

The Tennessee Commission on Education Recovery and Innovation



Preliminary Report to the General Assembly on the Educational Systems of Tennessee during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Commissioners: Dr. Marie Chisholm-Burns, David Coffey, Todd Dickson, Youlanda Jones, Dr. Robert Christopher Jones, Frank Rothermel, Glenn Swift, Joey Vaughn Vice-Chair, Tara Scarlett Chair.

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## Introduction and Legal Authority

With the unprecedented spread of COVID-19 coronavirus, combined with the two tornadoes which hit the state of Tennessee in the spring of 2020, the Tennessee General Assembly took several steps to address the effects of this public health crisis on the state's educational system for both the short- and the long-term. Just days before taking a two-month emergency recess, the legislature passed measures granting emergency rulemaking authority to the State Board of Education and allowed the Tennessee Higher Education Commission to make changes to attendance, operational timeframes and structures, graduation requirements, and to alter rules and policies necessary to support the ongoing operations of Tennessee's school districts and institutions of higher education during this time of crisis.

On June 17, 2020, the House of Representatives joined their Senate colleagues in unanimously passing Senate Bill <sup>1</sup>1974 thereby creating the nine-member Tennessee Commission on Education Recovery and Innovation (ERIC) to examine the short-and long-term systemic effects that the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters of 2020 have had on the state's educational systems. This act later became Public Chapter 792 and recognized in law that the pandemic is expected to affect students for the next twelve years. It charged the new commission to:

*"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 is broken down into 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 first of the three, is required by the statute and designed to provide an accurate snapshot of Tennessee's educational situation. The commission recognizes that as of December 2020, there remain informational gaps and limited data available to reflect the impact of COVID-19 on Tennessee's educational system. We plan on updating this report by **09/15/2021**.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://publications.tnsosfiles.com/acts/111/pub/pc0792.pdf>.

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## National Context of Tennessee Education Pre-Pandemic

Over the past decade, Tennessee has made great strides in education, but 2020 challenged the entire ecosystem. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a crucial data point in comparing Tennessee students' academic performance with other states, our K-12 system sits in the middle of the pack. The 2019 NAEP scores revealed that Tennessee was on-par with the national average in 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading (35% at or above proficiency, equal to the national average) and 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Math (40%, just one point below the national average of 41%).<sup>2</sup> Each state, district, and school has responded differently to the COVID-19 pandemic, and at this time, there is no exact comparison of actions.

According to the Lumina Foundation, the state's current post-secondary attainment rate stands at 43%, several points behind the national average of 51.3%.<sup>3</sup> Tennessee has a goal to see 55% of Tennesseans attain a post-secondary degree or credential by 2025. TN Promise and TN Reconnect programs have helped considerably in that effort, and the college and universities quickly pivoted to support their students as they left campus.

The effects on students of all ages, families, and educators throughout the education spectrum will continue to be reported and researched for years to come. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced unprecedented levels of innovation and adaptation, and it is essential to remember that Tennessee is a state that, for more than a decade, has mostly been unafraid to do what's right in the name of better student outcomes.

### Tennessee's Pandemic Timeline

March 2: Middle Tennessee tornados

March 5: 1<sup>st</sup> COVID-19 case in TN

March 24: Governor Lee recommended school closures through April 24

### K-12

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown a spotlight on decades of educational inequities and increased focus on operational services that our school districts provide for their communities. The COVID-19 crisis has revealed just how many other services that schools provide for their communities. Many schools act as a social services conduit issuing electronic benefit transfer (EBT) for students and families, or providing full meals, even when school is closed to teaching and learning. Last spring, Tennessee received more nutritional waivers to keep students fed than any other state in the country. It should also be noted that the General Assembly and Governor made no cuts to the BEP Funding formula for K-12 in the 2020-21 budget.

When the pandemic began, many of Tennessee's districts, schools, and educators were not set up to teach virtually. Students and families were unprepared for the heavy responsibility of remote learning. Many students lacked devices to access virtual learning, some schools did not have quality virtual curriculum readily available, and some educators lacked both the technology and expertise required to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://tnscore.org/tennessee-is-approaching-the-national-average-on-the-nations-report-card/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.luminafoundation.org/state/tennessee/>.

teach and connect with students electronically. Simultaneously, many districts did have strategies in place to make the immediate transitions necessary. Across the state, Tennessee's educators, parents, and administrators worked tirelessly to adapt to this new learning environment that changed from day-to-day and week-to-week, often without the necessary tools or broadband access needed to make this a smooth transition.

Some say that broadband access is this generation's required utility, and the pandemic has just uncovered the real need no matter where you live – urban, suburban, or rural. Due to this access crisis, the state passed through \$65 million in federal Corona Virus Relief Fund grants to supply devices and Wi-Fi/ Mi-Fi devices to students and educators. Students walked out of school in the spring into a new online learning environment, as did teachers and administrators. TDOE tried to help with several professional development programs, but as the dust settles, it's becoming clear that we will need to set new expectations with all our educator preparation programs to ensure the next generation of educators are prepared to teach in the virtual classroom setting in equal measure to a more traditional one.

Tennessee has 147 school districts with varying numbers of schools and educators supporting about one million students. As a result, quality of instruction, quality of the curriculum, and teaching consistency and student experience vary across Tennessee's districts.

## **Data**

This report used two primary data sources: TDOE report card and an ERIC district survey. To be clear, TDOE does not have current data on the effects of COVID-19 on student outcomes. As we are still in the midst of a school year and a pandemic, this report shares historical data pre-pandemic with some additional national context when relevant. As more data becomes available the ERIC will update this report.

In November 2020, all 147 Tennessee superintendents received a voluntary survey from the Education Recovery and Innovation Commission. This survey required districts to identify themselves as urban, rural, or suburban but did not require them to disclose the district's name, nor did the survey require respondents to answer all questions (a full list of question is listed in the appendix). Eighty-one or 55.1% of the districts responded, of those, 6.17% urban, 17.28% suburban, 76.54% rural. Readers will notice that the “N” count for each of the charts represents the number of respondents answering the specific question.

## **Federal CARES Act Provisions K-12**

The federal CARES act provided funding to Tennessee in three categories. The first was Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding of \$260 million for districts, \$234 million that passed through directly to districts based on the proportion of Title I students. The remaining was used by TDOE on a variety of resources. The second funding category was the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER), consisting of \$64 million directed by the Governor to various partner groups and strategic initiatives. The last category was the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF), which had \$155 million for K-12 to provide grants for technology, Internet connectivity, and educator personal protective equipment.

## K-12 Operations

The pandemic disrupted teaching and instructional models, caused a sudden shutdown of school buildings, and quickly forced extended building closures for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year in many districts. Districts had to immediately shift how they provided instruction to their students, resulting in various innovations among systems to ensure students still had access to learning opportunities.

Two of the most considerable barriers include access to technology and high-speed connectivity. Though the state did award \$65 million in grants supporting access to devices and Internet connectivity, Tennessee is behind in our broad technology adoption for education. Lack of high-speed Internet and national supply-chain delays in device orders may have contributed to many of these delays.

Governor Lee dedicated \$200 million federal dollars in addition to the direct district dollars distributed according to the CARES Act to support K-12 education. This helped close the technology device gap. However, there is a concern with the ongoing cost of technology maintenance once the grant and federal dollars end. In addition to the lack of high-speed Internet in some areas, the monthly cost of Internet service can also be prohibitive for students whose families are experiencing financial hardships due to COVID-19 or for other reasons. Thus, even where high-speed Internet is available, economically disadvantaged students will likely not have regular access to it.

