



2025

ANNUAL REPORT



SERVING STUDENTS & OUR STATE

At the Ayers Foundation Trust, our goal is to help every student reach his or her highest level of desired academic achievement. But we know success looks different for every student.

We work side-by-side with students to navigate college and career planning, admissions, financial aid, as well as the ongoing support they need beyond high school graduation for the continued success and degree and credential completion which will lead to a meaningful career.

The Ayers Scholars Program tracks and includes postsecondary enrollment, military enlistment, and students waiting for available space at a Tennessee College of Applied Technology when calculating outcomes through our Ayers Success Metrics.

We are able to collect this data due to the strong ties and one-on-one relationships our college access counselors have with their students. The Ayers Scholars Program's ability to collect this level of student information is unique and not found in other statewide college access and success programs.

Thank you for reviewing the information in this report and for all you do to support students in your local schools, communities and all across our state. We are grateful to you and our many other partners and supporters in working with us to better prepare and develop Tennessee's future workforce.

Janet Ayers
Janet Ayers
Board Chair

Dr. Burton Williams
Dr. Burton Williams
Chief Executive Officer



EMPOWERING STUDENTS & STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES

JUST THE FACTS



SERVING 30,000+ STUDENTS 8TH GRADE THROUGH COLLEGE COMPLETION

↓

97.6% FAFSA COMPLETION RATE
20 POINTS HIGHER THAN TENNESSEE'S BEST IN THE NATION RATE

100% FAFSA CHAMPIONS
ALL HIGH SCHOOLS SERVED BY AYERS HONORED BY THEC

100% SATISFACTION RATING*
FROM HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS, PRINCIPALS, AND DISTRICT LEADERS

*2024 TN Promise Evaluation, Tennessee Comptroller

“The Ayers Foundation has developed into more than just an outside organization housed at our school. They have filled a role that we did not know we needed. They are present at every school function possible and have made a deliberate effort to always be here for our students. Our Ayers counselors serve as another trusted adult students can turn to. Every foundation member has integrated into the fabric of our school culture and family.”

DR. A.C. WILLIS
Principal, Cocke County High School



MISSION

The Ayers Foundation Trust is dedicated to improving the quality of life of rural Tennesseans through education, conservation, and social welfare. We help students remove barriers, access quality education, and earn a degree or credential leading to a prosperous life.

VISION

We envision a thriving rural Tennessee where all students understand and embrace the opportunities that exist for them after high school and succeed in whatever path they choose. We want students to have the option to live and work in the communities that raised them.

THE AYERS SCHOLARS MODEL: SUPPORTING STUDENTS TO & THROUGH COLLEGE

WHAT MAKES THE AYERS MODEL DIFFERENT



Full-time, embedded counselors in high schools and community colleges



To-and-through support from 8th grade through postsecondary completion



Individualized student plan for each scholar's strengths and goals



More than 50 college and university visits a year across Tennessee

The Ayers Scholars Program is transforming education in Tennessee's most rural areas. Beginning in 8th grade, Ayers counselors and college retention coaches work alongside students to create a clear plan for life after high school – whether that's community college, technical school, university, military service, apprenticeships, or directly entering the workforce.

Full-time Ayers Scholars counselors are embedded in 5 community colleges and 40 high schools across 28 of the state's most economically distressed and at-risk communities.

Once we begin supporting a community, we are a committed long-term partner. We have never left a county we support. As a result, more than 30,000 students have already benefited from our Ayers Scholars Program – proof that investing in rural education can change lives and strengthen our communities.



AN INCREDIBLE RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Since 2021, thanks to the leadership and support of Governor Bill Lee, the Tennessee General Assembly, and the Governor's Rural Education Foundation, we have successfully expanded into many more at-risk and distressed counties across the state—bringing our proven model to students who need it most.

With recurring funding, the Ayers Scholars Program has expanded our successful college access and completion initiatives to many more rural communities across the state.

