

Diverse Learner Teacher Preparation in Tennessee





Introduction

Tennessee’s diverse learner population is growing rapidly – fourteen percent of Tennessee students receive special education services, and eight percent qualify as English language learners.¹ By law, these students must receive specified educational services from qualified specialists^{2,3}, yet in Tennessee, persistent teacher shortages have prevented many students from accessing their services. English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher shortages have been reported for the past 21 consecutive years.⁴ In fall of 2023, 281 special education teacher vacancies were reported even after nearly 500 educators earned a no-cost special education endorsement.⁵ Special education vacancies have been reported for 31 of the 35 years that vacancy data have been reported.⁶

While local education agencies (LEAs) are responsible for hiring and retaining qualified special education and ESL teachers, additional institutions contribute to the preparation and retention of teachers for these positions. Examples of these institutions and stakeholders are below.

136,300
Students with Disabilities

77,900
ESL Students

State Report Card, 2023

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Policy Makers

at the national, state, and local levels write and implement policies that codify teacher licensure standards, monitor effectiveness, influence teacher compensation, and more.

State Departments of Education

oversee school systems, and, among other activities, ensure districts are abiding by the above policies and provide support to increase teacher effectiveness and accountability.

Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs)

provide the coursework, training, and pathways to licensure that prepare teachers for these highly specialized positions within schools and districts.





Who is the Diverse Learners Cooperative?

The Diverse Learners Cooperative, a Tennessee-based nonprofit organization, exists to create purposeful networks of educators, providing them with high quality resources and collaborative learning experiences that increase best practices for diverse learners and teacher retention. We are a team of educators and advocates, curious listeners, and courageous doers. Fueled by a shared expertise and passion for equitable access to education for all learners, we partner with schools and systems to remove barriers and create new paths to meaningful inclusion and success.

For more information about the Diverse Learners Cooperative, visit www.diverselearnerscoop.com

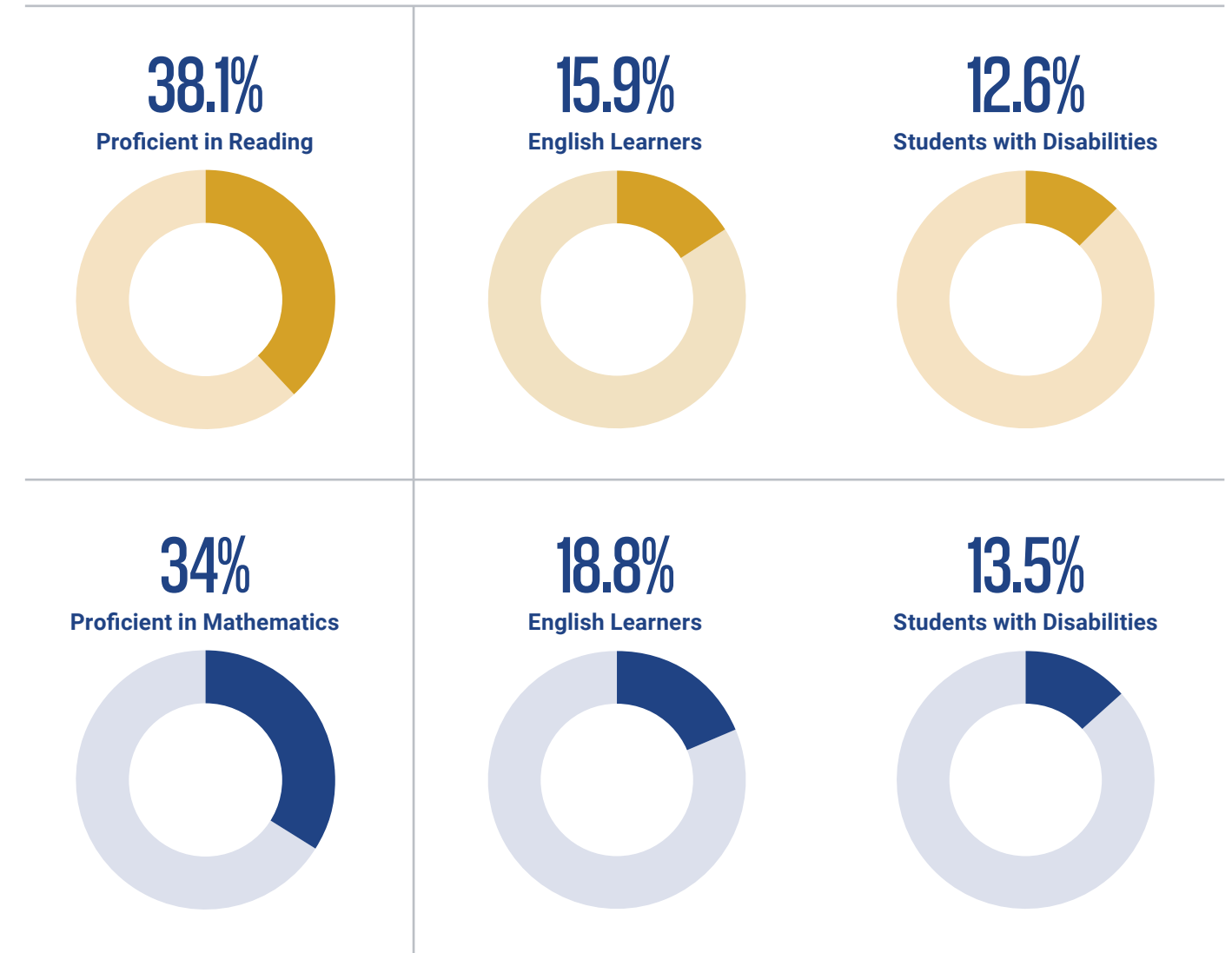
Tennessee has invested heavily in strengthening the state’s education labor market given decades of evidence that teacher quality and student outcomes have a strong positive correlation.⁷ However, the Tennessee Department of Education’s “Best for All” strategic vision does not explicitly outline a strategy for meeting the needs of diverse learners, leaving thousands of children at risk of disenfranchisement from services critical to their progress.⁸

