

The Undercount:

Who We Count Determines Who Gets Support

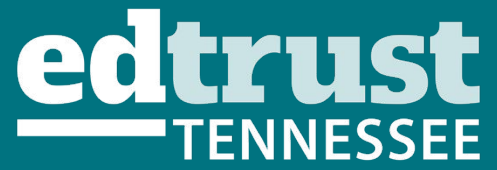
May 27, 2026

edtrust
TENNESSEE



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Who We Are



We Believe School Funding Systems Should:

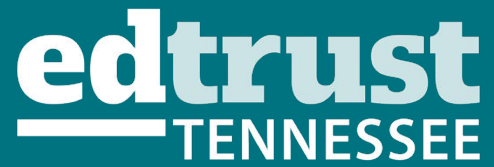
Cover the cost a rigorous, high-quality education that enables all students to succeed in school and in life.

Allocate additional funding to students who face unique barriers to learning.

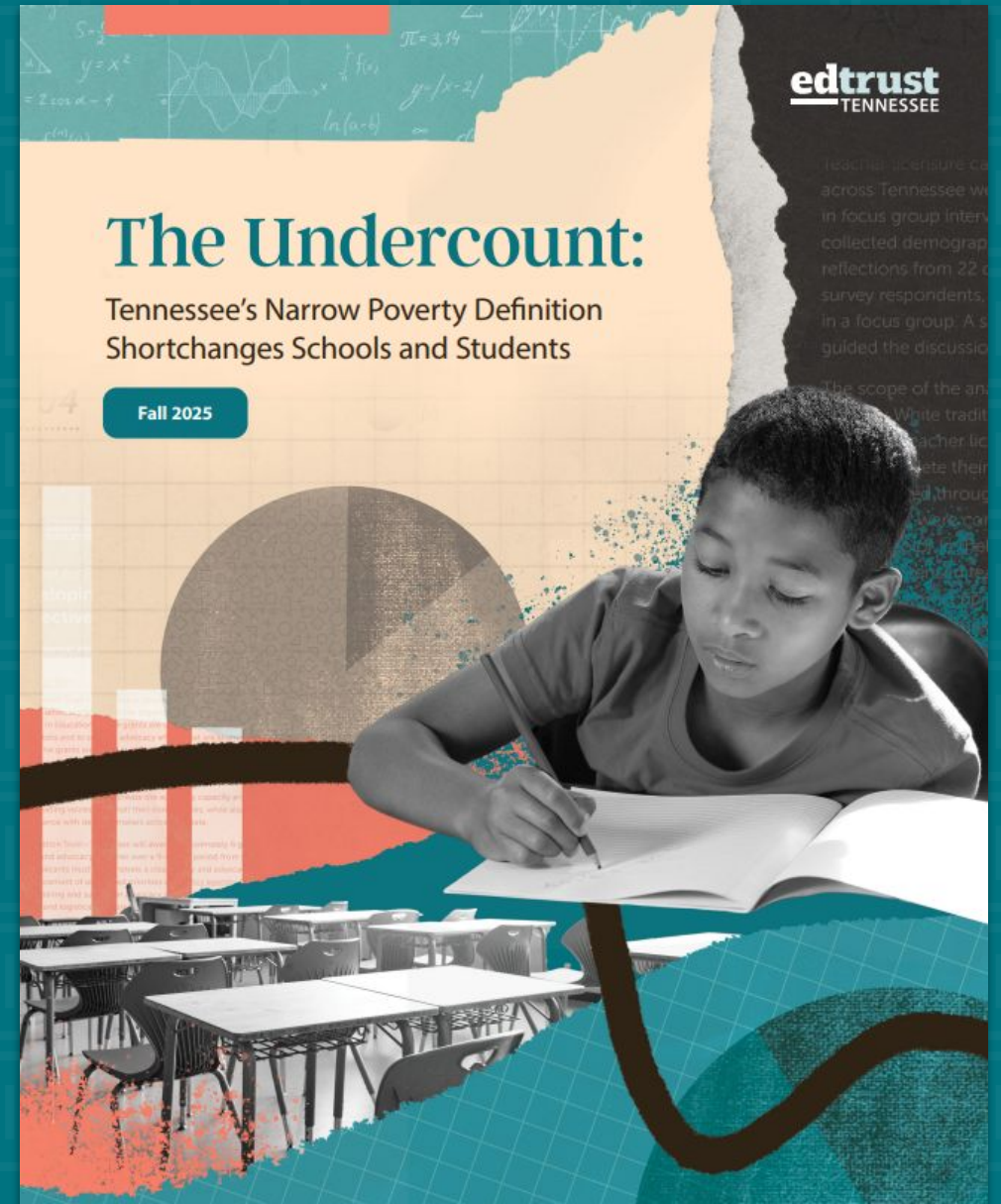
Provide more support to districts in high-poverty and rural areas, which face higher costs and have fewer resources.