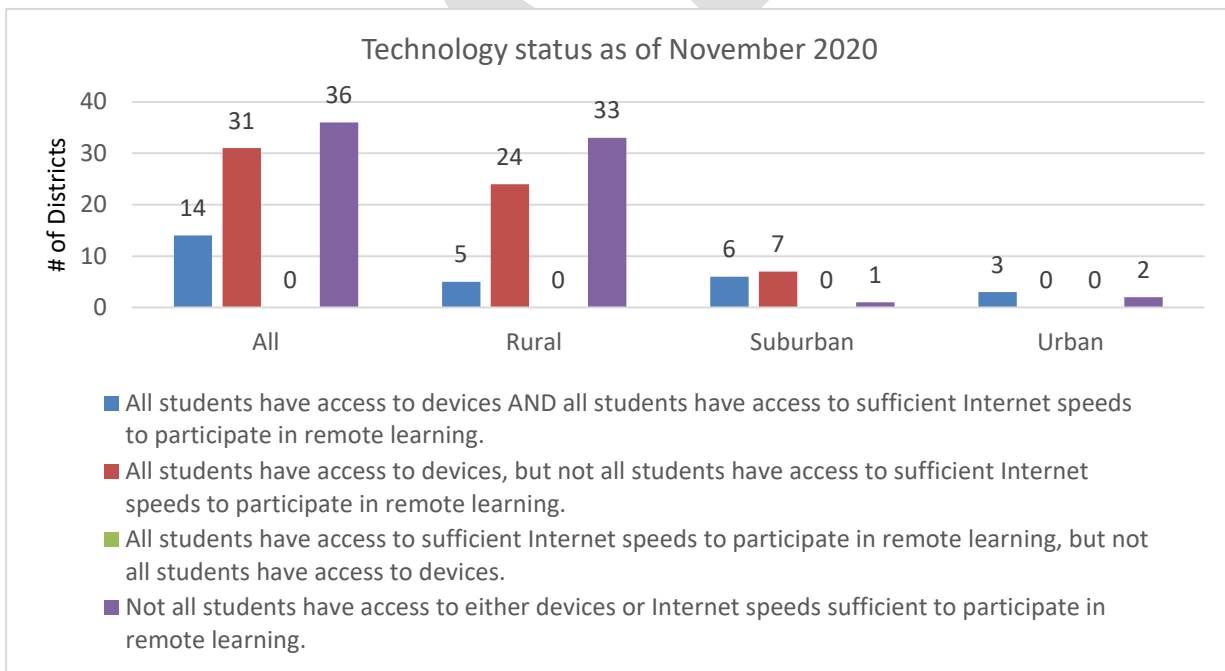


Figure 1  
Source: ERIC district survey  
N = 81

As districts shifted their focus to the start of the 2020-21 school year, they had more time to plan how instruction would occur. While some districts chose to delay the start of their school year, either due to COVID-19 cases or increased preparation time for teachers, all districts had officially started instruction by the end of August. By the end of September, the vast majority of districts, more than 90%, were operating a parent-choice model, meaning that each family decided whether to attend school in-person

or virtually. Within this model, ERIC district survey respondents noted that an average of eighty to ninety percent of their students attended in-person.

Beyond the complexities of operating both in-person and virtual instruction, whole districts and countless schools within communities have had to completely shift their instructional models as COVID-19 infection rates have fluctuated or caused viral exposures within buildings. This has placed high levels of stress on individuals at all levels, including district leaders, teachers, students, and families.

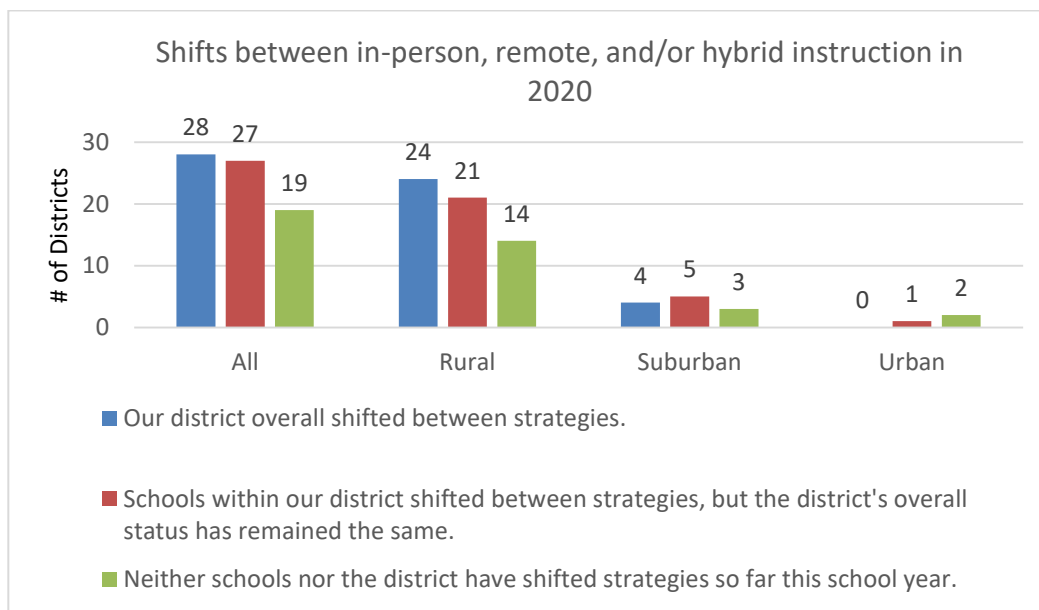


Figure 2  
Source: ERIC district survey  
N = 74

### Elementary Academics

Several statewide academic performance measures including TNReady, ACT scores and graduation rates indicate K-12 progress has stalled. TNReady<sup>4</sup> test data for grades 3 and 8 over the past three years, shows there has been little to no achievement growth in math and English language arts (ELA). A strong early education sets a clear course for any student who engages. We want our students to know the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic so they can thrive for the rest of their education and career. According to an Annie E. Casey Foundation report, one in six children who are not proficient at reading in third grade will not graduate from high school on time<sup>5</sup>. The above-mentioned K-12 data shows our pre-pandemic achievement levels. We will know the pandemic effects on these data points after the results of the spring 2021 TNReady assessments are available.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.tn.gov/content/tn/education/data/data-downloads.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.aecf.org/resources/double-jeopardy/>



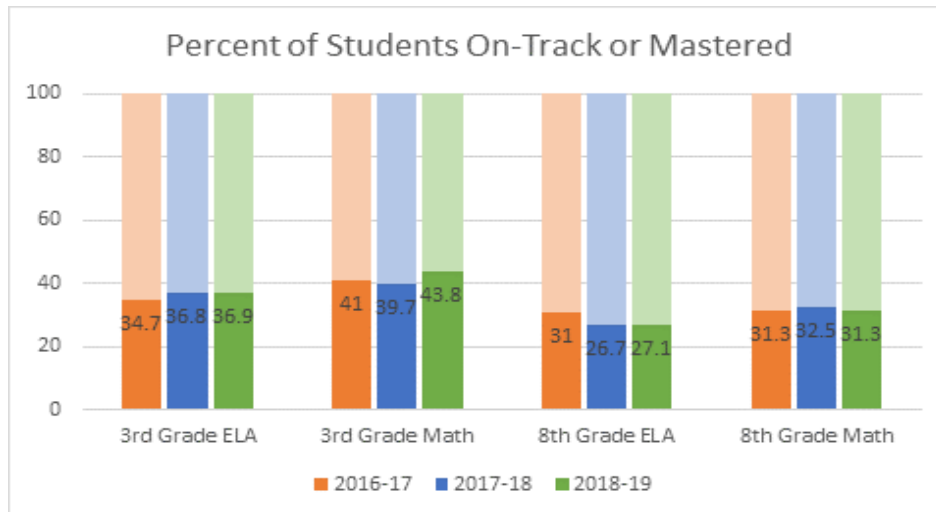


Figure 3

\*Lighter regions represent students not on-track/mastered TNReady Data

Source: <https://www.tn.gov/content/tn/education/data/data-downloads.html>

During this time, TDOE did partner with PBS to launch a reading series for younger students and a ReadyRosie application. It's unclear the use or viewership of these programs, though they were widely available.

### High School

Tennessee uses a "Ready Graduate" measure to determine if students are prepared for college or career post-graduation. Specifically, this is measured based on ACT score, completing early post-secondary opportunities combined with industry certifications or being prepared to serve in the military. The ACT is a nationally normed college assessment and is required to graduate high school in Tennessee. Scoring a 21 or above shows that a student is academically ready for college. Due to COVID-19, ACT spring 2020 testing was canceled, but many districts implemented alternative testing opportunities for the 2020-21 senior class. Post-secondary admission and scholarship funds typically rely on ACT scores, so it's vital for future planning that students can take the test. According to the ERIC district survey, many districts that held in-person instruction during fall 2020 offered expanded ACT preparation and free ACT dates for 2021 seniors.

