



For decades, mayoral candidates across the country have vied for the title of education mayor, and there's a clear reason why:

voters consistently rank education as one of the top priorities for a mayor.

Yet the reality of a mayor's role in improving student outcomes can seem limited, particularly in a city like Nashville where School Board members are elected to oversee district management and policy and Metro Council adopts the budget and levies taxes.

Historically, Nashville mayors have collaboratively worked with the Council, district leadership, and the School Board to secure the necessary funds to operate our public schools. While this role must certainly continue, this guide suggests that mayors can and must propose and implement strategies that go beyond securing funding if we want to see all students thriving in our public schools.

Effective education mayors balance five roles in the support of public education:



VISION CASTER: The mayor sets a clear and unifying vision of success for the children and youth of Nashville



INVESTOR: The mayor advocates for and secures the necessary resources to support learning and growth of children and youth, both in and out of school



AMPLIFIER: The mayor champions practices and policies that support student success and focuses the community on issues that matter the most for kids



CONVENER: The mayor organizes diverse stakeholders, often in collaboration with other policymakers, to collectively address needs and advance opportunities for students



INCUBATOR: The mayor pilots small-scale, evidence-based solutions that support student learning

What Is an Education Mayor?

Regardless of a city's governance structure, education mayors make it clear that the city is responsible for providing high-quality public education for all students. They prioritize public education using the bully pulpit and the city's investment strategy. They connect the dots between other critical city issues - economic development, public safety, affordable housing, and more - to a healthy public education system. They act on politically difficult things that are in the best interests of students, while lending support and political cover to the School Board and the Director of Schools in the management of the school system. They know when to cheerlead and they know when to challenge. In short, they spend time, political capital, money, and energy to move the needle for kids every day they are in office.

The guide is not designed to explore the many laudable initiatives and actions that Metro Schools is taking daily to improve outcomes for students. Rather, it's designed to give Nashville's mayoral candidates and the broader community an overview of the key issues in public education in Nashville today. In the coming years – and likely during the next mayor's first term in office it will be critical that our city prioritizes each of these if we want see a robust and sustainable system of public education long into the future.

THE CHALLENGE

The percent of students in Metro Schools that meet or exceed expectations in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math is **25.6%** and **21.3%** respectively, trailing state averages.

How did we get here?

Not unlike other U.S. cities, <u>Nashville's schools</u> were originally designed to serve white, mostly middle-class families. Non-white and poor students were either prohibited entirely from public schooling or segregated into schools with fewer resources and supports. Despite the American ideal that education is the great equalizer and a path toward upward mobility, our education system, originally designed to be exclusive for some children, has not ever provided the access, resources, and supports that would allow more students from marginalized groups to be successful. Nowhere is this felt more deeply than in urban school districts, where many students and families navigate daily the legacy of racist policies such as redlining, economic disinvestment, and the erosion of previously vibrant neighborhoods.

In the last few decades, school accountability systems, which include annual standardized testing, have helped identify gaps in supports for economically disadvantaged students, students of color, students with disabilities, and emerging English learners. At the same time, they have narrowed the purpose of education and the definition of student success to a handful of data points. While accountability systems have allowed us to identify and support more fully historically underserved students, they have also focused the daily work of schools on the pursuit of test scores that do not appropriately recognize or nurture the breadth and depth of our students.

Urban school districts can also suffer from self-inflicted challenges, including a lack of coherence in curriculum and instructional approach (think "the flavor of the month" education initiative), a lack of cultural awareness or responsiveness, inefficient supports for teachers, high rates of teacher attrition and churn, and low expectations for students of color, emerging English speakers, and special education students.

The result is that all of these factors compound, making it difficult for significant shifts in achievement to occur at scale. Structural inequities bleed into schools and place enormous pressures on schools not only to increase student achievement but also to tackle massive societal challenges. School systems are trying to embrace the future but are designed and incentivized to do the same thing they did in the past. Students are not engaged in an ever-narrowing curriculum and don't see a connection between school, their current reality, and their future hopes and dreams. And our achievement levels continue to flounder.

Where do we go from here?

While Metro Schools must continue to diligently address low achievement levels and gaps among student groups, we do not believe that the onus of improving student achievement is solely on the school district. In fact, we believe that the only way to significantly see achievement increases at scale is to simultaneously address structural inequities in our neighborhoods, strengthen the conditions in our schools that support student achievement and growth, and advocate for a more inclusive and holistic definition of student and school success.

That's why Nashville's next education mayor must look beyond individual initiatives, address all aspects of children's lives with a comprehensive strategy, and embrace each of the five roles of an education mayor if we truly want to see the change our students deserve.

True education mayors must set a clear **vision** for Nashville that prioritizes children and youth in all aspects of their lives. They must secure the necessary **investments** for public schools and rethink the city's investments in other institutions that touch children's lives. They must **amplify** the challenges faced by our children and youth and champion their unique needs. They must bring the community together and **convene** diverse stakeholders to identify collective solutions. And education mayors must **incubate** innovative ideas and try new things in an attempt to support our young people.

CASE STUDIES

Education Mayor Case Studies that Help
Address Root Causes of Low Achievement

In Denver, Mayor Hancock launched an <u>Opportunity Index</u> to identify inequitable investments in neighborhoods and address root causes of inequity.

Tulsa Mayor Taylor created <u>Impact Tulsa</u> to use data and the power of convening to drive change.

Tacoma Mayor Strickland partnered to create the <u>Tacoma Whole Child Initiative</u>, using data, partnerships, and shared goals to reimagine support for students.

KEY ISSUES Facing Public Education in Nashville

KEY ISSUE 1: City and district decisions over decades have ensured that deep inequities in access and opportunity remain embedded in our schools.

Nashville's schools were built within a larger system of social structures that collectively inhibit the ability for students of color and their families to gain access to resources that help them succeed. Guided by federal law, Nashville developed against a backdrop of racism and legal segregation that informed the policies upon which Nashville functions to this day. Policies such as federal housing assistance, urban development, redlining, and "intelligent zoning" have segregated the city by race and income, leaving schools responsible for overcoming deep, racially rooted inequities.

While we attempt to no longer govern from racist motivations, we have been unable or unwilling to address the fact that generations of racist policies dictate many of the results we see in our schools. The city's inconsistent investments, coupled with the active removal of key resources from Black neighborhoods, have ensured that deep inequities between white and Black communities in Nashville remain. Small scale efforts to reshape the system or drive more equitable policy fail to address the ways in which Nashville's schools are operating as designed.

Today, low-income students and Black and Brown students are more likely to live in areas of Nashville that were redlined or in neighborhoods that were created for Black residents following urban redevelopment projects. These areas have historically seen less investment and sometimes lack the core services, experiences, or amenities that are readily available in more affluent, often white communities, such as libraries, grocery stores, and access to culturally competent medical care. In other words, a significant number of MNPS students are living in neighborhoods that are not fully meeting their basic needs.

We see these systemic issues playing out in our schools, with students of color, English Language Learners, and students with disabilities performing lower than their peers on standardized tests.² Additionally, these groups of students have lower collegegoing rates and college completion rates.³ And while many of the inequities in our public schools are influenced by factors that exist outside of the school walls, students also have inequitable access to opportunities and resources inside the district. From quality of teaching to college counseling to early postsecondary opportunities, students face varying opportunities depending on where they go to school, in part because of decisions made by the district over decades.

MNPS has publicly reported on inequities in student discipline⁴ and advanced academics,⁵ two of several areas the district is working to eliminate through its <u>Equity Roadmap</u> and subsequent <u>Board policy</u>, both adopted in 2022.

Education Mayor Roles for Addressing Equity and Access

As MNPS continues to work diligently to eliminate inequities, the mayor can and must play a central role in dismantling education inequity by both supporting our public schools and by focusing on the supports and resources available to our students in the 80% of time they are not in school.

VISION CASTER



AMPLIFIER



INVESTOR

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Set a holistic vision for equitable access to opportunity within and across neighborhoods Publicly report on student access to neighborhoods with high-quality resources and conditions that allow children to develop in healthy ways

Assess investments based on their impact on inequity and call for new investments for strategies that support equity

CASE STUDIES

Education Mayor Case Studies that Help Address **Equity** and **Access**

INVESTOR

In New York, Mayor De Blasio focused on accelerating <u>pre-K for every child</u>, expanding <u>after-school programs</u> in middle school, and significantly expanding a <u>Community Schools</u> model to address education inequity.

VISION CASTER

Newark Mayor Baraka brought together stakeholders across the city with his <u>Roadmap</u> to <u>Educational Equity</u> conference to examine the changing landscape of urban education and create an action plan for disrupting systemic inequities.

KEY ISSUE 2: While legitimate issues around charter schools and academic magnet schools must be addressed, school choice discussions have become a lightning rod and litmus test that rarely center on the needs of students.