Make it easy to understand if funds are being well-spent and benefiting students with greater needs.

Fund public schools exclusively.



The Undercount Report



Who We Count Determines Who Gets Support

Tennessee identifies economically disadvantaged students using **direct certification** based on SNAP and TANF participation.

Our current definition has been **in place since 2016** and has not changed.

- Federal accountability system
- School funding with the passage of TISA

The economically disadvantaged **student weight (25%)** in TISA was \$1,823.75 for the 2025-2026 school year.

Source: 2025-2026 TISA Guide (TDOE)

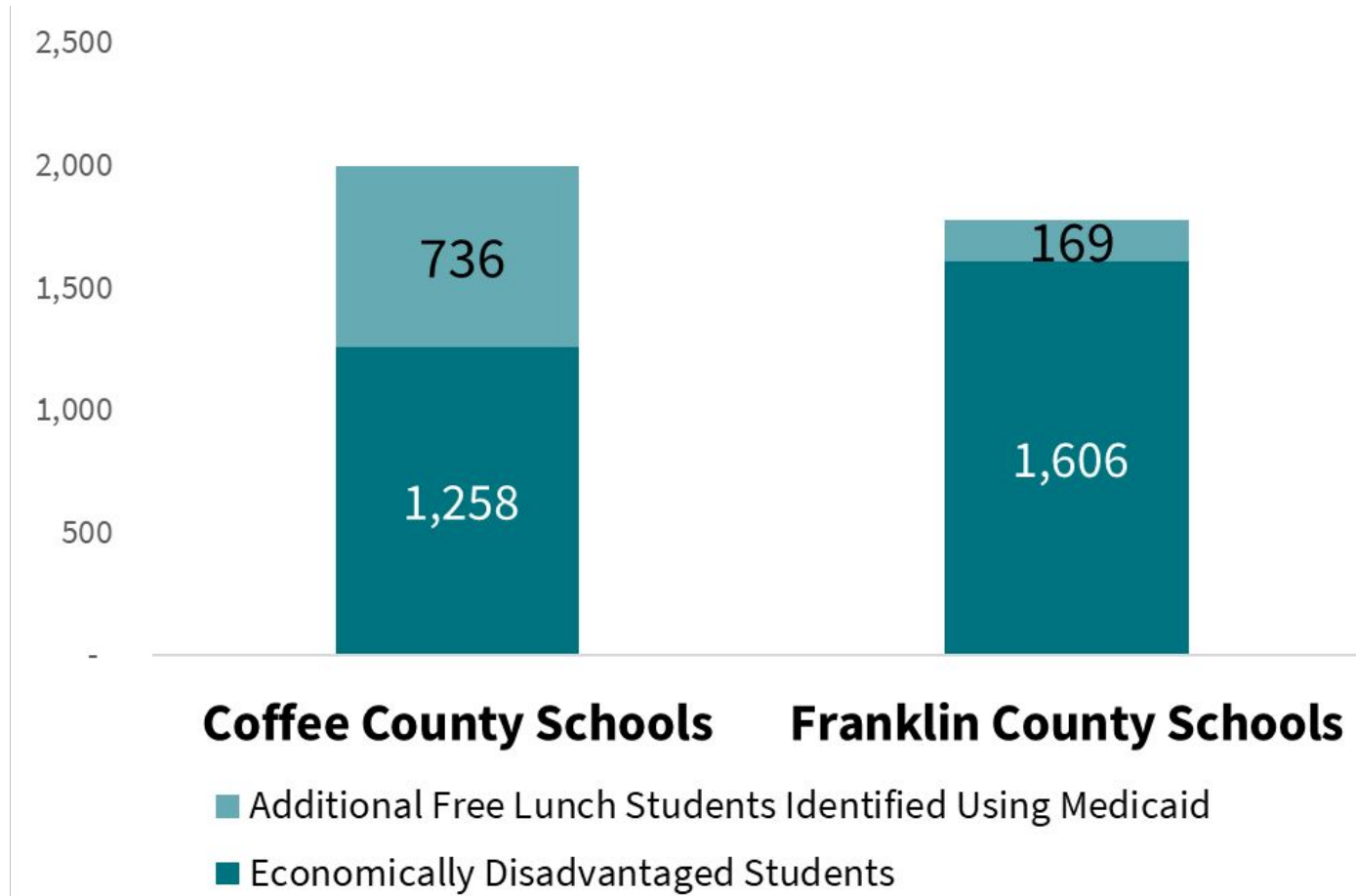
Tennessee's Definition of Economically Disadvantaged Students is Uncommonly Narrow

