

RENEWING OUR PLEDGE

2021 STATE OF EDUCATION
IN TENNESSEE



A young woman with long, wavy brown hair is looking down and slightly to her right. She is wearing a dark top under a light-colored, textured cardigan. The background is a blurred classroom or library setting with bookshelves and other people. A white rounded rectangle is overlaid on the bottom half of the image, containing the text.

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.



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A UNIFYING VISION, A STRONG PLAN, A RENEWED PLEDGE TO STUDENTS

BY SENATOR BILL FRIST & DAVID MANSOURI

This is the 11th time the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) has issued a report on the state of education in Tennessee. The reports typically have outlined progress for students in the previous year and identified priorities to advance student outcomes in the year ahead. This year, however, demands more of SCORE, of our state, and of you.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted learning for every student, we were concerned that education was not fully meeting the needs of Tennessee's 1.2 million students in K-12 and higher education or setting all students on their paths of success from kindergarten to career. Academic gains had slowed, the recent uptick in college enrollment and

completion had evened off, and some of the long-standing agreements about the foundations of student success had begun to fray. COVID-19 has worsened each of those problems and added significant new ones.

Educators rushed to respond to the COVID-19 emergency, and we applaud their work to ensure children were fed, their flexibility in pivoting to remote learning, and their determination to safely reopen schools and campuses this year. The early triage was necessary and impressive, and educators worked even harder once classes resumed in August.

As we reflect on that frenzied time, we are troubled that so much remains to be done. Tennessee must compile a clear, detailed, student-focused recovery plan for an



education system badly battered by the pandemic. There must be input from and action at every classroom, every school and campus, every district and higher education institution, and every state department and agency.

We know what the problems are – learning loss across the education spectrum from reduced classroom time, inadequate resources for the students who need the most help, literacy instruction that leaves most students struggling to read well, a teaching pipeline

not nearly as diverse as our student population, inadequate support for students in their first semesters in college – but as yet not enough solutions are emerging that are coherent, well implemented, and widely embraced.

Now, more than ever, Tennessee students need policymakers, educators, advocates, and community members to understand that we must have new answers to the new challenges. And now, more than ever, Tennessee students need us, the adults, to be in the same boat, headed to the same destination, and rowing in the same direction.

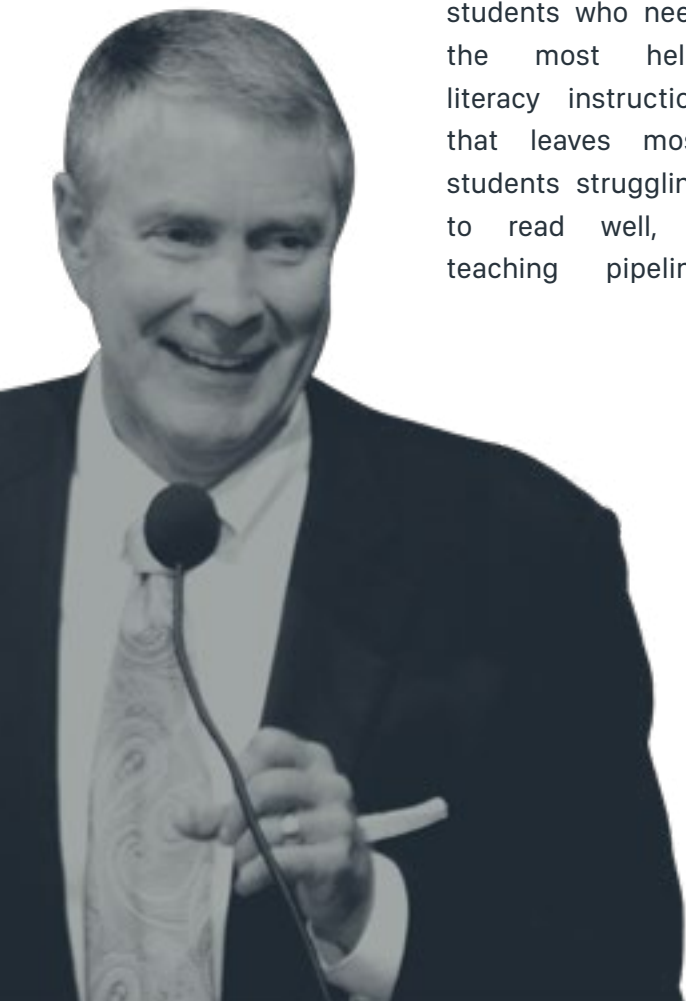
That's what Tennesseans did a decade ago when the state faced up to its education crisis after a US Chamber of Commerce report card gave the state three F's for truth in advertising on student proficiency, college and career readiness, and equitably educating disadvantaged students. Then Tennesseans came together to write, enact, and implement a plan that built a strong foundation of K-12 and higher education reforms: high expectations and assessment; deep and transparent data to support decision-making at the state, district, classroom, and family levels;

funding for higher education based on outcomes; and expanded college access through Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect.

As we head into 2021, it is imperative that Tennessee pursue education recovery from COVID-19, with:

A sharp, student-focused vision. This vision must be centered on the idea that the primary role of education is to support every student at every level to gain the skills, knowledge, and credentials that will allow them to become economically independent adults. And it needs to make clear that all students must be served equitably.

A detailed, measurable action plan that sets the state agenda for achieving the vision. A vision is worth no more than the paper it is printed on without a strategy to achieve the goal. We must set specific goals and measure our progress against them each year. Because we as a state are not yet preparing all students for college and career success, the goals must be as aggressive as more than doubling state performance on key student success measures – third-graders reading on grade level, the community college completion rate for



Black and Latino students, and recent high school graduates who earn associate degrees in three years or bachelor's degrees in six years – by the end of the decade. Tennessee must dream big for our students.

Excellent implementation. One of the big lessons of the past 10 years has been that passing ground-breaking policy can be easier than implementing that policy and delivering to students the major improvements laid out in the policy. Our limited resources cannot be wasted and must be directed first to the students who need the most support to learn at their highest levels. During this down economy, we must resist the temptation to cut education funding because the students are the ones who pay for that short-sighted approach. The most precious of our resources is our human capital, and we must make it a top priority to build the best possible team – from great teachers to strong leaders and talented state agency staff – because good people ensure that good policies work as intended. The people carrying out the plan bring the urgency and compassion to the work.

Widespread support for the vision and plan. The best plan in the world cannot be executed unless key stakeholders buy into it and help to enact it. Across a decade, SCORE has urged collaboration in setting student-focused goals and carrying out the work. We believe in collaboration and try to model it. Leadership is best demonstrated by actively building support among policymakers, educators, institutional staffs, parents, and students.

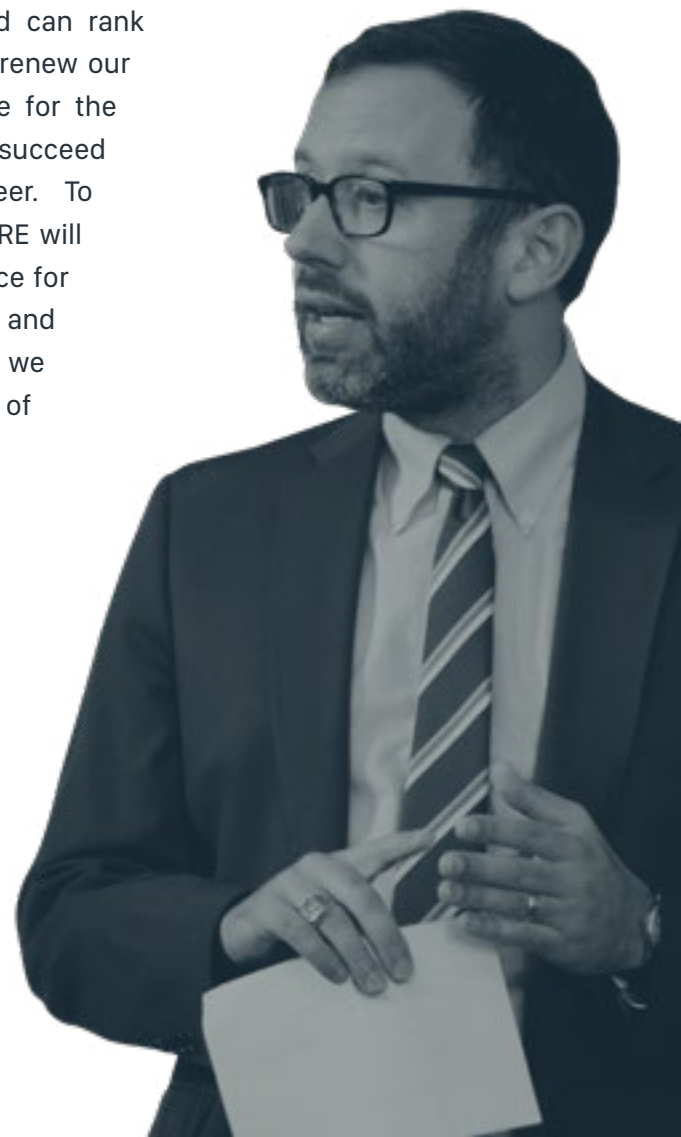
When SCORE was founded in 2009, the education environment was different, but student needs were not so different. Students needed then and need now an education system that at every

level – the classroom, the school, the district office, the college administration, the state agencies, and the state Capitol – is singularly focused on them and what they need to grow into knowledgeable, skilled, productive, and happy citizens.

This year's *State Of Education In Tennessee* report is the beginning of a new effort at SCORE. We are convinced that Tennessee students are as smart as any students in the country and can rank at the top of the nation. We renew our pledge to tirelessly advocate for the support students need to succeed from kindergarten to career. To deliver on that promise, SCORE will be a stronger and clearer voice for the students of Tennessee, and we will be speaking out when we see Tennessee is falling short of serving all students well.

We invite you to join us in reviving the commitment to serving students and measuring our success by their success.

Senator Bill Frist is the Founder and Chairman of SCORE. David Mansouri is SCORE President and CEO.



COVID-19 WORSENS RACIAL AND ECONOMIC INEQUITIES IN EDUCATION

In 2020, our nation navigated a disruptive public health crisis and a summer of protests that increased awareness of long-standing, systemic racial, economic, and justice inequities. These crises overlapped just as Tennessee educators and students were going back to school, virtually or in person. The opening months of the COVID-19 pandemic demanded ingenuity from educators as they stood up virtual learning practically overnight, responsiveness from leaders as they navigated an evolving public health crisis, and collaboration from communities as they worked to fill in resource gaps for students.

The efforts by educators and schools were wide-ranging, nimble, and necessary. The scale of need revealed by the pandemic, however, raises questions and adds urgency to efforts to address the quality of education for all students both before and after the pandemic.

Education is an essential means to economic and social mobility for Tennesseans. This idea is foundational to SCORE's work and is reflected in decades of education and economic research.¹ If today's children and young adults are going to thrive, if they are going to become

tomorrow's success stories, we must provide them with high-quality learning opportunities from early childhood through career.

In order for the state to claim to have an education system that works for all Tennesseans, special attention must be given to the experiences of students of color — particularly Black and Hispanic students — and students from economically disadvantaged families because these groups have historically been underserved.





LONG-STANDING EDUCATION INEQUITIES IN TENNESSEE

Not all students have benefited from the historic statewide improvement in student achievement and expanded college access.² At the same time that the state's rankings went from the low 40s to the national average on the Nation's Report Card, the state's gaps between Black and Hispanic students and their White peers remained large. Black students are half as likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade and half as likely to complete postsecondary education as White students. We know that most workforce opportunities will require some form of postsecondary education, and our current policies and practices are not setting all students up for success.³

Tennessee's School, College, Career Metrics

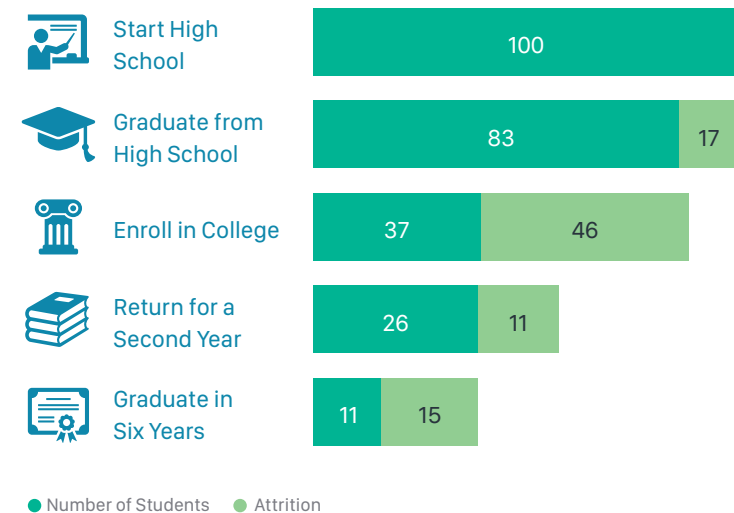
Key milestones and various measures of educational opportunity make clear that Tennessee must do more to support success among Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students. Tennessee cannot achieve statewide goals like ensuring 55 percent of Tennesseans have a postsecondary credential or all students are on grade level in third-grade reading without a clear focus and commitment to better serving the students who are currently below grade-level expectations.

Tennessee's Education System Currently Works For Only 1 In 10 Low-Income Students

At every step in the pathway from high school to college to career, economically disadvantaged students are progressing at slower rates than those who are not economically disadvantaged. Nearly nine out of 10 economically disadvantaged students in Tennessee are at risk of ending their education without a degree or credential.⁴ Put another way, success within the current system is not a function of the design but the result of herculean individual student effort. Here's the math, based on the 2018-19 success rates across public K-12 and postsecondary institutions in Tennessee:

- > High School Graduation Rate:** When 100 Tennessee students begin high school, only 83 of them will graduate, based on our current graduation rate of 82.9% for low-income students, and 17 of them will not.
- > College-Going Rate:** Of the 83 who graduate high school, only about 37 students will enroll in postsecondary education, based on our college-going rate of 44.6 percent for low-income students, and 46 will not.
- > First-Year Persistence:** With a persistence rate of 69.5 percent for all students, only about 26 of the 37 low-income students who entered college will return for their second year.

- > Six-Year Graduation Rate, Across All Institutions:** With a six-year postsecondary graduation rate of 40.6 percent for the 37 Pell-eligible students who enrolled in college, only about 11 of those initial 100 high school freshman will earn a postsecondary degree.

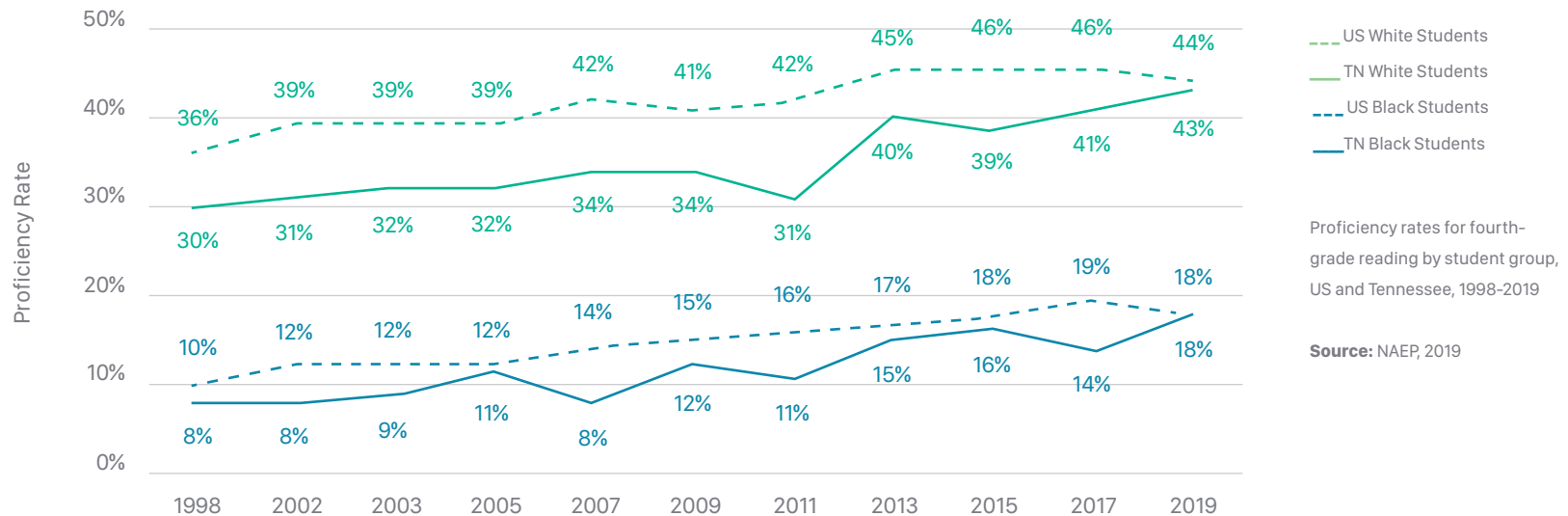


*This visual and its conclusion are estimated from publicly available data. Definitions for economically disadvantaged are different between K-12 and higher education. In K-12, economically disadvantaged is defined primarily as students whose families receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits or participate in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). In higher education, economically disadvantaged is defined as students who were eligible to receive Pell funds at any time in their postsecondary career. Because of methodological differences, the underlying success rates may be different than the rates used to calculate the 11 percent figure.

