

Tennessee State University President Dwayne Tucker on the TSU campus. NICOLE HESTER / THE TENNESSEAN

A ‘sense of purpose’ brought Tucker back

New president gives the school new hope

Rachel Wegner Nashville Tennessean | USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

When you ask Dwayne Tucker what has guided the last several years of his life, he goes back to one of his mother’s final wishes. • “As she was transitioning to heaven, she called me over and said, ‘I still want you to take care of those kids in North Nashville,’” Tucker said. • His mom spent decades as a juvenile court probation officer in North Nashville. Over the years, she looked out for many of the troubled kids she met. Some of those kids, now grown and scattered across the country, came to pay their respects after her death in 2017.

“They showed up at a funeral and they said, ‘Your mom gave me another chance at life,’” Tucker said, his voice cracking with emotion. “From then, I said I’m going to do whatever I can to make a difference.”

Tucker poured himself into leadership roles at LEAD Public Schools, a small collection of Nashville public charter schools known for serving disadvantaged commu-

nities. A North Nashville native himself who grew up in poverty, Tucker eventually became CEO of LEAD in 2018.

Fast forward six years and yet another call to leadership came to help young people in North Nashville, this time from Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee.

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Dakasha Winton
TSU board chair

As state lawmakers in March 2024 ousted the entire board of trustees at Tennessee State University — the alma mater of Tucker, his mother and most of her siblings — the governor tapped Tucker and seven other alumni to form a new board.

“I felt a sense of purpose to ... come back to the university as a trustee and help solve some of the challenges,” Tucker said.

In the 14 tumultuous months that followed, he went from being a trustee to interim president of the historically Black, public university in North Nashville as its financial situation grew dire. A few months after inking a major agreement with the state to steady TSU’s finances, Tucker was named its permanent president in August.

As he settles into his new role, The Tennessean sat down with Tucker and several people who have worked closely with him to learn more about his leadership, history and vision for TSU.

Tucker talks TSU finances, state underfunding

Before Tucker arrived at TSU, previous leaders said it was in its best financial position ever.

After the old board’s ouster and long-time President Glenda Glover’s retirement, the new leaders commissioned an outside firm to conduct a financial analysis for the university. That revealed years of wildly fluctuating budget deficits and financial mismanagement. It also showed TSU would run out of money fast if drastic measures weren’t taken.

In Tucker’s words, people were “shell-shocked” by the news.

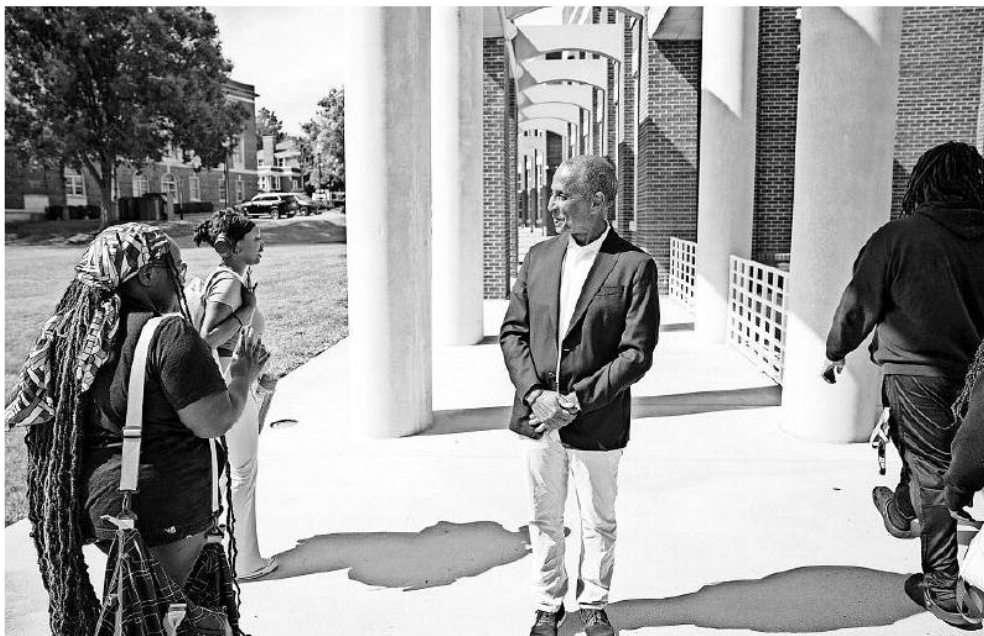
“Time was not on our side, at that point, because we were out of money,” he said.

TSU underwent layoffs in late 2024 and froze hiring and nonessential spending, among other measures. The state infused \$30 million into the university to help keep it afloat. Meanwhile, the board pushed back against Glover’s \$17 million buyout package the previous board arranged. Then came interim President Ronald Johnson’s abrupt departure in December 2024 after tensions grew between him, the board and state leaders.

