting in 2025, the 114th General Assembly has made multiple attempts to threaten access to free public K-12 education for undocumented students. [HB 793/SB 836](#) was first introduced in 2025 and was intended as a vehicle to overturn *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), which enshrines longstanding legal precedent allowing all children living in the United States access to public K-12 education, regardless of their immigration status. [HB 1711/SB 2108](#) similarly threatened undocumented students’ freedom to learn via the collection and reporting of status information as well as more broadly infringing on rights to public benefits. Both threats to education for all were stopped in 2026 through sustained advocacy, including from the [Education for All-Tennessee](#) coalition.

Student Impact

The size of the undocumented population in K-12 schools is unknown, although it has been estimated that an estimated 22,000 K-12 public and private school students in Tennessee are unauthorized immigrants ([Migration Policy Institute](#)). This number reflects students with statuses like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Temporary Protected Status (TPS), or pending asylum application. Had either of these policies passed, the impact would have been far reaching for many groups of students beyond undocumented students such as those experiencing instability, those with disabilities, and those whose family members are undocumented. Additionally, many studies have demonstrated that increased immigration enforcement negatively impacts academic achievement, attendance, school climate, and school finances ([Figlio & Özek, 2025](#); [Amuedo-Dorantes & Lopez, 2015](#); [Dee, 2025](#); [Kirksey, 2023](#); [Kirksey & Sattin-Bajaj, 2021](#); [Immigration Research Initiative, 2026](#)).

Priority 5: Expand Access and Success in Higher Education

Declining Lottery Revenues Threaten State Financial Aid

Lottery revenues, the primary funding source for Tennessee's state financial aid programs, are declining, largely due to the growth of sports betting and prediction markets. Sports betting revenue was diverted from funding state financial aid as a part of the bill that established the statewide voucher program in 2025. The governor's budget this year indicated that sports betting revenue will no longer be available to [cover the costs of scholarships](#) that go beyond lottery revenue starting in fiscal year 2027.

Implications for Student Financial Aid

Lawmakers have indicated that legislation will be brought next session to reduce overall financial aid spending. This could limit the amount of aid distributed to students and make it more difficult for students, particularly those with financial need, to enroll in and complete postsecondary education. The Tennessee Education Lottery currently funds [13 unique aid programs](#), which awarded \$504 million in financial assistance to more than 169,000 students in 2024-2025.

Bright Spot: Technical Transfer Pathways

[Public Chapter Number 899](#)

This legislation allows for the creation of technical transfer pathways, which may consist of approved coursework from a certificate, diploma, or associates of applied science program. Previously, [Tennessee Transfer Pathways](#) consisted only of non-technical associates degrees.

Student Impact

Transfer students who begin at two-year institutions can often face additional barriers to completing a bachelor's degree. These barriers to completion are [usually systemic](#) and include credit loss when transferring and unclear advising for transfer students. Allowing the creation of technical transfer pathways is another step towards improving transfer student outcomes.

Looking Ahead

Now nearly halfway through 2026, we have observed a range of policy changes from the federal level all the way to the local that will influence how all Tennessee students experience schooling. There is much to celebrate across the education spectrum, but we will also remain vigilant. Alongside promising policies that advanced this year are also equity threats. As we monitor policy implementation, continue to learn and collaborate with partners and bipartisan stakeholders, and prepare for 2027, EdTrust-Tennessee stands ready to ensure all students can thrive in an education system that creates pathways to a more just Tennessee.