

2023

# A Closer Look at Education in Tennessee

The Tennessee Alliance for Equity in Education’s 2023 Policy Agenda is the result of over 80 organizations across Tennessee coming together to address the most pressing education issues impacting our communities. This resource provides the contextual factors that shape our policy priorities and increase the urgency of our work.



## PRIORITY 1

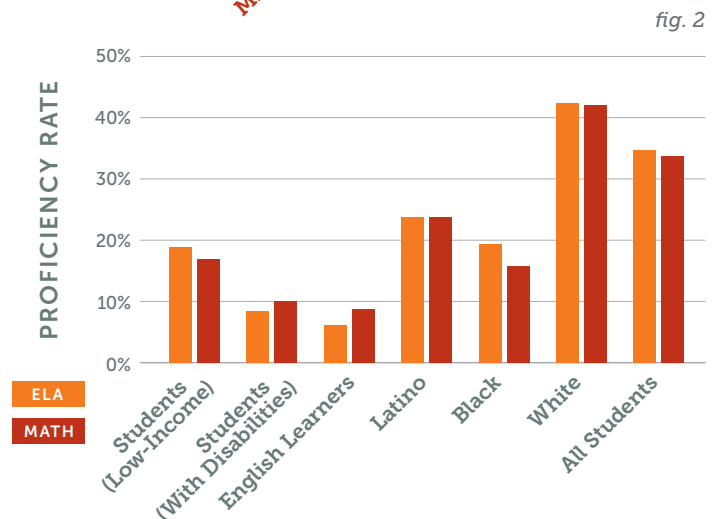
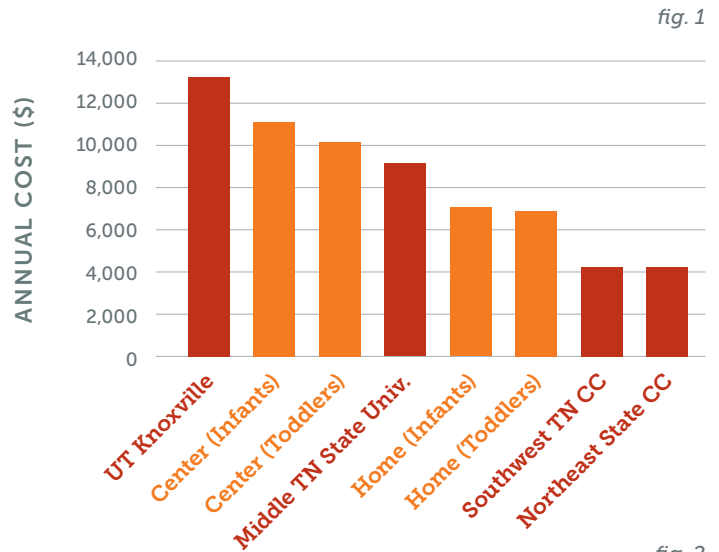
**Promote Accessible, Rigorous, and Affirming Learning Experiences**

**Equity Principle:** Every student in Tennessee attends a school that utilizes high-quality instruction and materials that are culturally and linguistically sustaining and prepare them for the opportunities and demands of an increasingly complex and diverse world.

## Opportunity Gaps and Limited Pre-K Reveal Unmet Demands of Tennessee Students

- The Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) program has positive impacts on cognitive skills that improve students’ school readiness.
- Approximately 300,000 Tennessee children aged 5 and under live in households where all available parents work.
- The VPK program enrolls roughly 18,000 children, which leaves approximately 4 out of 5 pre-K-aged children of working parents without state-funded/affordable early learning.
- Childcare costs more on average than in-state college tuition in Tennessee. Additionally, almost one-third of children age 5 and under live in households with annual incomes below \$40,000.

**TCAP Data:** Using 2021-2022 TCAP data, only 1 out of every 3 Tennessee students are proficient in ELA or math. The stakes are even higher for groups like students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, students of color, and English learners.





**PRIORITY 2**  
**Address Funding and Resource Equity**

**Equity Principle:** Every student in Tennessee attends a school that receives robust funding and resources based on student needs through a flexible and transparent funding system.