Over the past three years, Tennessee continues to see graduation rates of close to 90%. Yet only 40% of students are ready for a college experience based on the TDOE's "ready graduate" metric. In looking at last spring's graduation and ready graduate levels, there was not much change from the previous year even though many schools operating virtually. During this time, an emergency rule passed by the State Board of Education (SBE) froze student grades for seniors based on that last day of in-person attendance. That meant that the grade could only improve; it could not get worse.

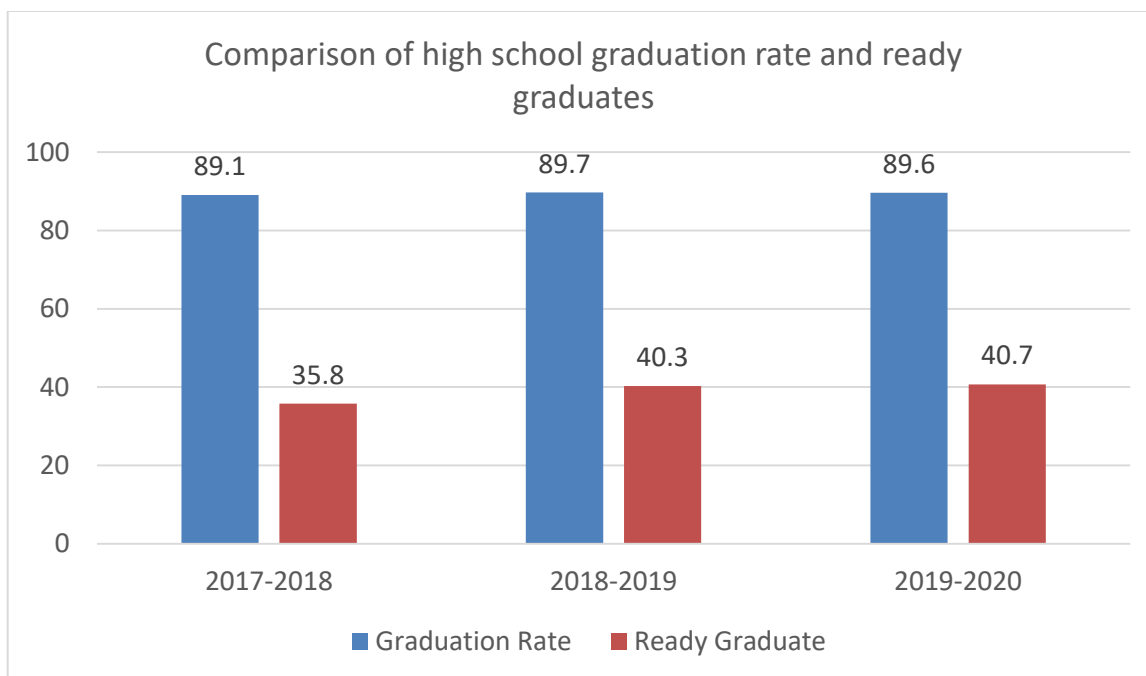


Figure 4

Note: "Ready Graduate" uses a score of 21 or above on the ACT or the completion of 2-4 early post-secondary opportunities combined with industry certifications or military readiness to determine whether students are ready for college and careers after high school.

Source: TDOE

As a result of extended school closures and remote learning in spring 2020, the state dropped all testing requirements for the 2019-20 school year, including both TNReady and ACT. Due to a lack of assessment data from the 2019-20 school year, measuring students' progress in the 2020-21 school year will be more difficult. We know that Tennessee did make a great effort to support some of the most vulnerable by providing \$8 million in grants to support its students with disabilities. Tennessee was the only state to do this.

Two national research organizations have tried to quantify the effects pandemic learning loss has had on students. First, The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University released a report titled *Estimates of Learning Loss in the 2019-2020 School Year*.<sup>6</sup> This report estimates a 50% drop in third-grade reading levels and a 65% decrease in third-grade math levels nationwide. If accurate, these results are deplorable. However, it is essential to note that this report used previous testing data and statistical calculations to estimate the impact COVID-19 has had on student learning. The crux of CREDO's data relies on the assumption that students received zero instruction from the time school buildings closed. At least in Tennessee, we know that districts, schools, and teachers worked with assiduity to continue providing students with instruction during the spring semester.

The second report, McKinsey & Company's *COVID-19 and Student Learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime*, attempts to quantify learning loss by assuming that K-12 students are receiving varying levels of virtual instruction: average, low-quality, or no instruction. The report estimates that if remote instruction were to continue until January 2021, students would lose between 3 to 14 months of

<sup>6</sup> [https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/short\\_brief\\_on\\_learning\\_loss\\_final\\_v.3.pdf](https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/short_brief_on_learning_loss_final_v.3.pdf)

learning, depending on the quality of virtual instruction. While the McKinsey report is a national report, it reflects what happened in Tennessee where a vast majority of students have received instruction of some kind since the spring school closures. McKinsey's piece reminds us that low-income, black and Hispanic students are most likely to experience learning loss. They are less likely to have access to the devices, high-speed Internet, and quiet learning spaces needed for successful remote learning. This loss of learning translates into decreased future earnings, according to McKinsey. Their report suggests that a pause in large-scale in-class learning until January 2021 will cost the average white student \$1,348 per year throughout a 40-year working life, \$2,186 per year for a Black student, and \$1,809 per year for a Hispanic student<sup>7</sup>.

According to the 81 districts responding to the ERIC district survey, Tennessee students lost, on average, forty to fifty instructional days (defined as a minimum of 6.5 hours of instruction per day).

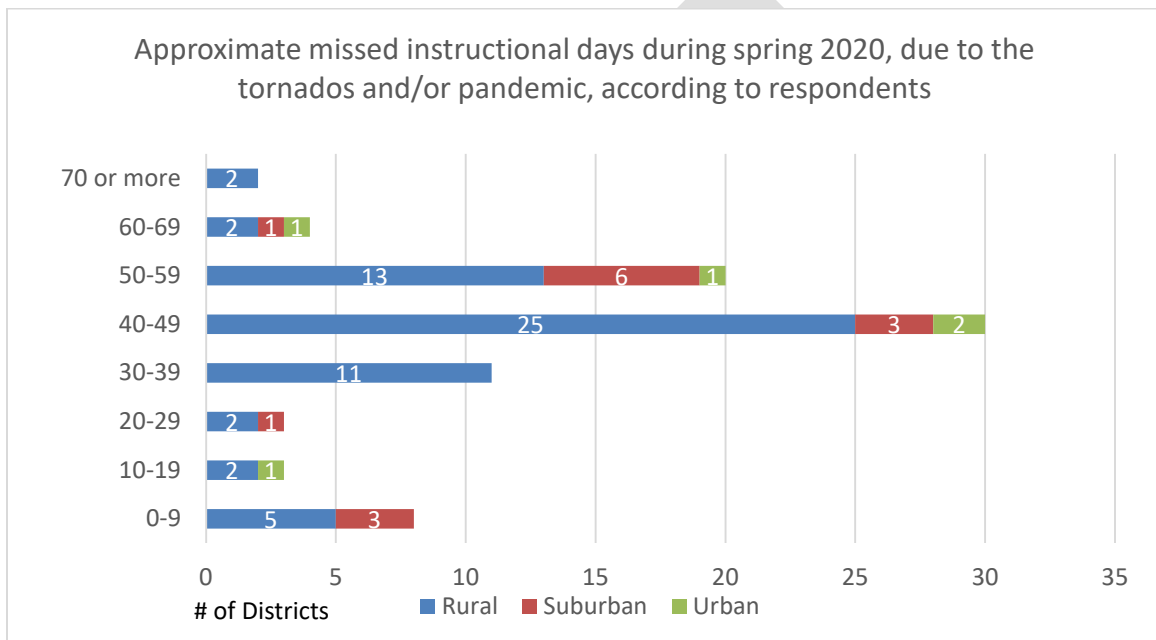


Figure 5  
N = 81  
Source: ERIC district survey results

This survey also revealed that responding districts provided a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities from the time buildings closed through the end of the school year. Asynchronous learning is a self-paced, virtual model that does not require real-time engagement. Synchronous learning is scheduled participation in real-time virtual classrooms.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime>.

