



SOUTHERNERS
FOR FAIR SCHOOL FUNDING
POWERED BY EDTRUST-TENNESSEE

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TENNESSEE

Deep Roots. Bold Strategy. Southern Impact.





Rooted & Rising: The 2025 School Finance Institute

On July 15-16, EdTrust-Tennessee hosted *Rooted & Rising: The 2025 School Finance Institute* – a powerful, first-of-its-kind convening that brought together over 50 education equity leaders hand selected from **nine Southern states** alongside regional and national school finance experts.

This in-person event marked an important milestone of our [Southerners for Fair School Funding](#) initiative, a bold regional strategy to unite state-based advocates across the South.

Our goal: **to grow power, align messaging, and build momentum** for fair, sustainable public school funding across one of the most politically complex and deeply underfunded regions in the country.

This is what movement-building looks like in the South.

“ I joined a cup-filling convening to explore how we might build fairer school funding systems across the South.

It was two days of powerful cross-state collaboration, comprised of committed, compassionate, and downright brilliant mobilizers working simultaneously at the grassroots and grasstops levels.

KENTUCKY ADVOCATE

Why The South? Why Now?

The South is often ground zero for school privatization, chronic underfunding, and deeply inequitable resource distribution. But it's also where advocates are organizing – and winning – against the odds.

Public education in the South has always been political. It's been shaped by some of the country's most powerful movements for justice – and by deliberate efforts to maintain inequity. **Southern states educate over half of all Black students in the U.S., more than 40% of students living in poverty, and a growing share of immigrant and multilingual learners.**

And yet, these same states consistently rank near the bottom in per-pupil funding, teacher pay, and access to basic student supports. This isn't by accident – it's the result of decades of policy choices, disinvestment, and exclusion from political power.

But here's the truth: **if we can shift the conversation here – if we can build sustained movements for fair school funding in the South – we can transform what's possible nationwide.**

1 out of 3

public school students go to school in the South

Nearly 60%

of Black students go to school in the South

5 out of 10

Southern states **have the fastest growing English Learner populations**

And Yet

6 out of 10

Southern states **have the highest child poverty rates in the country**

4 out of 10

Southern states **spend the least amount of funding per student**

4 out of 10

Southern states **pay their teachers the lowest average salaries**

A Closer Look

To ground participants in a shared context and ignite action, we opened with a powerful data gallery walk that surfaced the challenges, and opportunities, facing Southern schools. From there, *Rooted & Rising* became a rare space for leaders to move past the headlines and get real about what it takes to win; from building coalitions to navigating supermajority legislatures in states like Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama.

Participants tackled critical challenges such as:

- Combating the growing threat of vouchers and privatization
- Strengthening implementation of hard-fought funding reforms
- Exploring long-term revenue strategies to sustain equity wins
- Preparing for shifts in federal funding and political headwinds
- Elevating Southern narratives that can reshape the national conversation





“ Thank you to EdTrust-Tennessee for bringing us together. Those of us not from the South have so much to learn from their experiences advocating for equitable education in a challenging political context – one a lot of us are facing head-on right now for the first time. It’s my honor to learn from advocates (including student advocates!) and to offer support where I can for their work on school funding issues. This is hard work in a tough moment, but I have the best field colleagues there are.

NATIONAL PARTNER

“ It was a privilege to connect with smart, thoughtful advocates from across the South and to speak on a panel about school funding formula implementation alongside people I deeply admire.

MISSISSIPPI ADVOCATE



“ ... I marveled at the care and logistical thought EdTrust-Tennessee put into everything—from the panel topics and facilitators to the time to process and interact with others to the welcome note at the hotel and vegetarian meal options. So hard to believe it was your very first [school finance] convening, but fingers crossed and betting that it will not be your last!

INSTITUTE ATTENDEE



A Catalyst for Regional Impact

This convening affirmed EdTrust-Tennessee's leadership not only as a trusted voice in our state, but as a regional connector, strategist, and convener. We're committed to keeping this momentum going – equipping advocates across the South to not only defend against threats, but to proactively shape the future of public education.



30+ School Funding Partners in Attendance:



Join Us

As we expand Southerners for Fair School Funding, we're looking for philanthropic partners who believe in the power of the South to lead.



Connect with Us

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