## Lawmakers must make an annual commitment to keep school funding a priority and not lag behind other states

The Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA) is our state’s new student-weighted funding formula. It starts with a base amount for all students and adds additional funding based on students’ characteristics. However, the formula is only equitable if it is robustly allocated.

Under the Basic Education Program (BEP), our outgoing state funding formula, Tennessee students on average receive \$10,581 compared to the national average of \$15,446. Given the new TISA funding formula’s implementation, the Tennessee General Assembly must ensure that their annual allocation ultimately exceeds the national average to ensure we are competitive with other states.

PROPOSED BASE  
**\$6,860**

fig. 3

- +15–150% Students with disabilities and English learners
- +5% Student from low-income background
- +25% Student in low-income school
- +5% Small school district
- +5% Sparse school district

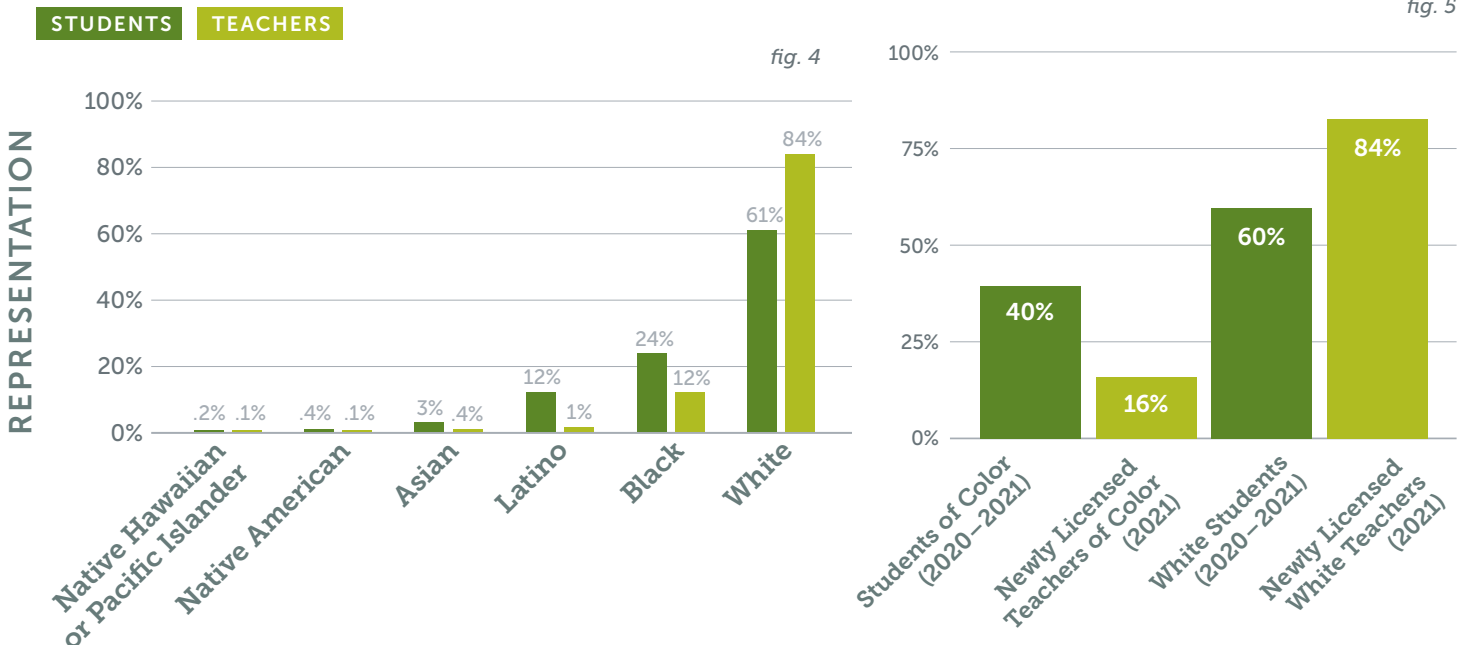


**PRIORITY 3**  
**Increase Educator Diversity & Quality**

**Equity Principle:** Every student in Tennessee has access to skilled, well-resourced teachers, leaders, and staff who reflect the state’s racial and linguistic diversity. Educators are supported and offered opportunities to engage in decision-making.

