



## 2026 Annual Federal Legislative Agenda

### Introduction:

AESA advocates for its members' federal legislative priorities as outlined in this legislative agenda. AESA's annual legislative agenda is drafted by the AESA Federal Advocacy Committee and is approved by the Executive Council. The legislative agenda drives our advocacy to build federal policy that broadly strengthens and supports ESAs and public education.

### Student Wellness

ESAs serve comprehensive student needs outside of just academic instruction, including addressing and supporting needs related, but not limited to, mental health, behavioral health, and social/emotional readiness. Policies must balance academic and non-academic factors in both the design and evaluation. The well-being and success of the whole child includes social, emotional, behavioral, physical, and mental health. Schools and school policy must acknowledge the importance of ensuring that schools, staff, and students have access to mental health and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) supports, services, and programs, including support for students to come to school ready to learn.

- Support a multi-pronged approach to federal policy relating to mental health, behavioral health, and SEL. The policy should enable ESAs to engage both proactively and responsively, through both prevention and intervention services, working as much to address and prevent as to resolve and mitigate. Federal policy must include investment via appropriations.
- Support sustained, predictable, and reliable investment in mental health-related programming.
- Support continued investment in the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, reduce paperwork burden, and improve access for new applicants.
- Support policies and resources aimed at increasing the prevalence of evidence-based social- emotional and mental health professional development opportunities for educators and staff.
- Support policies that minimize the potential for education disruption and ensure schools are a safe space for all students through multiple facets, including reinstating the sensitive locations designation for schools.
- Support policies aimed at streamlining school nutrition programs so implementers can focus on the important mission of ensuring students have the meals they need to learn and grow.
- Promote ESAs as critical partners for school nutrition programs by leading cooperatives, increasing the purchasing power of smaller programs.

### Department of Education

Public education is foundational to the strength, stability, and vitality of our democracy. AESA supports maintaining education as a federal cabinet-level priority and affirms the critical role of the U.S. Department of Education as a centralized federal entity that partners with states, Educational Service Agencies (ESAs), and local education agencies to administer federal programs, uphold civil rights protections, ensure accountability, and promote innovation in public education.

- Support the continuation of a federal cabinet-level position dedicated to education.

Approved: May 5, 2026

- Support the ongoing role of the U.S. Department of Education in administering and overseeing federal education programs in partnership with states, ESAs, and LEAs.
- Ensure federal education policy maintains a strong national commitment to equitable access and high-quality public education for all students.

### **Protecting Medicaid in Schools**

- Protect Medicaid in schools. As part of their work in implementing IDEA, ESAs and the schools they serve may provide Medicaid-eligible services and, as such, remain eligible to receive reimbursement.
- Support clarity to state agencies that federal policy currently allows schools and ESAs to seek and receive Medicaid reimbursement for school-based healthcare services, including mental health services, provided to students without an IEP.

### **IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

IDEA is the foundational federal commitment to ensuring students with disabilities have access to a free, appropriate public education and the services they need to learn, grow, and thrive. IDEA defines the role of the federal government in K-12 special education. The scope and severity of physical, cognitive, and emotional needs that ESAs and LEAs must address for the students they serve under IDEA only continues to grow. Congress's failure to fully fund IDEA represents an unfunded mandate on state and local communities that impacts both our most vulnerable children and the ability of ESAs to implement the law. It was designed to level the playing field for a historically disadvantaged population, students with disabilities, to ensure equitable access to high-quality educational opportunities. Advocacy around IDEA will relate to both the authorization of the underlying statute and the annual appropriations process. As AESA marks the fiftieth anniversary of IDEA, we recognize that the need for substantial, meaningful reform is now critical. Congressional and regulatory action is required to update the law and ease the overwhelming administrative burden it places on under-resourced educators and school systems.

- Oppose efforts to remove or diminish the administration of IDEA within the Department of Education. IDEA requires specialized education expertise, strong federal oversight, and alignment with broader K-12 policy—functions best carried out by the Department of Education in partnership with states, districts, and educational service agencies.
- Strongly urge Congress to meet its commitment to provide 40% of the additional cost associated with educating students with disabilities. AESA supports full funding of IDEA in both the short-term (through annual appropriations) and long-term (through stand-alone legislation providing a path to meet the 40% commitment).
- Support a long-term coordinated campaign to fully fund federal IDEA legislation.
- Support Congressional committees holding hearings about the increasing costs associated with educating students with disabilities, the impact of chronic underfunding from Congress, costs associated with litigation, and more.

### **Education Personnel Shortages**

ESAs and the schools they serve are constantly working to ensure they have effective employees. However, public school systems and ESAs are currently facing a nationwide education personnel shortage. AESA remains committed to the broader systemic conversation about education personnel shortages. AESA also supports a review and strengthening of educator retention patterns and pathways, both alternative and traditional, including analysis of high-needs schools and teacher diversity.

