

COVID-19 Impact Memo

Promising Practices In Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to all levels of education that could impact student outcomes for months and possibly years ahead. The SCORE series of COVID-19 Impact Memos analyzes challenges, examines emerging innovations and research-supported practices, and highlights student-centered approaches for educators to consider.

Trends In Tennessee ESSER Plans: A Landscape Analysis

Spring 2022

Introduction

Since the spring of 2020, students and educators have been navigating schooling disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Congress has passed three pieces of legislation appropriating nearly \$200 billion in federal funds to the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER). **The purpose of this fund is to support schools to safely reopen and to recover from the impacts on student learning.**

The State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) analyzed the ESSER spending plans from 136 of 147 Tennessee school districts to better understand how districts are planning to use ESSER funds. This analysis included all district plans that were publicly available as of December 31, 2021, and had been approved by the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE). District plans centered on using funds to address immediate pandemic-related challenges as well as seizing this opportunity to develop innovative and sustainable programs that support ongoing improvement for teaching and learning.

As the pandemic situation continues to change, districts likely will need to revisit and revise their initial plans to ensure their allocations are supporting educators and students to be successful. Based on our analysis of district spending plans submitted in August 2021, we outline key takeaways for current plan allocations as well as recommendations for how districts could more strategically address education recovery with revisions to their spending plans.

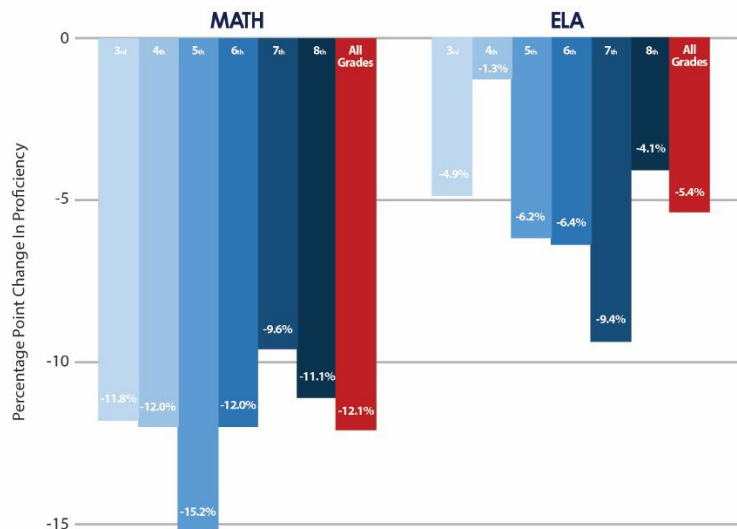
Student Learning Trends In Tennessee

The 2021 statewide assessment showed dramatic proficiency losses for all grades in English language arts (ELA) and math. Performance declines in math were double the drops in the ELA. In 2021, the math proficiency rate for grades 3-8 decreased by 12.1 percentage points. In ELA, proficiency rates in grades 3-8 decreased by 5.4 percentage points.¹ Districts could leverage additional resources through ESSER to address these stark declines.

TENNESSEE STUDENTS LOST GROUND DURING THE PANDEMIC

TCAP ELA and math
proficiency rate changes
by grade level, 2019-2021

Source: TDOE, 2021



Tennessee's Approach To ESSER

States receive ESSER funds based on the proportion of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Title I funds received annually. The legislation mandates that states allocate at least 90 percent of ESSER funds to districts proportional to their Title I allotments. States have autonomy over the remaining 10 percent to save for pandemic-related emergency purposes. ESSER funds must be used between spring 2020 and fall 2024.

Funds For Preventing, Preparing For, And Responding To COVID-19

	ESSER 1.0 March 2020	ESSER 2.0 December 2020	ESSER 3.0 March 2021	Total Allocation
National Allocation	\$13.5 billion	\$54.3 billion	\$122.7 billion	\$190.5 billion
Tennessee Share	\$259.9 million	\$1.1 billion	\$2.5 billion	\$3.86 billion

ESSER marks the largest single infusion of federal dollars into Tennessee's K-12 education system. For comparison, the second largest federal funding allocation came from the Race to the Top grant in 2010 totaling about \$500 million—less than one-seventh of the total ESSER allocation.