## Teacher Diversity Lags Far Behind Student Diversity

fig. 5





**PRIORITY 4**  
**Support Students' Social-Emotional and Academic Development**

**Equity Principle:** Every student in Tennessee has access to a physically safe, emotionally supportive, inclusive, diverse, and linguistically accessible school environment to advance their learning and support their mental health. Additionally, schools and districts have policies and practices that foster positive relationships between staff and students. Students are supported and offered opportunities to engage in decision-making.

## The Negative Impacts of Punitive Discipline and Police in Schools

**Corporal punishment:** 87 districts out of 146 districts in the state of Tennessee still allow corporal punishment, which has detrimental impacts on children and can trigger harmful psychological responses.

### School Discipline Data

- Black students in Tennessee experience out-of-school suspension at more than three times the rate of their white counterparts.
- Students from low-income backgrounds and students with disabilities in TN are also disproportionately suspended (in-school and out-of-school) at rates higher than the statewide average.

### SROs vs. Wraparound Supports/Counselors

#### SROs

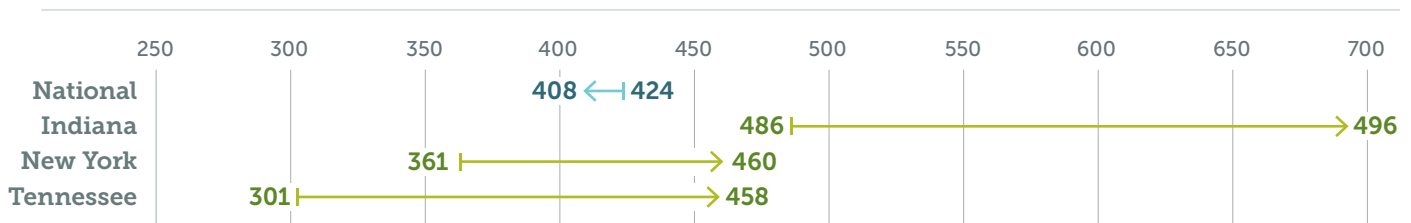
- The most recent data from the federal Civil Rights Data Collection shows that 86% of Tennessee high school students attend a school with police presence, 31 points above the 55% national average.
- Since then, the state invested \$30 million to hire 213 new full-time SROs, in addition to \$10 million recurring for subsequent years. Additionally, the governor recently proposed \$30 million in the upcoming budget for 200 additional SROs and a Homeland Security agent in each county.
- There is no clear evidence that school resource officer (SRO) presence in schools positively impacts school safety or reduces school shootings.
- Research shows that SRO presence has unintended consequences, particularly for students marginalized by race and/or disability who face increased rates of arrest and police assaults in schools.

#### Counselors

In contrast, between the 2019-20 and 2021-22 school years, Tennessee lost more than 1,100 school counselors and saw its student-to-counselor ratio rise from 301:1 to 458:1, with no significant state investments to account for the need for more mental health services. The American School Counselor Association recommended ratio is 250:1.

