



# AESA State Examiner

July 2026

A monthly, national look at State-by-State legislative issues, trends, and tips, empowering AESA members as education advocates

The *State Examiner* is a monthly, state-level advocacy report from the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA). It provides legislative monitoring, curated news articles, and related content gathered from across the fifty states. The purpose of the monthly report is to ensure AESA members are aware of the latest state-level education policy, funding issues and trends, and state-level news that are impacting educational service agencies (ESAs), their client schools and districts. ***Each report also concludes with action-oriented advocacy tips to activate and empower our members to be informed, effective education advocates.***

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## STATE LEGISLATIVE ISSUE MONITORING

In each edition of the *State Examiner*, AESA monitors state-level legislation and legislative trends impacting ESAs and their client schools and districts. This month's report for July 2026 examines student data privacy at the state level.

Student data privacy is no longer a niche legal issue buried in policy manuals. Student data privacy has moved from a technical compliance issue to a front-burner education policy concern, driven by the rapid growth of statewide data systems, the spread of digital learning tools, and the rise of artificial intelligence in classrooms. National policy groups like the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) report that states are strengthening longitudinal data systems and passing AI-related education bills that increasingly include privacy, transparency, and oversight requirements, showing why Congress and state legislatures see this issue as both a public trust matter and a core governance challenge.

## Student Data Privacy is Evolving into a Bigger State Policy Story

State lawmakers are paying close attention to student data privacy in 2026, but they are not treating it as a stand-alone topic. Instead, many states are folding privacy rules into broader efforts to improve data systems, connect education and workforce records, and set ground rules for artificial intelligence in schools.

This is not a distant debate happening in Washington or state capitols. It is becoming a practical leadership issue that affects vendor contracts, district policy, parent communication, staff training, records management, and the safe use of new technology in schools. That matters for education service agencies and local school systems. The new wave of state policy is not just about legal compliance. It is about how schools collect, share, protect, and use student information in a time when states want better data for planning and better safeguards for families.

### **Why this issue is growing**

Recent national reporting shows three big trends:

- First, states are still building stronger data systems so they can track student progress across early learning, K-12, higher education, and the workforce.
- Second, states are adding clearer privacy rules, oversight structures, and family protections to those systems.
- Third, AI is changing the discussion. In 2026, many state bills on AI in education also address student data privacy, teacher oversight, transparency, and limits on how AI can be used in important student decisions.

In other words, privacy policy is now showing up inside technology bills as much as in traditional student records laws.

### **What the featured bills show**

The bills highlighted below, taken from a review of information from Education Commission of the States (ECS) and the National Governor's Association (NGA), provide concrete examples of state-level policies in this area and fit into two main groups:

- Statewide longitudinal data systems, or SLDS, and other forms of data integration; and
- AI and technology governance in schools.

| Policy Area              | State and Bill Number    | Core Policy                                                                                                                                        | Why it Matters                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| SLDS/data integration    | Louisiana HB632          | Requires public and charter schools to share data with LA FIRST for research, with privacy safeguards and parent opt-out.                          | Shows how a state can use student data for research and improvement while still building in clear protections for families.                     |
| SLDS/data integration    | Louisiana HB992          | Creates early childhood education identification numbers that stay with students across programs and into later schooling.                         | Extends data linking into early childhood and supports long-term program analysis, which raises the need for strong identity and privacy rules. |
| SLDS/data integration    | Virginia HB427           | Requires collection of information on self-identified college students who are parents.                                                            | Shows how states use data systems to better understand and support specific student groups while still working within a privacy framework.      |
| SLDS/data integration    | Maryland SB0056 / HB0293 | Allows the Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center to share student and workforce data with a secure third-party center for multistate reporting. | Reflects the growing interest in secure cross-state data use tied to education and workforce outcomes.                                          |
| SLDS/data integration    | New Jersey A5802 / A3517 | Establishes a statewide longitudinal data system for education and workforce development, with a governing body and privacy protections.           | Shows that governance matters as much as technology when states build connected data systems.                                                   |
| AI/technology governance | Virginia SB394           | Requires state AI guidance, local AI policies, and guardrails on privacy, bias, transparency, and educator oversight.                              | Makes student privacy part of everyday decisions about AI use in teaching and learning.                                                         |
| AI/technology governance | Idaho S.1227             | Requires a statewide AI framework, district policies, AI literacy work, and privacy-compliant procurement.                                         | Connects AI adoption to local policy, staff capacity, and student data protections.                                                             |
| AI/technology governance | Oklahoma SB1734          | Requires educator oversight, annual parent disclosures, opt-out options, and privacy compliance for AI tools in schools.                           | Combines privacy, transparency, and human review in one policy structure.                                                                       |

### How These Bills Connect to National Themes

These examples show that states are trying to do two things at once: 1) they want better data to improve programs, study results, and connect education to workforce outcomes, and 2) they know public trust depends on clearer limits, stronger oversight, and visible privacy protections.

The AI bills follow the same pattern. States are not simply asking whether schools should use AI. They are asking how to make sure AI tools are safe, fair, transparent, and compliant with student privacy laws before those tools become part of daily practice.

For state leaders and education advocates, this is an important shift. Privacy is no longer only about records access or data breaches. It now includes vendor contracts, parent notice, opt-out rights, staff training, data sharing agreements, and limits on automated decision-making.

### Emerging Themes in State Student Privacy Policy

Taken together, several themes are beginning to emerge:

- Strong privacy rules and strong data systems can work together.
- States are increasingly building privacy protections into data-sharing laws and AI laws, not treating privacy as a separate issue.
- The most durable policies combine clear purpose, strong governance, family transparency, and practical rules for implementation.
- AI is making student privacy more urgent because new tools can collect, generate, and share information in ways that are hard for schools and families to track without clear rules.

### **Bottom line for ESAs and their Client Districts**

For ESAs and their client districts, the message is clear: state policy is moving toward better use of data, but under tighter expectations for privacy, transparency, and local oversight. That means regional service providers may need to help districts with model policies, vendor review, parent communication, staff training, records management, and AI implementation support.

## **STATE BUDGET & FINANCE MONITORING**

AESA monitors state level budget and finance news impacting preschool and primary and secondary education. These curated articles (with links) can provide insights into what is happening in your state and collectively across the U.S. The latest state budget and finance-related news for July 2026 follows below.

July 2026 saw state leaders and national media spotlighting how tightening budgets, evolving tax policy, and shifting enrollment patterns are reshaping the fiscal and operational landscape for K–12 education. These articles collectively illustrate the pressures and opportunities ESAs must navigate as states reevaluate spending priorities, instructional time, facilities, and efficiency expectations. See the following articles for greater detail on these finance and tax policy related issues:

[Gov. Jim Pillen calls for budget cuts, hiring freeze in new memo](#)

Nebraska Public Media

[Gov. Kotek says her next Oregon budget will prioritize summer learning programs](#)

Philomath News

[Indiana sets standards for 4-day school week waivers](#)

Indiana Capital Chronicle

[Gov. Newsom announces \\$2.4 billion in California special education funding](#)

CBS News

[States try new measures to get chronically absent students back to class](#)

Stateline

[Florida Property Tax Cut Amendment Could Cost Local Governments Nearly \\$12 Billion a Year by 2031, Economists Say](#)

South Florida Sun Sentinel

[How 5 States Gave Property Tax Relief in Their 2027 Budget](#)  
Newsweek

[26 Tax Proposals on 13 State Ballots Include Property Tax Relief Measures](#)  
Briefs Finance

[Finding a Second Life for Shuttered Schools](#)  
Governing

[School Vouchers Are Fueling a Private School Boom](#)  
Governing

[State efficiency is 'having a moment' amid upcoming elections, tightening budgets](#)  
Route Fifty

### Key Takeaways for ESAs

Several themes emerge across these state policy developments.

- ***Budget pressures are growing.*** Hiring freezes, spending cuts, and efficiency initiatives are increasing demand for shared services, regional staffing models, and streamlined operations.
- ***Targeted investments create opportunities.*** New funding for summer learning, special education, and other priority areas positions ESAs to serve as implementation partners for districts.
- ***Districts are navigating new policy changes.*** Shifts in instructional time, chronic absenteeism, and school choice require support in redesigning schedules, strengthening attendance strategies, and adapting to a more competitive education landscape.
- ***Fiscal planning is becoming more important.*** Property tax proposals and school facility decisions reinforce the need for long-term financial planning, facilities support, and community engagement around school assets.

