

Tennessee Learning Agenda: 2025 Progress Update

Background

Learning Agenda Context

In June 2024, the State of Tennessee [released](#) the first State of Tennessee [Learning Agenda](#). Coordinated by the [Office of Evidence and Impact](#) (OEI) within the Tennessee Department of Finance and Administration. The Learning Agenda is a strategic roadmap describing the specific areas where the state seeks to generate credible information in response to important short- and long-term strategic questions.

The Tennessee Learning Agenda was developed through a prioritization process to identify information needed to achieve the state's strategic operating priorities. The Learning Agenda was designed to stimulate evaluation and research activities and identify which policy approaches work, why, and for whom so the state can apply those lessons across contexts to improve outcomes.

2025 Progress Update

Learning agendas are designed to be living documents that evolve as priorities shift and new information becomes available. As such, over the summer of 2025, the Office of Evidence and Impact worked with state agencies to document evaluations, data analyses, and research activities tied to the learning agenda questions. This first progress update provides an early look at how the Tennessee Learning Agenda is catalyzing learning and evidence-building across the state. This process created the first statewide baseline of activity and identified both promising early findings and revealed areas where additional evidence building activities are still needed.

This 2025 Progress Update also demonstrates that the Learning Agenda has not only stimulated research within state government but has also catalyzed innovation beyond it. Researchers and practitioners outside of state government have begun generating valuable studies that directly inform Learning Agenda questions, complementing agency-led efforts and expanding the body of evidence available to policymakers. Taken together, these contributions highlight the Learning Agenda’s role as a statewide framework for evidence-building—one that supports alignment across agencies, partners, and researchers while driving progress toward Tennessee’s strategic priorities.

Priority Area 1 – Education Quality and Access

Overview of Priority Research Areas

- **Academic Learning:** Successful strategies for supporting literacy, early learning, and summer reading
- **School Effectiveness:** Ways that new school funding structures and behavioral health supports improve student outcomes and well-being
- **Workforce:** How career and technical education investments and partnerships improve effectiveness

Early Literacy

Tennessee’s recent research and evaluation activities have built a substantial evidence base on how state policies and targeted supports are shaping student achievement and instructional quality. The [Tennessee Reading Research Center’s \(TRRC\) Annual Report](#) and [Reading 360 evaluations](#) show how early reading training and literacy networks are influencing classroom practice and identify which supports are most effective at scale. The State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) has added to this work through its [Leading in Literacy](#) report and related case studies, which document partnerships between teacher preparation programs and school districts—including a Putnam County [pilot](#) of a structured mentorship model and a Knox County [pilot](#) of a targeted reading screener for struggling readers. These studies, alongside The Institute of Education Sciences’ [Joyful Literacy Principles Framework](#) and ExcelinEd’s [Science of Reading Policy Implementation Across States](#), point to the critical interplay between high-quality instructional materials, targeted interventions, and consistent engagement in driving sustained literacy growth in Tennessee.

Research points toward initial successes in early literacy as the [Tennessee Literacy Success Act Implementation Report](#) and the [Comptroller’s Literacy Success Act Review](#) document

measurable gains in third-grade English Language Arts proficiency since the introduction of the Tennessee Literacy Success Act and other foundational literacy policies. Third-grade TCAP ELA proficiency increased from 32.1% in 2021 to 40.9% in 2024, the highest level since updated standards were implemented in 2017. Relatedly, SCORE's [Literacy: Adopting Research-Based Strategies to Develop Young Readers](#) reviews how Tennessee's literacy policies have improved reading achievement by incorporating key evidence-based components of reading.

Summer Learning

Complementing this literacy research, Tennessee has also advanced its understanding of summer learning interventions. The University of Tennessee [Summer Reading Program Meta-Analysis](#) is synthesizing evidence from multiple studies to clarify the conditions under which summer reading programs improve student outcomes. The [Annual Book Fairs Evaluation](#) provides a targeted look at rural and high-poverty schools, finding promising (though not yet conclusive) impacts on reading achievement when students are given sustained access to books over multiple summers.

Bold, Evidence-Driven Approach to College Access

Tennessee's TN Direct Admissions pilot offers automatic college admission and personalized financial aid estimates to a subset of 41,000 high school seniors across 230 schools through a randomized control trial —removing barriers and simplifying the path to higher education. The initiative is grounded in research and a strong commitment to rigorous evaluation, led in partnership with Dr. Taylor Odle (University of Wisconsin–Madison). Spearheaded by Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), the pilot is a model of cross-sector collaboration, supported by Lumina Foundation, Kresge Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Making Caring Common at Harvard, and over 50 Tennessee colleges and universities.