- Allow all prep/licensure candidates to be eligible for federal student loans and grants, including alternative licensure programs that meet rigorous standards.
- Enable ESAs to serve as educator licensing entities.
- Ensure flexibility of federal grants and loans for educators and educator candidates regardless of age or current school enrollment.
- Protect and expand public service loan forgiveness programs for all educators and related service providers. Simplify the application process to ensure all applicants can access the program.
- Support incentives and programs to prepare, recruit, and retain high-quality educators through student loan forgiveness proposals, Public Service Loan Forgiveness, TEACH and Teacher Quality Partnership Grants, teacher residency programs, apprenticeships, and other Grow Your Own initiatives.
- Protect and preserve student aid (grants and loans) programs aimed at future educators and related service providers.
- Support federal higher education policy that accomplishes the following:
  - Ensures ESAs are eligible for grants.
  - Ensures ESAs coordinate collaboration with PK-16.
  - Supports programs that assist and develop students entering and completing college and post-secondary programs.
  - Ensures capacity of credentialed and specialized programs to support the pipeline of students into related service provider roles.
- Incentivize increased salaries for educators and related service providers in rural areas.
- Incentivize increased salaries for school health staff (e.g., mental health/SEL, school counselors, psychologists, nurses, and teachers of SWDs).
- Support strategies that expand the pipeline of qualified educators, including those from underrepresented communities, to meet the needs of all students.
- Support full resolution to the educational impacts of federal immigration law and its impact on educator and related service provider shortages.
- Take action to address the specific shortages of bus drivers and other pupil transportation service providers.
- Support policies working to expand access to housing for educators and ESA staff to allow them to live in the communities where they work, and as a tool for both recruitment and retention.

**Education Technology: E-Rate, Connectivity, Cybersecurity & Artificial Intelligence**

Education technology, including connectivity, equipment, and professional development for educators, is critical to AESA's support of educational equity and opportunity. AESA supports E-Rate and the Universal Service Fund programs as critical components of federal support for ESAs, schools, libraries, and the students they serve. Emerging technologies and their potential to impact, disrupt, and reshape education are not new. It is a reality of learning that needs to be embraced to best expand the myriad aspects of instruction, learning, and operations that could be streamlined, strengthened, replaced, and/or added. The enduring presence of emerging technologies paired with the human-centric nature of education means that successful implementation of any technology will include explicit and ongoing professional development, especially as it relates to access, storage, use, sharing, and removal of student data.

- Technology policy must reflect the reality that implementation will impact both the cognitive and social/emotional development of students. Policymakers, vendors, and educators have a responsibility to proactively account for the impact of technology on student mental health and well-being.
- Support federal policy impacting educational technology that includes ongoing support for professional development.
- Ensure implementation comes with appropriate governance, including as it relates to access, use, and storage of student data.
- Support federal policy on education technology that establishes general safety and safeguards, while allowing states to guide and shape specific implementation.
- Protect and preserve the Universal Service Fund (USF) and its component programs, including E-Rate.
- Ensure funding to support ESAs in ongoing efforts to respond to cybersecurity threats and breaches, including technology, training, and infrastructure updates.
- Protect the ability of schools, libraries, and ESAs to continue to provide affordable, equitable access to broadband and content to students and ensure that federal policy allows 24-hour learners to have 24-hour access.
- Preserve vendors' ability to recoup E-Rate discount funding on one-time, special construction costs, all in the first year of a contract.
- Support leveraging additional program and funding streams to better address remaining middle and final mile challenges to connectivity.

### **Student Data and Privacy**

Schools have always collected a wide range of data, detailing things from enrollment information and student performance to health and disciplinary records, to allow educators, school leaders, and the community to have a glimpse at how the schools and students are doing and to inform teaching and learning. ESAs play an increasingly large role in helping LEAs store, transfer, analyze, and administer data. While increased data use has the potential to transform education by empowering students and teachers to expand learning in ways they couldn't before the evolution of digital technology, it also has the potential to put sensitive student information at risk. Effective policies can help curtail some of the risks that accompany student data collection and ensure that data is used ethically to support learning.

- Support reauthorization of FERPA to include clear and updated language aligned with existing laws and regulations that schools are following.
- Provide coherent and easy-to-understand guidance for parents and educators regarding FERPA, PPRA, and COPPA and their protection of student data privacy and security.
- Update definitions to address current realities, making it possible to protect data while ensuring appropriate student data use for legitimate educational needs.
- Oppose federal language that would restrict local education administrators and staff designees' ability to share information with and from appropriate agencies as necessary.
- Support legislation that recognizes both schools and vendors (among others) have responsibilities related to student data and privacy, and ensures that all players are held appropriately accountable.
- Data collected for and around education and students is multifaceted and multi-functional. Federal policy addressing student data privacy cannot inhibit district access to data for student learning, safety and well-being, and district operations.