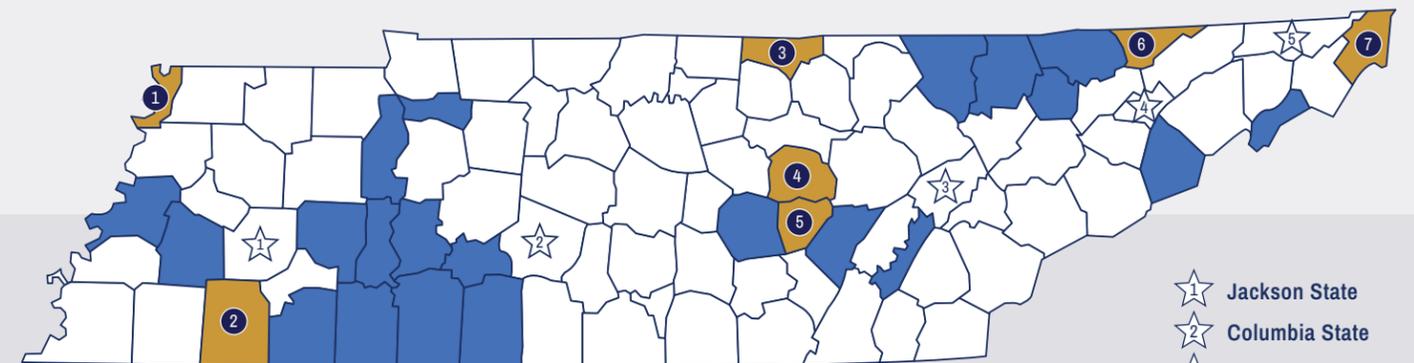
At the start of the 2025-2026 school year, we were pleased to expand the program to seven additional counties – Clay, Hancock, Hardeman, Johnson, Lake, Van Buren, and White.

This expansion also enabled the placement of College Retention Coaches at community colleges with 100 or more Ayers Scholars students. These coaches provide the ongoing personalized support our college students need to succeed. Today, the Ayers Foundation is positioned across every region of the state.

Ayers Foundation Trust Counties

KEY

- 2025 EXPANSION COUNTIES
- AYERS COUNTIES
- COMMUNITY COLLEGES WITH AYERS RETENTION COACHES
- 1 Lake County
- 3 Clay County
- 5 Van Buren County
- 2 Hardeman County
- 4 White County
- 6 Hancock County
- 7 Johnson County



- ★ Jackson State
- ★ Columbia State
- ★ Roane State
- ★ Walters State
- ★ Northeast State

SERVING ONLY THE STATE'S MOST ECONOMICALLY-DISTRESSED AND AT-RISK RURAL COMMUNITIES

LEADING THE NATION IN FAFSA

This past year, Ayers Scholars Program schools once again led Tennessee, the top state in the nation, in early Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion—an essential first step in opening the door to college access and postsecondary success.



TOP 25
Ayers Schools made up 17 of Tennessee's top 25 FAFSA Schools



100%
All 33 Ayers High Schools Named FAFSA Champions by THEC

97.6% Ayers Class of 2025 FAFSA Completion Rate

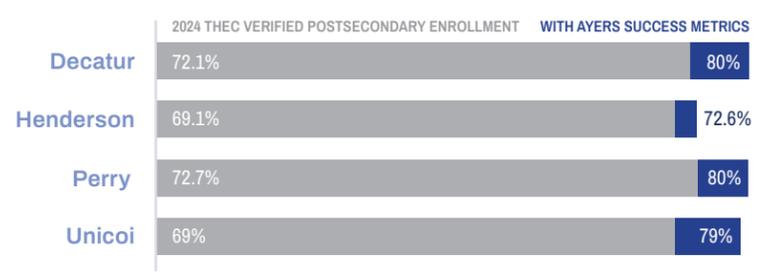
75.7% State Class of 2025 FAFSA Completion Rate
*Top state in the nation

“The Ayers Foundation has truly been a game changer for our school and community. Their team brings both expertise and heart to the work, ensuring every student receives personalized support and a clear plan for life and success after high school. Their impact is both deep and lasting.”

JOHN ENGLISH
Director of Unicoi County Schools

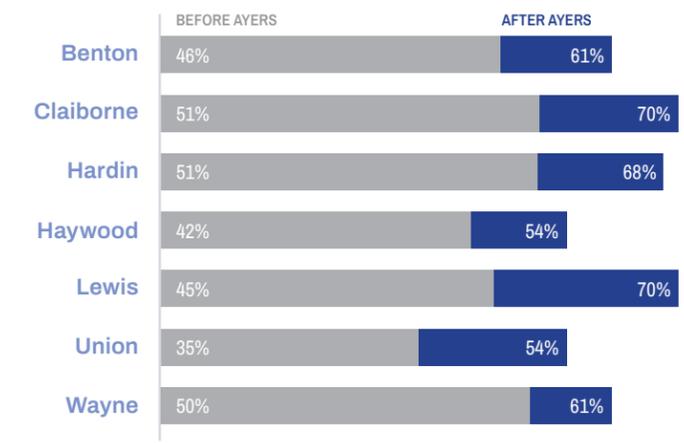
2024 Postsecondary Enrollment for Ayers Legacy Counties

Ayers Legacy Schools represented 3 of the top 5 counties for college-going according to the THEC Factbook for the Class of 2024.