Tucker said he was honored when the board approached him about taking over as interim president, especially given the critical moment TSU faced. In fact, he said, it was the third time he was in the running for the role. Years ago, an opportunity for him to lead TSU fell apart at the last minute. During the previous board’s search for a president to replace Glover as she retired in 2024, Tucker didn’t make the cut.

So when the opportunity came last December, he said it was an easy “yes.”

“I took it as fate,” Tucker said. “It was



Tennessee State University President Dwayne Tucker greets students on the TSU campus, Aug. 27.
NICOLE HESTER / THE TENNESSEAN

the right time.”

TSU Board Chair Dakasha Winton cited Tucker’s business acumen as part of the reason she and her colleagues chose him. Over the course of 40 years, Tucker held several high-level positions in Fortune 500 companies and ushered in financial turnarounds on several occasions.

Winton also talked about Tucker’s work ethic and how he goes out of his way to engage with students, staff, alumni and leaders alike. She said the board received multiple letters praising Tucker during his time as interim.

“It has been overwhelming support for Dwayne,” she said.

From the first day she sat down at the board room table with Tucker until now, Winton has been impressed with his character and his leadership.

“He just carries himself like a humble servant,” she said. “You know that he is not going to stand for anything he is not aligned with.”

Tucker stepped away from his role at LEAD and chose not to draw a salary at TSU while serving as interim president. He quickly got to work drafting a five-year financial plan that he pitched to key state leaders earlier this year. That ultimately ushered in a \$96 million agreement to free up funds the state previously gave TSU. The money is being used to address its pressing financial and operational needs, while still leaving funds for long-overdue infrastructure and building projects on campus.

Meanwhile, heated debates continued over the state underfunding TSU over the course of several decades. In 2023, the administration of then-President Joe Biden said that added up to \$2.1 billion. Many in the TSU community, including Glover, have pushed for the state to restore that money.

But Tucker has worked to shift the narrative to a different number: \$544 million. That amount was the upper end

of underfunding revealed by a state Office of Legislative Budget Analysis in 2021. In 2022, the state gave \$250 million to TSU in an effort to address that underfunding.

Tucker said he’s had his fair share of hard conversations with alumni, students, staff and parents over TSU’s finances, especially when it comes to the idea of underfunding. He summed up his approach to those talks in a few words: “The truth and transparency.”

As Tucker works to rebuild trust with state leaders and steady TSU’s finances for the long haul, he hopes to revisit conversations about restoring the remaining \$294 million in the state’s underfunding calculation.

‘His heart for people’

Ricki Gibbs, who took over Tucker’s position as CEO at LEAD Public Schools, said his former boss is both a mentor and friend to him. On any given day, their conversations include anything from shop talk to Gibbs lovingly ribbing Tucker over his golf game or his fashion choices.

Gibbs watched Tucker take LEAD through multiple challenges over the years they worked together, including the pandemic. Through it all, Gibbs said, Tucker exhibited kindness and made decisions based on what was best for his team in the long run. Gibbs said that’s what kept him at LEAD for so long, despite having opportunities elsewhere.

“A lot of people like to talk about Mr. Tucker’s financial acumen and his ability to get organizations out of holes, but not enough people talk about his heart for people,” Gibbs said. “It’s hard to leave an organization that has a leader with that type of heart.”

Despite Tucker’s quick departure from LEAD, Head of Schools LaVoe Mulgrew said the transition was seamless.

She attributes that to Tucker’s aptitude for pairing the right leaders with the right tasks. She and Gibbs both admitted they were uncertain of how they would work together after Tucker left.

But they quickly realized that Gibbs’ experience in leading people and Mulgrew’s ability to guide academics were a perfect match.

“He saw what we didn’t see,” Gibbs said.

Both Gibbs and Mulgrew attested to Tucker’s willingness to learn from others, especially in fields that are not his expertise. They also talked about his warmth, humor and integrity.

“He is very forthcoming and ... a generous leader,” Mulgrew said. “He gives of himself, he gives of his time, he gives of his resources, his knowledge.”

‘A light at the end of the tunnel’

While enrollment has dropped at TSU, in part due to the university reining in how many new scholarships it offers, Tucker said that was accounted for in his five-year plan. Over time, he said, the university will slowly but surely recover.

After a flurry of layoffs, firings and other staff departures, Tucker is now focused on the future of TSU and the people who will guide it.

“We’re working on getting the right people in the right jobs,” he said.

He wants TSU to focus on its “customer service” to students and families and to see it become the premier four-year college in the state. While he acknowledges there’s still a lot of work to do to turn TSU around, he sees a lot of hope and new energy in the university community.

“People can see the light at the end of the tunnel, and it’s not the engine coming at us,” he said with a laugh. “They can see a pathway to return Tennessee State back to the glory.”