### **Supporting Rural Education**

AESA supports federal policies and funding proposals to increase equity in student outcomes regardless

of geographic location.

- Support increased investment for rural education services through the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) Title VI of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.
- Support continued and timely investment in Impact Aid.
- Secure Rural Schools provides funding for ESAs, schools, and communities that find a portion of their land unavailable for generating revenues or taxes, given the presence of federal lands. The presence of federal land means the community has reduced the ability to generate property taxes (a common source of funding for schools). SRS helps fill some of the void, funding that is especially critical in these rural communities, where a significant portion (sometimes nearing 90%!) of their land is federally held and not subject to regular state and local taxation.
  - Advocate for long-term dedicated SRS funding for 5-10 years.
  - Timely access to SRS funds is critical for budget certainty and planning.
  - Support retroactive appropriations to ensure no disruption in funding.

### **Appropriations**

Public education represents one of our nation's earliest forms of equitable access to public infrastructure and, as such, requires continued support and investment from the federal level. Public education works to ensure that our nation's students are prepared to be engaged, community learners. Strong federal investment in public education, paired with reliable and timely distribution of funding, is essential to meeting students' needs and ensuring every learner has access to a high-quality education.

- Support significant fiscal investment designed to flexibly allow local education leaders to make the decisions and implement the plans necessary to safely operate schools for students and Staff.
- Oppose competitive allocations.
- Support investments in federal programs that provide greater access to educational opportunities for students facing academic, economic, or geographic barriers, including ESEA Title I and IDEA.
- Oppose efforts to privatize federal investment in education.
- Support increased investments in programs that support educator development and training, mental health supports, education technology, and well-rounded education, such as IDEA, Supporting Effective Instruction grants (Title II), and Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants (Title IV)
- Protect and expand funding for Head Start, Early Head Start, and the Child Care and Development Block Grant.
- As federal funding supports education and education-adjacent programs, funds must flow through LEA/ESA-facing entities as closely as possible.
- Support equitable federal funding mechanisms, including key federal programs like Title I and IDEA, as well as a commitment to research and revise alternative poverty indicators within federal education programs.
- Ensure ESAs are explicitly listed as eligible entities in federal education programs, including competitive grant programs.
- Support creation of a more robust and accurate poverty indicator for use in and across federal education programs, including E-Rate and school meals. The long-term work to support students will require additional federal funding to ensure the continuity of personnel and programs funded through federal emergency funds that are essential to students' academic recovery, safety and well-being.
- Federal funding should be as flexible as possible, allowing ESAs and the districts they serve to

Approved: May 5, 2026

balance the intent of the funding with the realities of implementation.

- Support sustained, predictable, and reliable investment in mental health-related programming.
- AESA supports a long-term coordinated campaign to fully fund federal IDEA legislation.
- Oppose federal block grants and support dedicated funding streams to best target resources and address identified needs. Any efforts to block grant or consolidate federal education funding should be based on an equitable formula developed with input from education leaders and must include strict “supplement, not supplant” language.

### **Career and Technical Education**

ESAs work to ensure all students graduate college and career ready. CTE is the backbone of ESAs' ability to prepare students for a career or additional career-specific training in the K12 setting.

- Provide and expand funding for career pathways for all students.
- Increase opportunities consistent with the expansion of dual enrollment, TRIO, and GEAR-up programs.
- Ensure equity of CTE opportunities by supporting rural and urban community college partnerships.
- Support the continuation of federal policies that allow ESAs to regionalize CTE to ensure opportunities for all students. Specifically, the federal government must continue to support consortia through fiduciary, professional development, and stackable credentialing policies.
- Support collaboration between multi-layered education systems, as ESAs, can be a link between K-12, higher education, and career pathways.

### **ESSA: Every Student Succeeds Act**

ESSA establishes a role for the federal government in K12 education. Designed to level the playing field for a historically disadvantaged population, students in poverty, ESSA was signed into law in 2015. It represents a significant return to the empowerment of state and local education agencies and education professionals related to education, program design, implementation, and students.

- Ensure ESAs continue to work with states to maximize flexibility in ESSA implementation.
- Support state plans that include a defined role for ESAs within their workbook/plan.
- Oppose the use of any voucher program, including but not limited to education scholarships, education savings accounts, and tuition tax credits.

### **Inclusive Early Childhood Education**

Just as ESAs and the schools they serve must be ready for all the students they enroll, so too must the students be ready (academically, emotionally, and socially) to learn.

- Protect and expand funding for Head Start, Early Head Start, and the Child Care and Development Block Grant.
- Expanded requirements for implementation need to be fully funded.
- Provide access to robust early education (birth to age five), particularly for students in high-need/low-income situations. It is a critical component of building a strong education continuum.
- Support provision of mental health and trauma-informed services to young children (birth through kindergarten enrollment).