Recent reports indicate that English learners’ proficiency levels have not recovered since the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹ In 2021-22, 32% of high school seniors with limited English proficiency dropped out before graduation.¹⁰ Significant discrepancies persist between the average reading and math achievement of Tennessee students and the disaggregated performance of students who receive special education and ESL services, as shown in **figure 1**.¹¹ These performance indicators, combined with the ongoing shortage of qualified educators to improve them, highlight a critical need for innovative, collaborative, data-based solutions to ensure that **all** students have access to educators who are prepared to make high-impact learning experiences accessible and effective for them.

This report complements existing national and state research and policy recommendations regarding educator preparation, retention, and shortages by focusing explicitly on **opportunities to increase the number of prepared special education and ESL teachers** entering and remaining in the Tennessee educator workforce. Specifically, the report considers:

1. Quality and accessibility of special education and ESL EPPs through existing teacher licensure pathways.
2. Policies and practices that may contribute positively to the development and maintenance of skilled special education and ESL teacher workforces.

fig. 1
2023 State Achievement Rates






Tennessee Department of Education, 2023

The report culminates with the identification of three opportunities to ensure that the evolution of teacher recruitment, preparation, and support are inclusive of the unique needs of special education and ESL teachers. Each opportunity is summarized to help guide key stakeholders’ (e.g., state legislators, superintendents, EPP leaders, etc.) engagement.

- **Opportunity 1: Include special education and ESL perspectives** in policy and strategy initiatives.
- **Opportunity 2: Design effective models for clinical practice** that account for variation in licensure pathway and school profile.
- **Opportunity 3: Equip school leaders** with the knowledge and competencies required to support novice special education and ESL teachers in their school buildings.

Methodology

The Diverse Learners Cooperative utilized multiple methods to develop the EPP landscape summary and action guides included in this report:

-  **Landscape analysis** of teacher preparation and retention, inclusive of national, state, and district-level data, EPP report cards, news articles, and models for addressing teacher shortages.
-  **Policy analysis** at the state level, including but not limited to: EPP approval and practices; policy and funding briefs; existing state EPP and licensure policies; summaries of proposed legislation related to efforts to increase educator diversity and quality; department of education and EPP websites.
-  **1:1 Interviews** with eight Tennessee EPP affiliates representing public and private universities as well as alternative licensure providers that offer pathways to special education and/or ESL licensure. Participants represented EPPs from Nashville, Memphis, Murfreesboro, Clarksville, and Knoxville. Seven interviews occurred via Zoom, and one interview occurred asynchronously in writing due to scheduling conflicts. Participants' roles in their EPPs and organizations varied and contributed collective expertise, including but not limited to: special education; English as a Second Language; curriculum design; elementary education; behavior; clinical supervision and placement; recruitment and training of mentor teachers; department or program executive leadership; district partnership; cross-sector non-profit partnerships.

