

Research Plan: Public Chapter 976, Acts of 2026, Early Childhood Education

Research Director: Michael Mount

Project Lead: Madison Thorn

Support: Jennifer Arzate

Deputy Executive Director Approval: Initial: *MMB* Date: June 2, 2026

Executive Director Approval: Initial: *CML* Date: June 2, 2026

Purpose

Conduct a comprehensive statewide study on public school administered early childhood education programs in Tennessee, including a statewide inventory of programs, the actual costs to local education agencies (LEAs) for operating those programs, current funding sources, an assessment of access and unmet need, a comparison with other states' programs, and policy options and recommendations for future program development and sustainable funding strategies.

Background

Tennessee's public schools administer several early childhood education programs, including voluntary pre-kindergarten (VPK), special education preschool programs, Head Start partnerships, and local government funded parent-pay programs, with many districts operating blended classrooms, serving children from different programs together to maximize resources. Despite the number of available programs, Tennessee ranks 33rd in the nation for pre-K access for four-year olds and 31st for three-year olds, measured by the percentage of each age group enrolled in state funded preschool during the 2024-25 school year, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research's *2025 State of Preschool Yearbook*. Funding for these programs comes from a combination of federal, state, and local funds and tuition and fees paid by families. Government spending on children ages zero to five is the least understood of all age groups in the state, according to Tennessee Department of Education's "Tennessee Early Childhood Care & Education Needs & Opportunities Assessment."

Tennessee launched the VPK program in 2005, which prioritizes four-year-olds considered at risk. Funding for VPK totaled \$113,911,200 for the 2024-25 school year, of

which \$85,505,734 were state grants for districts that meet the criteria for a highly qualified pre-K program, and 17,501 children were enrolled.

Head Start and Early Head Start are federally funded programs serving at-risk children from birth to age five from low-income families, generally those below the federal poverty level. During fiscal year 2023-24, 16,392 children were enrolled in both school-administered and non-school administered Head Start programs in Tennessee, according to the US Office of Head Start.

To help identify funding and program needs, Senator Massey and Representative Alexander amended Senate Bill 2361 and House Bill 2129 to direct the commission to conduct a comprehensive study on public school administered early childhood education programs in this state. The bill passed and became Public Chapter 976, Acts of 2026. The study is due September 1, 2027.

The Act states the study must include

1. a statewide inventory of public school administered early childhood education programs, including, but not limited to
 - a. voluntary pre-kindergarten programs,
 - b. early childhood education programs that serve students with special needs,
 - c. federally funded early childhood education programs such as a Title I program, and
 - d. school-administered head start or an even start programs;
2. actual operating costs to LEAs;
3. current funding sources and amount for each funding source;
4. assessment of program access, participation rates, and unmet needs;
5. comparison of the state's programs with the programs of other states; and
6. policy options and recommendations for future program development, anticipated needs, and sustainable funding strategies.

Define the Problem

Early childhood education programs in Tennessee are administered through multiple, overlapping funding streams with varying eligibility requirements and program standards, and it is not clear whether funding is sufficient to cover program costs or whether programs are meeting the needs of Tennessee's children and families.

Assemble Some Evidence

- Review referred legislation—Public Chapter 976, Acts of 2026, and interview the sponsors and any other member of the General Assembly who have an interest in early childhood education policy.
- Interview other stakeholders to determine what is driving this issue, including but not limited to:
 - Tennessee Department of Education
 - Tennessee Department of Children’s Services
 - Tennessee Department of Human Services
 - Tennessee Department of Disability and Aging
 - Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth
 - Comptroller’s Office of Research and Education Accountability
 - USDA Food and Nutrition Service regional office and other related federal agencies
 - Tennessee Association for Children’s Early Education
 - Tennessee Head Start Association, Tennesseans for Quality Early Education
 - Tennessee Council for Exceptional Children
 - Boys and Girls Club in Tennessee
 - Any other related statewide and regional advocacy and nonprofit groups
 - Tennessee Organization of School Superintendents
 - Tennessee Association of Elementary Principals
 - Tennessee School Boards Association
 - Any other related school leadership and governance organizations
 - Peabody Research Institute and Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center at Vanderbilt University
 - Brookings Institute
 - Tennessee County Services Association
 - Tennessee Municipal League
 - Local education agencies
 - Local governments

- Review Tennessee’s statutes and regulations relevant to early childhood education, and other topics germane to the study.
- Review existing programs designed to address this issue, and interview stakeholders involved with such programs.
- Review relevant federal statutes and regulations.
- Review similar laws, regulations, and programs in other states.
- Review relevant literature.
- Gather relevant data sets, including statistics related to the number, type, location, enrollment, and capacity of public school administered early childhood education programs in the state; the actual costs to LEAs for operating such programs; the current funding sources and amounts for each funding source; participation rates in, access to, and unmet needs for such programs; child outcome data related to program participation; and comparable data from other states.
- Review industry information on trends, best practices, and research in early childhood education program delivery, funding models, and policy development at state and national levels.

Proposed Research Timeline

- Problem statement and research plan (May 2026)
- Research
 - Assemble evidence (May-October 2026)
 - Construct alternatives and select criteria (November 2026)
 - Convene panel for discussion at the Fall 2026 commission meeting
 - Project outcomes, confront trade-offs, and select draft recommendations (November-December 2026)
- Storyboard, outline, and write the report (January-April 2027)
- Draft/Final report to commission for approval (Spring 2027 commission meeting)



State of Tennessee

PUBLIC CHAPTER NO. 976

SENATE BILL NO. 2361

By Massey, Campbell, Oliver

Substituted for: House Bill No. 2129

By Alexander, Maberry, Crawford, Littleton, Pearson

AN ACT to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 9 and Title 49, relative to pre-kindergarten.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE:

SECTION 1. Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 49, Chapter 1, Part 11, is amended by adding the following as a new section:

(a) The Tennessee advisory commission on intergovernmental relations (TACIR) shall conduct a comprehensive study on public school administered early childhood education programs in this state.

(b) The study must include:

(1) A statewide inventory of public school administered early childhood education programs, including, but not limited to, voluntary pre-kindergarten programs, early childhood education programs that serve students with special needs, federally funded early childhood education programs such as a Title I program, and a school-administered head start or an even start program;

(2) The actual costs to LEAs for operating early childhood education programs;

(3) The current funding sources and amount for each funding source to operate public school administered early childhood education programs;

(4) An assessment of the access to, participation rates in, and unmet needs for public school administered early childhood education programs;

(5) A comparison of public school administered early childhood education programs of other states with this state; and

(6) Policy options and recommendations for future program development, anticipated needs, and sustainable funding strategies for public school administered early childhood education programs.

(c) All relevant state and local agencies shall provide data and assistance to TACIR for the study conducted pursuant to this act, upon TACIR's request.

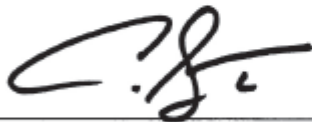
(d) TACIR shall submit its report and recommendations to the education committee of the senate and the committee of the house of representatives having jurisdiction over public school administered early childhood education programs no later than September 1, 2027.

SECTION 2. This act takes effect upon becoming a law, the public welfare requiring it.

SENATE BILL NO. 2361

PASSED: April 20, 2026


RANDY McNALLY
SPEAKER OF THE SENATE


CAMERON SEXTON, SPEAKER
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

APPROVED this 13th day of May 2026


BILL LEE, GOVERNOR