Student Achievement and Well Being

Recent evaluations emphasize how state policy changes are shaping student well-being both through funding reforms and targeted supports. Complementary reports from the [Department of Education](#) and [Tennessee Comptroller](#) about the implementation of the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA) legislation highlights how districts used new funding flexibilities to raise educator salaries, expand staffing, and launch new initiatives. While the Comptroller finds that most implementation requirements were met and that the transition has been relatively smooth, the Department of Education illuminates some local level challenges in understanding the formula and managing data complexity.

Parallel research on school-based behavioral health underscores the importance of ensuring that resources translate into supports for the whole child. The Department of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services funds School-based Behavioral Health Liaisons who connect students to needed care and reduce barriers to accessing services; caregiver surveys show that 46% of students served would not otherwise have received support. Research from Vanderbilt University and the Tennessee Education Research Alliance [finds](#) that school-based health centers reduce diagnosed mental health conditions among low-income students by up to 7%. Complementing these studies, the SCORE report [Connecting the Dots: Mental Health and Student Success in Tennessee](#), developed with Belmont Data Collaborative and NashvilleHealth, maps vulnerabilities at the county and zip code level and highlights factors like bullying, broadband access, and social media use. Together, this body of evidence highlights how both funding structures and behavioral health strategies are central to improving student achievement and well-being.

Learning Agenda Focus on Workforce Readiness: Career and Technical Education

Tennessee has developed a strong evidence infrastructure that links talent supply, academic programming, and labor market demand. The Tennessee Higher Education Commission's [Fact Book](#) establishes a statewide baseline by tracking enrollment, credential production, and outcomes across public institutions. Relatedly, the Office of Evidence and Impact's Education-to-Employment [dashboard](#) connects (anonymized) individual education records to wage and employment data. Together, the Fact Book and dashboard provide the foundation for identifying where education pipelines are translating into labor market success and where gaps remain. Building on this foundation, the multi-agency [Academic Supply for Occupational Demand Report](#) and the accompanying [dashboard](#) allow state and regional partners to map program pipelines directly against projected occupational needs.

The [Careers Start Here dashboard](#), part of a data partnership between the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development and the Tennessee Board of Regents, provide complementary evidence from community and technical colleges. These resources contain employment outcomes for graduates and non-graduates of community and technical colleges, providing insights on three key metrics: employment, wages, and industry alignment. External studies, such as Georgia State University's [Who Takes High-Earning CTE Pathways](#) and Advance CTE's report on [Credentials of Value: Aligning CTE with Labor Market Needs](#), add companion research on participation gaps in high-wage fields like IT and advanced manufacturing, offering Tennessee [insights](#) into increasing access to these fields.

Further, on the related theme of work-based learning, the Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury's Office of Research and Education Accountability released [An Overview of](#)

[Registered Apprenticeships in Tennessee](#) showing that apprenticeship opportunities nearly doubled between 2014 and 2023, though completion rates remain about 50% and small and rural employers face challenges with program access and costs. SCORE's [Work-Based Learning Participation & Success](#) memo provides a data-based snapshot of Tennessee high school student participation in credit-bearing work-based learning, showing patterns such as most students being seniors in CTE pathways and noting the state's growing WBL credits. A follow-up [memo](#) builds on this analysis with recommendations for how to deepen and expand opportunities for students.

To strengthen these pathways, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission is part of [MDRC's National Rural Higher Education Research Center](#), which is investigating rural participation in dual enrollment. Additionally, THEC is collaborating with the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) to study the recent growth of dual enrollment at Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs).

Finally, Tennessee's approach incorporates feedback from employers and innovative models of workforce development. The University of Tennessee's [Boyd Center Business Leaders Survey](#) captures demand-side perspectives, documenting persistent hiring challenges and reinforcing the need for alignment between education providers and industry. Public-private partnerships highlighted in [Global Action Platform's Innovative Workforce Initiatives in Tennessee](#) illustrate how regions are building targeted pipelines in advanced manufacturing, biotech, and energy. Additional resources, such as the [Course-Skill Alignment Atlas](#) provide tools to align curricula more closely with employer-identified skills. Together, this body of research highlights a coherent strategy: leveraging data systems to identify supply-demand gaps, strengthening program quality and access, and integrating employer feedback to ensure that Tennessee's career and technical education pathways prepare students for high-value careers while meeting the state's evolving workforce needs.