Source: Calculations based on 2020 data from TDOE and THEC

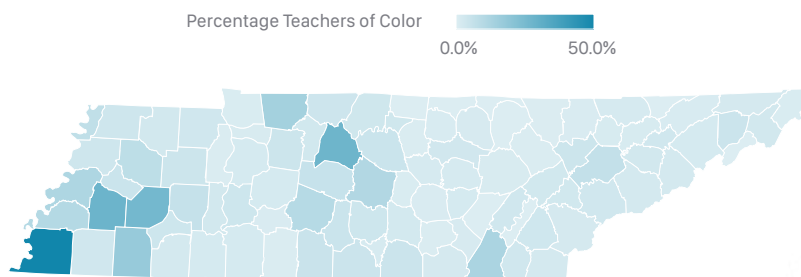
The Opportunity Gap Begins With Early Literacy

While Tennessee climbed in national rankings on the Nation's Report Card in fourth-grade reading overall and for Black students, the state still has a wide racial gap in student achievement.



Tennessee's Teacher Workforce Is Not Representative Of The Students Being Served

Research has demonstrated the academic and nonacademic benefits for all students, and particularly students of color, when learning with a teacher of color.⁵ Tennessee has a long-standing racial diversity mismatch between teachers, about 14 percent of whom are teachers of color, and students, about 38 percent of whom are students of color. While 13 districts have at least one-third students of color, only one district has at least one-third teachers of color.



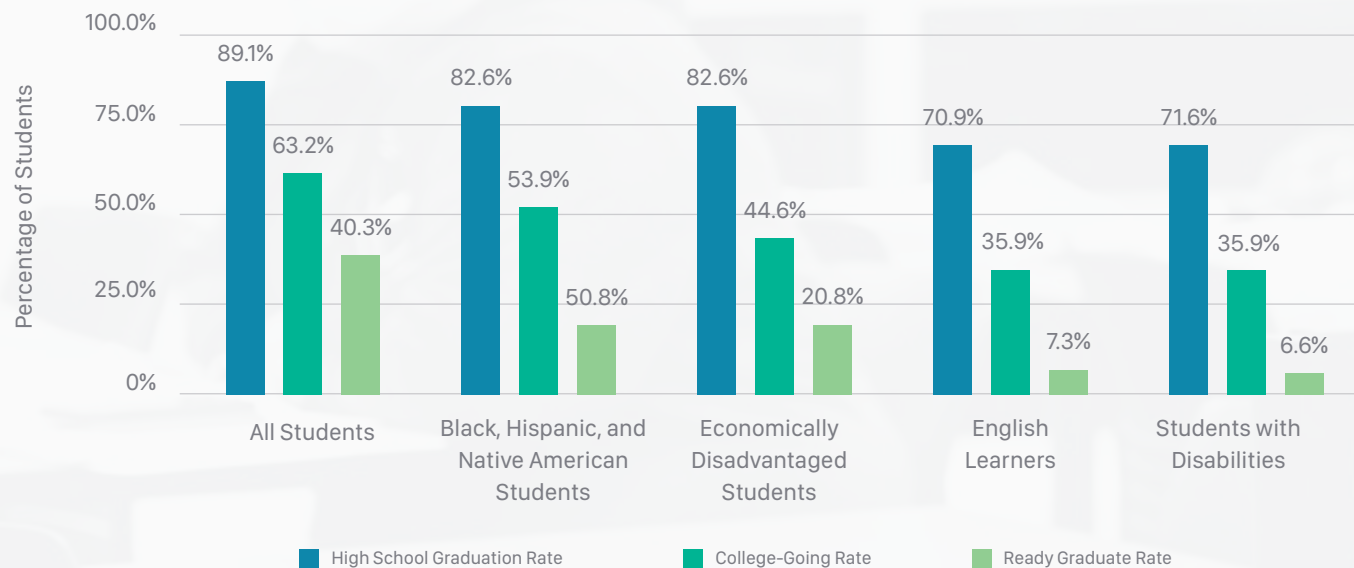
Educator diversity rates by county, 2018-19

Source: TDOE, 2019



High School Graduates Need More Preparation For Postsecondary And Career Success

The K-12 system graduates nearly 90 percent of its students, and the college-going rate has steadily improved in recent years. However, Tennessee's Ready Graduate indicator and college success rates make it abundantly clear that many students are not leaving high school prepared for college and career. Students who are underprepared are at greater risk of leaving college without a credential, incurring education costs that do not lead to greater prosperity.⁶



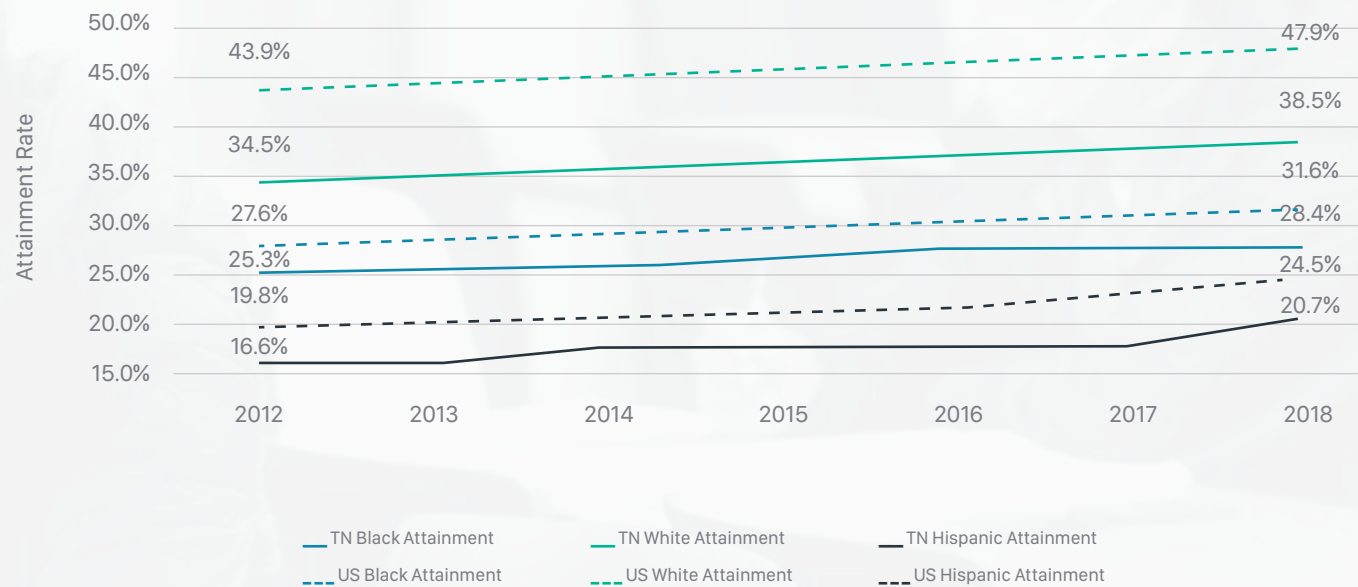
TDOE high school graduation, college-going, and Ready Graduate rates by student group, 2018-19

Source: TDOE, 2019

*The Tennessee Department of Education defined a Ready Graduate at the time this data was collected as a graduating senior who meets one of the following requirements: (1) earns a composite score of 21 or higher on the ACT or a 1060 or higher on the SAT; or (2) completes four early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs); or (3) completes two EPSOs and earns an industry certification; or (4) completes two EPSOs and earns a score of 31 on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT).

Tennessee Trails National Postsecondary Attainment Rates

With such wide opportunity gaps even before postsecondary education, Tennessee lags the rest of the country in postsecondary attainment across all racial and ethnic groups. Tennessee has not yet invested the resources or adopted innovative practices that would create a coherent system that students can easily navigate to degree completion.

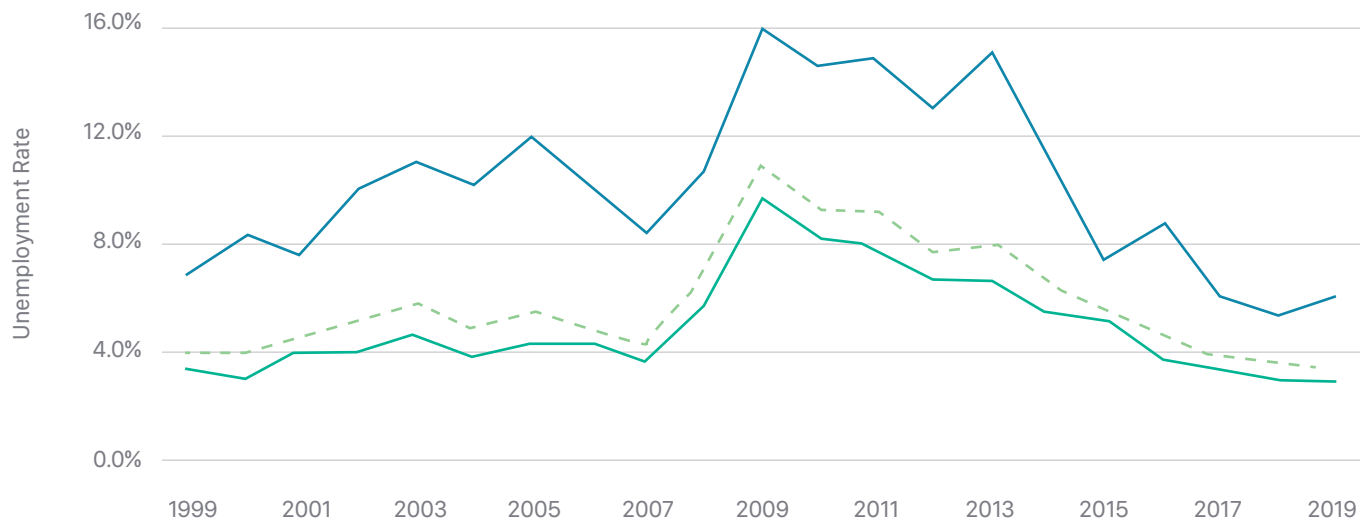


Postsecondary attainment rate of people ages 25-64 by race/ethnicity, 2012-2018

Source: Lumina Foundation, 2020

Black Tennesseans Have Less Opportunity For Employment

While the pandemic's long-term effect on economic opportunity remains to be seen, historical data show that regardless of the health of the overall economy, unemployment affects higher percentages of Black Tennesseans. These historical gaps will impede state efforts to increase the number of high-quality jobs and improve economic stability.



— Black Tennesseans
 - - - All Tennesseans
 — White Tennesseans

Estimated unemployment rate in Tennessee by race, 1999-2019

Source: Sycamore Institute, 2020



The pandemic did not create these inequities, but it shed light on the lived experiences of many Tennessee students and the opportunities provided by education to reduce the inequities. Decades of research and data make clear that student success depends on high-quality teachers and teaching, greater resources to students with greater needs, and college access and completion.⁷ Tennessee has shown the capacity to be a national leader for improving opportunity in the past. The next step for the state is to aim even higher and to commit to creating an education system that upends the historical correlations between a student's circumstances and opportunity and instead supports each student to success in career and life.⁸

LONG PANDEMIC RECOVERY AHEAD, BUT AN OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE A BETTER WAY

On top of the inequities that already existed in the education system, the COVID-19 crisis has put these gaps at risk of widening even more. The expected learning loss for all students is significant, especially for Black, Hispanic, and Native American students and economically disadvantaged students.⁹ As educators and leaders continue to navigate a constantly changing 2020-21 school year, Tennessee must reflect on what has been learned – both the challenges and the opportunities – as a result of the pandemic. This will determine if the state emerges from the crisis with a more resilient and equitable system.

Essential to that work is ensuring that Tennesseans know and reflect upon what happened with our education system in 2020 as

we reimagine the incomplete system that currently exists. While educators, parents, and policymakers alike will want to know what worked and what didn't during the pandemic, watching Tennessee's education response to COVID revealed several fundamental questions that must influence the scale, speed, and size of any future education investments and innovations:

- **Student attendance:** Which students were able to attend school, in person or virtually?
- **Student engagement:** What was the quality of learning opportunities that students received?
- **Student learning:** How much did students learn, and how does that compare to what they would be expected to learn in a regular year?
- **Student persistence:** Are students maintaining momentum to and through postsecondary education?

As state and community leaders urgently address these critical student needs, Tennessee must learn from the experiences of students and educators as well as what research and data suggest are the most promising solutions. A commitment to develop solutions and monitor progress across time and for all student groups will be key to having a united vision for recovery and innovation. For example, similar to other states across the country, Tennessee has launched an Education Recovery and Innovation Commission to recommend the state's path forward. Tennesseans deserve a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and outcomes of students during the pandemic to ensure that solutions are designed for them – and that they work.

Tennessee's Evidence-Driven Response To COVID-19

Early data and analysis from across the country as well as Tennessee's schools and institutions suggest that access to learning has been uneven, learning losses will be severe for some students, and the long-term consequences to student success may be devastating. While educators and leaders continue to respond to COVID, key opportunities exist to ensure that policymakers and communities have the evidence they need to wisely invest resources and improve policies and practices that will set up Tennessee to be even better than before the pandemic.

Education Topic	Student Experience Estimates	Evidence-Based Actions Tennessee Can Take	How Tennessee Can Advance
In-Person Learning For K-12 Students	<p>4 of 5 Tennessee students likely had fewer in-person school days than a typical school year through October 1.¹⁰</p> <p>Enrollment in K-12 public schools in Tennessee dropped by 33,000 students, or 3.5%, in the first months of the 2020-21 school year compared to 2019-20.¹²</p>	<p>Extend Learning Time</p> <p>Provide additional learning time such as vacation academies or extended school years.¹¹</p>	<p>Student attendance, enrollment, and engagement data</p>
Digital Divide	<p>A third of Tennessee students lack access to devices or internet for schoolwork.¹³</p> <p>Rural students in Tennessee were 20% less likely to receive virtual instruction, resources compared to urban and suburban students.¹⁵</p>	<p>Embrace Flexible Learning</p> <p>Develop long-term broadband and device solutions to the digital divide that support learning, create resilient instructional systems that improve the use of classroom and nonclassroom learning time, and end learning disruptions during bad weather or natural disasters.¹⁴</p>	<p>Community-level assessments of student access to internet and a high-quality device</p>
Quality Of Distance Learning	<p>National research shows a third of high-poverty districts primarily spent spring 2020 reviewing previously taught material.¹⁶</p>	<p>Invest In High-Quality Instructional Materials</p> <p>Align investments in instructional materials with professional learning to ensure equitable student access to rigorous content.¹⁷ Make improvements to intervention practices and supports for the students most behind.¹⁸</p>	<p>Analysis of district continuous learning plans submitted to TDOE</p> <p>Student and educator surveys</p>

Source: TDOE, 2020; Chalkbeat, 2020; Common Sense Media, 2020; TERA, 2020; AIR, 2020; NWEA, 2020; TBR, 2020; Annenberg Institute, 2020.

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Education Topic	Student Experience Estimates	Evidence-Based Actions Tennessee Can Take	How Tennessee Can Advance
Student Learning Loss	K-5 students across the country were projected to return to school in Fall 2020 up to one grade-level behind in mathematics as a result of spring closures. ¹⁹	Focus On Learning Acceleration Support educators to deliver learning acceleration instead of excessive remediation and invest in high-dosage tutoring. ²⁰	K-12 student assessments, including statewide assessments and district-based formative assessments
Transition To College	First-time, full-time freshman enrollment at Tennessee community colleges is down 19% this year. ²¹	Protect Postsecondary Transition Invest in high school to postsecondary transition supports, including college access and postsecondary-based advising, persistence support, and nontuition supports that ensure equitable opportunities to complete a credential. Commit resources to reinforce college-going intentions of class of 2021 and 2022. ²²	Postsecondary enrollment data Surveys of students in Tennessee postsecondary institutions about quality of learning and engagement
Long-Term Economic Losses	Current K-12 students can expect 3% lower income over their lifetime as an economic result of the pandemic. ²³	Invest In Long-Term Recovery Minimize long-term learning losses at key education milestones (early literacy, seventh-grade math proficiency, and college and career persistence) for the next several years.	Longitudinal data on student workforce outcomes

Source: TDOE, 2020; Chalkbeat, 2020; Common Sense Media, 2020; TERA, 2020; AIR, 2020; NWEA, 2020; TBR, 2020; Annenberg Institute, 2020.