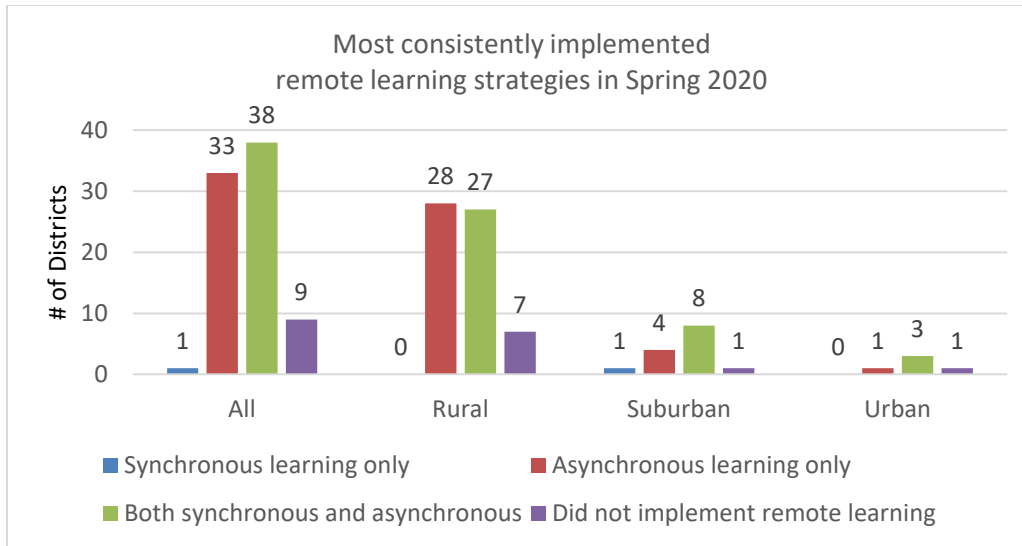


Figure 6  
 N = 81  
 Source: ERIC district survey results

Because state-wide Spring 2020 assessment data is unavailable, it is more important than ever for districts to administer and evaluate local benchmark testing. Of the 81 districts that responded to the ERIC survey, the vast majority administered fall benchmark testing, whether virtually or in-person. Student performance varied from district-to-district, but only one of the districts reported consistently higher results than previous years. Brookings Institute released a nationwide year over year comparison of academic achievement and growth where the sourced data was from four million MAP assessments<sup>8</sup>. Reading achievement is very similar to the previous year, with some students making gains during 2020. Math, on the other hand, is showing lower achievement and lower growth overall. Brookings also notes, this is all still preliminary information, and we have a lot more to learn.

The Center for Reinventing Public Education highlighted Tennessee as one of only 12 states in the country to require instructional plans from districts. A Continuous Learning Plan process was a strong partnership between the State Board of Education (SBE), TDOE, and Tennessee's school districts. It was a critical step towards ensuring substantial opportunities for children this year and an excellent example of state-wide partnership and collaboration. During the spring and summer of 2020, a great deal of work was undertaken by districts and teachers across the state to lay out how they would continue to teach students in the pandemic environment.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/12/03/how-is-covid-19-affecting-student-learning/>.

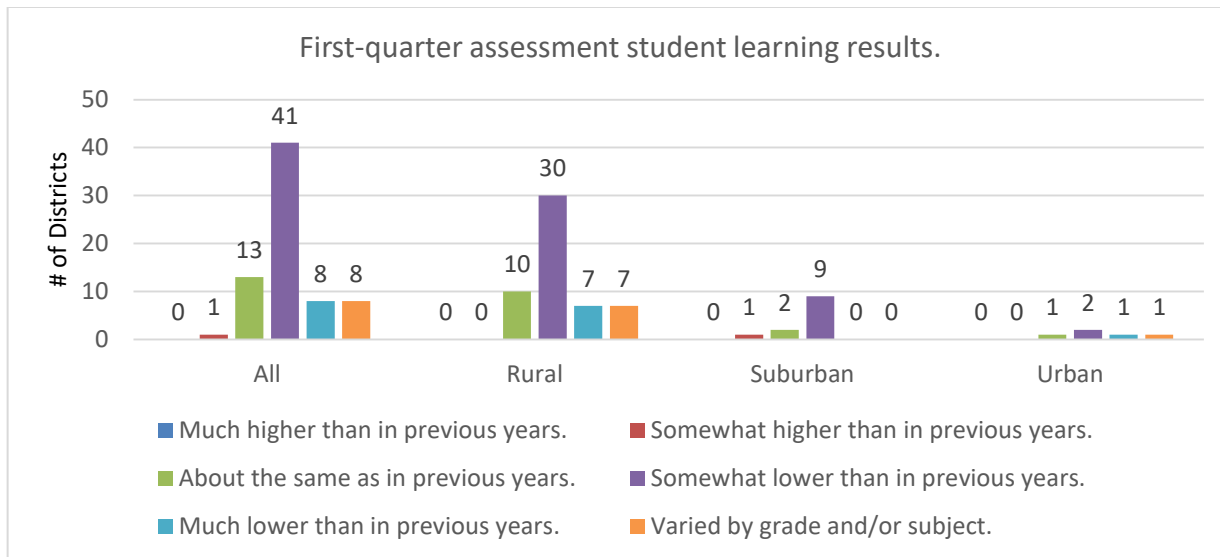


Figure 7  
 N = 71  
 Source: ERIC district survey results

Although the full extent of learning loss due to COVID-19 school closures is still being measured, anecdotal evidence suggests that the pandemic has negatively affected students. ***Tennessee must administer state-wide testing in the 2020-21 school year so that academic performance can be carefully evaluated to accurately inform which educational practices and innovations will best serve students moving forward.***

Currently there is no uniform way of collecting district mid-year benchmark assessment data across all the Tennessee districts. Changing that would require legislation. There is great work being done across the state by educators and districts, but not having a central data repository makes it hard to analyze and share best practices, and the most effective strategies which could inform practices for all of Tennessee's teachers.

### K-12 Enrollment

We suspect that the pandemic has affected student enrollment; however, obtaining an accurate picture of enrollment trends mid-year is difficult. Based on the annual October 1 enrollment count for the 2020-21 school year, the state experienced a projected decrease in public-school enrollment of 35,000 students. These are projections, not final numbers, and are typically finalized in the late spring by the TDOE. However, this, and other factors led the Basic Education Program (BEP) Review Committee, in its 2020 report, to recommend that the General Assembly and administration hold school districts "harmless" for the 2021 budget by allocating the same funds as the 2020 school year. At this point, it's unclear for sure where the estimated 35,000 students have re-enrolled, if at all. As more enrollment data becomes available, it may be possible to get a clearer picture.

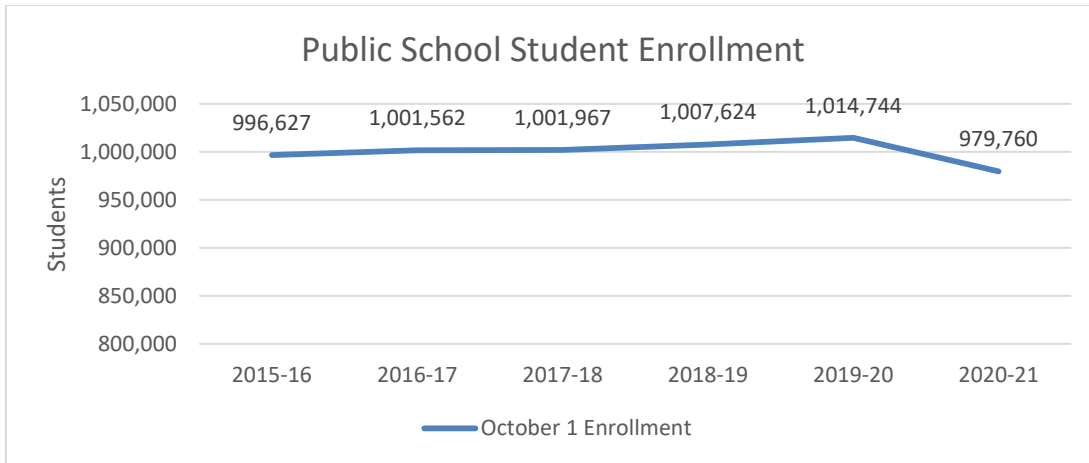


Figure 8  
Source: TDOE

According to anecdotal evidence provided by directors of schools on the ERIC district survey, the largest decrease in public-school enrollment is due to more students homeschooling. Directors cited parents' unwillingness to expose children to COVID-19, coupled with dissatisfaction with virtual options provided by the districts, as the impetus behind families choosing to homeschool. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, fewer than 4% of students in the country are homeschooled. Though there are theories of a mass movement to this education method, TDOE reports 11,096 students in Tennessee withdrew to become home schoolers. Owing to the varied nature of home-schooling programs, there is no state-wide criteria for all homeschool curricula.<sup>9</sup>