Priority Area 2 – Workforce Participation, Adult Learners, and Rural Talent Pipelines

Overview of Priority Research Areas:

- **Workforce Training and Participation:** How education, training, and support programs improve outcomes for adults, non-traditional students, discouraged workers, and formerly incarcerated individuals
- **Rural Workforce:** The role of incentives and infrastructure in recruitment and retention of service professionals in rural regions

Workforce Development

Beyond career and technical education, Tennessee is also focused on the supports and barriers facing adult learners, non-traditional students, and discouraged workers. An important source of information in this area is the Tennessee Higher Education Commission's [Fact Book](#), which provides longitudinal data on enrollment, credential attainment, and student outcomes across public colleges and the Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology. These data shed light on participation among adult and returning learners, highlight gaps, and track the extent to which sub-baccalaureate certificates and diplomas are providing on-ramps into Tennessee's workforce.

The Tennessee Office of Evidence and Impact's [Education-to-Employment](#) dashboard extends this analysis by linking education records to wage and employment outcomes. By using information from [TN DATA](#), the state's enterprise data analytics platform, the dashboard provides insight into Tennessee's high school and postsecondary graduates by instructional program area and their wages one to five years after graduation, as reported by Tennessee's unemployment insurance wage record data.

Highlighted Research Product

The Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Tennessee Higher Education Commission, Tennessee Department of Education, Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, and the Office of Evidence and Impact collaborate to produce the [Academic Supply for Occupational Demand Report](#). This report helps assess labor market demand, supply pipelines, and economic development needs—allowing the State to better align CTE investments with Tennessee's evolving workforce landscape. The accompanying [data dashboard](#) visualizes in-demand occupations by region, occupation type, education requirements, and wages—making the report's findings more accessible and actionable for educators, economic developers, and local leaders.

Population-level context comes from the [Tennessee Aging Data Dashboard](#), developed by the East Tennessee State University Center for Rural Health Research in partnership with TennCare. This provides an interactive resource at the county and regional level to explore employment barriers facing older adults by visualizing how differences in digital access, transportation, housing, and proximity to services affect older Tennesseans' ability to engage in the workforce. Other population specific information is being collected by the Department of Disability and Aging, which has launched a new real-time data collection system to capture wage, hour, and employment outcomes for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Rural Workforce Retention

Similarly, recruitment and retention of professionals in rural and high-need communities has been a particular focus of recent research. The University of Tennessee System's [Grow Your Own Center](#) research efforts have illuminated the importance of a registered teacher apprenticeship strategy and the role of job-embedded training in strengthening pipelines into hard-to-staff schools. The Tennessee Education Research Alliance has added further evidence through its [Teacher Labor Market Trends](#), which tracks educator supply, retention, and geographic distribution across Tennessee and Kentucky. These findings are complemented by statewide feedback from the Department of Education's [2025 Tennessee Educator Survey](#), which showed that retention is strongly influenced by supportive leadership, mentorship, and school culture. These findings build on the [2024 survey](#), which emphasized the value of job-embedded preparation and mentorship in strengthening teacher pipelines—reinforcing that sustained improvements in student outcomes depend not only on programmatic interventions, but also on building and maintaining a stable, well-supported educator workforce.

Parallel recruitment and retention challenges exist in healthcare and behavioral health. The [East Tennessee State University Center for Rural Health Research](#) statewide nursing [dashboard](#) provides a centralized resource to explore nursing workforce supply, demand, and distribution across Tennessee. This helps agencies, educational institutions, and healthcare providers identify gaps and design targeted recruitment and retention strategies. The Center has also documented how rural placement incentives, service-linked training, and residency pipelines affect the sustainability of the healthcare workforce, offering a deeper understanding of which multi-agency approaches are improving sustainability in high-need areas. In line with these approaches, the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services has worked to address public behavioral health workforce shortages in Tennessee through provider rate increases, recruitment and retention bonuses, and other efforts. Most recent data show that staff vacancies have decreased by 14% among public mental health providers and 7.2% among public substance use providers from July 2023 to July 2024.

Further, Center for Rural Health Research's recent policy brief on [Rural and Urban Differences in Suicide in the United States](#) underscores the urgency of these efforts by showing that rural areas face significantly higher rates of suicide, highlighting the need to expand the mental health workforce in underserved regions. Relatedly, the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services [Project Rural Recovery Annual Report](#) examines the use of mobile integrated health clinics to reduce access barriers in 20 rural Tennessee counties.