Landscape Analysis Summary

Special Education and English as a Second Language Educator Preparation Programs in Tennessee

PROGRAM QUANTITY

Educator preparation programs (EPPs) provide the pathway to licensure for teachers. In the state of Tennessee in 2023, there were 42 approved EPPs. Of those EPPs, 28 offer pathways to ESL licensure and 31 offer at least one special education endorsement outlined by the Tennessee Educator Preparation Policy (see figure 2).¹² Currently, all but two EPPs are run by institutions of higher education (IHEs). The two organizations that operate special populations EPPs are Teach for America Memphis, which is approved for special education and for ESL, and Nashville Teacher Residency, which is approved for special education.

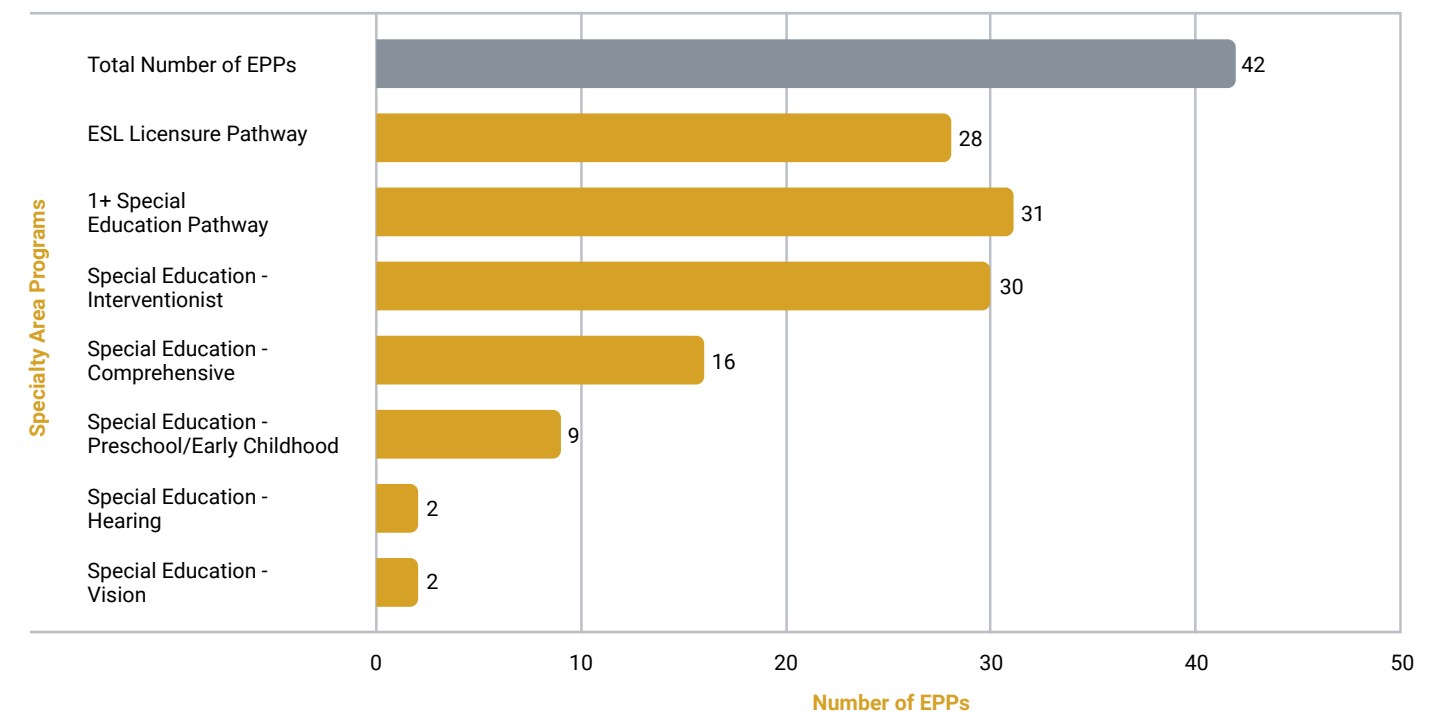
PROGRAM TYPES

Special education and ESL EPPs are governed by Educator Preparation Policy 5.504¹³ and rule Chapter 0520-02-04.¹⁴ Current programs provide a mix of bachelor's, master's, and licensure-only pathways. Providers who may recommend candidates for Tennessee licensure, as outlined in the above policies, include:

- Accredited, authorized institutions of higher education (IHEs),
- Tennessee-based education-related organizations,
- Consortiums of LEAs, and
- Out-of-state providers.



fig. 2
EPP Comparisons



EPP Report Card, May 2024

CLINICAL PRACTICE MODELS

Teacher candidates enrolled in Tennessee EPPs must engage in at least one of the following clinical practice models, dependent on program design:¹⁵

Student teaching: In this most traditional clinical practice, bachelor’s or master’s level teaching candidates preparing for initial licensure are placed in at least one school-based, credit-bearing clinical experience of at least 15 weeks that includes full-day teaching and observation activities. Supervised by both a university representative and a school-based mentor teacher, the candidate gains hands-on experience with teaching responsibilities, but is not employed by the district and is not a teacher of record.

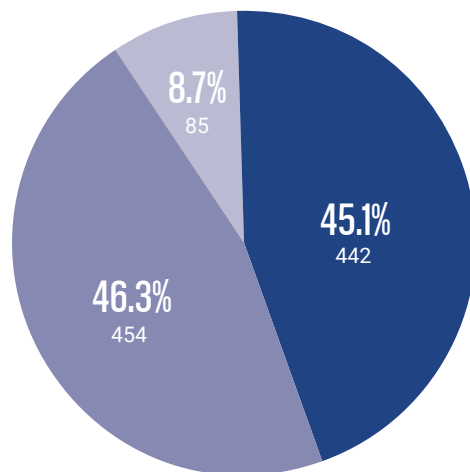
Internship/Apprenticeship: Internship-based licensure pathways employ candidates in existing school roles, such as paraprofessional or assistant teaching positions, for a full year of clinical practice under the supervision of a mentor teacher. Candidates are employees of the district but cannot be teachers of record during their apprenticeship. They engage in direct teaching activities for at least 100 school days and are simultaneously enrolled in an EPP that may offer bachelor’s degree pathways, licensure-only pathways, or master’s degree pathways.

Job-embedded: Job-embedded programs allow teacher candidates with at least a bachelor’s degree to be employed as the teacher-of-record for one year while completing licensure requirements through an approved EPP. Job-embedded candidates generally have previous experience in their content area through undergraduate coursework and/or passing content-specific exams, and programs tend to be licensure-only or master’s degree models.

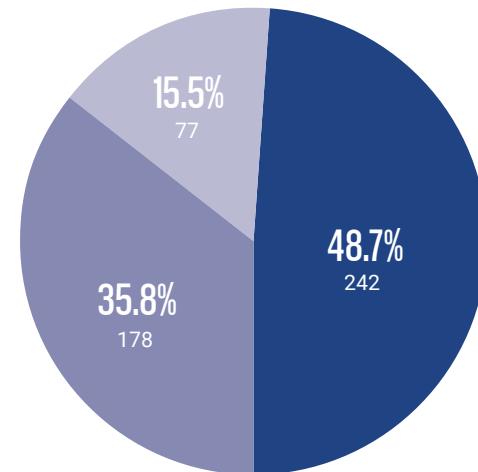
fig. 3

● Student Teaching ● Job-Embedded ● Internship

Special Education Teachers produced by EPPs in 3 year cohort (2019-20, 2020-21, 2021-22)



ESL Teachers produced by EPPs in 3 year cohort (2019-20, 2020-21, 2021-22)



Tennessee State Board of Education, March 2024

PROGRAM PERFORMANCE

The Tennessee State Board of Education tracks the number of EPP completers in three-year cohorts. In the cohort spanning 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22, EPPs produced 981 SPED endorsements and 497 ESL endorsements.¹⁶ These cohorts consist of students who **graduate** in a given year from student-teaching or internship programs as well as the number of students who **begin** a job-embedded program. The impact of these numbers on the special education and ESL teacher shortage should be interpreted with caution – the data, as currently tracked and reported, do not indicate who is earning these endorsements and cannot answer questions such as:

- How many licenses are awarded to brand-new teachers?
- How many vacancies do these new teachers fill across the state?
- How many licenses are awarded to current general education teachers who will remain in a general education classroom?