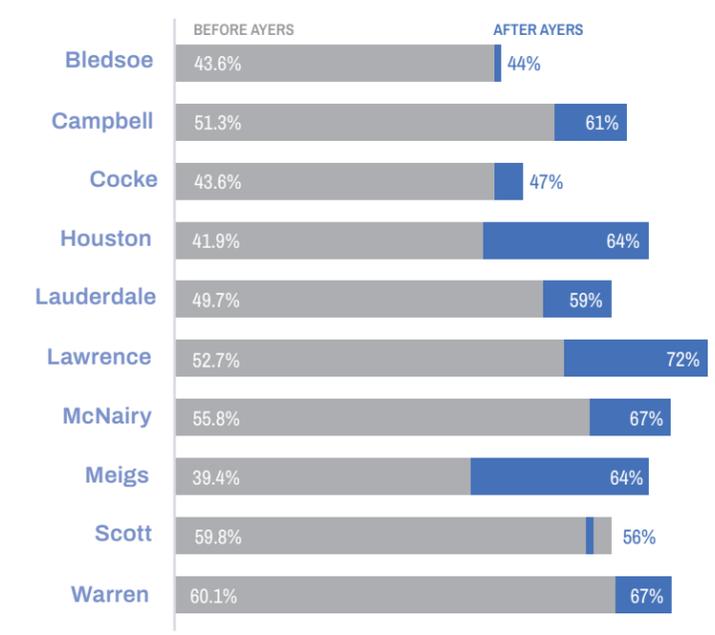


Class of 2024 Ayers Success Metrics in 2021 Expansion Counties

The THEC college-going data for the Classes of 2021 or 2023 is shown in the bar labeled “Before Ayers” for each school in the accompanying charts for reference.



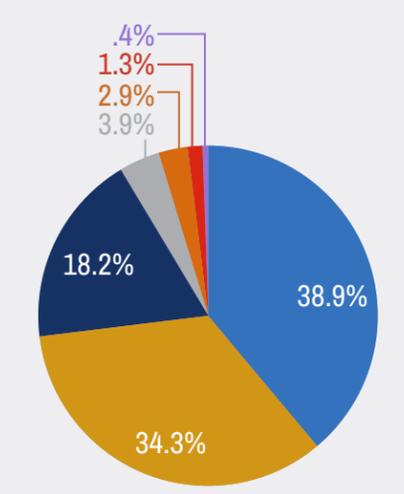
Class of 2024 Ayers Success Metrics in 2023 Expansion Counties



GOOD DATA MATTERS

Ayers Scholars’ data is verified through multiple sources to ensure accuracy. Each partner high school provides an exact student roster, which is then cross-referenced with data from the Tennessee Board of Regents, the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation, the National Student Clearinghouse, and college enrollment forms.

Ayers Postsecondary Enrollment



SUPPORTING STUDENTS TO & THROUGH COLLEGE SUCCESS BY THE NUMBERS

The Ayers Foundation Trust measures student success not just by enrollment, but by completion, persistence, and meaningful postsecondary outcomes.

Success looks different for every student, and for that reason, the Ayers Scholars Program includes postsecondary enrollment, military enlistment, and students waiting for available space at a Tennessee College of Applied Technology when calculating our Ayers Success Metrics.

But the Ayers Foundation Trust measures student success not just by postsecondary enrollment, but also by completion, persistence, and meaningful postsecondary outcomes.

We can do this because our counselors maintain ongoing contact with students following high school graduation, ensuring the support they need continues throughout their college journey and beyond.

COME HOME TENNESSEE

23,000
AYERS
SCHOLARS
ALUMNI

With a network of more than 23,000 Ayers Scholars Alumni, Come Home Tennessee connects Ayers Scholars Alumni and other Tennesseans with local employers and remote work opportunities that enable them to remain in or return to their hometowns to live, work, and raise their families should they so choose.



REVITALIZE

Revitalize rural communities so that Tennesseans from small towns have the opportunity to return home to live, work, and raise their families if they so choose



RECRUIT

Recruit employers, businesses, and remote work opportunities to rural counties, connecting them directly with Ayers Scholars Alumni and other Tennesseans



JUMPSTART

Jumpstart thriving rural economies to reduce the number of economically distressed and at-risk counties across the state

CREATING A RURAL REVIVAL IN TENNESSEE



“Coming into my senior year, I knew nothing about college, let alone what I wanted to do. The Ayers Foundation helped me decide what I wanted to do and where to go. This support has truly helped me be stress-free as I leave high school and start my new life.”

KAYLEE DAVIS
2025 Riverside High School Graduate



The Ayers Entrepreneur Center in Parsons serves the local region as a growing entrepreneurial center and central employment hub, and as a key driver in connecting more Ayers Scholars alumni and others who want to remain or return home with employers and remote work opportunities.