The Tennessee Department of Transportation's [Evaluating Transit Accessibility to Food, Education, Recreation, and Other Essential Services in Tennessee study](#) quantifies the role of transit access in enabling residents to participate fully in work and community life. In

addition, the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development partnered with the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development to launch nine regional taskforces focused on identifying local labor force challenges and expanding workforce pipelines. Together, this body of research provides actionable evidence on how targeted financial incentives, job-embedded preparation, working conditions, and transportation shape recruitment and retention in education, health, and other critical public service sectors in rural areas.

Priority Area 3 – Rural Infrastructure, Housing, and Environmental Sustainability

Overview of Priority Research Areas:

- **Infrastructure and Growth:** How transportation, broadband, and other state infrastructure investments impact rural economic development and quality of life
- **Land Use and Environment:** The role of land management, agricultural practices, and environmental management on farmland, housing, water quality, and long-term community sustainability

Growth and Infrastructure

Research on sector development highlights how different investment strategies affect rural economies. The Department of Economic and Community Development’s Industry Cluster [White Papers](#) document growth across eight sectors. For example, the [Automotive Cluster White Paper](#) highlights large-scale, capital-intensive projects like BlueOval City in West Tennessee, which drive major supplier growth and infrastructure expansion—typifying a “big push” investment strategy. In contrast, the [Food & Beverage Cluster White Paper](#) illustrates a more incremental path, showing job gains from distributed facility growth across rural counties. Together, these white papers help the state evaluate which sectors yield the most significant multiplier effects and inform investment strategies in rural economic development.

Tourism development offers a more incremental pathway. Through more than 40 community-based trainings, the Department of Tourist Development has provided technical assistance and planning support, contributing to increased visitor spending in 84 counties.

Broadband access continues to shape rural quality of life and growth. According to the Broadband Accessibility Grant Program Annual Report from the Department of Economic and Community Development, the number of unserved Tennesseans has been reduced to just over 1%. The Department also manages a Broadband [Dashboard](#) that tracks county-level progress and demonstrates how expanded access supports education, healthcare,

and economic opportunity. In addition, the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency coordinated with partners to complete a feasibility study—supported by interactive [dashboards](#)—on a statewide flood forecasting system that could deliver more accurate warnings to improve preparedness while guiding development to reduce damages, protect natural floodplains and watersheds, and strengthen long-term community resilience.

Land Use and Environment

Agricultural programs remain central to Tennessee’s land use strategy. A Tennessee Agricultural Enhancement Program (TAEP) Return on Investment study reported \$6.55 in local return for every dollar invested, while a 2024 follow-up evaluation found TAEP funds were linked to increased cropland, pasture, and hay, though with minimal effect on slowing conversion to development. The Department of Agriculture also commissioned a Tennessee Nutrient Management Report from the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, which provides important information for understanding how agricultural methods contribute to reducing water pollution in the state. Survey data show that over three-quarters of Tennessee farms rely on soil testing to guide fertilizer use and 60% of row crop farms have a nutrient management plan—both key for reducing over-application and pollution.

Best management practices (BMPs) continue to be supported through outreach and conservation funding. The Agricultural Resources Conservation Fund five-year evaluation found that while producers value BMPs, many eligible landowners statewide may be unaware of these programs. To expand uptake, the Land and Water Stewardship program hosted 120 outreach events and 170 presentations between 2023 and 2025.

The Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations produced a report on [The Condition Of and Best Practices for Tennessee Wastewater Systems](#), which reviewed wastewater system performance, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas. The Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation has complemented this research with several statewide initiatives, including an [assessment](#) of wastewater drip dispersal systems, which found that while widely used in rural areas, some require additional oversight. In addition, the department is also conducting a statewide PFAS [research](#) to monitor raw water sources for contamination, using a sampling strategy to guide this work across more than 1,200 sites. Further, the agency is leading the [Duck River Watershed Planning Partnership](#) to evaluate long-term water availability for drinking, recreation, and ecological health. These efforts help rural communities assess infrastructure conditions and environmental risks to support reliable, long-term access to clean water.