Between 2022 and 2023, a small fraction of EPPs (see chart) produced approximately 50% of all special education and ESL licenses in the state.¹⁷

981

SPED Endorsements

497

ESL Endorsements

produced by EPPs in the cohort spanning 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22.

Tennessee State Board of Education

Special Education

Austin Peay State University
Carson-Newman University
Lipscomb University
Vanderbilt University
University of Memphis
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

English as a Second Language

Lipscomb University
Lee University
Relay Graduate School of Education
Teach for America - Memphis
University of Tennessee - Chattanooga
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) also releases EPP Report Cards annually. The report cards rate EPPs’ overall performance across all of their state-approved programs, so the performance of individual programs cannot be determined by the current reporting structure.¹⁸ For example, Lipscomb University was the top provider of ESL endorsements in 2023, but ESL is only one of Lipscomb’s thirty-four state-approved specialty area programs (SAPs). Lipscomb’s EPP Report Card assesses EPP performance holistically, not separately for each of those SAPs.

In addition to an overall rating, report card metrics include:

- Employment:** Evaluates a provider's performance in preparing educators to begin and remain teaching in Tennessee public schools. Measures first-year employment, second-year retention, and third-year retention.
- Candidate Profile:** Evaluates provider's ability to recruit a strong, diverse three-year cohort of candidates and prepare them to teach in the content areas of greatest need. Measures cohort size. Reports racial makeup of cohort and percent of high-demand endorsements awarded.
- Provider Impact:** Reports on the effectiveness of a provider's cohort members in Tennessee public school classrooms. Measures percentage of cohort members whose classroom observation scores, Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) Scores, and Level of Effectiveness (LOE) scores are Level 3 or above.
- Candidate Assessment:** Evaluates a provider's performance in preparing cohort candidates to pass the pedagogical and content-area assessments required to obtain a Tennessee teaching license. Measures pedagogical and content assessment pass rates as well as literacy assessment first-time pass rates.
- Satisfaction:** For the duration of the cohort's three-year monitoring period, this measure reports how well cohort members feel that their program prepared them for teaching.

Geographically, the top producers of special education teachers are concentrated in three of the TDOE's eight core regions. The top producers of ESL teachers are concentrated in four of the eight core regions.