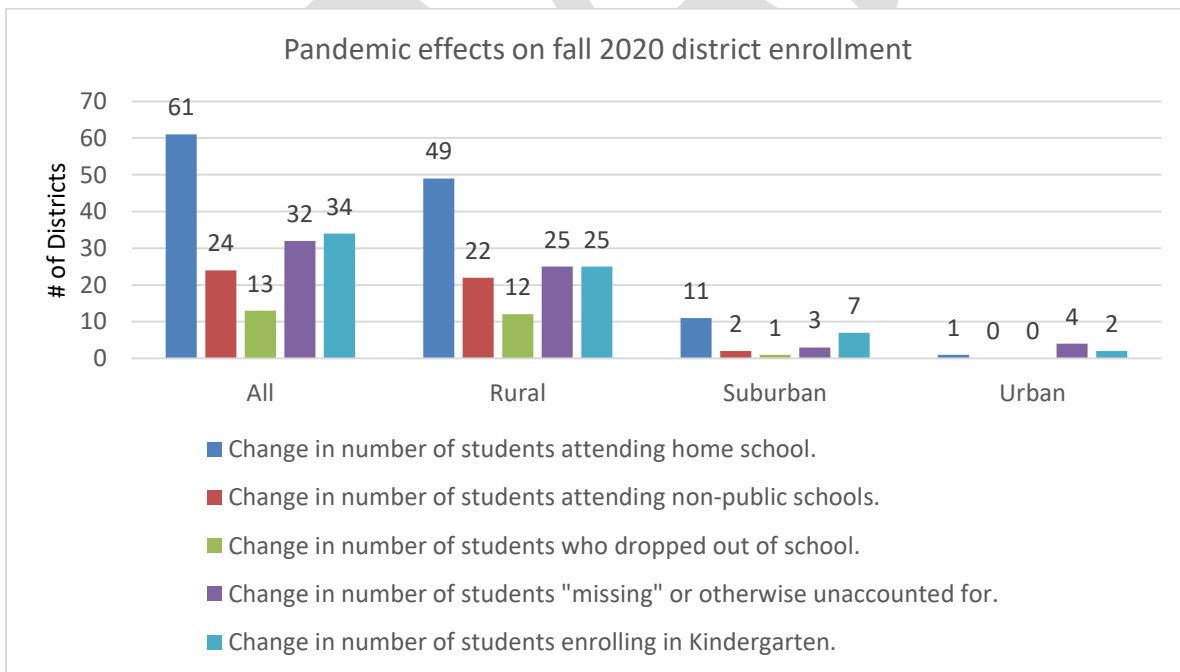


Figure 9  
N = 76. Please note respondents could select more than one answer including "no change" which is not reflected in the graph above.

<sup>9</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017102.pdf>

Source: ERIC district survey results

The Tennessee Home Education Association offered some insights into the benefits of homeschooling, particularly within the pandemic context.

*... reasons and concerns expressed by parents who transferred their children from a public or private school to home education are as follows: 1. My student is spending too many hours each day sitting before a computer. 2. The virtual manner of learning is not working for my student. 3. Will my student's progress be accepted by the public school if he/she returns to a public-school setting? 4. My student is suffering emotional stress due to the regimen of long hours each day before a computer. Some parents indicated from seven to 10 hours before the computer screen."*

Another concern for directors is "missing" students; these include previously enrolled students who did not re-enroll this year or students enrolled in virtual learning who have not attended. Districts are continuing to track down these students, but it means this data will continue to fluctuate. Several districts reported a drop in Kindergarten students, but many directors added that they anticipate these students will enroll in Kindergarten next school year.

The final area of consideration is the number of students dropping out. We will not have a clear picture of this data until the end of the 2020-2021 school year, but some directors provided anecdotal evidence pointing to students who are eighteen years old dropping out. These students may seek employment to help support their families or possibly pursue their high school equivalency (HiSET). While we cannot use last year's graduation rates as evidence due to the changes in course requirements and grading policies unique to the pandemic, some directors stated that they anticipate the lowest graduation rate in years for the 2020-2021 school year.

### **K-12 Staffing**

In addition to enrollment, staffing is one of the most challenging data points to measure before the end of the school year. Because numerous factors contribute to K-12 staffing, it will be almost impossible to definitively measure how the pandemic may have affected this. The State Board of Education (SBE) and TDOE granted additional educator licensure flexibility to allow more out-of-state teachers to teach in Tennessee. "Grow Your Own" grants totaling \$2 million were used in some districts to help staffing concerns. In the meantime, we have limited anecdotal evidence provided by the directors in the ERIC district survey. Overall, districts shared that they did not significantly change the number of vacancies for licensed educators compared to previous years. A few noted somewhat higher or much higher vacancies, but we are unable to connect those directly to COVID-19 at this time.

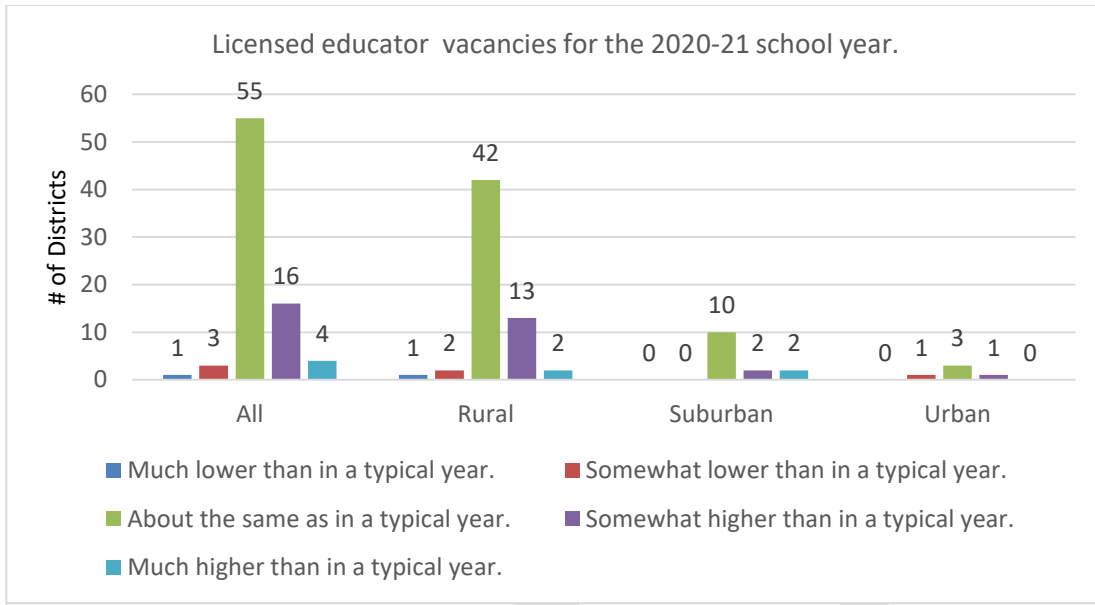


Figure 10  
 N = 79  
 Source: ERIC district survey

### Tennessee Higher Education: Contextual Overview

For the better part of the last decade, Tennessee has arguably led the nation on higher education reforms related to access, affordability, and cross-sector alignment of degree pathways. With the implementation of the Complete College Tennessee Act Of 2010 (CCTA) and the launch of the Tennessee Promise and the Tennessee Reconnect programs, Tennessee effectively challenged the policy boundaries around higher education funding and the socio-cultural biases ingrained in our perception of higher education. They facilitated the reemergence of technical post-secondary education. In the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, Tennessee had seen unprecedented growth in the number of students completing the federal financial aid application (FAFSA), applying for the Tennessee Promise scholarship, or in the case of adult and non-traditional students—the Tennessee Reconnect. Similarly, across the whole of Tennessee higher education, enrollment trends, retention rates year-over-year, and graduation rates have steadily increased across Tennessee higher education.