Priority Area 4 – Child and Family Well-Being, Health Access, and Prevention

Overview of Priority Research Areas:

- **Child Welfare and Youth Justice:** Effectively serving youth involved in the state's child welfare and juvenile justice systems
- **Family Supports:** The role of childcare, healthcare, and housing programs in addressing barriers faced by children and families

Child Welfare and Youth Justice

Tennessee is pursuing new strategies to improve outcomes for children with complex needs who are served by both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. A cross-agency steering committee—including TennCare, the Department of Children's Services, the Division of Disability and Aging, the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, the Council on Developmental Disabilities, BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee, and the state's Centers of Excellence, with support from Casey Family Programs—is developing a multi-year strategy to align behavioral health, education, and developmental supports. This effort is focused on improving earlier identification of needs and creating more coordinated responses across agencies.

The Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services also collaborates extensively with various state agencies, particularly in early intervention and prevention efforts related to court involvement. Using a Juvenile Justice Reform grant, the Department has an initiative with the Administrative Office of the Courts to share data and expand evidence-based practices focused on keeping children in their homes. In FY25, 98.7% of youth served by the initiative remained in their homes, and only 7.2% experienced recidivism, underscoring the program's effectiveness in diverting youth from state custody and reducing reoffending.

Family Supports

Recent research provides a clearer picture of how childcare, housing, and healthcare supports can reduce barriers for families. The Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations report on [Improving Policies and Removing Regulatory Barriers to Grow and Support Tennessee's Childcare Industry](#) provides recommendations for state agencies to improve services, streamline processes, and better align policies in ways that lower barriers to opening and expanding facilities and reduce operational burdens on childcare providers.

The Tennessee Housing Development Agency's [regional housing needs reports](#) and [County Housing Indicators Dashboard](#) provide robust, place-based data on housing supply, affordability, and demand across Tennessee. These tools help identify where specific types of housing—such as affordable rental units or accessible housing—are most needed. By offering granular insights into homeownership rates, rental burden, and population change, they support more strategic siting of new housing developments to better align with local needs and conditions.

Complementing this data, the Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations report on [Reducing the Burden: Increasing Housing Supply to Lower Costs](#) analyzes Tennessee's rising housing costs and identifies potential strategies to expand supply while minimizing displacement and unintended consequences. Similarly, the Sycamore Institute's [Access to Housing in Tennessee](#) report identifies state- and local-level policy options to address housing affordability in Tennessee, especially for vulnerable groups such as older adults, disabled individuals, and people with behavioral health challenges. The two analyses include recommendations for reforming zoning, creating development incentives, and promoting balanced development strategies that take into account the needs of both new and existing residents.

On the health front, TennCare's recent maternal health benefit expansions—including postpartum eligibility extensions, lactation consultations, and a diaper benefit pilot—were informed by a combination of internal data review, research evidence, and extensive stakeholder engagement. For the postpartum expansion, TennCare reviewed maternal mortality data from the Tennessee Department of Health and identified a clear opportunity to improve maternal health by extending coverage to 12 months postpartum. The lactation consultation benefit was shaped by a review of existing literature and direct input from stakeholders across the lactation care community. The diaper benefit pilot—launched in August 2024—was designed through partnerships with pharmacies, manufacturers, and diaper banks, and continues to evolve based on ongoing feedback.

Priority Area 5 – Performance Management, Data Integration, and Decision Support

Overview of Priority Research Areas:

- **Data and Monitoring:** Strengthening performance management through real-time data, IT modernization, and transparent reporting that improve accountability and service delivery

- **Customer Experience:** Streamlining referrals, reducing duplication, and using evidence and advanced analytics to connect services and decision-making across agencies

Data and Monitoring

The Department of Safety and Homeland Security has adopted a platform to generate systematic data on customer engagement and service delivery. The tool enables departments to track and transfer citizen requests more efficiently while producing actionable insights on system friction points that inform broader process improvements. The department now collects and monitors customer satisfaction scores and service level agreement performance across business units, with results displayed in real-time through agency dashboards. These data provide a foundation for evaluating customer experience, identifying areas for strategic system updates, and testing emerging approaches.

Customer Experience

The Department of Human Services has [modernized](#) its technology infrastructure, replacing legacy mainframe systems with cloud-based platforms, integrated portals, and mobile applications that generate real-time monitoring and analytics across economic assistance, childcare, and workforce programs. To improve customer experience, DHS migrated its call center to a cloud platform and deployed a virtual assistant chatbot that resolves the majority of citizen inquiries, reducing wait times and streamlining referrals. These tools are paired with in-person service options and expanded virtual assistance to ensure access for populations facing digital barriers, while performance dashboards provide data to track service levels and customer satisfaction.