Tennessee entered the pandemic with historical inequities but also a history of making sustainable changes. Since 2010, Tennessee has carried out a decade-long strategy centered on:

- **High expectations:** Adopting and supporting educator implementation of rigorous college- and career-ready academic standards
- **Aligned assessment:** Aligning state assessments to rigorous academic standards and building an accountability system that reflects real student learning

- **Excellent educators:** Providing regular feedback to teachers and leaders that emphasized educator impact on student growth and performance of all student groups

To deliver an excellent education for all, Tennessee should continue the 2010 reforms and abandon “business as usual” practices that did not work for students before the pandemic. If the state is to provide students an equitable education, it must adopt innovative strategies and make targeted investments. When Tennesseans look back on 2021, it should be remembered as the moment our state embraced a student-focused vision of change.



COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

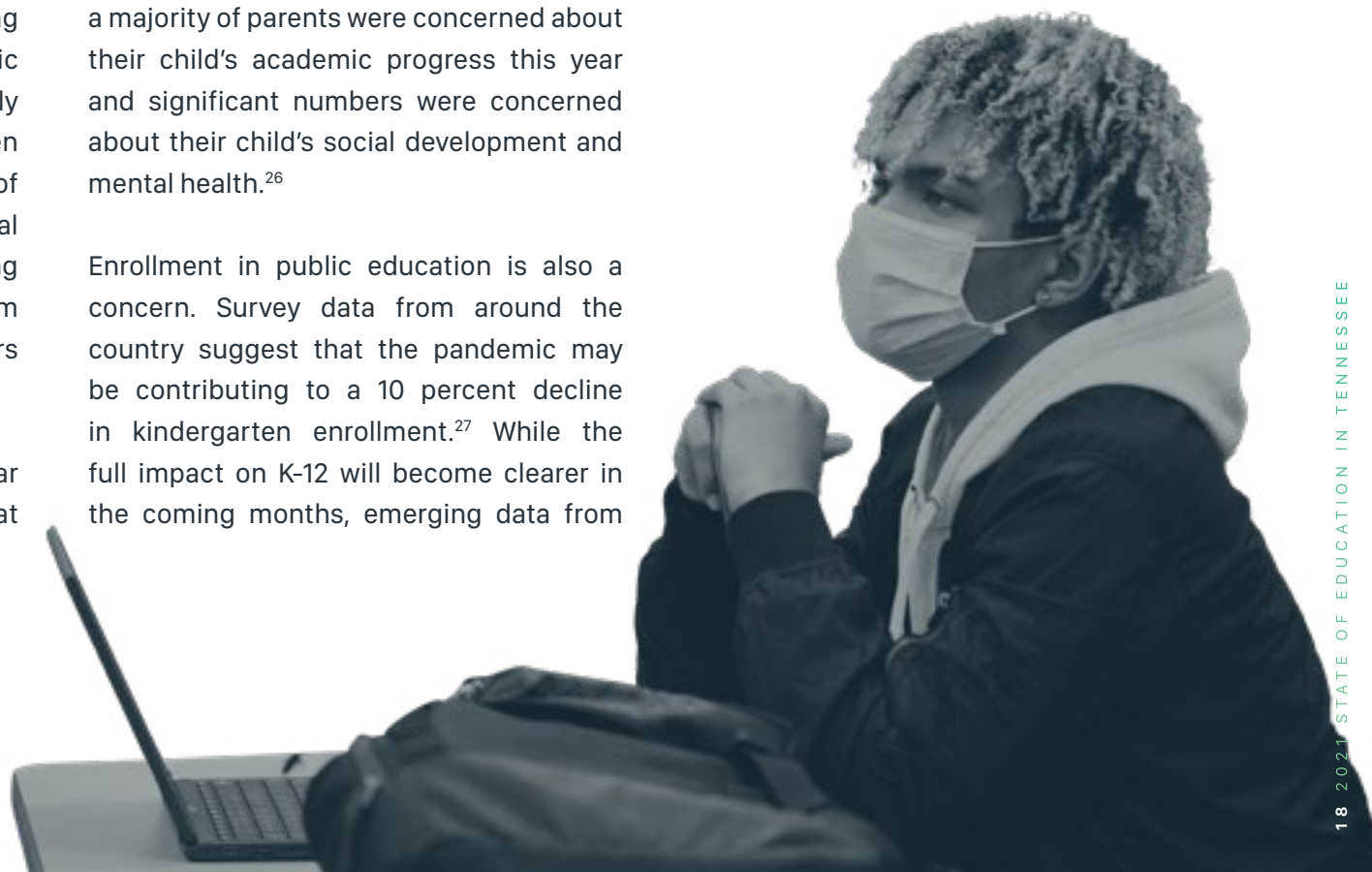
It is likely that 2020 will be a lost learning year for thousands of students because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Early estimates suggest steep learning losses, particularly for young learners and students who were furthest behind pre-pandemic, while economists estimate that K-12 students will lose up to 3 percent of their lifetime earnings as a result of the pandemic.²⁴ Long-standing education inequities for Black and Hispanic students and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds have been exacerbated. Despite the tireless work of educators and faculty to stand up virtual learning systems and adopt safe reopening practices, much more will be needed from state leaders, communities, and educators in the coming months and years.

As the first half of the 2020-21 school year draws to a close, evidence mounts that

student disengagement from learning – either by circumstances or by choice – will set back even more students. Data from around the country echo experiences described by Tennessee students, who affirmed that they are struggling with virtual learning, anxiety, and isolation.²⁵ In an October 2020 poll commissioned by SCORE, a majority of parents were concerned about their child's academic progress this year and significant numbers were concerned about their child's social development and mental health.²⁶

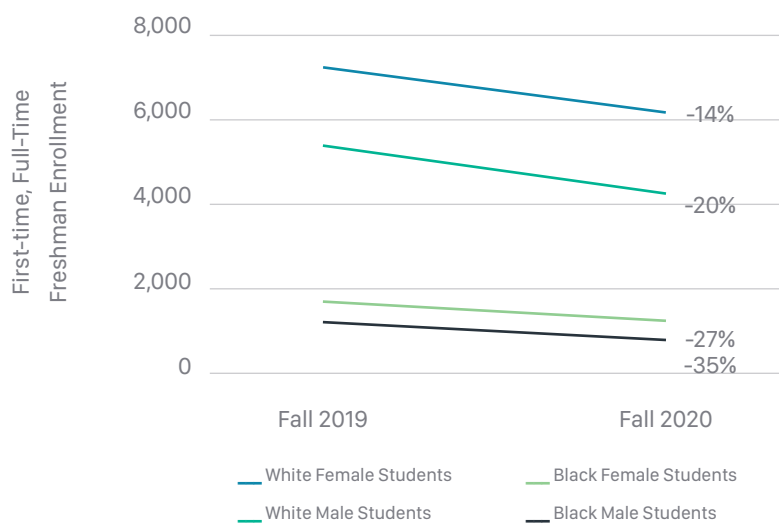
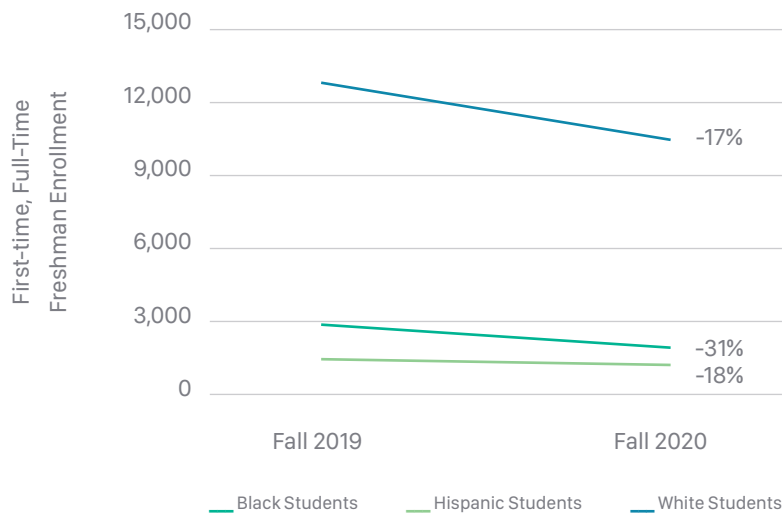
Enrollment in public education is also a concern. Survey data from around the country suggest that the pandemic may be contributing to a 10 percent decline in kindergarten enrollment.²⁷ While the full impact on K-12 will become clearer in the coming months, emerging data from

Tennessee's community colleges show a 35 percent decline in enrollment for first-time, full-time Black male freshmen compared with a 20 percent decline for White male freshmen. This disparity has enormous equity implications for Black students and Tennessee's postsecondary attainment goals.



Freshman Enrollment At Tennessee Community Colleges Declines 19 Percent

The average college graduate earns more over a lifetime than a high school graduate nationwide and in Tennessee.²⁸ While postsecondary education remains as important as ever to access high-quality careers, there is an emerging enrollment crisis for Tennessee students at community colleges. Community colleges are gateways for many first-generation college students and are a crucial part of Tennessee Promise.



First-time, full-time freshman enrollment at Tennessee community colleges by student group, 2020

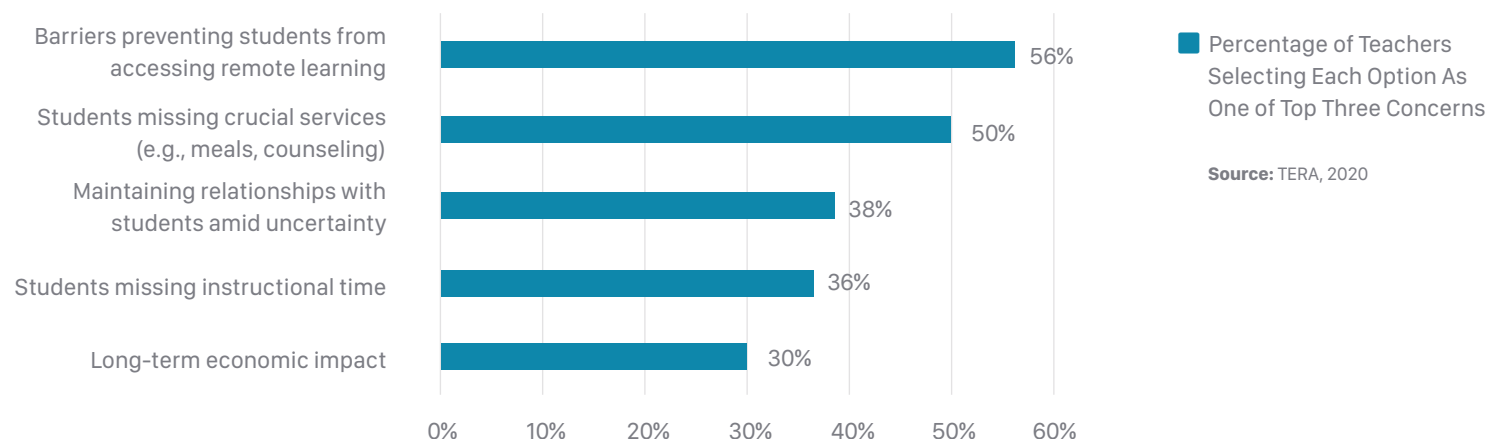
Source: TBR, 2020

Inequitable access to virtual learning during school and campus closures has emerged as a priority issue. In the annual Tennessee Educator Survey, K-12 teachers said student access to remote instruction was their top concern.²⁹ Faculty at Tennessee's community and technical colleges reported that nearly half of students were not as engaged in coursework during the pandemic as before, with more than half of respondents stating that internet access remains a barrier for many students.³⁰



Student Access To Remote Learning A Top Teacher Concern

More than half of teachers identified the digital divide as one of their top three concerns for students during the spring school shutdowns.



Closing The Digital Divide For Tennessee Students

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced Tennessee to confront its digital divide. Researchers estimated that up to one-third of the state's students did not have adequate access to devices or internet when schools closed in the spring.³¹ Digital access is both an urgent and long-term education equity problem. Research shows that students who do not have home internet access or solely rely on a mobile plan for internet access are less likely to attend college and more likely to have weaker digital skills, both of which limit career opportunities later.³²

While Tennessee has made strides to increase digital access to rural families, experts estimate that it will take at least another \$500 million of infrastructure investments to achieve 100 percent broadband access statewide.³³ Furthermore, improving federal and state data about internet access, lowering the cost of high-

speed internet access, and making appropriate learning devices available will be central to eliminating the digital divide for Tennessee students.³⁴

Hamilton County provides a promising example of how a community can create long-term solutions to this issue. Hamilton County Schools' EdConnect is an innovative public-private partnership launched in July 2020 to provide high-speed internet for about 28,000 students from economically disadvantaged families.³⁵ Instead of relying on a patchwork of hotspots and mobile devices, the partnership is centered on a 10-year, \$8.2 million commitment to install in-home routers that provide 100 Mbps internet service — key for live, synchronous instruction. Leveraging both existing investments in broadband infrastructure and the school district's ability to reach the highest-needs students, the initiative is a national model to address multiple

facets of the digital divide and ensure students can access virtual learning well beyond the pandemic.

State policymakers can play a role in accelerating progress. The Georgia Department of Community Affairs' Broadband Deployment Initiative and the Colorado Broadband office provide models for how to rapidly solve gaps in federal data quality that make it difficult to know where infrastructure improvements are most needed. Tennessee's \$65 million investment in devices for K-12 schools through coronavirus relief funds are a start at addressing device needs. However, in order to fully close the gap across all communities, Tennessee will need to address issues of data quality, affordability, access, and use in the coming years so that students can fully benefit from the flexible learning that technology investments can provide.

Building A More Resilient Education System In Rural Tennessee

Due to limited resources and isolated systems, small and rural school districts often have unique struggles adapting student and teacher supports to meet changing needs. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, making it difficult for rural districts to quickly implement changes in instructional systems to accommodate the sudden shift to remote learning in spring 2020.

To support rural Tennessee school districts with their COVID-19 response, the Tennessee Rural Acceleration and Innovation Network (TRAIN) was begun by the Ayers Foundation in partnership with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) and SCORE. TRAIN brings together 15 rural school districts, many located in counties that are classified as distressed or at-risk,

to provide support in addressing the specific challenges of teaching and learning in rural communities during COVID-19.

With limited capacity to deal with emerging issues, the districts in the network initially focused on purchasing devices and expanding internet access. TRAIN extended district capacity to address instructional issues through weekly collaboration with expert technical assistance providers that helped local leaders develop their Continuous Learning Plans for the 2020-21 school year. NIET developed resources to help educators navigate the logistics of virtual and in-person instruction and designed and implemented professional development and instructional supports to build the capacity of teachers and leaders. Throughout the year, districts

will receive tailored professional learning in response to their needs.

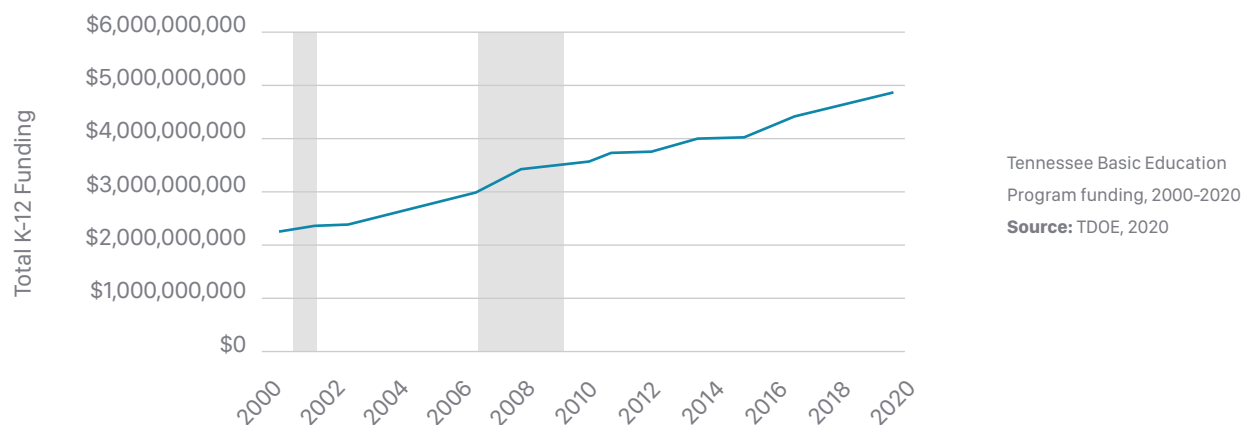
TRAIN highlights the value of intensive and immediate support to rural districts in times of crisis to support them in responding to the ever-changing needs of students and teachers. The network provides the 15 districts with a platform to approach problem-solving quickly, share emerging best practices, and ultimately strengthen instructional systems to accelerate learning in the 2020-21 school year – whether in person or virtual. TRAIN fosters a culture of continuous improvement that helps participating districts both improve current operations and be prepared to respond effectively to future crises.

