

**The Tennessee Commission on
Education Recovery and Innovation**



**Year Two Report
A Revitalization: Transforming Education in Tennessee
“Ease of Use” Document**

November 30, 2021

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Legal Authority

On June 17, 2020, the House of Representatives joined their Senate colleagues in unanimously passing Senate Bill 1974, thereby creating the nine-member Tennessee Commission on Education Recovery and Innovation to examine short- and long-term systemic effects on the state's educational systems of the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters of 2020. This act later became Public Chapter 792, which recognized in law that the pandemic will likely affect students for the next 12 years and charged the new Commission to do the following:

“Advise and make recommendations to the General Assembly, the state board of education, the department of education, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, and the state institutions of higher education on strategies to close educational gaps resulting from school closures, and to modernize the state’s educational structure from kindergarten to career to create more flexibility in the delivery of education to students.”

The Commission's work involves three deliverable reports as detailed in the law:

“The Commission shall submit an initial assessment of the effect the COVID-19 pandemic has had on Tennessee’s educational systems to the General Assembly no later than January 1, 2021. The Commission shall submit a report on the Commission’s actions, findings, and recommendations to the General Assembly no later than January 1, 2022 and shall submit a final report on the Commission’s actions, findings, and recommendations to the General Assembly no later than June 30, 2022.”

This report, the second of three, is required by the statute and is designed to detail the Commission's actions, findings, and recommendations to the General Assembly.

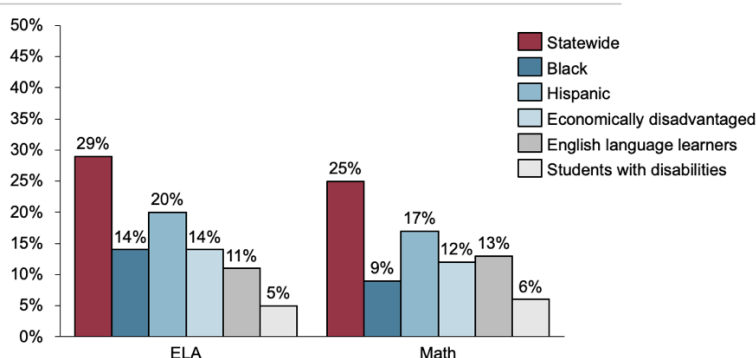
Executive Summary

A high-quality education paves a path to political and economic freedom and upward mobility.¹ Most Tennesseans are not on that path.

While Tennessee has made some important educational improvements over the past decade, they have not changed the fact that the majority of our students do not have the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in their lives and careers. Less than one-third of all Tennessee K-12 students are scoring as proficient or higher in English language arts (29%), and just a quarter are doing so in math (25%). Tennessee's more vulnerable students meet these benchmarks at even lower rates (see graph below).

Percent of Students Meeting or Exceeding Grade-Level Benchmarks in ELA and Math

All grade levels
School year 2020-2021



Tennessee's high school graduation rate is excellent at 90%; however, that reflects only partial success. For most graduates, possessing a diploma does not reflect readiness for success beyond high school. Only 41% of all graduates meet the state's Ready Graduate benchmark, which measures the percentage of students who earn a diploma from a Tennessee high school and meet success milestones that increase their probability of seamlessly enrolling in postsecondary education and securing high-quality employment.² Ready Graduate rates were far worse for Black students (21%), Hispanic students (26%), economically disadvantaged students (21%), English language learners (6%), and students with disabilities (8%).³ Overall, higher education enrollment rates dropped by approximately 4% between fall 2020 and fall 2021, with variation across institution types: Community colleges saw an enrollment decline of 7%, locally governed institutions saw a decline of 4%, and the University of Tennessee system saw an increase of almost 1%.⁴

The state's economic and workforce needs are changing rapidly — a reality that underscores the urgency of addressing these issues. The Tennessee labor market is projected to net 356,000 jobs over the next decade, and more than half of those jobs (53%) will require workers with some training or education beyond high school (often referred to as "middle-skill" workers).⁵ Thirteen of the 15 high-demand occupations with the highest projected growth rates over the next decade will require education beyond high school.⁶ However, reports from 2019 indicate that just 36% of Tennessee adults hold a postsecondary degree (an associate's or higher), and 29% hold a four-year degree or higher.⁷

These academic and workforce-related challenges existed well before recent natural disasters and COVID-19 forced the transition to online learning and disrupted the education of hundreds of thousands of students across the state over the course of nearly two years. These recent events only exacerbated the challenges. The effects of school closures and educational disruption hit vulnerable groups of students — those who are Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, or learning English and those who have disabilities — the hardest.⁸

The impacts of COVID-19 and other disruptions to schooling in the past two years extend far beyond academics, however, and have negatively impacted students' overall well-being, including their mental and emotional health,⁹ physical health,¹⁰ and social development.¹¹ Tennessee's students have asked for greater empathy, counseling, and emotional support to help them deal with the effects of pandemic-related school closures.¹² These domains not only affect students' academic achievement but also underlie the development of skills such as critical thinking and analysis, problem-solving, self-management, and working with people — all of which are skills increasingly prioritized by employers.¹³

To begin to address the challenges presented by COVID-19, the state has already undertaken a number of actions, including:

- Offering flexibility in testing administration to maximize districts' ability to meet participation goals.
- Distributing nearly \$3.5 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding directly to districts to help them meet their most pressing needs.
- Calling a special legislative session in January 2021, which resulted in the passage of legislation specifically aimed at addressing students' learning recovery needs.
- Making strategic investments in a variety of programs to support districts and students, such as summer programming, tutoring, and the Reading 360 initiative.

Since the release of the Commission's first report in December 2020,¹⁴ Commissioners have undertaken a comprehensive approach to examining Tennessee's education landscape from kindergarten to career, hearing from dozens of experts and reviewing hundreds of pages of research and information on a wide range of education policy issues. This report is the result of that yearlong effort. It points to nine critical areas where additional focus and acceleration of ongoing effort are needed to address gaps exacerbated by recent events and restructure the system into one that is more flexible, adaptable, and able to address the evolving needs of the state's labor market and economy. It offers a path forward aligned to the Commission's vision for the state: Every Tennessean will have high-quality education necessary for life.

The Commission has identified nine priorities for the legislature. Each priority is supported by a menu of actionable steps to be taken by a number of agencies and organizations, including the State Board of Education, the Tennessee Department of Education, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, state institutions of higher education, and the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce. While some of these action steps are new, many build on and aim to accelerate work these departments and agencies are already doing.

The Commission believes that adopting these priorities will bring success, close educational gaps, and ensure every student in Tennessee has a solid foundation of knowledge and skills. These priorities are intended to reimagine the state's educational systems as flexible and responsive to learners at every stage, provide the right training and educational opportunity at the right time to enable long-term success, and ensure Tennessee talent is recognized as superior by employers to sustain a thriving state economy. Those nine priorities are:

- Ensure students master literacy and numeracy skills.

- Address learning remediation and acceleration needs.
- Strengthen, retain, expand, and diversify the state’s education professionals.
- Equip schools and districts to address students’ well-being.
- Optimize capacity for flexible, high-quality school options.
- Redesign high school to ensure students have access to flexible pathways to college and career.
- Streamline postsecondary systems to facilitate lifelong learning.
- Strengthen alignment across the K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems.
- Incentivize locally led innovation.

Underlying these priorities is the Commission’s recognition that each of Tennessee’s 1 million K-12 students¹⁵ and 220,000 postsecondary students¹⁶ is unique and that the legislature must address the needs of all students — including those who are most vulnerable. As a result, the Commission enjoins the legislature to think beyond a one-size-fits-all model and move toward a personalized approach that allows young people and adults alike to receive education tailored to their needs and that, critically, allows for the acquisition of additional training and skills development as career opportunities evolve and the economy demands it. The success of these nine priorities hinges on the elimination of financial disincentives for systems to foster the best opportunities for students.

It is imperative the legislature act now to move beyond recovery to truly reimagining, renewing, and creating a renaissance in education and economic freedom for its citizens. This report offers recommendations for doing just that.

List of Priorities and Corresponding Recommendations

Priority	Recommendations
<p>Ensure students master literacy and numeracy skills.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure recently enhanced and existing early literacy programs maintain financial viability, oversight, and accountability. ● Establish rigorous and periodic evaluation of early literacy programs by independent evaluators (such as the Office of Research and Education Accountability, OREA), and make those results public. ● Create evidence-based professional development programs for teachers and leaders to improve math teaching and learning in order to respond to pandemic-related unmet learning, particularly for vulnerable populations. ● Establish evidence-based curriculum recommendations for early numeracy. ● Fund Tennessee’s K-12 system and focus funding in the classroom on literacy and math initiatives, ensuring, through rigorous external evaluation and public reporting, that those dollars are resulting in significantly improved student literacy and math achievement.
<p>Address learning remediation and acceleration needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expand long-term funding for tutoring programs designed in alignment with research-supported best practices to address known gaps in literacy and math. ● Expand access to, and continue in the long term (including by providing long-term state funding for), programs created by recent legislation (e.g., bridge camps, after-school learning mini-camps, and summer learning camps) that are demonstrating effectiveness at accelerating student learning. ● Support early interventions and research-based materials and instruction for K-12 students to minimize the need for postsecondary remediation. ● Create an early warning data system and corresponding interventions, ensuring integration across existing data systems and equal access and support (including funding) for implementation across districts. ● Establish metrics to track and periodically report on student remediation and acceleration and ensure those data are used to inform classroom practice.
<p>Strengthen, retain, expand, and diversify the state’s education professionals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strengthen the classroom-based clinical practice for all teacher candidates across all preparation pathways to include components of high-quality, research-based clinical experiences. ● Strengthen the curriculum in educator preparation programs for both teachers and leaders to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to meet students’ diverse academic and well-being needs. ● Create or expand high-quality, research-based, state-facilitated professional development opportunities to support teachers in using data to inform their instruction and meet the needs of individual students.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase educator compensation with the intent of elevating the profession and increasing competitiveness in Tennessee’s educator labor market. ● Expand and strengthen the existing Minority Teaching Fellows Program. ● Provide technical assistance to districts, in particular rural districts, to establish partnerships with local educator preparation programs to create local Grow Your Own programs. ● Create a strong evaluation plan for Grow Your Own programs to ensure these programs result in high-quality educators being placed in Tennessee’s classrooms. ● Incentivize postsecondary institutions to work with their partner districts to cultivate new teacher pipeline programs. ● Create new state-operated financial incentive programs for highly effective teachers and leaders.
<p>Equip schools and districts to address students’ well-being needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Incentivize the expansion of existing, and the development of new, high-quality programs to support students’ well-being. ● Provide professional development to equip all staff to recognize students’ well-being needs, especially adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and know when and where to refer students for more support. ● Fully fund school-based nurses, counselors, and social workers in line with Basic Education Program Review Committee 2021 recommendations. ● Incentivize partnerships between education systems and existing mental and behavioral support systems to help educators and community members understand and leverage existing resources.
<p>Optimize capacity for flexible, high-quality school options.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rigorously evaluate and hold current statewide internet infrastructure initiatives and future investments accountable to ensure goals and outcomes are met. ● Incentivize the coordination and innovation of universal broadband access. ● Require districts to maintain infrastructure, including devices, integrated technology platforms, and connectivity solutions, to seamlessly transition modes of instruction, and provide ongoing support and state funding. ● Require periodic virtual “drills” both to ensure schools, students, and families can move seamlessly between virtual and in-person delivery modes and to identify and address infrastructure-related challenges. ● Hold online schools receiving public funding accountable through existing school accountability structures. ● Enjoin educator preparation programs to incorporate best practices for multiple modes of delivery, including remote instruction, into their instruction and field experiences for all teachers. ● Provide ongoing professional development to K-12 educators to develop and strengthen remote instruction skills. ● Require that all curricula purchased by districts have an integrated technology-based capability and that districts establish and/or maintain the infrastructure and training required to fully leverage curricular resources across modes, allowing districts to seamlessly switch between delivery modes as necessary.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clarify how enrollment, admissions, and financial aid policies classify graduates of virtual schools, then communicate with students and families about the impact attending a virtual school has on eligibility and access.
<p>Redesign high school to ensure students have access to flexible pathways to college and career.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Evolve all districts to offer multiple pathways toward postsecondary credentials and degrees, including through industry certification programs, microcredentials, Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs), community colleges, four-year institutions, and other opportunities, with integration to allow students to move among pathways if one isn't a good fit, and evolve funding streams to mitigate disincentives for K-12 and postsecondary systems to enable flexibility for students. ● Ensure every high school student has the opportunity to attend a TCAT or to substantively complete sufficient early postsecondary coursework toward an institution or industry credential while in high school. ● Fully fund dual enrollment courses for high school juniors and seniors and expand dual enrollment courses to include qualified freshmen and sophomores. ● Incentivize districts to support students in accessing a meaningful senior-year capstone experience such as an apprenticeship, a co-op, an internship, or another industry- or work-based learning experience, including opportunities to earn both course credit and wages. ● Move to an hours-per-year minimum to give districts flexibility over their calendars, with some guardrails to ensure districts maximize quality instructional time for students. ● Expand opportunities for students to demonstrate proficiency at their own pace: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Create a high school equivalent to the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) test to allow students to show proficiency in subjects at the secondary level for the necessary credits while altering the Basic Education Program to eliminate disincentives for districts for early graduation. ○ Conduct research to identify challenges with the Move on When Ready Act and develop and implement a plan to strengthen it. ○ Leverage best practices from the Governor's Investment in Vocational Education (GIVE) Act to create scalable work-based learning and apprenticeship models statewide. ● Pilot competency-based delivery models in high school to identify existing models and scalable best practices. ● Incentivize the expansion of existing mentoring programs to support students in exploring and aligning their career goals and postsecondary pathways.
<p>Streamline postsecondary systems to facilitate lifelong learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop scalable, nonlinear credentialing pathways across TCAT, community college, and university pathways, including on- and off-ramps that are not fixed in a perceived order based on credential type. ● Create an automatic dual admissions option for students entering two-year institutions that are partnering with four-year institutions to facilitate seamless transfer and degree alignment. ● Conduct a full assessment and redesign of Tennessee Transfer Pathways, including clarification of which

	<p>pathways transfer automatically between institutions without additional requirements or conditions (beyond earning a passing grade in coursework) and those that have additional requirements or conditions attached to transferability, and incentivize four-year institutions to partner with two-year institutions and TCATs in order to advance Transfer Pathways.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expand the reach of TN Reconnect to accommodate additional alternative pathways and to reduce the eligibility gap between HOPE/TN Promise aid for traditional students and programs for independent adult learners. ● Expand reverse articulation to include alternative credential pathways. ● Incentivize students to take 15 credit hours per semester rather than 12 to improve on-time completion. ● Pilot competency-based delivery models in higher education to identify existing models and scalable best practices. ● Conduct a full assessment of the state's financial aid portfolio for alignment with best practices, consistency across programs, and alignment with other state goals and initiatives. ● Create a state grant program to incentivize multistakeholder, multifocused initiatives and policies designed to address students' non-tuition-based needs, such as textbook and inclusive access fees, nontuition fees (auxiliary costs), and other success-inhibiting costs. ● Create a pilot program at a set of community colleges to test the success of alternative scheduling, such as block scheduling or year-round scheduling, in meeting the needs of nontraditional students. ● Develop a comprehensive advising/mentoring initiative not tied explicitly to subpopulations of financial aid recipients. ● Task the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) with developing a workforce-responsive degree program and academic program approval policies at postsecondary institutions. ● Incentivize postsecondary institutions to track the number of degrees leading to jobs in a related field.
<p>Strengthen alignment across the K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Improve access to and use of the existing P20 Data System, while protecting privacy. ● Align incentives across K-12 and postsecondary public funding systems to encourage systems to collaborate, prioritize flexibility for students, maximize student success, and minimize the cost and time to degrees and industry certificates employers are seeking, and remove disincentives for school districts to support students in accelerating high school completion. ● Incentivize the expansion of high-quality mentoring programs systemwide to support efforts related to student well-being, high school progression, and success in postsecondary.
<p>Incentivize locally led innovation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create an innovation hub at the state level to support local innovation, including rigorous evaluation and robust dissemination and scaling opportunities for successful strategies.

Note: See the glossary at the end of this document for a definition of key terms and the separate appendix document for more detail on these recommendations

Conclusion and Next Steps

This report has described a variety of challenges facing students across Tennessee, from kindergarten to career, including:

- Poor academic outcomes in reading, math, and college-readiness.
- Persistent gaps in K-12 and postsecondary outcomes among student subgroups, in particular for vulnerable populations (e.g., Black students, Hispanic students, economically disadvantaged students, students with special needs, and students learning English).
- A need for more robust well-being supports for students of all ages.
- A need for improved broadband and device infrastructure to facilitate access to educational options.
- Rigid structures that make it challenging to progress through K-12 and postsecondary at an individualized pace.
- A lack of efficiency and coordination among systems, making it difficult for students to access additional education, training, and skills development at various stages in their lives and careers.

The Commission identified nine priorities for the General Assembly to address these challenges:

- Ensure students master literacy and numeracy skills.
- Address learning remediation and acceleration needs.
- Strengthen, retain, expand, and diversify the state's education professionals.
- Equip schools and districts to address students' well-being.
- Optimize capacity for flexible, high-quality school options.
- Redesign high school to ensure students have access to flexible pathways to college and career.
- Streamline postsecondary systems to facilitate lifelong learning.
- Strengthen alignment across the K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems.
- Incentivize locally led innovation.

These priorities and their corresponding recommendations offer the General Assembly a path to:

1. Address the learning needs that have existed for years and were exacerbated by recent pandemic- and natural disaster-related disruptions to schooling.
2. Modernize Tennessee's education system to be more flexible, adaptable, and resilient as the needs of the state's people and economy change.

As the state of Tennessee begins to move out of a recovery mindset and toward a "new normal," state leaders and policymakers must not overlook the challenges exacerbated by the pandemic and natural disasters over the last two years. Nor can they focus solely on addressing those gaps; they must simultaneously reimagine the state's education systems to create more flexible, adaptable pathways that can change as the needs of the state and its citizens change.

Over the coming months the Commission will continue to learn, engage with stakeholders, including educators and students, and refine these recommendations. Final revisions will be captured in the next and final report, due to the General Assembly by June 30, 2022.

Endnotes

- ¹ See, for example: Nathan Grawe, *Education and Economic Mobility* (Urban Institute, n.d.), <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/31161/1001157-education-and-economic-mobility.pdf>; Ron Haskins, *Education and Economic Mobility* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2016), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/02_economic_mobility_sawhill_ch8.pdf.
- ² Tennessee Department of Education, "Ready Graduate Indicator Overview," TDOE, last updated 2019, https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/ccte/ccte_ready_graduate_overview_2018-19.pdf.
- ³ TDOE Ready Graduate data for the class of 2018-19.
- ⁴ Data provided by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission.
- ⁵ Rework America Task Force, *How Tennessee's Next Governor Can Create Opportunities for Workers and Businesses in a Changing Economy through a Skills-Based Labor Market* (New York, Markle Foundation, n.d.), <https://www.markle.org/sites/default/files/RATF-Tennessee-Opportunity-Final.pdf>.
- ⁶ Tennessee Higher Education Commission, *Academic Supply and Occupational Demand Report* (Nashville: TN Department of Labor & Workforce Development, 2021), Table 5, <https://www.tn.gov/thec/research/supply-and-demand.html>.
- ⁷ United States Census Bureau, "Educational Attainment." US Census Bureau, last modified 2019, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=ACSST1Y2019.S1501&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S1501&hidePreview=true>.
- ⁸ Tennessee Department of Education, *Spring 2021 TCAP Release* (Nashville: TDOE, 2021), <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/tcap/spring-2021/TN-AcademicPerformance2020-2021.pdf>.
- ⁹ See, for example: Dan Levin, "In a World 'So Upside Down,' the Virus Is Taking a Toll on Young People's Mental Health," *New York Times*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/us/coronavirus-young-people-emotional-toll.html>; Joyce Lee, "Mental Health Effects of School Closures during COVID-19," *The Lancet* 4, no. 6 (2020): P421, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(20\)30109-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30109-7/fulltext); Sarah Brown and Alexander C. Kafka, "Covid-19 Has Worsened the Student Mental-Health Crisis. Can Resilience Training Fix It?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/covid-19-has-worsened-the-student-mental-health-crisis-can-resilience-training-fix-it/>.
- ¹⁰ See, for example: Jeanne M. Santoli et al., "Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Routine Pediatric Vaccine Ordering and Administration — United States, 2020," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69, no. 19 (2020): 591–93, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6919e2.htm>; Jessica Fu, "School Lunch As We Know It Is Over. Here's How School Nutrition Directors Are Reinventing It for an Uncertain Year." *Chalkbeat*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2020/6/23/21300529/school-lunch-as-we-know-it-is-over-coronavirus-school-nutrition-directors>; GENYOUth, "Life Disrupted: The Impact of COVID-19 on Teens," *Cision*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/life-disrupted-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-teens-301073871.html>.
- ¹¹ See, for example: UNESCO, "Adverse Consequences of School Closures," UNESCO, last modified 2021, <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/consequences>; <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00787-021-01758-x>.
- ¹² See, for example: Caroline Bauman, "Here's What 14 Tennessee Students Want You to Know about Life and Education under COVID-19," *Chalkbeat*, May 11, 2020, <https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2020/5/11/21255199/heres-what-14-tennessee-students-want-you-to-know-about-life-and-education-under-covid-19>; Education Trust, "'Help Me, so I Can Help You.' Tennessee College Students Call for Greater Empathy during the Pandemic," *Chalkbeat*, September 21, 2020, <https://edtrust.org/news/help-me-so-i-can-help-you-tennessee-college-students-call-for-greater-empathy-during-the-pandemic/>; Education Trust, "Back in School, Tennessee Students Wish for More Counseling and Hope to Move Toward Normalcy," *Chalkbeat*, September 14, 2020, <https://edtrust.org/news/back-in-school-tennessee-students-wish-for-more-counseling-and-hope-to-move-toward-normalcy/>.
- ¹³ Saadia Zahidi et al., *The Future of Jobs Report 2020* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2020), http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2020.pdf.
- ¹⁴ Tennessee Commission on Education Recovery and Innovation, "Preliminary Report to the General Assembly: Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic," December 24, 2020, https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/stateboardofeducation/documents/education-recovery-and-innovation-commission/2020-report/ERIC_REPORT_ONE.pdf.
- ¹⁵ Penny Schwinn, "State of Tennessee," TDOE, last modified 2021, <https://reportcard.tnedu.gov/state/0>.
- ¹⁶ TN Higher Education Commission, "Tennessee Higher Education Enrollment Increases for the Third Consecutive Year," news release, October 10, 2018, <https://www.tn.gov/thec/news/2018/10/10/tennessee-higher-education-enrollment-increases-for-the-third-consecutive-year.html>.