To support districts with ESSER planning decisions, TDOE created a spending plan template based on four focus areas: academics, student readiness, educators, and foundations. This framework provided valuable guidance for districts to develop their ESSER spending plans. TDOE has been a national leader in establishing a consistent, cohesive process for districts to follow in planning their ESSER expenditures.

The TDOE templates did not specify how much districts should or should not spend but rather laid out potential spending areas in alignment with the state's goals for COVID recovery. Education agencies in most other states allowed districts to submit plans in a variety of formats, making it difficult to identify trends and track how resources are driving toward intended outcomes.

HOW TENNESSEE DISTRICTS ARE SPENDING \$3.5B FOR EDUCATION RECOVERY

Average ESSER funding allocations across all TDOE spending categories

Source: TDOE, 2021



SCORE's review shows that many Tennessee districts have allocated funds toward immediate concerns and challenges related to offering continuous learning during the pandemic. The initial plans, which were drafted by districts in August 2021, include significant allocations toward facilities and technology that were essential to offering in-person and remote instruction. This spending is not the primary focus of our analysis, which centers on long-term recovery strategies.

District allocations varied significantly across the state ranging from about \$500,000 to just over \$800 million. Despite this variation in available funding, we found no correlation between district allocation and spending decisions. Specifically, districts that received the largest ESSER



allocations, on average, allocated funds in the same way as districts that received the smallest allocations. Additionally, we did not find correlations across other indicators including student demographics or geography. **At the time districts were drafting their ESSER spending plans, their primary concerns were to ensure that students and staff could return safely to in-person schooling and to begin implementation of learning recovery strategies. Looking ahead to the next two years of ESSER funding, there is a critical opportunity for districts to address learning losses and put structures in place that will support ongoing recovery and get students back on track to be successful in K-12, college, and career.**

Academics: Accelerating Academic Achievement

The COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges to schooling, which led to limited and inconsistent in-person and remote instruction for K-12 students throughout the 2020-21 academic year. In grades 3-8 math and ELA, proficiency rates across all student groups dropped to below the levels of 2017 with large achievement gaps remaining.² To address these losses and support the recovery and acceleration of student learning, TDOE outlined an Academics spending plan category including key components targeted at student learning:

- ◆ High-dosage, low-ratio tutoring
- ◆ Summer programming
- ◆ Early literacy
- ◆ Interventionists
- ◆ Other academics, including curriculum and virtual learning

On average, Tennessee districts are allocating just over 25 percent of total ESSER funds to academics. Allocations vary widely across district plans, ranging from 3 percent to 75 percent of total funds. Across academic spending areas, districts are allocating the most funding toward the “other academics” category with about 75 percent of districts using funds for curriculum and materials and just over one-third of districts directing funds toward virtual learning. One-third of districts are using this funding to hire instructional coordinators and educational assistants.

DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT: SCALING FOR SUCCESS

Metro Nashville Public Schools has introduced the Accelerating Scholars high-impact tutoring program, which expects to serve more than 10,000 students over the next three years. This research-based program involves multiple partners and recruits teachers, paraprofessionals, retired educators, and volunteers to support students through online and in-person intervention taking place during the regular school day and in structured before- and after-school settings.

Districts are clearly focused on addressing student achievement declines with 15 percent of all district allocations directed toward interventionists, summer programming, and tutoring as strategies for recovery. Districts are allocating the least amount of funds to early literacy, less than 2 percent, with many citing that they had already prioritized early literacy spending in their annual budget or with other grant opportunities such as Reading 360.






High-dosage tutoring (HDT) is a highly effective strategy for improving student achievement, providing students with an average of 3-15 additional months of learning.³ In particular, HDT can improve low-income student achievement and self-efficacy. This individualized engagement can enable students to regain critical lost instructional time. **About 75 percent of all districts analyzed opted to use ESSER funds to provide tutoring programs to students across grades K-12.** Districts participating in the state’s All Corps program received additional funding for tutoring implementation.



TDOE defined HDT as having maximum ratios of 1:3 in elementary and 1:4 in high school, with at least three sessions per week. Research has also outlined other HDT design principles that can increase effectiveness for improving student outcomes including when tutoring is offered, which students are prioritized, and whether tutors are trained to use high-quality instructional materials. SCORE analyzed plans for alignment to HDT best practices.