**Student-to-counselor ratios between 2019-20 and 2021-22**

fig. 6



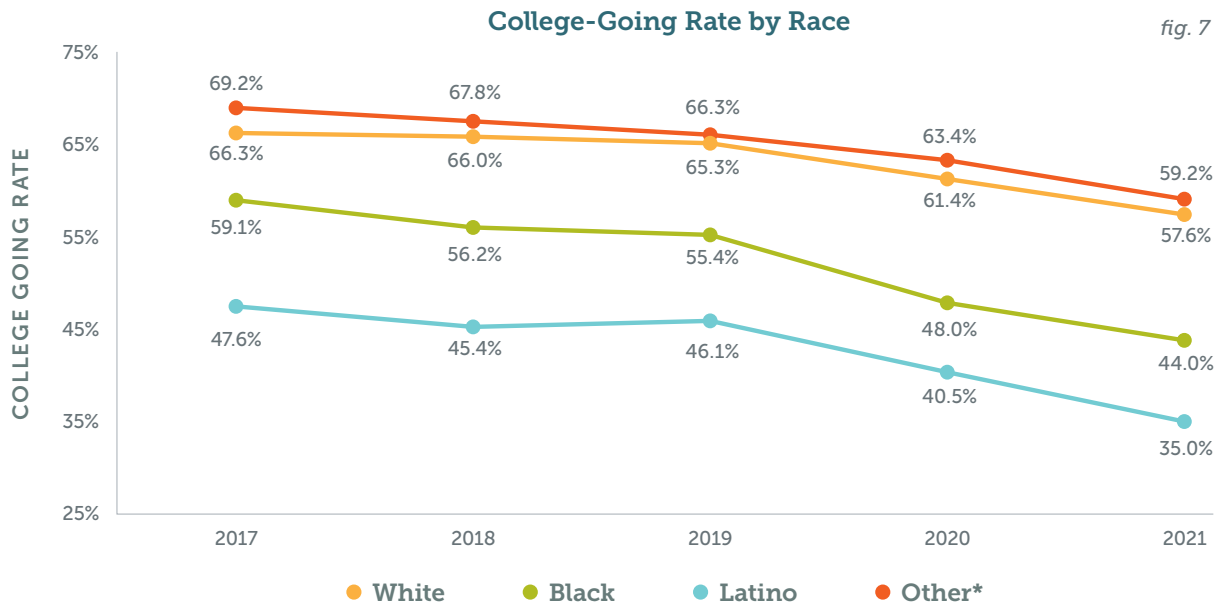


**PRIORITY 5**  
**Expand Access and Success in Higher Education**

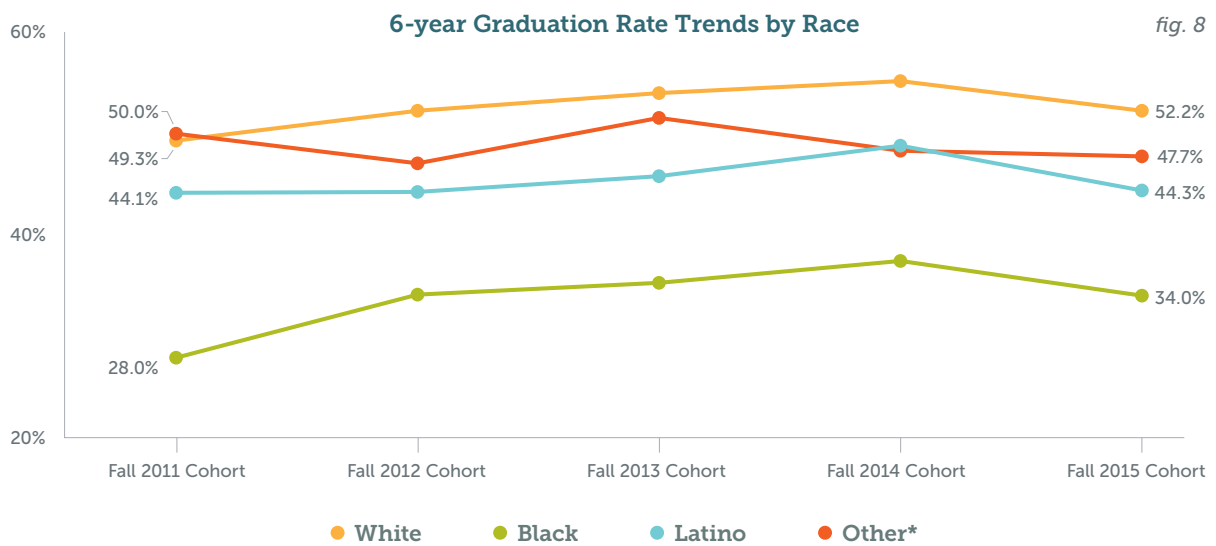
**Equity Principle:** Every student in Tennessee has access to an affordable postsecondary degree or credential that propels them to a career that ensures economic mobility. In addition, all students have access to resources that support them to and through higher education.

## Widening Racial Gaps in College-Going and Attainment Showcases Need for Targeted Strategies

- Tennessee’s college-going rate for the Class of 2021 was 52.8%, representing a decline of 11% since 2017.
- There is a 13-point and 22-point gap in the White-Black and White-Latino student college-going rate.
- Attainment rates have improved, but there remains an 18-point and 8-point gap in the White-Black and White-Latino 6-year graduation rate.



\*Other is defined as any student who identifies as Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Alaska Native, or Two or More Races



Sources:

