2027 State Policy Priorities

Children need quality early learning, good health, and family supports to succeed in school. Parents need reliable, affordable child care to stay employed. These priorities help ensure Tennessee children get a strong start while supporting working families and the state's economy.



TQEE's 2027 priorities are guided by our Policy Blueprint, built on data, research, and statewide community input. They span three connected domains: Child Care & Early Learning, Health & Mental Health, and Supported Families.

TQEE will work with the incoming governor and Tennessee General Assembly to build on recent progress and advance these priorities.

Child Care and Early Learning

Clear the Smart Steps Waitlist. Restore sustainable funding to clear the Smart Steps child care assistance waitlist. As of June 2, 2026, 13,835 children in 9,546 families were waiting.[1] TDHS has begun contacting families, but access remains limited.[2] Assistance helps eligible parents afford care, stay employed, and enroll children in available programs. Reliable funding would help families maintain care and give providers more predictable tuition revenue.

Launch the CareShare Tennessee Tri-Share Pilot. Launch the Promising Futures Fund's CareShare Tennessee pilot as early in 2027 as possible so employers and families can enroll. Employers, employees, and the state share child care costs, making care more affordable while helping businesses retain workers.[3] Set a clear implementation timeline, bridge funding gaps from revenue delays, and keep participation simple. Evaluate employer uptake, affordability for participating families, and employee retention to guide future investment.

Build the Early Educator Workforce Pipeline.

Implement the Promising Futures Fund's Child Care Workforce Scholarship Pilot to help eligible educators afford their children's care.[3] Tennessee child care workers earned a median $29,660 in 2025.[4] Providers struggle to offer competitive compensation because families already cannot afford higher tuition. Low pay hinders educator recruitment and retention, leaving classrooms closed and families without care.[5]

Consider further investments informed by the Early Educator Workforce Development Resource Task Force's forthcoming recommendations (Dec. 2026), including WAGE$, orientation, career navigation, apprenticeships, and coursework stacking toward credentials and degrees.

Strengthen the Business Climate for Child Care Providers. Commission a Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (TACIR) study of child care liability insurance with recommendations to improve coverage and competition, and continue simplifying licensing and compliance while protecting children. Providers operate on slim margins. Costly or unavailable insurance and complex compliance can force tuition increases, enrollment cuts, or closures. In a national provider survey cited by the National Conference of State Legislatures, more than one in eight respondents reported premium increases of at least $10,000.[5] Improving coverage and reducing unnecessary administrative burdens would help providers stay open and add capacity.

Health and Mental Health

Protect Young Children's Healthy Development in a Digital Age.

Dedicate part of Tennessee's Meta settlement proceeds, deposited in the Children's Digital Protection Fund,[6] to prevention and early intervention for infants, young children, and their families. Prioritize infant and early childhood mental health consultation, parent support, and pediatric care that integrates mental health services.[7] Use the Fund to give families practical, research-based guidance on technology's effects on young children's wellbeing, delivered through pediatric practices, early learning programs, and community organizations.

As TACIR completes its study of AI and child safety,[8,9] and the General Assembly evaluates AI policy, ensure recommendations and legislation account for children under five. Engage parents and child development experts and include specific safeguards for AI-enabled toys, apps, and parenting tools that address children's safety, privacy, developmental needs, and clear disclosure of AI use.[10] Reaching families early can help identify concerns and support the responsive relationships young children need for healthy development.[7]

Maximize Rural Health Transformation Investments for Mothers and Infants. Prioritize maternal, infant, and early childhood health and mental health services as Tennessee implements its Rural Health Transformation Program.[11] Expand access to group prenatal care, doula support, voluntary home visiting,[12] and integrated pediatric care, prioritizing models supported by evidence. Support community health centers and other local providers so families can access care locally, including prenatal and maternal care regardless of ability to pay.[13] Coordinating care before and after birth can help families get timely support and reduce service gaps.

Supported Families

Expand Paid Parental Leave Options for Working Families. Advance employer-friendly approaches that expand paid parental leave, building on the enhanced federal paid family and medical leave tax credit. From 2026, eligible employers can claim the credit for qualifying insurance premiums and qualifying leave wages.[14] Explore state incentives and insurance options that help employers offer leave, particularly to low- and middle-income workers. Paid leave supports recovery after childbirth and parent-infant bonding while helping families maintain income and easing pressure on infant care.[15]

Connect Workforce Housing and Child Care. Encourage partnerships among housing developers, child care providers, and local communities to pair affordable and workforce housing with accessible, quality child care. Build on successful models through development incentives, coordinated planning, and financing options to help cover child care space costs and support sustainable provider operations.[16] Addressing two of working families' largest expenses together can strengthen financial stability and help parents stay employed, with care closer to home.

Count Every Child Who Needs Support. Add Medicaid eligibility data to how Tennessee identifies economically disadvantaged students under the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA) funding formula, as recommended by the TISA Review Committee.[17] Each identified student generates an additional 25% of base funding.[18] Current identification measures, including SNAP and TANF participation, leave many children from low-income families uncounted.[17] A fuller count would help school funding reflect students' needs, including in early grades when additional support can help children build foundational reading and math skills.

TQEE Tennesseans for Quality Early Education

Sources

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