HOW TENNESSEE DISTRICTS ARE MEETING HIGH-DOSAGE TUTORING BEST PRACTICES

Number of school districts meeting best practices by design principle

Design Principle	Best Practice	Tennessee Data
Frequency	 The most effective tutoring interventions have 3 or more sessions per week with sessions lasting 30-60 minutes per day	104 of the 136 districts analyzed are aligned to frequency best practice
Group Size	 In lower grades (K-5), tutors should maintain ratios of 1:3 or lower. For upper grades (6-12), ratios can be 1:4 or lower	66 of the 136 districts analyzed are aligned to group size best practice
Scheduling	 Tutoring programs are shown to have the greatest impact on student learning when they are integrated into the school day	Districts were not required to report this information, though 24 of 55 who specified were aligned to scheduling best practice
Prioritization	 Targeting lower-performing students can support those students who could benefit most from personalized instruction	Districts were not required to report this information, though 22 of 32 who specified were aligned to prioritization best practice
Overall	 62 of the 136 school districts analyzed are planning programming aligned to high-dosage tutoring best practices	

Source: TDOE and Ed Research for Recovery, 2021

Currently, about half of all districts analyzed are planning tutoring programs aligned to HDT best practices. District tutoring programs that are not aligned are less likely to see meaningful gains in student achievement. While tutoring implementation will likely require iteration and scaling, HDT programs should be focused on providing in-school tutoring sessions to students who can benefit most from individualized instruction with a trained tutor using standards-aligned instructional materials.

Student Readiness: Postsecondary Preparation And School Supports

As a result of the pandemic, many middle and high school students have missed out on significant instruction in key courses that improve student readiness for postsecondary education and careers. In 2021, only one in ten ninth graders were proficient in Algebra I, a highly predictive course for college preparedness.⁴ These losses will not only impact future academic success while in high school but also student performance on college entrance exams, postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion. With a nearly 20-point drop in community college enrollment since Fall 2019, it is critical for districts to invest in supports for middle and high school students to get back on track.⁵ TDOE outlined a Student Readiness spending plan category focused on providing nonacademic supports and supporting secondary students to be prepared for college and career. The components of this category are:



- ◆ AP and dual enrollment/credit opportunities
- ◆ High school innovation
- ◆ Academic advising
- ◆ Special populations
- ◆ Other student readiness, including CTE investments

DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT: INVESTING IN INNOVATION

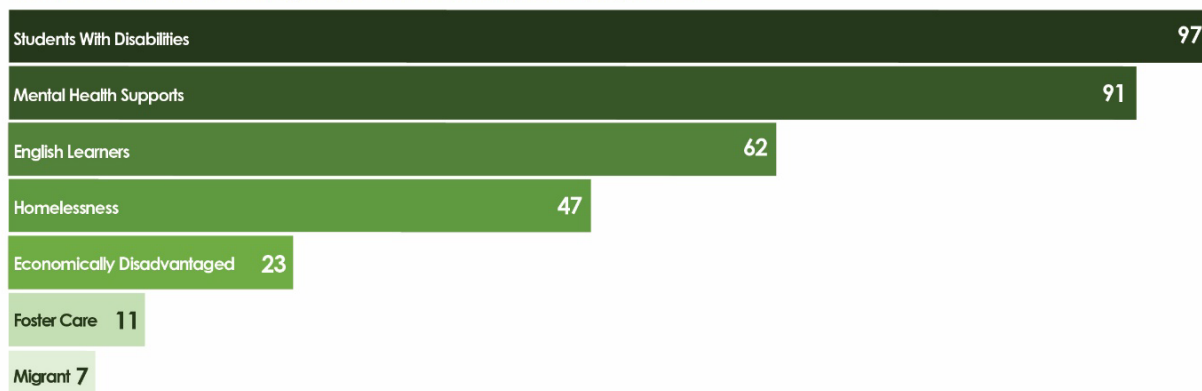
Blount County Schools is making significant investments, over \$1 million, in career and technical education (CTE) as well as virtual job shadowing for middle school students to create more opportunities for students to prepare for college and career. These investments aim to raise the district's Ready Graduate rates.

COVID-19 school disruptions disproportionately impacted high-needs students – English learners, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities – and presented many challenges to students' emotional wellbeing. TDOE asked districts to consider directing ESSER funds toward special populations of students to support them through and out of the pandemic.