Across all three higher education sectors, as a result of the outcomes-based funding model in the CCTA and the three primary financial aid programs - the HOPE Scholarship along with TN Promise and TN Reconnect - Tennessee students and institutions have seen greater access and opportunity in addition to more significant funding from the state. Due to this steady growth and state support, Tennessee has seen five years of the lowest tuition increases in the modern era. These policy efforts, coupled with a re-imagined State Higher Education Master Plan, provided the framework for a THEC initiative to facilitate maximum alignment between higher education, local and state workforce needs, and related state initiatives and agencies: Future of Work (FOW).

Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) had only recently begun to convene and engage with stakeholders around FOW when Governor Bill Lee announced the first diagnosed case of COVID-19 in Tennessee on March 5 and just a week later, declared a state of emergency. By Mid-March, all public universities and most Tennessee Bureau of Regents (TBR) institutions had announced a suspension of



classes or extended Spring Break to allow more time for developing appropriate protocols for transitioning to emergency remote teaching.

### **Student/Institution Effects: Transitions and Resourcing**

On or around March 16, every public post-secondary institution had notified its student and faculty community of the decision to suspend on-campus instruction indefinitely and transition to a fully online instructional model where possible. Most Universities informed faculty of new work-from-home measures with exceptions for specific critical leadership and facilities personnel. Resident students on each university campus were strongly encouraged to return home, given the ongoing shelter-in-place orders from the administration and the shift to online course delivery. Those students with no viable alternative to campus residence for the term could remain subject to heightened restrictions on movement throughout campus.

By mid-April, all universities elected to prorate or refund students for housing, dining, and other campus access fees impacted by the transition to emergency remote learning. In total, universities refunded nearly \$50 million to students for these services. Eventually, all universities and most TBR institutions announced plans to remain in remote learning posture through the summer semesters. The institutions would use the following two months to assess strategies for returning to campus and setting up fall semester planning scenarios. In early May, for example, East Tennessee State University announced that the Future Operations Workgroup would develop a plan on how to return to academic, campus, and business operations safely. Chattanooga State Community College announced return-to-campus phase-in plans to allow support personnel and faculty to return to campus safely. And UT Knoxville convened the Re-Imagining Fall Task Force to brainstorm how the campus would re-open in the fall.

In the weeks following Governor Lee's initial announcements and with the escalating nature of the pandemic, the Governor chartered the Unified Command Group (UCG) and charged it with the management of the pandemic and related activities. The THEC Executive Director and other staff members have served on the UCG since its inception and have been responsible for coordinating with campuses and multiple state agencies in preparation for the fall return to campus and all other campus COVID-19 related issues. As part of this planning, the Higher Education Liaison coordinated with the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) to execute tabletop exercises at every Tennessee Higher Education Institution or System and conducted numerous calls with each campus to identify gaps in their respective COVID-19 emergency response plans.

#### *Tabletop Exercises Overview:*

##### **Objectives:**

1. *Assess the institutional Emergency Response Plan in the context of COVID-19*
2. *Assess how the existing campus structure will address the challenges of COVID-19*
3. *Assess how institutions will coordinate their response with external partners (i.e., area hospitals & public health agencies)*
4. *Identify the next steps in the planning process.*
5. *Clarify lines of accountability and communication to enable a timely, coordinated, and effective response*

**Outcomes:** *As a direct result of participating in these exercises, every campus identified gaps in their planning, response, and/or coordination concerning COVID-19. Since those identified gaps differed in depth and difficulty, campuses resolved what they could during the exercise and*

*resolved the more difficult or complex issues in follow-up planning meetings. THEC created a Lessons Learned Document that outlined common challenges and best practices to facilitate the sharing of knowledge.*

By mid-summer, most universities had established on-campus working groups to determine viable working plans for students' return. Most of the institutions moved forward with an altered fall semester, in which academic courses would not break for Labor Day and Fall break, and students would not return to in-person classes after Thanksgiving. All final exams would be online. Further, institutions deployed different modalities for instruction:

1. In-Person/On-Campus: Given that not all courses can be facilitated virtually, some classes and clinical instruction will require in-person learning but with sufficient precautions.
2. Hybrid: Courses may be taught by remote learning except in specific competencies that must be taught in-person. This would also include course sequences that could be deployed using both virtual and on-campus learning as a mechanism to minimize class sizes.
3. Online/Remote:
  - a. Asynchronous: all student learning will occur virtually but shall be self-paced and require no real-time engagement within the overall academic calendar.
  - b. Synchronous: student learning will be scheduled for a specific day and time for participation in real-time virtual classrooms.

For the remainder of the summer, universities and community colleges implemented safety protocols in coordination with the Tennessee Pledge's [Access Guidelines for Higher Education](#), planned for the expansion of testing upon student return, reserved quarantine space for students potentially exposed to COVID-19, and implemented mask requirements for all students and personnel.

The transition to online course delivery presented an additional disruptive obstacle to many students across the state living in WIFI-challenged or broadband deficient areas. To facilitate student learning irrespective of the learning environment, most universities and community colleges established laptop loan programs and provided mobile broadband hotspots, primarily for students in rural areas with no personal or local access to broadband Internet. However, students in urban and suburban areas of the state are also dealing with minimal access to Internet services. Several universities partnered with nonprofit agencies, businesses, and libraries, expanding Wi-Fi capabilities so students could connect remotely from their parking lots. Additionally, campus resources related to IT help desks and digital library services remained operational for students, providing full technical support and access to all available learning research resources, respectively.

## Fall 2020: Student Enrollment Trends

All public universities and community colleges have submitted to THEC the fall 2020 14<sup>th</sup> day aggregate enrollment data. The preliminary results indicate a state-wide decrease of 8,355 in total student headcount, a 3.7% decline compared to fall 2019 14<sup>th</sup> day enrollment. Specifically, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic appears to have primarily affected enrollment in our community colleges.

The TBR reports 78,772 students enrolled in community colleges this fall, a decrease of 9,046 students. No Tennessee community colleges reported an increase in students year over year. This decline mirrors national trends: analysis by the National Student Clearinghouse found public 2-year enrollment for summer 2020, the most recent nationwide data available, down 5.6% year over year. One critical factor in this decline is the significant number of adult learners who have been economically impacted by the pandemic. Adult and non-traditional learners can make up between 40 to 60 percent of the student headcount at a community college. We know that adult learners often face obstacles associated with work schedules, transportation, food insecurity, and childcare. These factors have been compromised and exacerbated for the thousands of our current TN Reconnect enrollees who have to make hard decisions about work and school priorities.

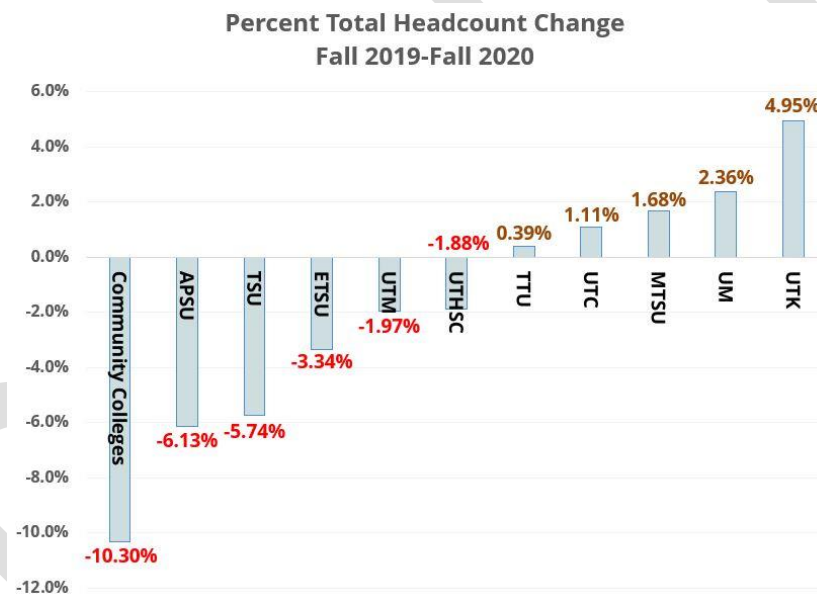


Figure 11

Overall, headcount enrollment at the University of Tennessee (UT) institutions increased 2.7% over last fall, with substantial variance across institutions. Undergraduate enrollment at UT institutions is up 2.3%, while graduate student enrollment is up 4.0%. Among locally governed institutions (LGIs), notable increases occurred at both the University of Memphis and Middle Tennessee State University (2.4% and 1.7% increases in overall enrollment, respectively). Graduate student enrollment, up 5.7% overall, bolsters LGI enrollment, while undergraduate student enrollment is down 1.2%. Only Tennessee State University (up 2.1%) and the University of Memphis (relatively flat but up 0.02%) register an increase in undergraduate enrollment. Overall, the LGIs are down less than a percent from fall 2019 14<sup>th</sup> day enrollment.

