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The State of Public Education in Memphis (2025)

Overview of the Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS)

Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS) is Tennessee's largest school district and the 23rd-largest in the U.S., serving over 109,000 students across more than 220 schools—including both district-run and charter campuses [National Center for Education Statistics+15Wikipedia+15Wikipedia+15](#). In the 2023–24 academic year, the district enrolled about 110,057 students, with a student-teacher ratio of approximately 16.25:1 [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

Academic Performance and Progress

Recent results from the TCAP (Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program) show that academic performance remains a concern: only about 29% of students in grades 3–5 met grade-level expectations in reading—a modest rise from 26% in 2023–24 [Chalkbeat+2Tennessee Lookout+2Memphis Shelby County Schools+2](#). District-wide, proficiency levels improved slightly—English Language Arts (ELA) rose from 23.7% to 24.6% overall, with the strongest gains in elementary grades (3–5 jumped from 26.8% to 29.1%) [Memphis Shelby County Schools](#).

Despite incremental progress, leaders including state legislators have called the gains insufficient and have cited the persistent gap in proficiency—especially given statewide third-grade benchmarks (about 41.7%) [PSR Memphis+2Tennessee Lookout+2The Tennessee Firefly+2](#).

Systemic Challenges and Equity Issues

The district is heavily impacted by concentrated poverty and trauma, which complicate efforts to raise student performance, particularly early literacy rates: chronic disadvantage has contributed to a reading gap deeply rooted in third grade and beyond [PSR Memphis](#).

System-wide inequities remain stark: for example, University Schools—an alternative system serving roughly equal numbers of Black and white students—draws from a socioeconomic pool with far fewer disadvantaged students compared to the broader MSCS population, which is composed of over 50% economically disadvantaged students [Tennessee Lookout+1Seeding Success+1](#).

Reform Efforts and Governance Turmoil

MSCS has experienced significant leadership turnover, with four superintendents in fewer than three years. The most recent superintendent, Marie Feagins, was removed from her

position in January 2025, creating further political tension around district accountability [Chalkbeat+1Chalkbeat+1](#).

This backdrop has fueled legislative efforts at the state level. In early 2025, Tennessee lawmakers proposed multiple intervention bills:

- A **House proposal** would authorize a state-appointed board to oversee budgets, policy, contracts, and potentially replace board members.
- A **Senate version** would instead vest more control in the Shelby County Commission, allowing the removal and appointment of board members and even the superintendent for up to four-year terms .

Critics—including local union leadership—have raised concerns over democratic process erosion, calling the proposals a "hostile takeover" of a locally elected system .

Transition from ASD and New Improvement Models

The state-run Achievement School District (ASD), which once managed many of Memphis's lowest-performing schools, is slated for dissolution by the start of the 2026–27 academic year. Only three ASD schools remain in Memphis, and plans are in place to absorb them into MSCS and replace the pipeline model with a state-approved, locally managed tiered intervention system .

Funding Landscape

A significant financial development came in June 2025 when the U.S. Department of Education reversed its earlier decision to freeze pandemic-relief funds, unlocking \$55.6 million in federal funding for MSCS. This boost will support critical programming and maintain financial stability as the district enters the new school year .

Strategic Initiatives and Future Directions

MSCS continues building on long-standing reform efforts. The “Reimagining 901” initiative—introduced in 2021 and now in progress—includes constructing new schools, consolidating or closing others, and expanding facilities through 2031, aimed at modernizing the district and addressing neighborhood-level needs .

In addition, specialized programs such as Medical District High School (opened 2021), which allows students to earn community college credits and associate degrees in allied health and IT, and a continuing expansion of Optional Schools (magnet programs), reflect ongoing efforts to provide educational pathways tailored to student interests and needs .

Conclusion

As of mid-2025, Memphis-Shelby County Schools is wrestling with structural transformation, funding recovery, and academic urgency. While modest gains in literacy and math assessment offer a glimmer of progress, glaring proficiency gaps persist across grade levels. Political rifts over governance and proposals for state intervention underscore the stakes of district leadership.

Closing the persistent achievement gap will likely depend on sustained strategic investments—from improving early literacy in high-need schools to expanding innovative programs like medical-district high schools and magnet options. Learning from past reforms and ensuring meaningful local voice while implementing evidence-based interventions will be key to charting a path forward.