Even though MNPS did not authorize its first charter school until 2003, school choice – the concept that families can select a school outside their assigned school zone - has been in operation in the city since 1983 when Hume-Fogg became the first magnet school to serve academically talented students through an enrollment process.

In the modern era, school choice has become shorthand for charter schools and vouchers, rather than the broader definition that would include choosing any school outside of the student's zoned option. On the one hand, school choice policies give families the ability to make decisions about schooling that best fits students' and families' needs. On the other hand, school choice reshapes the composition of individual school communities, makes it difficult for the district to predict enrollment, and diverts funds away from neighborhood schools. This more narrow definition has given rise to tribalism that forces one to identify as pro- or anti-school choice without providing space for nuanced conversations around the role of school choice in supporting student success.

The state's original charter law, passed in 2002, limited eligibility for charter schools to students who were zoned to a lowperforming school or students who were not proficient in reading or math. These requirements initially concentrated charter schools in East and North Nashville before state law was amended to expand eligibility to all students in 2011. As more students became eligible, charter schools expanded to most sectors of the city. Originally embraced by the district as a turnaround strategy, over time, the expansion of charter schools in all areas of the city made some view them as direct competition to traditional schools.

Current state law allows charter schools to be authorized by the district or by the state, which splits the governance of schools between charter school boards that directly oversee these schools, the school district, which holds the charter for some of these schools, and the state chartering agency, the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. Taken together, this governance model can put the MNPS School Board at odds with the state's Charter Commission, because a school that is denied a charter by the MNPS School Board can petition the Tennessee Charter Commission for authorization. This process has resulted in 4 state-approved charters originally denied by the MNPS School Board, a trend that will almost certainly continue.

It is true today-as it was prior to the rise of charter schoolsthat the district's three academic magnets are some of the most sought-after schools in Nashville. Even with hundreds of students applying for the coveted spots each year, the student demographics of our academic magnets do not reflect the district demographics as a whole, with lower percentages of students of color, emerging English speakers, and economically disadvantaged students.

Education Mayor Roles for Addressing School Choice

Nashville's mayor must find a way to thread the needle between advocates on both sides of the debate to recenter the conversation around what is best for our students. Transparently addressing the challenges that a choice system brings to Nashville while creating space for the concerns of families and students can go a long way in moving the city toward a productive dialogue that focuses on students.

VISION CASTER



CONVENER



In collaboration with the Director of Schools, paint a picture for the future of public education in Nashville that is uplifting, positive, and solution-forward

Addresses School Choice and Enrollment

CONVENER

Boston Mayor Menino charged charter leaders and traditional school leaders to work together through the **Boston Compact** to break down traditional barriers and collaborate to improve learning for all students.



KEY ISSUE 3: An evolving public education ecosystem coupled with declining birth rates and outmigration is causing declining student enrollment in MNPS.

In 2015, Metro Nashville Public Schools was home to almost 87,800 students. Since then, over six thousand students have left the district.⁶ While declines in student enrollment certainly can affect school culture, the biggest impact of the decline is financial: Using an average per pupil allocation of \$10,000, the departure of these students has left a \$60 million deficit in the budget. Additionally, the demographic composition of the student body is continuing to become less affluent and more diverse.

Thirty years ago, education in Nashville primarily meant two things – a traditional neighborhood school or a private school. Today, the education ecosystem has expanded to include charter schools, homeschooling, and vouchers that allow students to use public dollars for private school tuition. The effect of this rapidly evolving system is that Nashville's families have more choices than ever before about how their students are educated.

These policy options come at the same time we have seen declining public school enrollment nationwide following the pandemic⁷ at the same time we see demographic and economic conditions in Nashville change: fewer women are having children in Tennessee⁸ and fewer people can afford to raise families in Nashville.⁹

As a result of the 2019 law that created the Tennessee Charter School Commission, which can authorize charter schools at the state level, the MNPS School Board no longer has complete control over when or where a public school may open in Nashville making it difficult for the district to forecast enrollment in its schools and drawing funding away from the district. Today, the number of state-approved charter schools in Nashville is 5, with 4 additional schools approved to begin operating in the coming years.¹⁰

Some students have also left MNPS to take advantage of the state's Education Savings Accounts, vouchers that allow families to use state education dollars to pay for private school tuition that went into effect in Nashville and Memphis in 2022. While this number is relatively low at this time, we could see the number of students opting for vouchers – and the fiscal impact on the district – grow substantially in the coming years.