## **Fiscal Implications for Students: Tuition & Financial Aid**

Upon the Governor's announcement of a "Declared Emergency," THEC worked with leaders in the General Assembly to stabilize the financial implications facing students and institutions at the outset of the pandemic. Students were informed of abbreviated semesters, restricted housing, housing closures, and distance learning—each of these carries critical financial implications for them personally and for their student standing. The legislature adopted Public Chapter 632, which granted specific authority to the THEC/TSAC Executive Director to approve waivers for individual relevant statutory and rule requirements.

Public Chapter 632: the authority to temporarily suspend, modify, or waive any deadline or other nonacademic requirement in statute, rule, or policy of any financial aid program..." for a specified period of time as determined by the Executive Director of TSAC.

- *Operationalized to Date:*
  - *Deferred requirement for TN Promise Summer Community Service (3/25/2020)*
  - *Modified GPA calculations for Lottery Scholarship Programs (3/26/2020)*
  - *Suspended interest accrual and deadlines for loan-scholarships (4/1/2020)*
  - *TN Promise Fall Community Service (5/28/2020)*
  - *Qualifying ACT Exam Scores (7/16/2020)*

Every higher education institution, and the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC), reconsidered campus and financial aid policies to provide relief to students whose academic performance might suffer due to the transition to emergency remote learning. For example, in April, most of the institutions implemented pass/fail extensions, granting students the ability to reassess their progress within an altered classroom experience without causing undue damage to their cumulative grade point averages. Likewise, as noted in the graphic above, TSAC made several substantive changes and allowances within TN Promise and the HOPE Scholarship to help students avoid the loss of crucial scholarship funding due to grades, timing, and altered attendance measures.

## **Fiscal Implications for Higher Education Institutions: State Funding & Tuition Revenues**

While a full analysis of the fiscal impact from COVID-19 pandemic will require additional longitudinal impact data, below is a snapshot of the most immediate fiscal impacts as of October 2020 for each university, community college, and TCAT. The first column reports funds returned to students in the Spring and Summer semesters in response to the move to emergency remote learning. These refunds include prorated housing and dining fees. The federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act stipulated that the institutional portion of the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) could be used to reimburse such refunds. However, for nearly every university, the total aid available did not meet the full refunds required.

The second column reports any known revenue loss and actual expenditures from the Spring and Summer semester due to the pandemic. Lost tuition revenue from reduced enrollments and reduced auxiliary (e.g., dining, housing, athletics) utilization are included for revenue loss. Actual expenditures include, among others, instruction and student support services and required cleaning and PPE protection. Finally, the third column reports projected revenue loss and expenses for the fall semester.

Most significant for universities are lost housing and dining revenue and, for the University of Memphis and UT Knoxville specifically, athletic revenue.

The primary cause of revenue loss for the community colleges is lost tuition dollars, as community college enrollment is down nearly 10 percent from the previous fall semester. In total, the combined actual and projected financial hit to all public higher education institutions as of October 2020 surpasses \$330 million.

COVID19 Financial Impacts - October 2020

Institutions	Spring & Summer Refunds <sup>1</sup>	Spring & Summer Revenue Loss & Actual Expenditures <sup>2</sup>	Fall Estimated Revenue Loss & Expenditures <sup>3</sup>	Total
<b>LGIs</b>				
APSU	\$ 2,348,139	\$ 2,806,432	\$ 6,549,300	\$ 11,703,871
ETSU	\$ 3,460,000	\$ 3,020,000	\$ 7,068,000	\$ 13,548,000
MTSU	\$ 1,901,397	\$ 10,038,000	\$ 13,002,000	\$ 24,941,397
TSU	\$ 3,877,000	\$ 6,872,660	\$ 23,679,000	\$ 34,428,660
TTU	\$ 3,252,783	\$ 5,261,614	\$ 3,710,443	\$ 12,224,840
UM	\$ 4,083,000	\$ 17,996,353	\$ 22,763,000	\$ 44,842,353
<b>LGI Total</b>	<b>\$ 18,922,319</b>	<b>\$ 45,995,059</b>	<b>\$ 76,771,743</b>	<b>\$ 141,689,121</b>
<b>UT Institutions</b>				
UTC	\$ 5,938,000	\$ 2,357,965	\$ 9,795,102	\$ 18,091,068
UTK	\$ 21,251,000	\$ 29,767,000	\$ 66,619,000	\$ 117,637,000
UTM	\$ 2,222,000	\$ 2,234,750	\$ 1,501,000	\$ 5,957,750
UTHSC	\$ 116,872	\$ 4,701,221	\$ -	\$ 4,818,093
<b>UT Total</b>	<b>\$ 29,527,872</b>	<b>\$ 39,060,936</b>	<b>\$ 77,915,102</b>	<b>\$ 146,503,910</b>
<b>Community Colleges</b>				
CHSCC	\$ 4,000	\$ 748,000	\$ 4,565,000	\$ 5,317,000
CLSCC	\$ -	\$ 679,000	\$ 1,168,000	\$ 1,847,000
COSCC	\$ 4,000	\$ 337,187	\$ 2,022,500	\$ 2,363,687
DSCC	\$ -	\$ 386,000	\$ 713,000	\$ 1,099,000
JSCC	\$ -	\$ 185,755	\$ 1,311,118	\$ 1,496,873
MSCC	\$ -	\$ 219,240	\$ 3,392,140	\$ 3,611,380
NASCC	\$ -	\$ 80,000	\$ 2,225,000	\$ 2,305,000
NESCC	\$ -	\$ 33,545	\$ 1,281,134	\$ 1,314,679
PSCC	\$ -	\$ 1,774,600	\$ 2,762,000	\$ 4,536,600
RSCC	\$ -	\$ 819,000	\$ 3,408,000	\$ 4,227,000
STCC	\$ 20,000	\$ 1,967,625	\$ 5,205,000	\$ 7,192,625
VSCC	\$ -	\$ 1,531,298	\$ 2,600,000	\$ 4,131,298
WSCC	\$ -	\$ 867,687	\$ 600,000	\$ 1,467,687
<b>CC Total</b>	<b>\$ 28,000</b>	<b>\$ 9,628,937</b>	<b>\$ 31,252,892</b>	<b>\$ 40,909,829</b>

1 - Funds returned to students in the Spring & Summer semesters in response to the move to emergency remote learning.

2 - Includes foregone revenue and revenue losses from the Spring and Summer semesters as well as realized expenditures in response to COVID-19 (e.g. funds expended to limit the spread of PPE or to help students, faculty and staff response to an online learning environment).

3 - Estimated foregone revenue, revenue losses, bad debt, or losses due to installment tuition agreements for the Fall 2020 semester.

Figure 12

## Federal CARES Act Provisions Higher Education

The Federal CARES Act<sup>10</sup> Provided tremendous support to K-12, as cited earlier in this report. It was signed into law on Friday, March 27, providing \$30.75 billion for the Education Stabilization Fund. Tennessee public institutions received \$169 million through the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF). At least half of an institution's HEERF allocation was distributed to students in the form of emergency financial aid grants related to the disruption of campus operations, including eligible expenses under a student's cost of attendance, such as food, housing, course materials, technology, health care, and childcare. Institutions could spend the remaining portion on student refunds for room

<sup>10</sup> Full text of law available here: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/748/text>.

and board, tuition, and other fees owed to the changes in instructional delivery due to the pandemic, or to reimburse themselves for expenses related to providing students with technology, such as computers or Internet service, required for the transition to online learning.