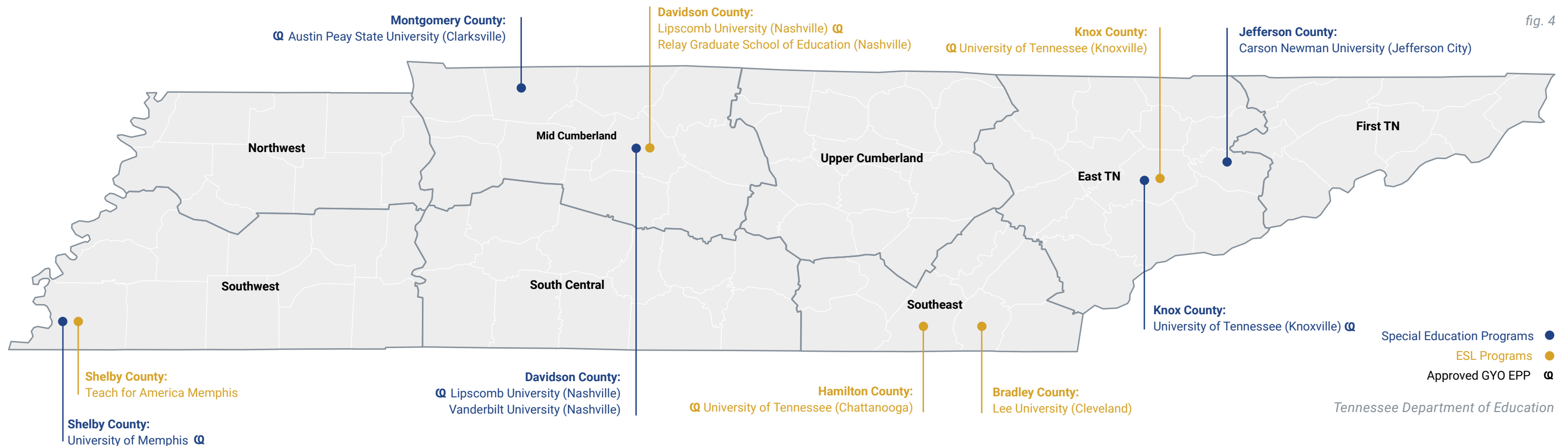


fig. 4

Tennessee Department of Education

EPPS AND LEAS

While schools - and the diverse learners within them - feel teacher vacancies most acutely, EPPs are responsible for preparing the special education and ESL teachers who will eventually be employed in Tennessee schools. However, there is no guaranteed direct connection between the EPPs and any of the state's 147 school districts.¹⁹ By law, all approved EPPs must identify a geographic area to serve and document formal partnership with at least one primary LEA or charter management organization partner. Additionally, if an EPP places candidates in a non-primary district for clinical experience, a state-recognized partnership agreement is required.²⁰

Established in May 2022 and opened in January 2023, the Tennessee Grow Your Own Center (GYO) has helped establish apprenticeship model pathway partnerships in 77 of the 101 school districts reporting shortages. Eleven of the state's 42 approved EPPs have entered into at least one of these partnerships, and five of those EPPs are also top producers of special education and/or ESL teachers, as shown in the map.²¹

The Tennessee Department of Education provides an online Framework for the Development of Effective Educator Preparation Partnerships.²² The framework provides access to tools that can be used to establish processes and timelines for creating partnerships between districts and EPPs, as well as a set of recommendations for implementing and sustaining long-term partnership plans. Additionally, the Grow Your Own Center partners with both TDOE and the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development to identify districts with staffing needs and provide technical assistance in generating partnerships between districts and EPPs.²³ However, research and interviews did not reveal resources or assistance directly related to special education or ESL teacher role preparation.

CONCLUSION

There is significant momentum regarding teacher preparation in Tennessee. The state is investing in innovative teacher preparation models and collecting data to study their effectiveness. Agencies are collaborating to quantify localized needs, recruit future educators, and connect candidates with preparation pathways. Many of these efforts focus on increasing the quantity of teachers efficiently in response to teacher shortages.

These efforts also lead to new demands on the state's EPPs and LEAs. First, EPPs may be asked to engage in licensure pathways that do not currently exist within their institutions. Second, if efforts are successful, LEAs must be prepared to support novice teachers who fill vacancies. Leveraging research and expertise to create models for clinical practice and novice teacher development can support effective innovation and scaling. **Models specific to special education and ESL practices are critical due to the differences between specialized roles and general education teaching roles.**

Increasing the number of qualified, effective diverse learner educators will have a direct impact on students' lives in Tennessee, and there is significant urgency to understand and address this need. The next section of this report identifies **opportunities for stakeholders** (e.g., state legislators, superintendents, EPP leaders, etc.) to engage in efforts to **increase the number of prepared special education and ESL teachers** in the Tennessee teacher workforce. Through shared dialogue, individuals, organizations, and coalitions can use these summaries to:

- facilitate collaboration across disciplines,
- create guidelines and recommendations for quality preparation programs, and
- develop resources that are inclusive of the needs of specialized disciplines.

As stakeholders internalize the opportunities on the following pages, they should ask themselves: How can I leverage my role to improve diverse learner educator preparation in Tennessee? Engaging in these recommendations is a first step in creating more equitable educator preparation systems that support diverse learners in our state.



How can I leverage my role to improve diverse learner educator preparation in Tennessee?

A note regarding terminology: "English as a Second Language" refers to a specialized service offered by schools to support the development of a student's English language skills. We recognize that state policies most often use "English as a Second Language" (or the acronym ESL) when referring to language services for non-English speakers. To stay consistent with state policies and advocate in spaces where this is familiar terminology, the term ESL will be used most frequently in this report. We acknowledge other terms such as multilingual learners or emergent bilinguals are more inclusive when referring to their group of students, and therefore prefer these terms in other DLC publications.

Opportunity 1:

Include strategic special education and ESL perspectives in all educator preparation policy and strategy initiatives.

RATIONALE

Tennessee is a national leader in the development of teacher apprenticeship pathways to complement student teaching and internship models.²⁴ One interviewee described traditional university coursework culminating in student teaching as a “Learn to Work” model compared to internships and apprenticeships as a “Work to Learn” model, stressing that both models are valid and necessary and must be equally effective.