Education Mayor Roles for Addressing Declining Enrollment

The role of the mayor in addressing declining student enrollment is complex in today's education ecosystem. Tennessee state policy limits Nashville's autonomy in determining the structure and composition of its public education system. If current trends continue, the city could be looking at two distinct systems of schooling – one operated by MNPS and one comprised of stateauthorized charter schools – serving roughly the same number of students in the next decade.

Within this context, mayors have two primary levers to address declining enrollment: stem cost of living pressures that force families to out-migrate and convene stakeholders across charter and traditional schools to create an inclusive vision for public education in Nashville.

VISION CASTER



INVESTOR



INVESTOR

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In collaboration with the Director of Schools, paint a picture for the future of public education in Nashville that is uplifting, positive, and solution-forward In collaboration with the district, consider creative uses of municipal properties to address capital needs and enrollment shifts Invest in initiatives that decrease the burden of cost of living in Nashville

CASE STUDY



See Education Mayor Case Study that
Addresses School Choice and Enrollment.



KEY ISSUE 4: As fewer people are going into teaching and policymakers have centered the profession in polarizing political debates, Metro Nashville Public Schools is facing an unstable pipeline of future educator talent.

In Nashville, several reasons contribute to the decrease, including a decades-long decline in the enrollment of teacher preparation programs, ¹¹ a growing disparity between teacher pay and Nashville's cost of living, increased responsibilities of teachers, respect for the profession, and state policy. Many of these issues were exacerbated during the pandemic as we also saw a significant rise in students' mental health needs.

When adjusting for inflation, the average teacher salary nationally is lower today than it was 20 years ago. In Tennessee, with a minimum required starting salary at \$40,000, teachers are making less today than they were 20 years ago due to cost-of-living factors. ¹² In the last several years, major efforts have been made in Nashville to make teachers the best paid in the state, but the average salary overall still lags the cost of living in the city.

Like most urban districts, MNPS has long struggled to staff specific positions, STEM teachers, Spanish and other world language teachers, and special education teachers, regularly averaging dozens of vacancies at any given time. ¹³ Education preparation programs are also not producing enough teachers of color, which is particularly important in Nashville where students of color make up 75% of all students but teachers of color make up just 28% of all teachers. ¹⁴

Education Mayor Roles for Addressing Teacher Recruitment

A recurring theme, addressing the affordable housing crisis, runs throughout this guide and the effect of a strategic investment in affordable housing would certainly support the district's teacher recruitment efforts. Mayors can also spearhead and champion innovative approaches to teacher preparation and certification in addition to a citywide recruitment effort.



VISION CASTER



INVESTOR



Set a narrative about Nashville becoming a teacher-friendly city and articulate benefits around teaching and living in Nashville Invest in affordable housing units for teachers

CASE STUDIES

Education Mayor Case Studies that Address **Teacher Recruitment**

AMPLIFIER

Denver Mayor Hancock amplified Denver's <u>substitute teacher shortage</u> by serving as a substitute teacher himself.

AMPLIFIER

Richmond Mayor Stoney went on a <u>Higher Ed Recruitment Tour</u> to encourage education degree seekers to start their teaching careers in Richmond Public Schools.

KEY ISSUE 5: After several years of positive trends in MNPS graduates' access to and success in college, Nashville is now facing its lowest college-going rate in a decade.

Metro Nashville Public School graduates are enrolling in 2- and 4-year colleges at the lowest rate in over a decade (44%) and saw the "melt rate," the rate at which students take actions toward applying to college but ultimately do not enroll, double in recent years. ¹⁵ While the job market certainly has opportunities for non-college degree candidates, students who do not go onto college are looking at significantly less in lifetime earnings than their college-going peers. In fact, college degree holders earn up to 84% more than those with high school degrees only. ¹⁶ Ready Graduate rates, a statewide indicator that incorporates ACT scores, early postsecondary opportunities, industry credentials and military readiness, vary significantly across Nashville's schools and gaps between students based on race and economic status persist. ¹⁷

While students choose not to enroll in college for different reasons, many cite the burden of massive amounts of debt as a central reason. Other students' home and family responsibilities dictate an immediate path to employment. The pandemic contributed to the college-going declines as well, as students opted out of virtual learning and received less access to college counseling resources and supports. And while Tennessee provides free community college through the last-dollar scholarship program Tennessee Promise, some first-generation low-income students do not benefit from this funding. Additionally, most MNPS students who are non-U.S. citizens are not eligible for Tennessee Promise.