Economically Disadvantaged Student Population in Direct Certification States using Medicaid Data Compared to Tennessee

State	Total public school enrollment: (2023-24)	Median annual income among households with children (2023)	Children ages 6 to 17 in poverty (2023)	Students considered economically disadvantaged or low-income (2023-24)
Massachusetts	914,958	\$130,200	13%	42%
Indiana	1,032,536	\$87,000	15%	52%
Tennessee	1,003,495	\$82,000	19%	28%
South Carolina	793,860	\$81,000	19%	51%

Sources: 2024 Common Core Data (National Center for Education Statistics); 2024 Median Family Income Among Households with Children in United States (Kids Count Data Center); Children in Poverty by Age Group in United States (Kids Count Data Center)

Student Identification Looks Different Across Districts



Sources: EdTrust Tennessee analysis of 2024-2025 TISA Interactive Dashboard Data (TN Comptroller of the Treasury) and 2024-2025 Community Eligibility Provision Annual Notification of State Educational Agencies (TDOE)

Upcoming Changes Could Affect Student Identification Moving Forward

Tennessee has been implementing **hold harmless funding** to stabilize the economically disadvantaged student counts for the last two school years.

- Based off 2022-23 student counts
- Included in the FY27 budget

Tennessee has expanded **Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE)** as of May 2026, which will change who is eligible for SNAP.

Coming **federal changes** to SNAP are likely to result in fewer students identified starting in 2027. Medicaid will also experience changes.

Policy Considerations: Stabilize Funding

Ensuring consistent funding for districts by minimizing large swings in student counts.

- How much **volatility** from year to year is desirable?
- What role could state agencies play in smoothing volatility from year to year?

Policy Considerations: Comprehensive and Adequate Identification

Comprehensive and adequate identification through the use of additional data sources to identify students.

- Some data sources are updated more regularly and quickly than others as conditions change. How should **data timeliness** factor into which data sources are prioritized?
- Should the definition continue to be based solely on **student-level indicators** or should **community indicators** also be considered?

Incorporating measures beyond public benefits participation to ensure all students experiencing economic hardship are reflected.

- What is the right balance between detailed data from multiple sources and the **burdens and costs** data collection may place on students, schools, and state agencies?

Recommendations

Identify a method to stabilize the student counts that Tennessee can begin to implement starting in the 2027-2028 school year.

Set a recommended timeline, such as the start of the 2030-2031 school year, when Tennessee should complete fiscal modeling and analysis to determine the optimal way to identify students from low-income backgrounds in the TISA formula.



Read and share the
full report.

edtrusttn.org/the-undercount-report

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