The pandemic will continue to influence students' educational experiences through at least 2021, so Tennessee must address both immediate and long-term challenges in educational opportunity. The state has invested more than \$572 million in federal funding for education during the pandemic, but those additional resources represent less than 5 percent of total state spending on education.³⁶ For example, some investments have helped narrow the digital divide, which is estimated to impact nearly a third of Tennessee's K-12 students, but significant public and private investment will be required to erase the digital divide.

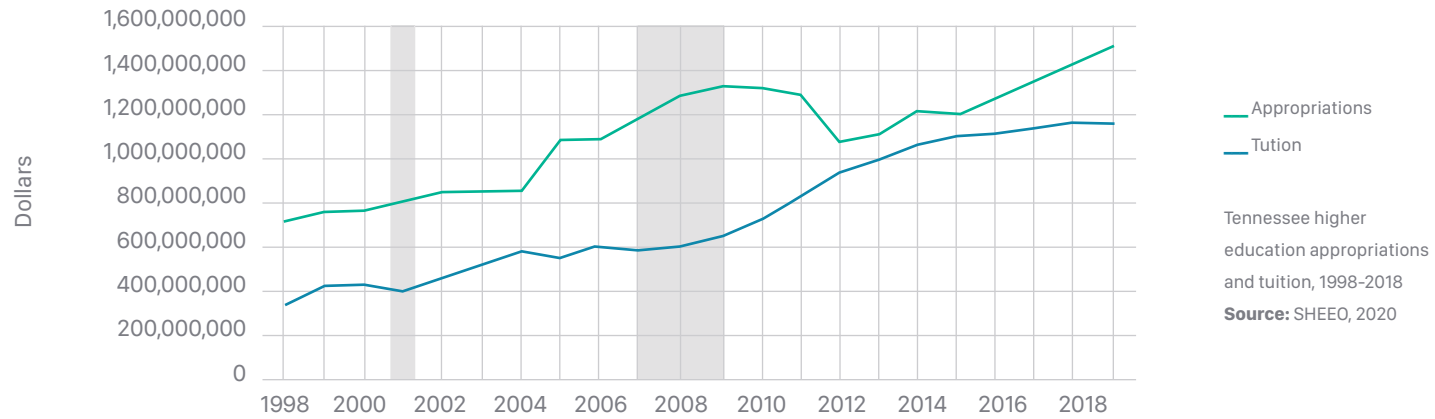
Tennessee maintained total education funding during the Great Recession with the help of federal relief funds.³⁷ Research from around the country demonstrates the negative impact of state funding cuts on student outcomes, as state resources often have an outsized influence on the experience of students of color and from economically disadvantaged families.³⁸ As the fiscal outlook continues to evolve in Tennessee, schools' and institutions' actions will be framed in part by how the state prioritizes its limited resources.

Tennessee Has Prioritized Education Funding During Recessions

During the recessions that began in 2001 and 2007, Tennessee maintained appropriations for K-12 and higher education with the help of federal relief funds. After the federal funds dried up following the Great Recession, state appropriations for higher education declined, and students took on a greater burden in the form of higher tuition.



Tennessee Has Prioritized Education Funding During Recessions (cont.)



Tennessee has a history of enacting seemingly impossible student-focused policy and practice changes by thinking boldly, working collaboratively, and investing in our students and educators. If the state is to emerge stronger from the pandemic, Tennessee must articulate and commit to a unified vision for a more equitable and resilient education system that ensures:

1. Every student receives rigorous instruction and personalized supports from educators – in-person or otherwise – that facilitate high-quality learning.
2. Every educator and faculty member receives the support, professional learning, and feedback that empower them to meet student needs.
3. Every school and institution adopts evidence-based practices that ensure students are served equitably while embracing an innovative mindset to address their students' needs.
4. Every student is ready for college and career, and stakeholders have the necessary data to target support and investment around this priority.

Equitable Education Opportunity Requires Investment, Insight, And Innovation

Even as Tennessee's districts and institutions urgently address learning challenges during the pandemic, there are emerging examples of how the state and local communities can organize a long-term response to the glaring inequities exacerbated by the pandemic. Across a range of issues, entrepreneurial leaders and innovative educators have been and will continue to be the key to transformative thinking that ensures Tennessee provides a high-quality education for all students.

Commission To Study, Address Education Gaps From Pandemic

As districts and institutions continue to serve students in the 2020-21 school year, the Education Recovery and Innovation Commission – established by the Tennessee General Assembly in 2020 – will study the impact of the pandemic and develop recommendations



for how the state can recover and modernize its education system. Foundational data about enrollment, attendance, and statewide assessments must be paired with surveys of student and teacher perspectives, as well as longitudinal analyses of student outcomes. These critical data will provide insights into the student experience during the pandemic, giving the Commission the opportunity to address information gaps while crafting recommendations that help Tennessee emerge with a more resilient and equitable education system.

Evidence-Based Advances And Bold Innovations Equally Needed

Tennessee schools and institutions need to look and operate differently after the pandemic. Within and beyond the state, there are examples of evidence-based advances – models and practices with proven records – as well as outside-the-box thinking that redefines whole systems. Both will be needed.

> **Better and more learning time:** Strategic use of extended learning time, such as vacation academies and high-dosage tutoring models studied in Massachusetts school districts, provide a promising way to address learning loss and reengage students after a period of disrupted or isolated learning.³⁹ Low-performing schools in Florida that added an additional hour of reading instruction each day saw

the equivalent of up to three months of extra learning as measured by state assessment results.⁴⁰

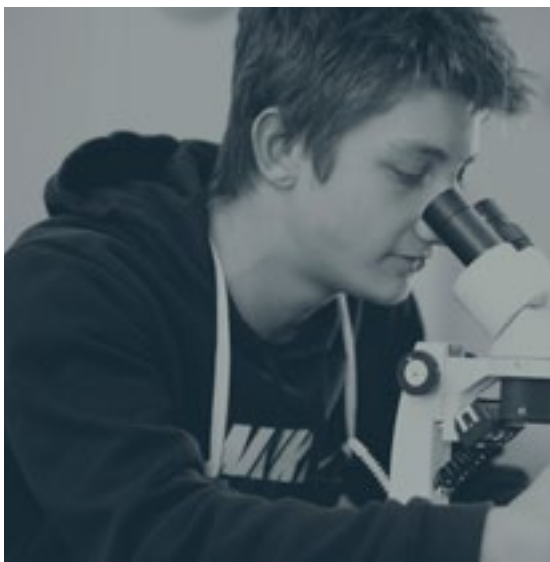
> **Mastery-based student advancement:** The Cleveland Metropolitan School District is exploring ways to promote mastery-based learning by doing away with grade levels, flexibly scheduling students for in-person and virtual learning, and building on mastery grading pilots already underway in the district.⁴¹

> **More informed remedial education placement:** With spring 2020 disruptions to ACT testing, the Tennessee Board of Regents is piloting a new remedial education placement policy that now includes high school GPA as part of the process. This comes after an analysis of a multiple-measure approach to remediation placement showed a consistent relationship between high school GPA and postsecondary success.⁴²

> **Stackable credentials:** Postsecondary institutions in Louisiana, Oregon, and across the country are exploring stackable credentials to flexibly respond to workforce needs for highly skilled workers. After aligning programs with workforce needs, institutions implement statewide transfer agreements, develop credential consortiums, integrate credentials from prior learning, and create a streamlined program approval process.⁴³

2021 Priority: Recover And Reorient Education Systems In Response To COVID-19

Tennessee should ensure the state emerges from the pandemic with a more resilient, equitable, and student-focused education system. In 2020, schools and institutions embraced innovation by necessity, with many hard-earned lessons on how to meet evolving student needs, adopt virtual learning, and maximize the use of limited time with students. Tennessee must refocus its support to ensure that students learn and grow in 2021 while moving toward a unified vision for educational equity and excellence that is responsive to the lessons learned from the pandemic.



Articulate a vision for education equity and create a COVID-19 recovery plan that advances the state toward that vision.

Tennessee will need to articulate a vision for an equitable recovery from the pandemic while emerging from the crisis with a more resilient education system. This vision will frame the scale of the investments needed as well as the innovations and supports that must be created for the students who likely lost the most in this pandemic – students of color, with disabilities, from economically disadvantaged families, from rural communities, and English learners. To ensure that the vision is actionable, responsive, and specific, it should include:

- Clear, measurable, and time-bound goals about what outcomes the state is working toward for students – with special attention to closing specific equity gaps for students from historically underserved groups
- Outline of strategies that address learning loss and acceleration, improve flexibility and resilience of instructional systems, and break down traditional siloes in the education system to advance student outcomes

- Collaboratively developed action plan that engages educators, leaders, and communities in a unified effort to reorient the education system toward equitable outcomes for all students

The strategies and action plan should build on a base of evidence-driven policies as well as a bold reinvention of practices. Communities will need to take extra care of key student transitions, such as those to postsecondary education and career. Postsecondary institutions will also need to lean in on online learning, embrace stackable credentials, and build systems – not just programs – of student supports.

The Education Recovery and Innovation Commission will serve an important role in helping the state understand its own experience with the pandemic in order to help chart an innovative, student-centered strategy going forward. However, it will be up to state leaders to embrace this vision and direct the resources and supports that address the serious educational inequities exacerbated by the pandemic. As of the writing of this report, that clarity of vision and aligned resources, supports, and collaboration, is not yet present.

Reengage all students in 2021 by organizing a statewide response that helps educators focus on teaching and learning.

Throughout the pandemic, there are documented cases of students who are unengaged or completely disconnected from learning, and most of these students are Black, Hispanic, or economically disadvantaged.⁴⁴ The 35 percent drop in Black male student enrollment in Tennessee's community colleges between 2019 and 2020 is an intolerable crisis within a broader postsecondary completion crisis. A national analysis found that about one-third of high-poverty schools primarily spent the spring semester reviewing previously taught content compared to less than 10 percent of low-poverty schools.⁴⁵



Every effort must be made to find and reengage Tennessee students who have disconnected from learning. To address this as a state, school districts and postsecondary institutions should collect, report, and reflect on data about student attendance, diagnostic learning assessments, access to devices and the internet, and progress on college and career pathways. The state should then leverage every available resource and government agency to help coordinate health, education, and community organizations' efforts to block and tackle for schools and higher education institutions as they develop responsive interventions for their student population. As more examples of successful coordination across the state and the country become available, communities, schools, and institutions should use those insights to shape their strategies. Research makes clear that student absences reduce academic achievement, increase risk of future absences, and increase the probability of dropping out of school.⁴⁶

Some communities and policymakers are stepping up to support student needs in the pandemic. The state's provision of personal protective equipment is an important health and safety contribution. Clarksville's early and consistent engagement with public health experts gave it an edge in planning school operations.⁴⁷ The Tennessee Tutoring Corps is addressing immediate learning loss needs by employing college students to provide elementary students with one-on-one tutoring.⁴⁸ The Better Together initiative between Metro Nashville Public Schools and Nashville State Community College is supporting student transitions to postsecondary education at a moment when greater attention on that transition point is essential.

Student disengagement predated the pandemic. Thirteen percent of Tennessee students, or approximately 129,000 students, were absent more than 10 percent of the 2018-19 school year.⁴⁹ Prepandemic national surveys of student perceptions showed that only a third of 11th-graders felt engaged at school.⁵⁰ The work to reengage students in response to the pandemic should establish a new normal for how our state and communities support schools and institutions to focus on their unique teaching and learning missions. While initial school closures forced schools to focus on student nutritional needs and provision of resources to support virtual learning, schools should not remain responsible for those activities moving forward. Communities should be prepared to fill this role as schools facilitate access to students and families.

Help educators learn from pandemic-motivated innovation – and replace practices that failed students before and during the pandemic.

While educators, districts, and institutions have all embraced distance learning by necessity, these hard-learned lessons and initial steps should serve as a foundation for instructional reinvention regarding how

educators make use of the limited time they have with students. Innovative teaching practices that leveraged technology during the pandemic — such as the use of online learning, experiments with synchronous and asynchronous learning, flipped classrooms, or creative scheduling — should be piloted, studied, and, if effective, permanently adopted to make learning more flexible and responsive to student need.

Tennessee should work toward a future where the learning goes on because all students are able to rewatch or engage in high-quality lessons virtually when school buildings close for inclement weather or flu season. The State Board of Education should assess the impact of pandemic-related policy changes that created new ways to track distance learning days in student attendance systems. The Tennessee Department of Education should incentivize the piloting of innovative practices with resources by convening practitioners and do so in time to influence how schools' and institutions' plans for summer 2020 and the 2021-22 school year. The Education Recovery and Innovation Commission should highlight emerging examples of promising practices from within and beyond Tennessee to encourage their adoption.



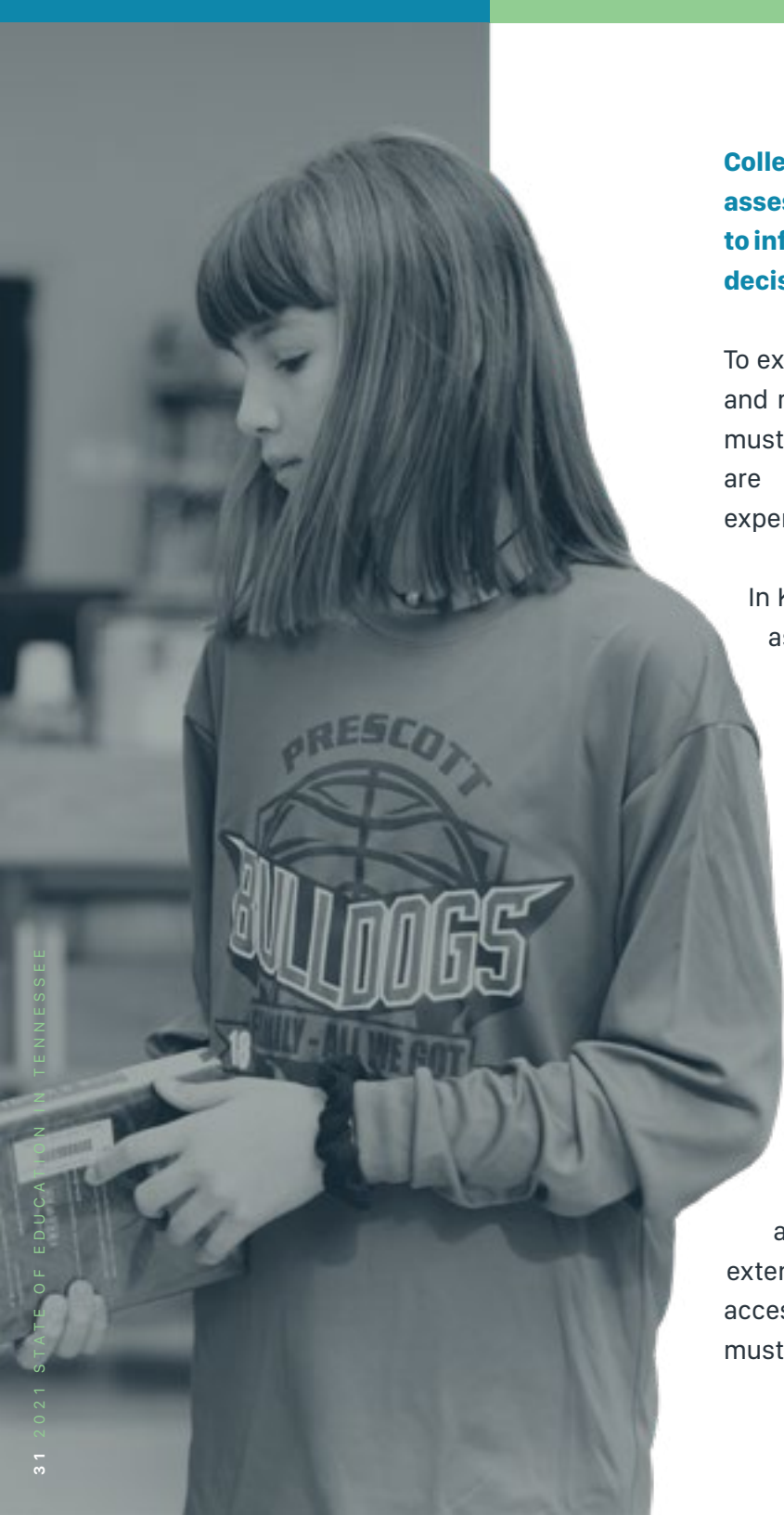


While professional development on teaching in a virtual environment – like the kind offered by the Tennessee Department of Education in K-12 and the Tennessee Board of Regents in postsecondary education – is an important first step, educators need to reflect on what practices must be kept or abandoned as a result of what was attempted in 2020. Crucial to that reflection is feedback and data – both from existent systems, like the Tennessee Educator Survey and state assessments, and in the creative use of student experience surveys or engagement opportunities – to find out what might have worked or not.⁵¹ Eight out of ten Tennessee parents say it is important to measure whether students are meeting academic expectations and know whether schools are meeting the needs of economically disadvantaged students, Black students, Hispanic students, and students with disabilities.⁵²

Research has shown that practices like excessive remediation will leave students further behind, while providing just-in-time review paired with grade-level material is key for accelerating student learning.⁵³ As more educators move toward this more challenging model of instruction, support

and collaborative time will be key. Educators, faculty, districts, and institutions must work together to evaluate and learn from each other about what worked – and did not work – during the pandemic.