Tennessee districts are currently allocating the least funding to the student readiness category, representing about 10 percent of total allocations. Across the state, district allocations in readiness range from 0 percent to 40 percent of total funds. Over one-third of districts are not allocating any ESSER funds in middle and high school opportunities such as academic advising, ACT preparation, AP and dual enrollment/credit programming, and high school innovation. Several districts cited that they are using other funding sources, including state High School Innovation grants, to support this work. For districts that chose to invest in these areas, most are not investing a significant portion of their funds to prepare students for transitions to high school and postsecondary. Fewer than 10 districts invested more than 5 percent.

DISTRICTS INCREASE SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND MENTAL HEALTH

Number of districts spending any ESSER funds on special populations



Source: TDOE, 2021

Investments in middle and high school opportunities help ensure students are prepared to continue their education beyond K-12. The most common allocation area is expanding academic



advising capacity with just under one-third of districts investing in this area. Developing strong advising practices in middle and high school are critical for students to understand potential college and career pathways and can increase rates of postsecondary matriculation.⁶ **High school innovation makes up the largest investment in secondary opportunities, about 60 percent of allocations, most often representing investments in career and technical education (CTE).** By strengthening CTE courses, districts can better prepare students to earn high-demand credentials and be successful in the workforce.⁷

Educators: Improving The Teaching Pipeline

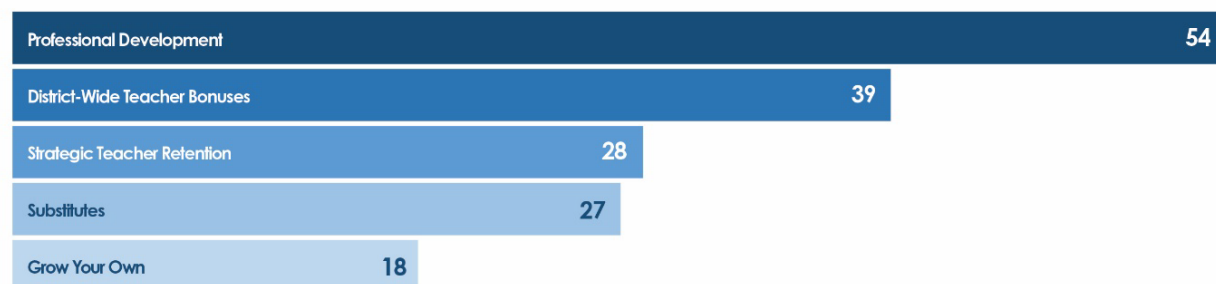
Educators have faced new challenges and pressures to provide high-quality instruction against difficult circumstances such as remote and hybrid learning. Lack of operational consistency and expanded demands on teachers' time to cover classes due to staff absenteeism increase likelihood of burnout among educators.⁸ To focus on investing in supports for teachers across the state, TDOE outlined four spending categories related to educators:

- ◆ Strategic retention
- ◆ "Grow your own" and other sustainable recruitment models
- ◆ Class-size reduction
- ◆ Other educators spending, including stipends and substitutes

Teachers are the most important school-level predictor of a student's educational success. Strategic district investment in supporting educators can help students recover quickly.⁹ Across the educator spending categories, district allocations of total funds range from 0 to 41 percent.

DISTRICTS ARE INVESTING IN SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATOR SUPPORT OVER LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

Number of districts spending any ESSER funds on educators by allocation area



Source: TDOE, 2021

Our analysis found that **many districts are making bigger investments in short-term strategies rather than long-term solutions as districts continue navigating pandemic labor market disruptions.** Most commonly, district allocations are going toward professional development and district-wide bonuses. Just over 10 percent of districts allocated zero dollars to educators, and less than half allocated funds to strategic teacher retention or sustainable recruitment models. These decisions may stem from fears of a fiscal cliff when ESSER funding availability ends in 2024, reflecting the one-time nature of these funds and the well-documented negative impacts of budget cuts after Great Recession-related federal resources for education ran out.¹⁰ A recent education investment proposal from Governor Lee, including a modernized funding formula, could give



districts the chance to reposition ESSER investments as recovery and reinvention strategies that if successful can be sustained with anticipated additional state funding.

