

Tennessee Public Schools Suffer Severe Teacher and Support Staff Shortages

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A new report by Education Law Center, [More Funding Needed to Fix Tennessee School Staff Shortages](#), shows Tennessee's high poverty school districts are burdened with larger student-to-teacher ratios than wealthier districts and support staff ratios that are drastically out of line with minimum national standards. This staffing shortage is the result of the well-documented failure of Tennessee's school funding formula, the Basic Education Program (BEP), to adequately fund the cost of education for all students, especially students in the state's poorest districts and schools.

The ELC report documents the need for all Tennessee districts to hire more staff than the BEP funds, especially in the case of the state's poorest districts, which are more understaffed than their wealthier counterparts. ELC's analysis finds:

- Nearly all districts raise more local funds than required by the BEP. Districts with the least fiscal capacity raise, on average, \$375 per pupil above the level required by the BEP formula, compared to over \$2,350 per pupil in districts with the most fiscal capacity.
- On average, the BEP funds one teacher for every 23 students. Wealthier districts supplement with local funds to reduce that ratio to 19-20 students per teacher, while the poorest districts average a student-teacher ratio of 24:1.
- The population of English language learners (ELL) is considerably higher in the poorest districts than in the wealthiest (10% vs. 3%); yet the ELL student to ESL teacher ratio is twice as high in poor districts than in wealthier districts.
- Of the 140 districts in the state, 111 did not have a single social worker on staff, including 15 of the poorest districts.
- Twelve districts across the state had no social worker, no psychologist and a student to counselor ratio above 600. These districts educate over 25,000 students, nearly 40% of whom are poor.

The report also presents district-level details. For example, it is possible to compare staffing levels in Shelby, with 59% of students in poverty, with neighboring Collierville, with a student poverty rate of only 7%. Both districts add nearly double the local funding they are allocated through the BEP formula, or about \$2,000 per pupil. But Shelby has a student-teacher ratio of 26:1 compared to Collierville's ratio of 21:1. Overall, Shelby hired 4% more staff than they were allotted through the BEP formula, compared to 11% more staff in Collierville.

This summer, Tennessee legislators decided to flat fund the deeply inadequate BEP formula in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. An \$117 million increase in teacher salaries in this year's state budget was lowered to \$58 million in March and then cut completely in June. The severe deficits in essential teachers and support staff are likely to worsen given the Legislature's continuing [resistance to follow-through on a promised increase in teacher salaries](#) and other

school funding increases. This will require districts to seek more local funds to meet the additional needs of their students during this time of pandemic school closures and reopenings, increased unemployment, and health dangers.

“Tennessee lawmakers must protect current levels of funding in high-poverty districts and provide additional support to these districts wherever possible,” said Mary McKillip, ELC Senior Researcher and report co-author. “The State should also take the opportunity presented by the pandemic to rethink its clearly broken funding formula and set the stage for long-term improvements to public education, including supporting teachers and other school staff.”

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