Currently, special education and ESL candidates are overrepresented in the state’s Grow Your Own population of nearly 650 current apprentices or program completers because LEAs must have existing positions to staff with apprentices.²⁵

“We need to be offering both models in parallel, with equal levels of importance, rigor, and confidence in the educators that come out of them.”

— Apprenticeship representative

These available positions are often special education paraprofessional or aide positions because many districts have not yet developed strategic staffing models designed to leverage all preparation pathways. However, only five of the state’s top producers of special education and ESL teachers are currently part of the EPP cohort contributing to the development of this influx of apprentices.²⁶

Rapid innovation in educator preparation, shaped by research and policy, are already underway.²⁷ Most of the momentum is related to increasing Tennessee’s capacity to prepare and retain teachers, with significantly less evidence pointing to interagency efforts to influence the **quality** of the preparation that special education and ESL candidates teachers receive in their training or professional experience.

RECOMMENDATION

Convene local top producer(s) of diverse learner teachers and Grow Your Own expert(s) to **develop a vision** for multi-pathway special education teacher and/or ESL teacher preparation.

Only five of Tennessee’s top 10 special education and ESL teacher-producing universities currently partner with LEAs through the Grow Your Own Center.

Grow Your Own Center

STAKEHOLDER OBJECTIVES

- Identify shared outcomes across all pathways
- Develop pathway-specific practices aligned to each outcome
- Seek objective feedback from unaffiliated stakeholders such as licensure specialists, mentor teachers, superintendents, and geographically diverse EPP representatives
- Engage policy makers and policy advocates to determine dissemination practices, incentives, and support opportunities



Opportunity 2:

Design effective models for special education and ESL clinical practice that account for variation in licensure pathway and school profile.

“There is a real tension in our program to prepare teachers quickly and well. That is a delicate balance.”

— EPP Professor



in clinical practice quality, but in interviews, multiple EPP representatives cited difficulty recruiting them. Additionally, 90% of traditional EPPs do not screen mentor teachers effectively.³⁰

Experiences in a variety of strategic clinical placements³¹ — supported by effective mentors³² — can help prepare candidates to become more effective teachers, for longer periods of time, in a greater variety of school settings. Student teaching placements are also highly predictive of first job placements.³³

In 2023, 50% of early career teachers in Tennessee were employed by a district in which they completed a clinical practice experience.³⁴ An investment in clinical practice quality has potential for positive impact on both student achievement and retention of effective teachers.

RATIONALE

Tennessee is exploring innovative models for increasing and diversifying the educator pipeline amidst rapid technological changes that may help eliminate historical barriers of access and capacity. These changes have immense potential to transform teacher recruitment and preparation, but current providers caution that **urgency cannot come at the expense of effectiveness.**

Clinical practice elements (Student teaching, internships, apprenticeships, and/or job-embedded elements) are required for all licensure pathways²⁸, but EPP representative interviews and policy reviews did not identify any unifying standards for these experiences. Research indicates that high-quality clinical practice experiences may lead to novice teachers who are equally effective as third-year teachers.²⁹ Mentor teachers play a critical role

Only 26% of EPPs and 30% of districts consider adult mentorship competencies when selecting mentor teachers.

National Council on Teaching Quality

RECOMMENDATION

Synthesize research, stakeholder input, and experiences from effective EPP partnerships to develop a job-embedded special education **clinical practice playbook.**

Effective clinical practice can enable a novice teacher to generate student outcomes equivalent with two years of teaching experience.

Tennessee Education Research Alliance

STAKEHOLDER OBJECTIVES

- Distill guidance for developing, selecting, and supporting mentor teachers
- Produce a mentorship toolkit that includes key resources for novice special educator development
- Develop training and implementation guidance for toolkit use in districts
- Identify metrics of resource effectiveness and implement a data collection cycle
- Share outcomes and lessons with knowledge brokers and champions, including the Tennessee Department of Education, Grow Your Own Center, and EPPs who participated in this research



Opportunity 3:

Equip school leaders with the knowledge and competencies required to support early-career special education and ESL teachers in their school buildings.

RATIONALE

Improving the clinical practice experience for special education and ESL teachers will not have a long-term impact on student outcomes or teacher shortages if teachers continue to leave the profession.