Many districts focused their educator spending on responding to immediate COVID-related

DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT: SUPPORTING STRATEGIC RETENTION

Hamilton County Schools, in addition to a district-wide retention bonus, is offering differentiated compensation for educators at Promise and Hope schools (more than 80 percent of students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds) and in hard-to-staff subjects. Through this plan, teachers can earn up to 20 percent more in total compensation.

challenges. Rather than creating new programs, many districts invested in professional development on virtual learning, district-wide bonuses to reward teachers for their work throughout the pandemic, and substitute teachers to supplement quarantine-driven staffing shortages. While these investments address immediate hurdles and support current teachers, districts also face challenges with teacher recruitment and retention issues.

Tennessee's teacher pipeline struggled with sustainability in serving students with the greatest needs prior to the pandemic, and the challenge has only been exacerbated by COVID-19. Current planned investments fall short of directing funds to address strategic workforce sustainability that result in the recruitment highly qualified educators from diverse backgrounds who are incentivized to support students with the greatest needs and remain in the profession long term.

Foundations: Infrastructural Investments And Stakeholder Engagement

ESSER 1.0 and 2.0 focused on responding to the immediate challenges of COVID-19, including the safe reopening of schools, improving access to remote instruction and assessment, and ensuring health and safety foundations in schools. To address the capital improvements needed to offer safe, in-person instruction, TDOE outlined key spending areas in the foundations category:

- ◆ Technology
- ◆ High-speed internet
- ◆ Facilities
- ◆ Monitoring, auditing, data collection and reporting
- ◆ Other foundations, including personal protective equipment (PPE) and transportation

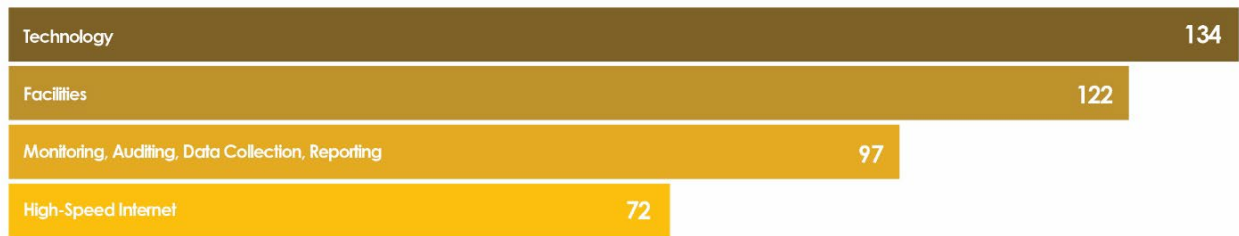
Aligned to the focus of ESSER 1.0 and 2.0, districts have made large investments in the foundations category across the state, averaging 50 percent and ranging from 21 percent to 87 percent of total funds. One district serves as an outlier in this category allocating less than 3 percent of total funds to foundations. The Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (TACIR) reported in January that K-12 education infrastructure needs in the state totaled \$8.6 billion, and ESSER has given districts an influx of resources to address some long-standing facilities needs.

Nearly every district plan is allocating funds toward technology, most commonly citing 1:1 device purchasing to offer remote and hybrid instruction to all students. Most of the spending in this category has gone to structural improvements to ensure school health and safety, including heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) and additional classroom spaces to allow for appropriate social distancing. We did not find any evidence of districts putting funds toward non-learning spaces such as athletic facilities. These investments are important to ensuring students



NEARLY EVERY TENNESSEE DISTRICT INVESTED IN TECHNOLOGY

Number of districts spending any ESSER funds on foundations by allocation area



Source: TDOE, 2021

across the state have access to a safe and productive learning environment and will enable districts to think beyond day-to-day structural needs and plan for long-term recovery strategies.

As part of the ESSER planning process, TDOE required districts to complete meaningful stakeholder engagement and a needs assessment to ensure allocations were reflecting the priorities of the community. While surveys and website postings were the most common methods of outreach, districts also engaged their local communities through school board meetings, focus groups, advisory councils, school events, and local news media. As districts revisit and revise sections of their spending plans, it will be critical to communicate with stakeholders about how changes reflect previous feedback and focus on strategic improvement.

DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT: ONGOING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Haywood County Schools is providing ongoing opportunities for their community to participate in feedback and meaningful stakeholder engagement throughout the life of their ESSER funding. They plan to regularly review their spending plan and make adjustments aligned to community and industry partner goals to ensure district spending is reflective of relevant student and educator needs.