Collect and report data on student assessments, outcomes, and experiences to inform policies and resource allocation decisions.

To exit the pandemic with a more equitable and resilient education system, Tennessee must ensure that the right lessons are learned from student outcomes, experiences, and gaps in opportunity.

In K-12, the state must gather summative assessment data by administering the 2020-21 Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP). In a fall 2020 poll, 86 percent of parents were concerned that students in Tennessee were falling behind because of the pandemic disruptions.⁵⁴ The TCAP assessment data are consistent and comparable across schools and districts and will be an important way for the state to understand and address the most urgent student learning gaps.

Other measures, in addition to achievement and growth, indicate the extent to which all Tennessee children can access learning opportunities. The state must ensure consistent recording and

public reporting for all other indicators that have previously been part of the State Report Card: graduation rate, chronic absenteeism, English Language Proficiency Assessments (ELPA), Ready Graduate, per-pupil spending, and postsecondary enrollment.

Additionally, the State Board of Education, the Education Recovery and Innovation Commission, and state policymakers should direct the Department of Education to collect information relevant to the pandemic – such as access to in-person instruction, quality of virtual instruction, student learning loss, and surveys of student experience. These data can be used to improve the State Report Card by setting the context for students' opportunity to learn in 2020-21 alongside student outcome data.

To address postsecondary completion challenges, higher education institutions and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission should follow the lead of the Tennessee Board of Regents in providing disaggregated cross-tabs of student data – the kind of specific insight that helped the state realize the dramatic enrollment decline in Black male students at community colleges during the pandemic.

While there may be broad general awareness of the education challenges related to the pandemic, Tennesseans deserve to know the full extent and have actionable insights to address educational inequities. Only with high-quality assessment data and transparent reporting of new forms of information on the student experience will we know the supports and scale of investments needed to drive urgency in innovation and reinvention.

The data also can help ensure that the education investments for pandemic recovery focus on addressing long-standing inequities in the system instead of simply returning to business as usual. Tennessee has learned hard lessons about the gaps in educational opportunity as a result of this

pandemic – and we should not let those lessons be for naught by failing to design a better system that serves all students.

Protect education funding and close the most pressing opportunity gaps.

In order to appropriately respond to the learning crisis our schools, districts, and postsecondary institutions are facing, the state must provide financial stability. Research has demonstrated the significant negative impact that funding cuts in other states have had on student outcomes in K-12 and postsecondary education.⁵⁵ Leveraging all governmental funding sources, Tennessee should at least maintain total education funding.

Key to this commitment is to hold school districts harmless for enrollment fluctuations in 2020-21 disbursements of the state's Basic Education Program funding. In postsecondary education, fully funding the Outcomes Based Funding Formula will keep institutions focused on supporting students toward completion as higher education faces what may be the sector's greatest fiscal challenge from unprecedented enrollment decreases.⁵⁶ Maintaining financial support for the state's education system will make longer-term recovery more manageable – and more likely.



In addition to keeping overall education spending steady, the state and other partners should invest resources to close the most urgent opportunity gaps heightened by the pandemic. With nearly a third of Tennessee's students facing device and/or internet barriers to learning, Tennessee should move beyond its patchwork response to closing the digital divide. The state must convene and create incentives for the business community and local partners to develop a public-private strategy that aligns data, devices, and infrastructure to close this opportunity gap.⁵⁷ With more than \$572 million of state-directed federal resources spent to address COVID-19 impacts on education, the state should also transparently report how these resources have reached subgroups of students, specifically Black, Hispanic, and Native American students and economically disadvantaged students.

In a moment when resources must be stretched and difficult tradeoffs must be made, district and institution leaders can better align resources – people, time, and money – to bring to scale a more resilient education system. Analysis of school district spending decisions nationally during the pandemic suggest that most districts have yet to make substantive changes in their budget decisions.⁵⁸ The longer that resources are locked in services that aren't being provided because of the pandemic or practices that do not work, the longer it will take to recover and reorient education systems to what students need during COVID recovery.



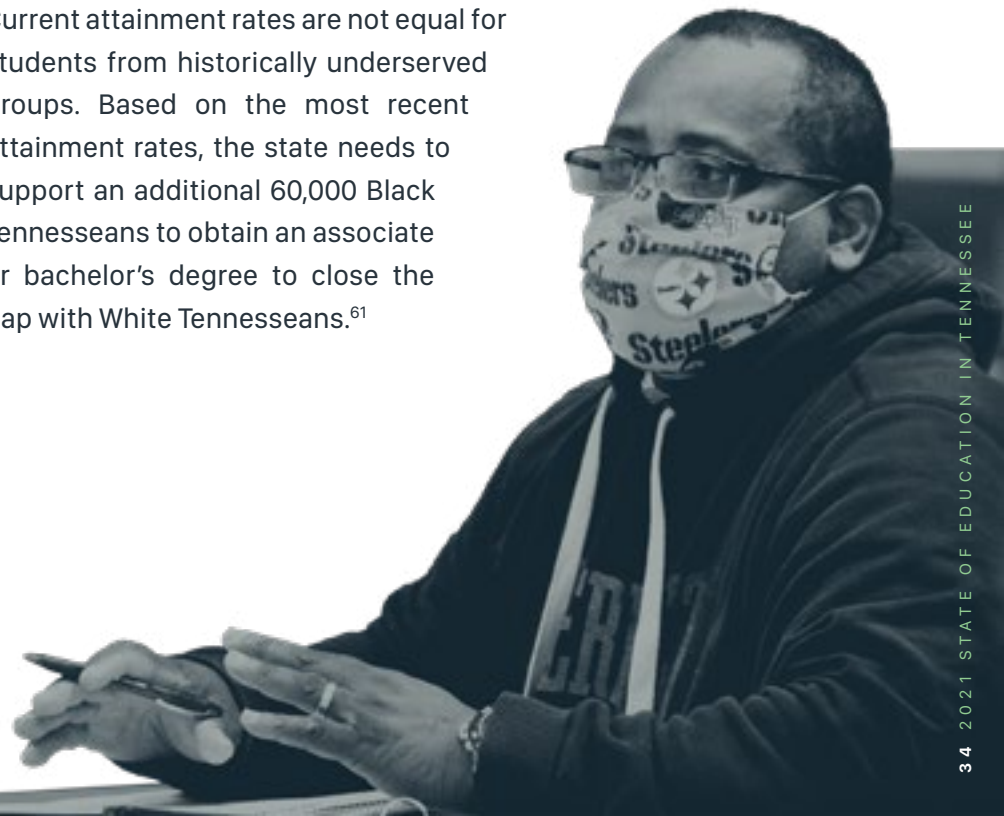
POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Tennessee became a national policy leader in postsecondary access with Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect, programs that demonstrated the state's belief that a postsecondary education is essential in the 21st century. The state benefits from a policy framework, including the Outcomes Based Funding Formula, that incentivizes supporting students to complete credentials rather than simply enrolling them. Even before the pandemic, however, credential completion data made clear that not all students benefited from the state's investments in postsecondary education. In addition to the steep drop in Black male student enrollment during the pandemic, Latino student enrollment fell 18 percent, new student enrollment in Tennessee Promise fell 6 percent, and Tennessee Reconnect enrollment fell 15 percent. Higher education in Tennessee must urgently address long-standing opportunity gaps as part of pandemic recovery.

Data from the two previous recessions show that adult Tennesseans without any postsecondary education were more likely to be unemployed during those recessions. Worse, the unemployment gaps between degree earners and those without degrees widened during those recessions as routine and low-skill jobs disappeared.⁵⁹ From an economic competitiveness perspective, Tennessee has lower rates of postsecondary attainment than most states in the region.

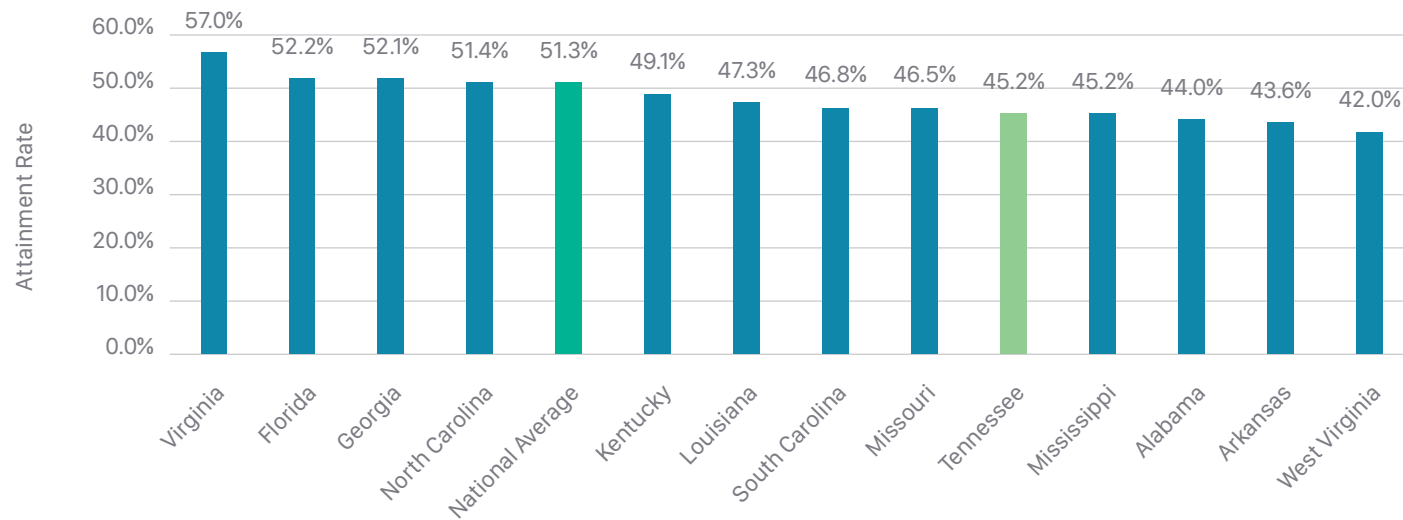
A postsecondary education – whether in the form of a technical certificate, associate degree, or bachelor's degree – is increasingly necessary in a rapidly changing economy. While the state's attainment rate growth has been in the top quarter of states for the last several years, below half (45 percent) of Tennesseans have a postsecondary credential. Currently, only 22 percent of jobs in Tennessee that pay over \$35,000 are available to those with only a high school degree, and research shows that our current attainment level is not sufficient to meet workforce needs.⁶⁰

Current attainment rates are not equal for students from historically underserved groups. Based on the most recent attainment rates, the state needs to support an additional 60,000 Black Tennesseans to obtain an associate or bachelor's degree to close the gap with White Tennesseans.⁶¹



Tennessee Trails Southeastern States In Credential Completion

Tennessee is below the national average and trails all but four states in the Southeast with percentage of adults with a postsecondary degree or credential.



Postsecondary attainment of people ages 25-64, 2018

Source: Lumina Foundation, 2020

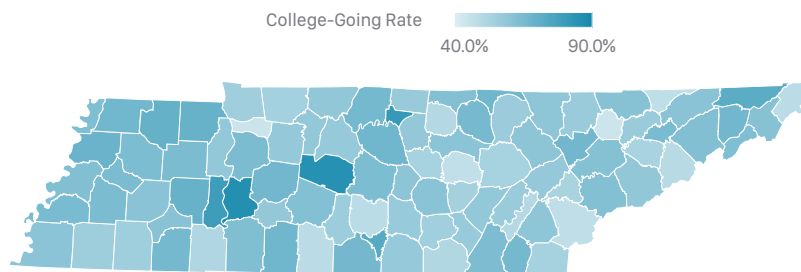


Amid significant progress, a concerning reality remains: Only half of students attending a postsecondary institution in Tennessee will complete a credential within six years.⁶² If current completion rates persist, a significant proportion of Tennesseans will not experience the many research-proven benefits of postsecondary education, including improved health outcomes, community vitality, and prevention of and recovery from interactions with the criminal justice system.⁶³

Despite gradual improvements in completion rates for first-time, full-time students at community colleges over the last decade, only 25 percent complete a credential within three years. While the state's four-year universities have higher completion rates, emerging research suggests that admissions processes at the most selective state institutions increase inequities for Black and Latino students.⁶⁴ A postsecondary education remains essential to economic opportunity, but the state's current success rates are permanently impeding students' economic and social mobility.

Most Counties See Almost Half Of Students Go To College

While the statewide college-going rate for new high school graduates is 61.8 percent, the rate by county varies from a little over 40 percent to nearly 90 percent.



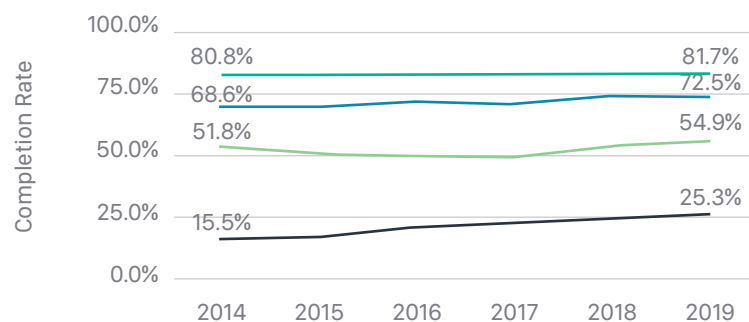
College-going rate by county, 2018-19

Source: THEC, 2020



Completion Rates Leave Many Students With Some College But No Credential

The Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs) have the highest completion rates in the state with four-fifths of students earning a certificate or diploma. At the state's community colleges, only a quarter complete their degrees in three years.