Strategic support must extend to **early career teachers**. Twenty-one percent of Tennessee teachers leave Tennessee schools before their third year, with 35% leaving by their fifth year.³⁵ According to the March 2024 national School Pulse Panel survey, 57% of public schools in the southern United States anticipate needing to fill at least one special education position before the start of the 2024-25 school year.³⁶ In a 2023 survey, only 62% of special education and general education teachers expressed job satisfaction, compared with the Tennessee Department of Education's reports of 87% general teacher satisfaction the previous year.³⁷ Experiences of isolation are often exacerbated for special education and ESL teachers due to the specialized nature of their roles³⁸, and research indicates that special education³⁹ and ESL teachers⁴⁰ often do not feel that their positions are understood by their administrators. In 2023, leadership was the most cited reason, after personal reasons, why teachers did not return to their positions.⁴¹

The Diverse Learners Cooperative's 2023 report, "[Diverse Learner Teacher Retention in Tennessee](#)," synthesizes findings from surveys, focus groups, and interviews with special education and ESL teachers.⁴² Five themes emerged:

- **Supportive team and leaders:** Approach planning, instruction, program, and policy development with an understanding of diverse learner needs.
- **Individualized professional growth opportunities:** Provide access to professional learning opportunities aligned with diverse student needs and tailor evaluation procedures to acknowledge unique roles of diverse learner educators.

35%

of early career teachers did not have a formal mentor

49%

did not receive instructional coaching or professional development targeted to their needs

37%

of teachers who exited their school cited leadership as a reason

2023 Tennessee Educator Survey

- **Access to specialized resources:** Ensure special education and ESL teachers have access to and support with implementation of academic and behavior resources that meet their students' unique needs.
- **Manageable caseloads:** Monitor caseload distribution for manageability and develop schedules and collaborative structures that enable collaboration, instructional planning, and operational tasks.
- **Equitable compensation:** Consider role-specific incentives. For example, in addition to supporting policies that improve base salary, reimburse or offer stipends for specialized professional learning.

RECOMMENDATION

Develop a special education and ESL **leadership action guide** for school teams.

"I would love to see a greater emphasis being put on administrators who are good at managing their schools and who are good at supporting the teachers in their schools."

— EPP Professor and Clinical Practice Director

STAKEHOLDER OBJECTIVES:

- Include real-life implementation examples
- Recruit a group of school leaders to pilot action guide use
- Identify metrics of resource effectiveness and implement a data collection cycle
- Share outcomes and lessons with knowledge brokers and champions, including the Tennessee Department of Education, Grow Your Own Center, and EPPs who participated in this research



Appendix A: Definitions

Diverse learner: A student who receives special education services and/or ESL services

Diverse learner teacher/educator: A teacher who is licensed to deliver special education services and/or ESL services

Educator Preparation Program (EPP): Institutions of higher education, education-related organizations, consortiums of LEAs, and/or out-of-state providers approved by the state of Tennessee to provide designated pathways to teacher licensure

English as a Second Language (ESL): Specialized service offered by schools to support the development of a student's English language skills. We recognize that state policies most often use "English as a second language" (ESL) when referring to language services for non-English speakers. To stay consistent with state policies and advocate in spaces where this is familiar terminology, the term ESL will be used most frequently in this report. We acknowledge other terms such as multilingual learners or emergent bilingual students are more inclusive when referring to this group of students, and therefore prefer these terms in other DLC publications.

Grow Your Own (GYO): Grow Your Own refers to initiatives that support school districts in strengthening teacher pipelines by creating apprenticeship-based licensure pathways at little to no cost to teaching candidates. In Tennessee, these initiatives are supported by the Grow Your Own Center at the University of Tennessee - Knoxville.

Local Education Agency (LEA): State-authorized board of education or other public authority tasked with administrative control over designated public school(s). For the purposes of this report, LEA may refer to public school districts or charter management organizations.

Special Education (SPED): Special education is specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. Special education is specifically developed to address a student's needs, and its programming is individualized for each student. Each student receiving special education has an individualized education program (IEP) that outlines the school's roles and responsibilities to address a student's academic, behavioral, social, functional, vocational, and extracurricular needs. We acknowledge that other terms are used for special education (i.e. exceptional education). However, we've chosen to use "special education" as it is more widely used in the policy space.

Specialty Area Program (SAP): Specialty area programs are the designated courses of study and requirements within an EPP that comprise the pathway to a specific licensure category. One EPP may offer many SAPs.

Acknowledgements

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