We are pleased to announce that a second center will open in Erwin in 2026, expanding similar opportunities for our graduates across Northeast Tennessee.

“The Ayers Entrepreneur Center (AEC) has been a vital component in maintaining a work-life balance, paired with a professional work environment. Being that Parsons is between my home and office, AEC provides the perfect middle ground saving me time and travel expenses. AEC also provides me with the opportunity to connect with other professionals, along with expanding our outreach to other local municipalities and potential clients.”

HAYDEN DEBERRY
L.I. Smith & Associates

AYERS
LEARN • GROW • SUCCEED
ENTREPRENEUR CENTER

JIM AYERS
TORCHBEARER
AWARD

TORCHBEARER AWARD

The Ayers Foundation Trust proudly presented the inaugural Jim Ayers Torchbearer Award to Ayers Scholar alumnus Trevor Teague of Darden, Tennessee. This award honors the enduring legacy of Jim Ayers, the Trust’s founder and visionary leader, whose belief in the power of education and opportunity transformed the lives of thousands of students.

“As Jim achieved personal and professional success, he was determined to create opportunities for others. The Torchbearer Award continues his legacy by celebrating those who give back to their rural Tennessee communities.”

JANET AYERS
Ayers Foundation Trust Chairman of the Board

The Jim Ayers Torchbearer Award will be presented annually to an alumnus who demonstrates outstanding professional achievement, community engagement, and a commitment to improving the quality of life in rural Tennessee.



*Our Inaugural Honoree:
Ayers Scholar Alumnus Trevor Teague*

Ayers Foundation Trust Chairman Janet Ayers was recently honored with the prestigious Dolly Parton Excellence in Leadership Award by Leadership Tennessee.

This award recognizes leaders who embody impartiality, equality, respect, and a deep love for Tennessee – qualities Janet lives out every day as she works to empower students and strengthen communities across our state.

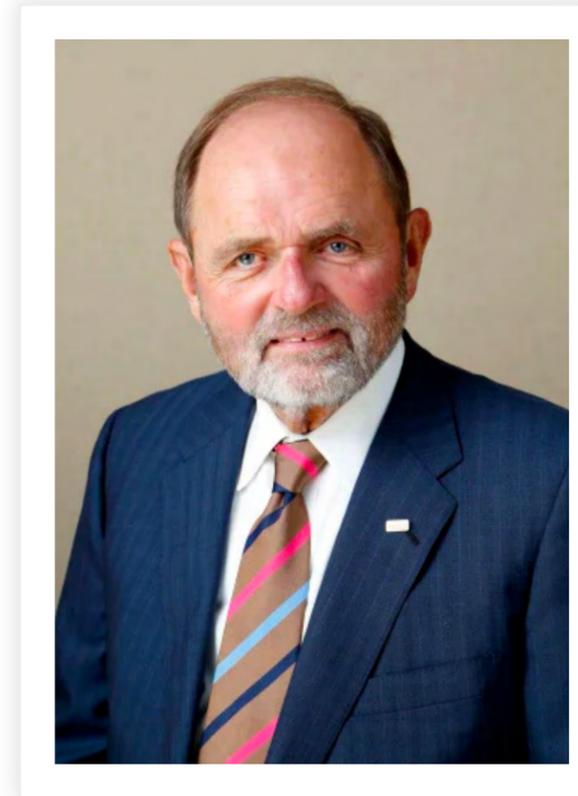
Only the third time this prestigious award has been presented, Janet joins Dolly Parton and Governor Bill and Crissy Haslam as honored recipients, a true testament to her leadership and dedication to the Trust and rural communities across Tennessee.



Since 2007, Janet Ayers has served as President of the Ayers Foundation Trust. Under her leadership, the Ayers Scholars Program has expanded to 40 high schools across 28 of Tennessee’s most at-risk and distressed counties to help nearly 30,000 rural students remove barriers in accessing a quality education and earning a degree or credential that can lead to a rewarding career and a more prosperous life.

As of June, Janet assumed the position of Chairman of the Board, where she will continue to work tirelessly to improve the quality of life of rural Tennesseans.

Jim Ayers believed in the power of education to transform lives. Through the Ayers Scholars Program and his lifelong commitment to philanthropy, his vision continues to support students, remove barriers, and transform rural communities all across Tennessee.



JAMES WESLEY “JIM” AYERS

NOVEMBER 19, 1943 - APRIL 1, 2025

Beloved husband, father, grandfather, brother, uncle, cousin, businessman, banker, entrepreneur, philanthropist, and friend.

“To whom much is given, much is expected.”

- LUKE 12:48



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