Minority-serving institutions, such as Tennessee State University and Southwest Tennessee Community College, and institutions that qualify for the federal Strengthening Institutions Program, received an additional \$22.5 million through the HEERF. All of these funds could go to student grants, cost refunds, or lost revenue due to disruption of campus operations. In total, institutions received nearly \$200 million through the CARES Act. With roughly half earmarked for student emergency grants, the CARES Act provides less than a third of the revenue needed to meet the estimated financial deficit caused by the pandemic—approximately \$330 million as of October. Of the funding available through the CARES Act, THEC is administering \$21.4 million through the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF), authorized by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, to assist the Tennessee higher education enterprise in dealing with challenges related to:

*Social distancing:*

- Adapting classroom configurations,
- Modifying student housing to comply with COVID-19 health precautions,
- Supporting physical plant costs, or
- Subsidizing non-executive payroll expenses for faculty/staff dedicated to mitigating COVID-19.

*Transition to online learning:*

- Expanding and supporting online instruction,
- Increasing students' access to technology, including laptops, Wi-Fi hotspots, and digital subscriptions, or
- Subsidizing payroll expenses for new personnel or extended duties of existing non-executive personnel.

CRF grants were open to the accredited public and private, nonprofit institutions of higher education (IHEs) domiciled in Tennessee. All eligible institutions that opted to submit a grant proposal were ultimately approved for funding after a thorough THEC staff review. Funds were awarded based on the proportionate share of low-income students the institution serves. THEC staff communicates regularly with campus program directors and are monitoring all institutions through monthly reports.

### **Tennessee Student Well-Being**

Pandemic-related school closures have affected not only students' academic performance but also their social and emotional well-being. When in school, students of all ages have access to a variety of support services, including meal programs or food pantries, medical or emotional counseling, and therapeutic services for students with disabilities. In spite of the use of phone line counseling, and extraordinary efforts to provide nutrition services through the “SchoolMealFinder.com” program, because of school building closures, some students were not receiving these essential services, which is likely to have a negative effect on their mental or emotional health.

While some reporting on emotional well-being for K-12 students has started, it will take years to conduct comprehensive research. According to the Tennessee Child Wellbeing Task Force report<sup>11</sup> and The Communities in Schools of Tennessee COVID-19 Report<sup>12</sup>, economic hardships, isolation, domestic violence, and other factors contribute to adverse experiences that can have long-term effects on students. The Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) conducted a survey<sup>13</sup> of educators in Spring 2020 that included questions on the impact of COVID-19. The teachers' top three concerns were students missing critical services such as meals and counseling, maintaining relationships with students amid uncertainty, and barriers preventing students from accessing remote learning. The report goes on to state:

*Educators expressed concern for the physical and mental health of students and their families in their open-ended comments. Teachers and leaders indicated that necessities—including adequate nutrition, security, and supervision—are crucial to ensure that students can successfully engage in remote learning.*

The TERA report shows how profoundly concerned Tennessee teachers are about students' well-being. Studies have shown a correlation between student health and wellness concerning academic performance.<sup>14</sup> Without addressing the social-emotional strains the pandemic has had on students, these challenges are likely to continue affecting their academic performance negatively.

In post-secondary institutions nationwide, mental health and well-being has been on ongoing discussion prior to COVID-19. Research<sup>15</sup> suggests that these students were already susceptible to mental and emotional health concerns and that the pandemic has revealed considerable stress and worry which is negatively impacting student academics and overall well-being.

## **Conclusions and Next Steps**

The events of 2020 have presented unprecedented challenges, and Tennessee's kindergarten-to-career education ecosystem has been stretched to the limit. The purpose of this first report is to provide an accurate snapshot of the educational situation in Tennessee. Because we are still in the middle of a pandemic and do not have all the information needed to provide a clear picture, we relied on historical data to level set the state of education in Tennessee. Based on national research, some students may be excelling academically, especially in reading, though we fear that many, mostly those economically disadvantaged, may fall even further behind.

Every school in Tennessee at the K-12 and post-secondary levels stepped up during this crisis. After ten months of worry, wearing masks, and keeping our distance, educators and students alike are exhausted. Though we may not have all the data on the effects of COVID, our educators have identified and

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/health-&-safety/CWTF\\_Summary.pdf](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/health-&-safety/CWTF_Summary.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> [https://76bb3e70-87ed-449f-b8d26293d7d730cb.filesusr.com/ugd/c9b4b6\\_1898fb4495a04f6e9aa7772bdf34e3d2.pdf](https://76bb3e70-87ed-449f-b8d26293d7d730cb.filesusr.com/ugd/c9b4b6_1898fb4495a04f6e9aa7772bdf34e3d2.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> [https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/TERA/files/TERA2020\\_COVID\\_Brief\\_FINAL.pdf](https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/TERA/files/TERA2020_COVID_Brief_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Langford R, Bonell CP, Jones HE, Pouliou T, Murphy SM, Waters E, Komro KA, Gibbs LF, Magnus D, Campbell R. The WHO Health Promoting School framework for improving the health and well-being of students and their academic achievement. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2014, Issue 4. Art. No.: CD008958.

<sup>15</sup> Changwon Son, Sudeep Hegde, Alec Smith, Xiaomei Wang, Farzan Sasangohar. Effects of COVID-19 on College Students Mental Health in the United States: Interview Survey Study (<http://www.jmir.org>), 03.09.2020.

launched new and innovative solutions to support their student communities. The state leaned in with incremental funding, the TDOE propped up supplemental programs and partnerships, and the educators supported students of all ages.

Four themes surfaced from this report that the Education Recovery and Innovation Commission will spend more time on:

- 1- College and Career Preparedness: Tennessee needs to ensure our students are graduating prepared for college and career which mean as we must make sure early childhood education (K-3<sup>rd</sup>) is superior and successful, and our career opportunities are connected to the education opportunities in secondary and postsecondary. Tennessee's Higher Education systems responded quickly to the changing needs of their student populations, unique given the famously tepid response of academia to an immediate change of any kind. Faced with the pandemic, mass student departures, and corresponding tuition refunds, Tennessee's higher educational systems transformed from traditional to almost entirely online delivery in a mere two weeks. Granted, some schools did already have the online class infrastructure, which did help, but not all schools did. While communication from administration to students varied in its effectiveness, all institution provided some level of disaster response thanks to the assistance rendered by THEC through tabletop exercises and help from other institutions.
- 2- Learning Loss: Tennessee needs to aggressively address learning loss with a keen focus on early literacy. TDOE is expected to set Tennessee's K-12 direction, our governance structure is that each district operates independently and, in their community's best interest. That being said, there is not a coordinated single outcomes-based plan for Tennessee's K-12 system. Tennessee's districts have worked hard to create some normalcy while still laser-focused on educating Tennessee's children in an ever-changing environment. Our educators are struggling with student attendance, attentiveness, inflamed mental health issues, and the need to manage the brick and mortar, as well as the virtual classroom. Educators' efforts remain focused on educating and supporting students despite this pandemic.
- 3- Technology: Tennessee need to strategically address the gaps in technology and Internet access at all levels of education. Across the board, one of the largest gaps was technology. Students of all ages lacked basic computer technology, and access to broadband, or high-speed Internet, necessary for access to online education. Like everyone else in the U.S. to one degree or another, the state was able to pull together support, but we need a long-term solution. Many schools lacked seamless curriculum transfer from in-class instruction to online instruction, not to mention some educators, like students, did not have a device or access to broadband at home.
- 4- Well-Being: Tennessee needs to fully assess and support the social and emotional state of our students and educators. As with any high impact event that includes job loss, loss of life, or extreme social isolation, the emotional effects will be long term.

Tennessee is in the midst of an ongoing crisis that has revealed many gaps in our Kindergarten-to-career operations, including the need for real-time data across the education continuum, which often requires legislative authorization. The best-laid plans are based on available data, and in the absence of that information, setting a course is challenging. As noted by Governor Lee, Tennessee must administer state-wide testing in the 2020-21 school year so that academic performance can be carefully evaluated to accurately inform which educational practices and innovations will best serve students moving forward. Tennessee needs to align a consistent, high-quality K-12 education with higher education to the jobs of tomorrow so our students can thrive with living wage, high growth opportunities.



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