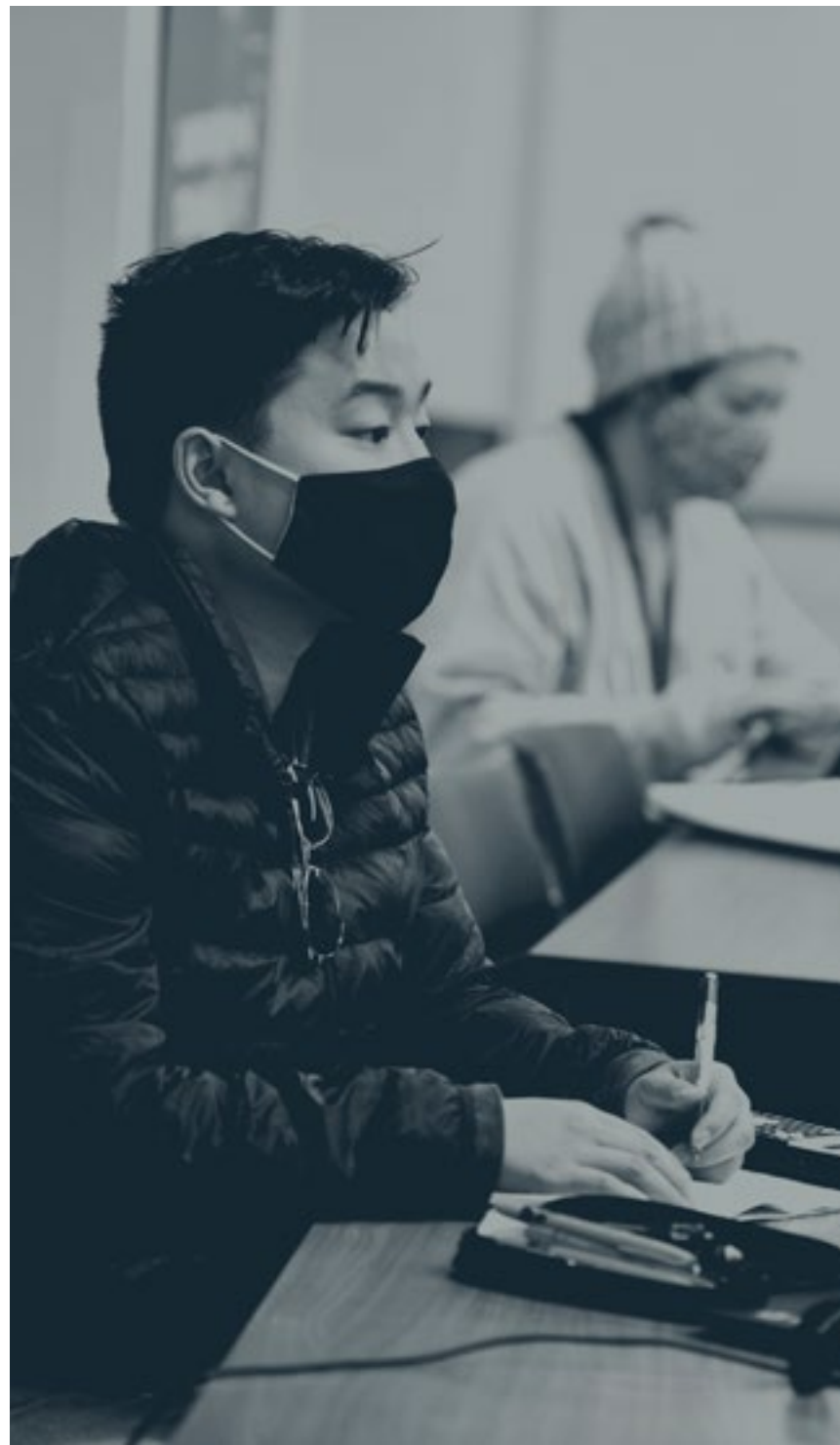


- TCATs (Certificate/Diploma Program Rate) **
- UT System (6-Year Rate)
- Locally Governed Institutions (6-Year Rate)
- Community Colleges (3-Year Rate)

Completion rates by institution type, 2014-2019

Source: THEC and TBR, 2020

**TCAT programs shorter than 900 clock hours issue certificates, while those longer than 900 hours issue a diploma

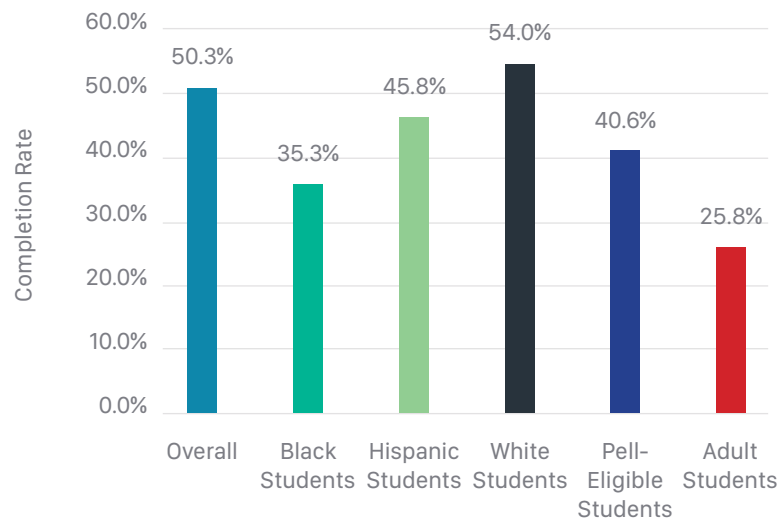


Postsecondary Completion Gaps Require Attention

Completion rates are lower for Tennessee students from historically disadvantaged groups — Black, Hispanic, or economically disadvantaged students.

Six-year completion rate across all institutions by student group, 2019

Source: THEC, 2020



At the beginning of the pandemic, public postsecondary institutions rapidly switched to virtual instruction for more than 200,000 students. Institutions balanced how to continue hands-on instruction vital to technical colleges, while developing plans for hybrid instruction.⁶⁵ Emerging data from the Tennessee Board of Regents suggest a growing familiarity among community and technical college faculty with virtual instruction as a result of the pandemic.⁶⁶ There is urgent need during the rest of the pandemic and beyond for the state to close the digital divide so more students benefit from the flexibility the accelerated adoption of virtual instruction provides.

A postsecondary enrollment challenge is looming with an inequitable decline in the high school graduation rate in 2020. After a decade of improvement and despite policy flexibility from the State Board of Education, the overall high school graduation rate fell 0.1 percentage points to 89.7 percent in 2020. For Black students the rate dropped 0.5 percentage points and for Hispanic students 1.7 percentage points.⁶⁷ This uneven high school graduation rate drop coupled with lower college enrollment will require districts and institutions alike to monitor and design interventions to ensure that the Classes of 2020 and 2021 maintain momentum to and through postsecondary education.

Better Together Initiative Aims To Align K-12, Postsecondary Sectors In Nashville

Launched in 2020, Better Together is a joint K-12-postsecondary partnership between Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) and Nashville State Community College (NSCC) to support MNPS students to and through college. The partnership encourages sharing knowledge, data, and experiences across sectors to address challenges and improve student outcomes for college readiness, access, persistence, and completion.

The partnership centers on initiatives that support students to successfully move from high school to college, such as dual enrollment, one-on-one near-peer tutoring, and a student success course in the summer transition from high school to college. In

Better Together's first year, MNPS and NSCC changed strict GPA eligibility requirements for dual enrollment to expand access to college-level coursework in high school for 85 students in fall 2020 – a key strategy for improving postsecondary enrollment for students from historically underserved groups.

Better Together also highlights the opportunities that come with better data coordination across K-12 and postsecondary. Better Together worked with tnAchieves – the statewide organization that facilitates the Tennessee Promise college access initiative – to construct a shared data dashboard that monitors students' progress toward key milestones on their journeys to

and through NSCC. MNPS and NSCC continue learning from this process to develop and codify data-sharing agreements that facilitate sustained collaboration. This work will ensure that both partners can focus on designing and improving interventions that support students from a shared understanding of those students' needs.

Though this type of cross-system collaboration has great potential to impact student success, it is still relatively unique in Tennessee and across the nation. Better Together models an innovative K-12 and postsecondary partnership that helps ensure students experience a more seamless transition.

Tennessee has made important strides in acknowledging higher education as a key contributor to the state's economic vitality. However, in order to ensure that all Tennessee students experience postsecondary success, Tennessee needs to drive a bold and aggressive reform strategy. With the pandemic disrupting an already challenged system that did not work for many students, Tennesseans must act urgently to create a system that works for all students.

2021 Priority: **Create Equitable Opportunities For College And Career Success**

Student completion rates before the pandemic are clear proof that higher education was not built to serve all students. A Tennessee high school student who is Black or low-income has a 90 percent chance of not receiving a postsecondary credential after high school. Ongoing and forthcoming changes in the economy will accelerate the success of those with

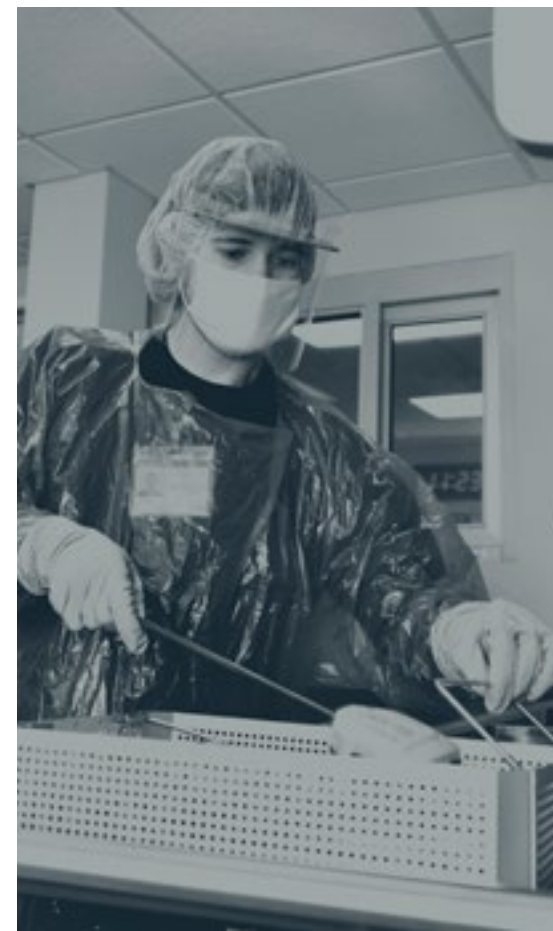
credentials and leave behind those without credentials. Accepting the status quo means consigning multiple generations of Tennesseans to permanent social and economic inequality. State leaders, school districts, higher education institutions, and communities must work urgently to create the equitable opportunities for students that the state aspires to.

Empower local communities and share statewide data to drive interventions that improve persistence and completion.

Tennessee's status as a national leader in student-focused education policy draws in part on how data and evidence are used to support students. While Tennessee has important state policies to improve postsecondary access, the next step is to give communities and institutions easy access to the data that will lead to targeted solutions for retention and completion challenges they face locally.

The state already collects much of the data to inform this kind of decision-making, but stakeholders must sift through multiple government sources to construct even a partial picture of student outcomes. Only the state is in a position to build the technological

infrastructure that can deliver to local communities accessible, comparable, and disaggregated data about their students' current and projected pathways to college and career. When connected, these data points can help high school counselors, postsecondary advisers, faculty, workforce partners, and local policymakers develop a common understanding of what students need and then design nimble local solutions for addressing those needs.



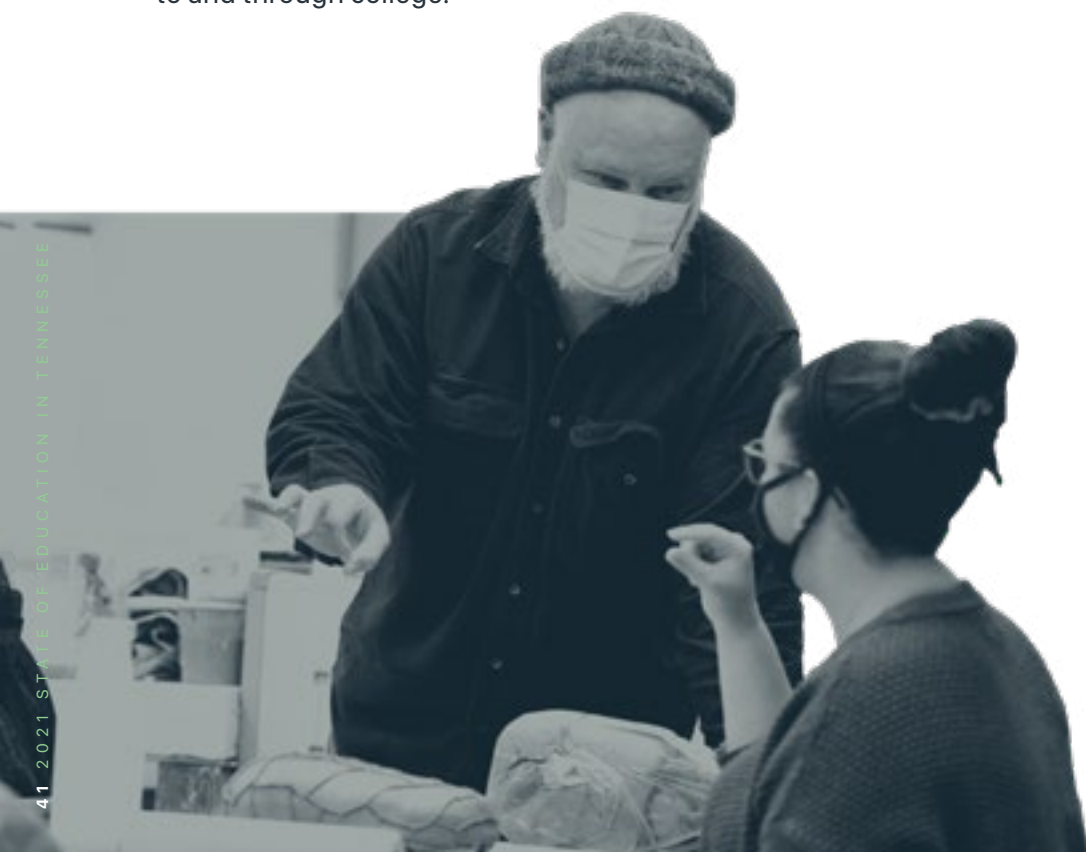
Innovative college access and completion initiatives, such as the Ayers Foundation Scholars Program, Knox Promise, Nashville GRAD, Better Together, and others, would benefit from better access to disaggregated data that connects K-12, postsecondary, and workforce so that interventions are strategic and not duplicative. Emerging research suggests that postsecondary access initiatives at the community-level or more direct services have stronger returns than generic top-down, one-size-fits-all interventions from the state or system level.⁶⁸

No state in our nation has yet to systematically shatter the historic correlations between socioeconomic status, postsecondary success, and positive employment outcomes. Tennessee can and should set a new foundation for a more equitable system that supports students to and through college.

Invest in students' seamless transition to postsecondary with summer bridge programs, nontuition support, and dedicated advisers.

For Tennessee to reach postsecondary attainment rates that support the state's economic development needs, it must invest in the evidence-based supports that have been proven to close equity gaps in higher education. Tennessee's top national rankings in FAFSA completion rates, adoption of Tennessee Promise, and innovations in corequisite remediation were important policy advances in past years to build student momentum toward enrollment and persistence.

However, that work is not enough if all students are to earn a postsecondary credential. Advising and nontuition supports have been shown to support postsecondary persistence, influencing the creation of programs like Knox Promise in 2019.⁶⁹ The program supported 91 percent of the 1,587 students it served to persist during the 2019-20 school year by providing access to completion coaches and completion grants that addressed transportation, book, and food costs.⁷⁰ Other nontuition support programs in Texas, North Carolina, and Michigan are designed to remove emergency costs and student debt as barriers to completion in both community college and four-year institutions.⁷¹ Emerging research on nontuition grants suggests that every additional \$1,000 of nontuition support per student can improve completion rates for the lowest-income students by 4 to 6 percentage points.⁷²



The state should work to ensure that completion grants – particularly to address nontuition costs of going to college – are systematically available to all students who need support. State policymakers should prioritize resources for such programs and incentivize the creation of large-scale public-private partnerships that bring these supports to every student with a demonstrated need.

While more of these programs get built, the state should ensure the stability and continuation of existing programs like the Tennessee Promise Summer Bridge, which addresses summer melt between high school graduation and postsecondary matriculation for historically underserved students.⁷³ Current data suggest that across Tennessee, the transition from high school to college is the biggest drop-off point for students. While Tennessee Promise students at Southwest Community College are twice as likely to persist and complete their education compared to their non-Promise peers, the tnAchieves Summer Institute program guaranteed that almost all 111 Memphis students – 72 percent of whom were from economically disadvantaged families and 100 percent of

whom were students of color – successfully completed the first year of college.

Adopt K-12 and postsecondary policies and practices that create a smoother path to college completion.

Postsecondary success is the responsibility of both K-12 districts and postsecondary institutions. Academic preparation, college and career advising, completion supports, and workforce alignment are shared concerns across both sectors. However, the student experience navigating districts' and institutions' siloed solutions to these issues can be disjointed and jarring – with the burden most heavily felt by students of color, with limited college experience, or from low-income backgrounds.⁷⁴

In addition to the advising and completion support initiatives outlined previously,

Tennessee should recommit to existing work that advances postsecondary opportunity. Tennessee's most recent Ready Graduate data suggest that inequities in access to early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs) for students of color and other historically underserved groups continue. Districts should adopt policies that automatically enroll students in the next most rigorous course and set goals to rapidly close inequitable gaps in access. The state should commit to public reporting of Ready Graduate information disaggregated by pathways (ACT of 21, four EPSOs, two EPSOs plus industry certification, and two EPSOs plus ASVAAB score of 31). Furthermore, the state should deepen its understanding of the quality of industry credentials offered in high schools, particularly by evaluating their alignment to the workforce outcomes of students who earned them.



There should be a parallel effort to strengthen implementation of existing college completion policies. Tennessee Transfer Pathways were created to support students seeking a four-year degree to start at a community college, earn relevant credits, and easily transfer and finish at a four-year institution. Of the one-third of students enrolled in a Tennessee Transfer Pathway, 40 percent never transfer out of their two-year institution and most do not successfully earn a postsecondary credential within six years of enrolling. Tennessee must create the inter-institutional partnerships and alignment – from revising credit policies to beefing up advising – that will deliver on the intent of Transfer Pathway.

The Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) should also establish a common application system for community and technical colleges that reduces the burden on students. The more complicated the application and financial aid experience is for students, the less likely they are to succeed.⁷⁵ A common process would empower TBR to spot application trends, respond to those trends, and make it easier for school districts to support students in applying for postsecondary opportunities.

Initiatives like Better Together, where a school district and its local community college jointly build a smoother pathway through higher education, should become the norm. While educators, faculty, and other adults think of the pipeline in distinct silos, students should not experience it as such. A disjointed system invites disconnection. Data sharing expertise and capacity will be central to the work, and the state should work to identify cross-sector funding sources to incentivize more of these collaborative efforts. Communities that prioritize these types of intrasector and interinstitutional partnerships will become tomorrow's leaders in postsecondary completion.