Recommendations

As districts continue to navigate the 2021-22 academic year, many will begin to revisit and revise their ESSER spending and implementation plans. To ensure ESSER funds can have the greatest positive impact for students across Tennessee, SCORE encourages district leaders to consider four key recommendations for any revisions to their plans:

1. Rely On Research-Based Tutoring Practices To Accelerate Student Learning

Three-fourths of Tennessee school districts are investing in tutoring, but not enough of these programs are aligned to high-dosage, low-ratio tutoring best practices. Districts can see bigger gains for student learning if they revisit the structure of tutoring programs to ensure they are aligned to best practices identified by HDT research. High-quality implementation will likely require continuous improvement and scaling over time to ensure tutoring is high-dosage and serving the students who need additional academic support. Districts should consider making structural changes such as scheduling in year one and potentially serve a smaller group of identified students to provide in-school, high-dosage tutoring. This way, districts can ensure financial sustainability by using existing teacher time and reaching high-need students who may not have equal access to out-of-school opportunities. Over time, tutoring programs can expand to serve more students while maintaining research-backed implementation standards because districts will have a strong foundation. By prioritizing high-quality implementation, districts can see larger



returns on investment for student academic achievement and stronger recovery from COVID-related disruptions.

2. Invest In Supporting Students Across Transitions

Districts invested the least in the student readiness category, about 10 percent of total allocations. To combat the declines in secondary student academic achievement and postsecondary enrollment during the pandemic, districts should invest in student supports and pathways to ensure that students are academically prepared to successfully enter high school and continue their education beyond graduation. Current middle and high schoolers have not experienced secondary education without some level of interruption. In particular, the students who missed significant instruction during key preparation courses such as Algebra I are not only underprepared for subsequent courses but potentially off course for postsecondary education. Districts should consider stronger investments in academic advising and student support pathways, particularly for students with the greatest needs, to get them back on track and create programs that will continue to strengthen connections between K-12 and higher education. For example, districts could structure summer programming for students entering high school to serve as a bridge opportunity when students can get connected to advisers to begin pathway planning. By investing in transitions and advising, districts can create better supports to prepare students for higher education and careers.

3. Take An Expansive View Of Educator Workforce Sustainability

A significant amount of ESSER funding for educators is being allocated to one-time bonuses and stipends for staff district wide. Such uses help reward teachers and staff for their additional work over the past two years. A more strategic way to use ESSER funding is to cover start-up costs for long-range programs to improve recruiting, training, and retaining educators. The federal funding could allow districts to stand up sustainable programs to support their educator workforce needs. Districts can use these funds to cover start-up costs of programs that address their educator workforce needs and can be sustained over time. Currently, 35 percent of districts are investing in strategic recruitment or retention strategies. Districts should consider how they can offer incentives to ensure students with the greatest needs have access to highly qualified teachers. Additionally, districts can utilize educator workforce data to evaluate how they are recruiting and supporting educators of color that reflect the student population being served. With the current influx of ESSER funds, districts can make strategic investments in their educator pipeline that can be affordably sustained in future years and continue to have positive returns.

4. Proactively Communicate Plan Revisions To Stakeholder Engagement Groups

The ESSER planning process required Tennessee school districts to engage in meaningful stakeholder engagement with a variety of communities, including school boards, educators, parents, and students. Given the significant time and planning it took to develop spending plans, districts will need to be thoughtful in how they approach communication about revisions. Community members will want to know how changes still reflect district needs assessment and still prioritize greater impacts on teaching and learning. To build buy-in around plan revisions, districts should clearly communicate how they are choosing to reallocate funds and why. For example, districts may choose to direct additional funds toward high-dosage tutoring staff recruitment to ensure that students can receive instruction from trained tutors. This investment in staff recruitment and training will enable districts to see greater academic gains for targeted student groups. As circumstances and student needs change, districts will need to adjust their plans accordingly. By demonstrating the line of decision points for intended changes and providing transparency, districts can improve stakeholder understanding of and support for ongoing revisions that create structures to best support teaching and learning.



About SCORE

The State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) is a nonpartisan nonprofit education policy and advocacy organization based in Nashville, Tennessee. SCORE was founded in 2009 by Senator Bill Frist, MD, former US Senate majority leader, and works to transform education in Tennessee so all students can achieve success in college, career, and life. Learn more at tnscore.org.

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² SCORE calculations based on publicly available data from TDOE (2021).

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