Education Mayor Roles for Addressing College and Career Access and Success

As the Athens of the South and home to over 20 institutions of higher education, Nashville is poised to be a national leader in college access and success. But that can't happen with a compelling vision from city leadership and a collective action to embrace our students. Small investments and initiatives can also go a long way in this space.



CONVENER



INCUBATOR



Strengthen partnerships between business and MNPS to develop high paying, in demand career pathways for students that support actual industry and student needs

Invest in pilot initiatives in collaboration with businesses that train MNPS graduates, provide degrees and certifications, and offer employment upon completion

CASE STUDIES

Education Mayor Case Studies that Address **College Access** and **Success**

INCUBATOR

San Diego Mayor Gloria launched <u>Homes for All of Us</u> a broad initiative to tackle affordable housing that included supports for college students.



INVESTOR

St. Paul Mayor Kelly launched <u>College Bound</u>
St. Paul, which provides every child born in the city a savings account with a \$50 seed deposit. Families can then contribute to the account and invest in their children's education.



San Francisco Mayor Lee launched the <u>Middle School Leadership Initiative</u> to support the superintendent's vision to open students' access to careers in technology.



CONCLUDING Thoughts

Mayoral candidates this election year have a lot to discuss: How will Nashville balance its economic development with the needs of its citizens? What needs to happen to ensure a safe and tourist-friendly downtown experience? How can the city drastically increase its affordable housing opportunities? While these and more topics are certainly critical to the future success of our next mayor, we hope he or she will also take stock of the key issues facing public education in our city and articulate a powerful agenda for ensuring all students can thrive in our public schools. In short, we hope that our next mayor will be a leader on education who prioritizes long-term, often politically challenging solutions for our public school students over the pursuit of popular, but not transformational, quick fixes. We are looking forward to seeing who will be our next mayor and are hopeful that that person can also rise to the title of Nashville's next education mayor.

Creating the Conditions for Student Success: Other Topics on Nashvillians' Minds

In addition to the key issues above, these five topics regularly come up in conversations about our students. Most of these issues are best addressed by fully funding public education; however, we also see opportunities for the mayor to cast a vision that includes strategies to address each of these specific challenges, amplify the importance of these issues across our community, and convene stakeholders to advance action.

SUPPORTING SCHOOL READINESS

The brain develops at a faster rate between birth and five years of age than at any other time of life. Research tells us that childhood experiences before age 5 provide the foundation for future learning, behavior, and health. While there are many dedicated nonprofits and providers working to support families during these critical years, Nashville lacks a comprehensive, coordinated strategy for ensuring that every child has the necessary resources and supports that promote positive development and prepare children for school.

ADDRESSING THE RETENTION OF NON-PROFICIENT READERS

In 2021, the Tennessee Legislature passed a law that requires 3rd grade students who are not proficient in English/Language Arts to be retained unless certain other requirements are met. Students in the 3rd grade in the 2022-23 school year will be the first students affected by the law. Seventy-three percent of MNPS's 3rd graders are at risk of being retained, 4 out of 5 of whom are students of color.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

In a relatively short period of time, teachers are reporting significant increases in students' mental health concerns nationwide. One study found that between 2016 and 2020, the number of children ages 3-17 diagnosed with anxiety grew by almost 30 percent and the number of children diagnosed with

depression by 27%. Teachers express increased anxiety about the mental health of their students and the additional responsibilities of identifying and supporting these students at the same time teachers themselves may have undiagnosed or unsupported mental health needs. Additionally, school counselors and social workers often have large caseloads and limited capacity to meet increased need.

MITIGATING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Chronic absenteeism refers to students who are absent more than 10% of the school year (18 days) for excused or unexcused reasons. In 2022, roughly 30% of MNPS students were chronically absent. Chronically absent students miss essential instruction time and are at a high risk of falling behind and dropping out of school. Tennessee is also one of 37 states that uses chronic absenteeism as a nonacademic metric to measure school success, meaning schools' accountability status hinges in part on student attendance.

ENSURING SAFE SCHOOLS

In the wake of the horrific shooting at the Covenant School in Nashville in March 2023, student safety and gun laws have resurfaced as a major concern for some families. In recent years, Tennessee legislators have rolled back gun restrictions and the state now has some of the laxest laws on guns in the nation. In 2022, MNPS partnered with MNPD to expand security at our schools following the Uvalde massacre and the district regularly performs safety audits.

REFERENCES

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