The sooner this work is widespread and rigorously implemented, the sooner students can benefit from a system that was designed for them and not in spite of them.





EARLY LITERACY

It is past time to change the literacy policies and practices that help only one in three Tennessee third-graders become proficient in reading and writing. Based on data from the Nation's Report Card, an estimated half million Tennessee students completed third grade in the last decade without a solid foundation in reading.⁷⁶ Disruptions to schooling as a result of COVID-19 have likely added more cracks to many students' already shaky literacy foundations. While Tennessee began 2020 with significant momentum to address this literacy crisis, the state began the 2020-21 school year without the needed investments and policies. At the end of 2021, Tennessee must have made significant advances to ensure many more students develop the reading and writing skills critical for lifelong success.

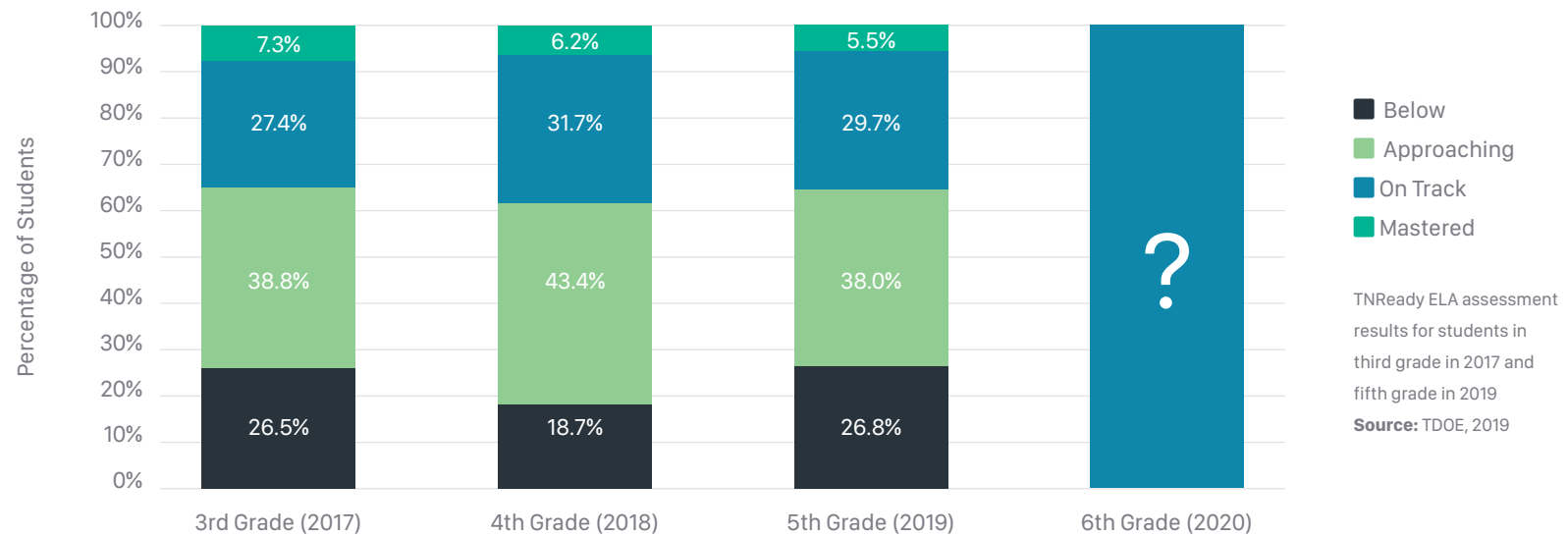
Early literacy is critical for student success in college and career. A student who does not meet reading expectations by third grade is four times less likely to graduate high school

by age 19 than a child who reads proficiently by that time.⁷⁷ Proficiency levels have shown little change as students advance beyond third grade and track closely with what Tennessee students experience when they go on to postsecondary education, with less than one-third (28 percent) of students successfully completing a postsecondary degree or credential within six years. With 2020 state assessments canceled due to COVID-19, we are unable to see what progress, if any, the state made in early literacy since 2018-19.



Literacy Performance Changes Little After Third Grade

Tennessee third-graders who are not on track in English language arts do not catch up in the following years.



Early literacy outcomes as measured by the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) have remained stubbornly flat for nearly a decade across the nation. While Tennessee's literacy improvement efforts have been important, students clearly need more. Based on several years of research, learning from the Leading Innovation for Tennessee (LIFT) Network, and engagement with district leaders and educators, SCORE has sought to understand Tennessee's most compelling opportunities to improve early literacy.⁷⁸ Several key findings emerged:

- Tennessee has not embraced a clear, comprehensive, and cohesive vision for strong literacy instruction grounded in the science of how reading develops and how it should be taught
- Current teachers and leaders have unfinished learning about literacy instruction
- New teachers enter the field underprepared to teach reading

The 2020 SCORE report *Urgency For Literacy* outlined a comprehensive set of policy and practice solutions: improving teacher preparation practices, supporting current teachers and leaders to close gaps in their knowledge, and setting a statewide vision for strong literacy instruction. These solutions were intended to be adopted in 2020 to align policies and support educators to make the most of the state's once-in-seven-years English language arts textbook adoption to change practice. This blueprint must be adopted in 2021.

During the 2020 legislative session, both Governor Bill Lee and legislative leaders proposed far-reaching literacy legislation reflecting the significant statewide momentum and support for a

reset of Tennessee's literacy vision. The proposal would have codified a policy framework for K-12 schools and educator preparation programs and provided significant investments in professional learning for current and future teachers, high-quality instructional materials, and assessments. The legislation reflected Tennessee's research-supported approach of driving historic student progress by supporting educators with resources, professional learning, and feedback.⁷⁹ The legislation was grounded in the learning of other states, such as Mississippi, that have stayed committed to comprehensive science-based reforms for numerous years and have seen substantial improvement in early literacy outcomes.⁸⁰

Despite widespread agreement about what needed to be done for students, bureaucratic differences were not resolved and the General Assembly adjourned without passing literacy legislation.



High-Quality Instructional Materials Key To Resilient Instruction Systems During COVID- 19

When the Leading Innovation for Tennessee (LIFT) Education network of districts began working together in 2016 to improve early literacy outcomes, COVID-19 did not exist in Tennessee. However, as a result of more than five years of steady work to ensure strong implementation of high-quality instructional materials, the LIFT districts rapidly responded to the school shutdowns and became exemplars for how to effectively teach early literacy during pandemic disruptions. High-quality instructional materials are closely aligned to Tennessee's college- and career-ready standards and have scored highly through independent rigorous review processes that include educators, such as those done by EdReports.org.

By centering their vision for strong literacy instruction on the use of high-quality instructional materials, LIFT districts freed up teachers to focus on the "how" of teaching while knowing that the "what" of teaching was already taken care of. Each lesson in their high-quality curriculum is part of a coherent sequence, aligned to standards, and reflective of research on how students learn to read. Districts have supported teachers to deeply understand the key components of the Simple View of Reading — a research-based approach to learning to read that acknowledges literacy as a complex interaction between

systematic, explicit foundational skills and building knowledge that helps support student comprehension.

All this work created a common infrastructure and language to facilitate strong instructional delivery during the spring 2020 school closures. Instead of scrambling to find materials or having multiple teachers recreate entire learning sequences, educators in the LIFT network were able to use their strong instructional materials and instead focus on translating instruction to the virtual setting, authentically engaging families, and supporting students' social-emotional needs.

The districts have seen improvements in instructional rigor (58 percent of observed lessons reflected the demands of Tennessee's ELA standards, compared to 6 percent in 2016) and student learning (62 percent of students met the demands of grade-level standards on assignments, compared to 5 percent in 2016). When looking at 2019 TNReady data, the percentage of students scoring on track or mastered in third-grade literacy in LIFT districts was 25 times more than students across the state as a whole.

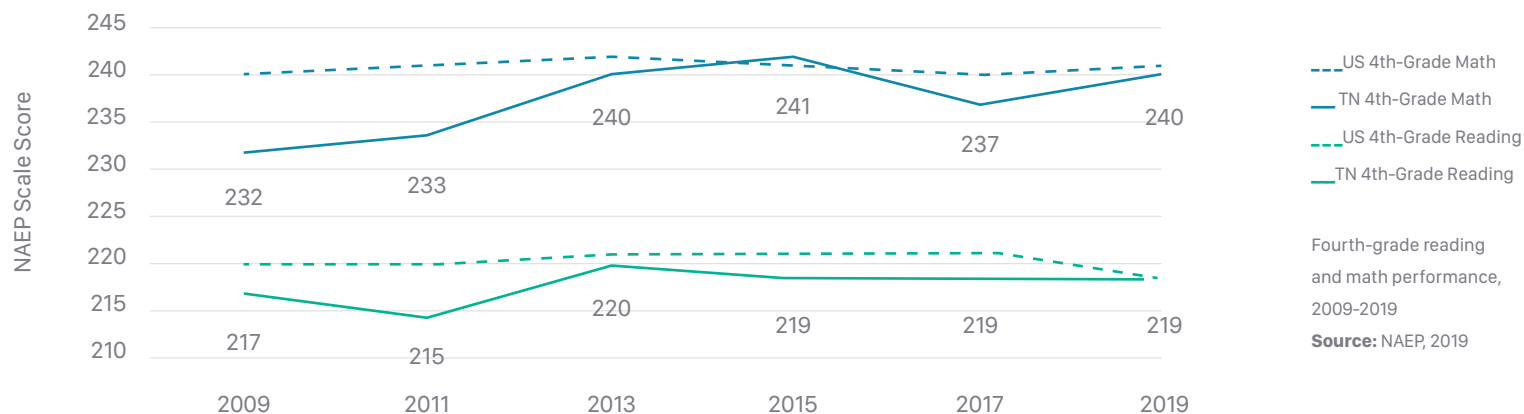
Unfortunately, due to the cancellation of state assessments

in 2020, LIFT districts were unable to see if that rapid growth continued. This is particularly disappointing as 2020 would have been the first opportunity for students who benefited from the LIFT work the longest – those who were kindergarteners in 2017 – to take the third-grade TNReady English language arts

assessment. Going forward, the lessons of the LIFT network provide a pathway for school districts to make the most of their materials adoption and purchasing decisions for ELA in 2020 and for learning broadly as districts continue addressing instructional quality during the pandemic.

Tennessee's Fourth-Grade Reading Scores Flatline

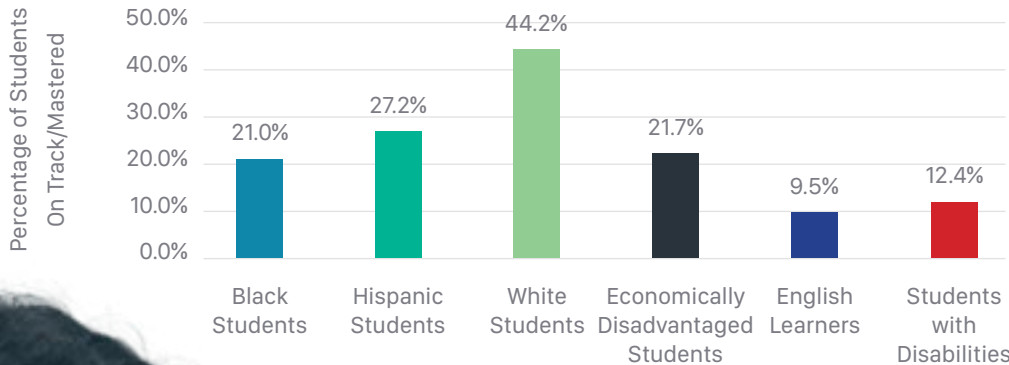
While Tennessee math results have shown significant growth since 2009 on the Nation's Report Card, reading performance has not improved since 2013.



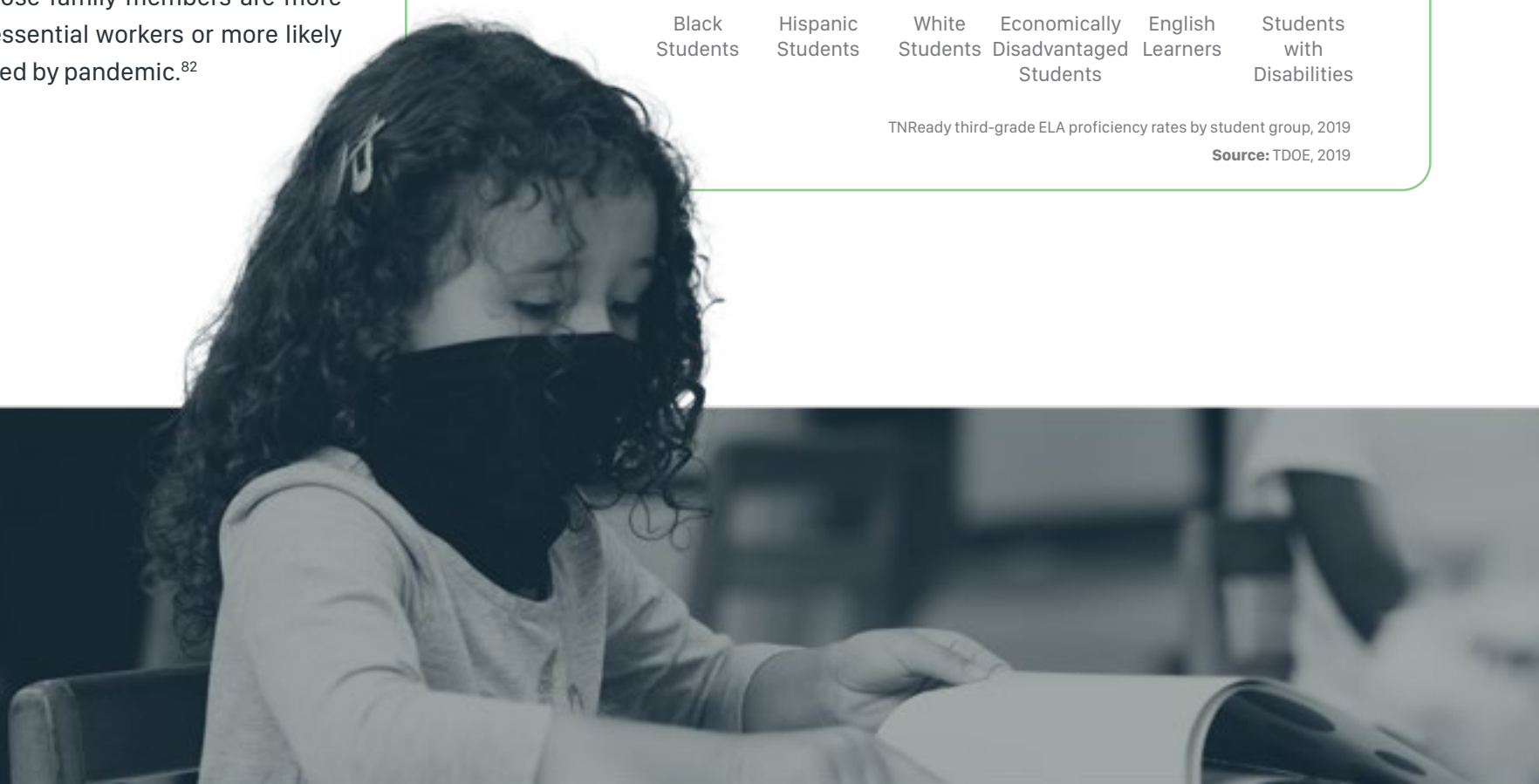
COVID-19 disruptions in 2020 interrupted every elementary school student's ability to participate in the in-person, targeted instruction that is key to building early literacy foundational skills. Experts in health and education have signaled throughout the pandemic how important it is to prioritize early elementary grades during school reopening because of the essential skills taught early in a student's education.⁸¹ With school disruptions increasing the need for at-home learning support for students, this work takes on urgency for students whose family members are more likely to be essential workers or more likely to be impacted by pandemic.⁸²

Wide Gaps Apparent In Third-Grade English Language Arts

No student group has a majority of third-graders meeting Tennessee's ELA expectations, with the worst outcomes for students in historically underserved groups.



TNReady third-grade ELA proficiency rates by student group, 2019
Source: TDOE, 2019



Tennessee has, and can, make significant progress for students. Continued, sustained student success requires the state to implement the ambitious and comprehensive vision for high-quality literacy instruction cast by SCORE and state partners – and then support both preservice and current teachers to do that work.

With Tennessee students more likely to be unsuccessful in literacy by third grade than not, the state cannot afford to wait another year to take action to improve early literacy.

2021 Priority: **Treat Early Literacy Like The Crisis It Is**

We must ensure that the pandemic does not seal shut the doors to opportunity for another cohort of elementary school students. Success in learning to read and write early on in a student's education journey remains essential, and our efforts must rise to the occasion.

Help all districts and classrooms adopt high-quality instructional materials and support educators during implementation.

Research shows that adopting better materials is a cost-effective way to improve instruction and give students equitable access to rigorous learning.⁸³ Now that districts have adopted materials, success rests on their ability to provide robust support for implementation. Districts must choose, and the state must provide resources, to invest in intensive professional learning for teachers and leaders so that educators are empowered to provide personalized, rigorous instruction for students. This can include grants to districts to develop professional learning efforts,

networking districts together by geography or materials, and leveraging the expertise of CORE offices.

The state also should study and publicly report on the 2020 district textbook adoption choices to determine if all students have access to high-quality materials and instruction. This includes reviewing which materials districts adopted, the quality of those materials, and whether the district purchased the materials. These insights will show whether literacy teachers have access to high-quality instructional materials – a precursor to understanding whether and where students have access to cohesive, standards-aligned instruction.



Ensure Tennessee's early literacy policies and practices prioritize both explicit, systematic foundational skills instruction and knowledge building.

Meaningful improvement in Tennessee's early literacy rate depends on the hard work of educators to adopt instructional practices aligned with the two key tenets of the Simple View of Reading – that students must learn foundational skills based on the science of reading while simultaneously building knowledge through rich, complex texts.

State incentives and support for early literacy should ensure that these evidence-based practices are prioritized. Tennessee should follow the lead of states like Arkansas by precluding instructional materials based on discredited ideas about early literacy, including whole language and cueing. Every state-led or state-sponsored initiative, such as support networks, grants, professional learning, and assessments, must align to this same research-backed reading framework.

The state should support districts that want to assess reading progress in K-2 by vetting and providing resources to purchase optional high-quality early literacy formative assessments. This data should be publicly reported and disaggregated to provide transparency and valuable feedback that support continued improvements to practice and give systematic insights into Tennessee's early literacy progress before grade 3, when the current state summative assessment system begins.

Engage with and support EPPs to prepare teacher candidates in the Science of Reading.

In a review of 180 educator preparation programs (EPPs) across the country, the nonprofit TPI-US found that 53 percent of the inspected programs did not adequately prepare elementary teachers with the knowledge and skills to effectively teach using the Science of Reading.⁸⁴ State policymakers should direct the Comptroller's Office to conduct a landscape analysis of educator preparation programs to assess how the Science of Reading is incorporated into teacher preparation and to what extent the state reflects national patterns of underpreparing teachers. This formative assessment for continuous improvement should be coupled with state-provided resources to help EPPs restructure programs and practices to align with the Science of Reading. State policymakers should also explore investments that can incentivize EPPs to become exemplar preparation programs for strong literacy instruction.

The State Board of Education (SBE) updated the literacy standards for EPPs in 2019. To ensure that these standards are adopted, programs need explicit guidance and support through clear evidence of what standards look like in practice to inform EPPs' continuous improvement processes. Additionally, teachers should be expected to demonstrate their knowledge of the Science of Reading in their licensure exams. Tennessee's current teacher licensure exams for literacy include outdated practices, such as cueing, that are not aligned to the latest cognitive science research. As such, the SBE should adopt a licensure assessment that is aligned to the Science of Reading for elementary grades licensure and endorsement.

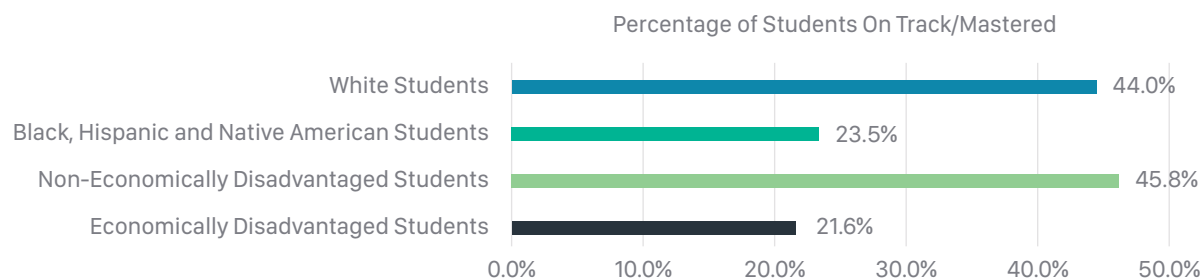
CHARTER SCHOOLS

High-quality public charter schools serve an important role in advancing innovation and expanding student learning opportunities. SCORE seeks out models that are proving what is possible for students, and particularly for students of color and economically disadvantaged students. National data show that from 2005-2017, public charter schools had faster achievement growth for Black students and students from economically disadvantaged families compared to traditional public schools.⁸⁵

Since the first Tennessee charter school opened in 2003, the state has advanced policies that increase access to high-quality schools for students, educators, and communities. Because the overwhelming majority of charter school students are Black or Latino and come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the state can advance a more equitable education system by creating the environment that supports the state's public charter schools to serve students – and expanding the number of high-quality charter schools.

Tennessee Achievement Gaps Remain

While Tennessee has helped almost half of White and higher-income students to meet or exceed grade-level expectations for math and English language arts, less than a quarter of students in the Black-Hispanic-Native American and low-income groups have been supported to proficiency.



TNReady grades 3-8 math and ELA proficiency rates by student group, 2019
Source: TDOE, 2019

The state's public charter schools serve nearly 40,000 students in more than 115 schools and are an important part of the state's framework to improve student outcomes broadly and equitably. Charter schools are subject to the same state accountability model as all other public schools in Tennessee. While charter schools receive greater flexibility to design teaching and learning models, they are also subject to additional accountability and can be shut down should their performance not meet expectations over multiple years.

Tennessee Charter Schools Serve Higher Proportions Of Disadvantaged Students

- Public charter schools serve **4% of Tennessee's students** across 115 schools in Hamilton, Davidson, Knox, and Shelby counties.
- **91%** of public charter students are **Black, Hispanic, or Native American**, while 33% of traditional public school students are in this subgroup.
- **61.4%** of public charter students are **economically disadvantaged** compared to 34% of students in traditional public schools

Source: TDOE, 2019



Research from across the country shows the potential of public charter schools to contribute positively to both student outcomes and to the broader education system. The charter school sector in Boston, as an example, has helped eliminate achievement gaps between Black and White students in middle school and high school, demonstrated that high-performing public charter schools can be replicated, and contributed positively to the strength of the teacher labor market for both charter and traditional public school sectors.⁸⁶

When looking at charter school practices, research has found that high-dosage tutoring – an important practice for Tennessee to consider as it recovers from the pandemic – as well as frequent teacher feedback explained much of the observed positive impacts on student learning in some of the highest-performing charter schools in the country.⁸⁷ Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that charter schools pursued impactful innovations – such as intensive teacher coaching, civic engagement, and social and emotional skills development – and initiated a rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸⁸

Student assessment data show promising signs that public charter schools in some Tennessee communities are outperforming the traditional public schools within the same community. These results are despite evidence that local charter authorization processes are not adequately meeting student need – and parent demand. Some district authorizers in Tennessee have adopted broad moratorium policies that impede the replication of successful charter schools, and local boards have voted against expanding high-quality charter schools with a track record of success, evidence of enrollment demand, and when district staff recommended expansion.⁸⁹



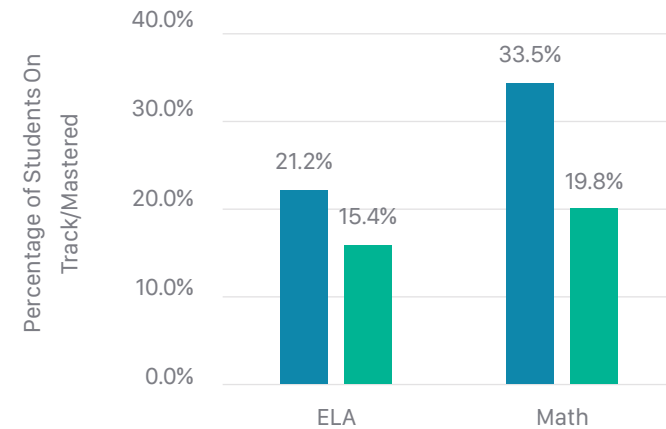
MNPS Charter Student Achievement Outperforms Counterparts

In Nashville, low-income public charter school students were about 5 points higher in ELA proficiency and about 15 points higher in math than students in the city's traditional public schools.

TNReady grades 3–8 ELA and math proficiency rates for economically disadvantaged students by school type, Metro Nashville Public Schools in 2019

Source: TDOE, 2019

■ MNPS Public Charter Schools
■ MNPS District-Run Schools



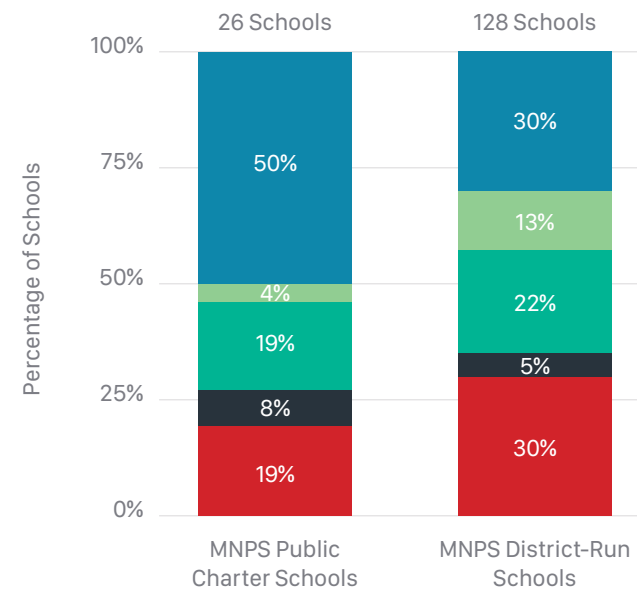
MNPS Charter Student Growth Outperforms Counterparts

Almost half of public charter students in Nashville achieved the top level of growth, compared to less than a third in the city's traditional public schools.

■ Level 5 (Most Effective)
■ Level 4 (Above Average)
■ Level 3 (Average Effectiveness)
■ Level 2 (Approaching Average)
■ Level 1 (Least Effective)

Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System results by school type, Metro Nashville Public Schools in 2019

Source: TDOE, 2019



In recent years, the state has improved the charter authorization process by requiring district authorizers to adopt high-quality authorizing practices, establishing an authorizer fee to help local school districts pay for the costs related to effective charter authorizing, and providing grant funding for charter facilities.⁹⁰ Tennessee charter schools have faced long-standing challenges that force them to use operational resources on capital expenditures.⁹¹ While the state announced the use of \$5 million of federal discretionary CARES Act funding to assist with charter school facilities cost in 2020, charter schools will continue to operate without a stable, long-term solution that allows the schools to provide their students a safe learning environment. The establishment of the Tennessee Charter School Commission in 2020 was another large step toward ensuring a robust and responsive authorization process in the state.

How Tennessee Funds Charter School Facilities

Access to adequate facilities funding is a common problem for public charter schools. Traditional public schools benefit from local tax revenues as well as state aid allowances that can go toward facilities construction and maintenance. Public charter schools, however, do not have access to annual, dedicated facilities funding. When public charter schools are forced to secure adequate funding for facilities, they redirect, on average, 10 percent of per-pupil allocations to pay for property purchases, building leases, capital improvements to existent buildings, and other facilities costs.⁹² This forces public charters schools to spend funds meant for instruction and student supports on facilities.

Tennessee is among 15 states as of 2019 that have enacted and funded capital grant programs to cover the cost of a wide range of charter school capital needs, such as facility maintenance or to cover building leases. Because the state funding is not recurring, Tennessee's public charter schools still need a long-term solution to providing basic facilities without diverting instructional resources.

Currently, charter schools have access to per-pupil facilities allowances through the Basic Education Program. Before pandemic-related budget cuts, state policymakers proposed \$24 million in facilities funding for charter schools, with \$12 million of that amount as recurring funding.

Tennessee's experience with charter schools shows promising evidence that the schools are an important provider of educational opportunity for students and a value-add to the overall education system. As the state continues to address the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and seeks to emerge with a more innovative education system, high-quality public charter schools will play an important role in serving students most in need of high-quality education opportunity.

2021 Priority: **Support And Expand Proven School Models To Advance Opportunities For Students Of Color And Low-Income Students**

Tennessee has worked to ensure that high-quality public charter schools serve students well and are an effective part of the education landscape. Data from across the country and within Tennessee demonstrate that public charter schools can effectively expand education opportunity for Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students. The state should continue this progress by making the operating environment more conducive to serving students, advancing innovations in teaching and learning, and replicating and incubating high-quality schools.

Create a permanent solution for facilities funding for high-quality public charter schools.

Tennessee has made nationally recognized progress in dedicating state funds to cover facilities costs for public charter schools to ensure that more public education dollars are spent on students and instruction.⁹³ With charter schools spending an estimated 10 percent of per-pupil funding on facility costs, the average charter school needs approximately \$1,200 per student to cover costs – equal to approximately \$48 million each year. Although the state stepped up to provide \$5 million in critical facilities funding in 2020, these nonrecurring grants do not provide a permanent solution.

The state proposed \$12 million in recurring and \$12 million nonrecurring facilities funding in 2020, but this investment was cut back due to the economic uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Going forward, the state should commit state dollars to a recurring facilities fund that establishes a predictable framework to address long-term charter facilities needs. Allowing charter schools to focus on instruction and student supports will enable them to both deliver on student outcomes and provide capacity to innovatively address opportunity gaps for students.



Tennessee Public Charter School Commission Serves Essential Role In A Healthy Public Charter School Sector

Established in 2019 by the Tennessee General Assembly, the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission is the state-level, independent charter school authorizing board. The commission is composed of nine members appointed by the governor, with at least three members from each Grand Division of the state. It hired its founding executive director in 2020 and will hear its first charter appeals in 2021.

The creation of the commission ensures one independent, state-level entity is focused on authorizing high-quality public charter schools. Having an independent authorizing board allows the State Board to serve as an evaluator of all authorizers and ensure that student needs are the focus of

charter school authorization decisions. Quality authorizing creates an environment for building and growing more high-quality public charter schools. These schools can go on to provide educational opportunities for students and build community capacity for developing innovative practices that serve all students.

In other states, charter schools can essentially “shop” for an initial authorizer. In Tennessee, all charter schools must first apply to their local school district to be authorized. If denied, the charter school can apply to the Charter Commission on appeal.



Establish stronger charter authorizer accountability.

Ensuring a high-quality charter authorization process has been a key focus for Tennessee in recent years. With the Charter School Commission fully operational in 2021, the state has an opportunity to further enhance charter school quality and innovation in Tennessee.

The state should ensure the successful launch of the Charter School Commission to maintain high-quality authorization processes. In its first year of existence, the commission has adopted policies based on national best practices in charter school authorization that cover a range of academic, financial, and organizational issues as well as policies to address deficiencies with charter schools that the commission oversees. While this is an important first step to ensure that the commission earns a reputation for making data-driven and student-focused decisions, state policymakers should ensure that the commission has high-quality staff to execute on its duties, ensure high standards and expectations for the charter schools it will oversee, and show a transparent process in its authorization decisions.

Since the State Board of Education is no longer an authorizer itself, it should have a renewed focus on governing charter school authorizing practices across all charter authorizers. It also should identify and publicly report on the quality of charter school authorizers to maintain the vibrancy and effectiveness of the state's charter school environment. If district charter authorizing practices do not improve, Tennessee should consider the capacity of the Charter School Commission to become a direct charter authorizer to ensure high-quality charter schools can continue to serve Tennessee students.

State policymakers should find ways to improve insights and targeted support for charter schools. One model to follow is the Tennessee Department of Education's direct collection of Continuous Learning Plans from charter schools during the pandemic. Having direct insights into how charter schools responded to their students' needs during the pandemic will strengthen education opportunity for those students and enhance the state's ability to monitor the working relationship between districts and the charter schools they oversee.

Incentivize the expansion and replication of high-quality charter schools.

Charter schools with a demonstrated track record of strong educational outcomes for students should be supported to expand. Research demonstrates that effective charter school replication is possible.⁹⁴ In addition to ensuring authorizing practices allow for this, the state and philanthropic community should provide resources that incentivize incubation, expansion, and replication of high-quality public charter schools – particularly in communities where current public school options are not serving student needs.

As this work occurs, the state should monitor how high-performing charter schools fare in the current framework of charter school authorization to help remove any further barriers that prevent their growth. This can include developing a separate, more efficient replication application process for existing operators with a track record of results. In the future, data on how the charter sector is serving unmet student needs – such as waiting lists for oversubscribed schools and the populations they serve – should be systematically analyzed to help assess the effectiveness of the current charter authorization policies.

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