### STATEHOUSE NEWS: EDUCATION POLICY

Each month AESA finds representative examples (with links) of news items coming out of the states or impacting the states that may be of interest to ESAs and their client schools and districts. The articles for July 2026 follow below:

[East Central Ohio ESC \(ECOESC\) Center opens doors with medical offices, café and community amenities](#)  
The Times Reporter

[Questions arise at Chittenden Central CESA's first meeting](#)

ABC22 & FOX44 Burlington News & Weather

[Oakland County schools seek new tax to bypass funding limits. Some cry foul](#)  
Bridge Michigan

[What Will the Justice Department OCR Agreement Mean for Schools?](#)  
K12 Dive

[As Massachusetts codifies science of reading, experts expect results to take a few years](#)  
K12 Dive

[Local mayors connect with teachers during ESC bootcamp](#)  
Salem News

[9 in 10 students expected to be eligible for Education Freedom Tax Credit](#)  
K12 Dive

[Budget shortfalls, declining enrollment top district leaders' concerns](#)  
K12 Dive

[From literacy to school choice: How Michigan's governor candidates compare on education](#)  
Chalkbeat Detroit

[Gov. Whitmer signs education budget to help every kid succeed](#)  
The Alpena News

[Chicago Public Schools coping with a staggering rise in special ed needs, costs](#)  
Chicago Sun-Times

[4-day school week? It has potential — if lawmakers let it](#)  
Indiana Capital Chronicle

## STATE & NATIONAL REPORTS IMPACTING EDUCATION

AESA monitors state and national reports and policy briefs highlighting state-level information of interest to ESAs. As always, *it is important to view these reports through a critical lens with attention to research design, methodology, data sources and citations, peer review, and publication venue*. This month AESA spotlights reports, surveys and policy briefs from researchers at Brookings, the American School District Panel, Bellweather, and the Phone Free Schools State Report Card Project.

- [School spending equity since 1976](#). Inequality of educational outcomes by race and class is large and persistent, and the role that schools do or could play to reduce these gaps is complex and long debated. **In this report Brookings** uses newly assembled school district level data spanning 1976 to 2021 to address the following questions:
  - Do high-poverty and predominantly non-white districts spend less than their lower-poverty or predominantly white counterparts?

- How has that changed over time as policy preferences evolved and states reformed their school finance systems?

Access the full report [here](#).

- **[A Mile Wide, an Inch Deep: The State of Civic Learning in U.S. School Districts.](#)** As the United States marks its 250th anniversary, civic learning is having a moment—but new data suggest that more support is needed to move students from knowing the basics to participating in civics learning and practice within their communities. This brief is the first in a three-part series from the American School District Panel (ASDP), a research partnership between RAND and CRPE that surveys hundreds of school district leaders.

Read the full brief [here](#).

- **[Proficiency Confusion: Making Sense of Student Math and Reading Scores.](#)** This report from Bellweather addresses the transparency challenge by using a common scale for reading and math to translate state proficiency thresholds into a shared framework. Rather than focusing on whether individual states have “high” or “low” standards for proficiency, this analysis aims to provide essential context: It allows stakeholders to understand what proficiency means in terms of real-world reading and math skills and to compare expectations across states without requiring a national standard. More generally, the findings demonstrate that while proficiency thresholds do vary across states, the story is not one of total fragmentation. There is meaningful variation in where states set the bar, with differences that can translate into different expectations for students. However, there is also notable alignment — particularly among states that are part of assessment consortia — where clusters of states set similar proficiency thresholds, suggesting more consistency than is often assumed. That said, the dataset includes only about half the states in the U.S., so further research is needed to determine whether that pattern holds for the other half.

Read the report [here](#).

- **[Phone Free Schools State Report Card.](#)** Eleven states passed or strengthened their laws this year governing students’ phone use in school, according to a report card released earlier this month, but policies remain varied across those states. A coalition of nonprofits and other organizations, including The Anxious Generation, Smartphone Free Childhood, the Institute for Families and Technology and the Becca Schmill Foundation, recognized states for their efforts to pass what they deemed “strong” policies, and spotlighted states they felt “fell short.” According to a new report, 24 states + DC have passed laws restrict cellphone use Bell-to-Bell. Forty-one states have a law addressing personal electronic device use in schools (D states Alaska and Minnesota don't specify that personal electronic device use in schools should be limited: only that a policy should be put in place. The Report Card project is a collaboration between The Anxious Generation, Smartphone Free Childhood US, Institute for Families and Technology, and Becca Schmill Foundation. State legislators and advocates were also consulted throughout the report card project.

To access the report, click [here](#).

ESA leaders should engage with these reports because, taken together, they illuminate how funding equity, civic learning, assessment standards, and emerging phone-free school policies are reshaping the

operating environment for ESAs and their client districts. The Brookings analysis of school spending since 1976 underscores that finance reforms have changed the distribution of dollars by income and race over time, raising critical questions about how ESAs design support for high-poverty and racially diverse systems and where state-level funding structures still undermine equitable outcomes. The American School District Panel's civics brief shows that while most districts embed civics in required courses, far fewer provide structured, experiential opportunities for students to practice civic engagement, signaling a need for ESAs to help districts move beyond "mile wide, inch deep" civics toward deeper project-based and community-connected learning. Bellwether's proficiency report highlights wide variation—but also areas of alignment—in state proficiency thresholds and offers a common Lexile/Quantile framework for interpreting reading and math scores, which has direct implications for how ESAs communicate data to boards, families, and policymakers and how they benchmark instructional support across states. Finally, the Phone Free Schools State Report Card documents rapidly evolving, state-level regulation of student device use—only a small number of states currently meet the "gold standard" of bell-to-bell, inaccessible storage—creating operational, legal, and instructional design questions that ESAs must help districts navigate as they balance student well-being, classroom management, and local control.

## **JULY 2026 MONTHLY ADVOCACY TIP**

### **There are No Unimportant Legislative Staff: *The Relationship Behind the Vote***

In every statehouse, the most important people in the room are not always the ones at the dais. Legislative staff shape what members hear, what they understand, and what they are ready to act on. For those of us who advocate for educational service agencies, that reality should shape how we approach every meeting, email, and hallway conversation.

Robert L. Guyer's book, "Guide to State Legislative Lobbying," includes a list of 27 lobbying fundamentals including the not-so-subtle reminder that "there is no unimportant staff." This rule captures a truth that experienced advocates learn quickly. You may not need a staff member's support on every issue, but you can absolutely be hurt by their opposition. Better yet, the right staff relationship can help move an issue from confusion to curiosity, and from curiosity to action.

For ESA leaders and advocates, this means staff relationships are not optional. They are a core part of advocacy strategy.

### **Start before you need something**

The best time to build a relationship with legislative staff is before a bill is moving, before a hearing is scheduled, and before a crisis arrives. Too often, advocates first make contact only when they want a vote, a sponsor, or a change in language. That is usually too late to build trust. Instead, think of staff as long-term partners in information. Introduce yourself early. Share who you represent, what your agency does, and why your work matters for students, schools, and communities. Make it easy for staff to remember you as someone who is useful, respectful, and reliable.

### **Make their job easier**

Legislative staff manage heavy workloads, shifting priorities, and constant interruptions. If you want their attention, help them do their job well. Be clear about your ask. Be brief when you can. Bring one-page summaries, local examples, and plain language explanations rather than long packets of jargon. Staff appreciate advocates who can quickly explain:

- What the problem is.
- Why it matters now.
- Who is affected.
- What action you want.

The more complicated the issue, the more important it is to simplify without dumbing down. In education advocacy, we often know too much to communicate clearly. Staff need the version they can understand, repeat, and use.

### **Be accurate and credible**

Nothing builds trust faster than reliable information. Nothing damages it faster than exaggeration. If you make a claim, be ready to back it up. If you do not know the answer, say so and follow up. If the numbers are uncertain, explain the range or the source.

This matters especially in ESA advocacy, where policy decisions often involve funding formulas, service delivery, student counts, compliance requirements, and local impact. Staff do not need the most dramatic argument. They need the clearest one. A well-supported, modest claim is far more effective than a stretched case that cannot survive scrutiny.

### **Respect the office, not just the member**

Good advocates understand that a legislative office is a team. The scheduler, legislative aide, committee staff, policy analyst, chief of staff, and district staff all play different roles. Treat each one professionally. Learn names. Say thank you. Be on time. Follow the office's preferred process.

If an office asks you to send materials in advance, do it. If a staff person says they need a shorter summary, listen. If you are asked to work through a policy issue with the author's staff, do not jump over them and go straight to the member unless there is a compelling reason. Staff notice when advocates respect the chain of communication, and they also notice when they do not.

### **Stay connected after the meeting**

A lot of advocates think the meeting is the finish line. It is not. The meeting is the beginning of the next step. Follow up with the materials you promised. Send a thank-you note. Offer to answer follow-up questions. Share updated information if the issue changes.

This is where many advocacy relationships are won or lost. Staff remember the people who made their work easier, responded quickly, and stayed useful after the first conversation. Over time, those relationships become a real advantage when a bill is being drafted, amended, or scheduled for action.

### **Give staff something real to use**

The most effective advocacy does more than raise awareness. It gives staff something they can use internally. That might be:

- A short summary of how a bill affects students or local agencies.
- A district-level example from their own region.
- Implementation concerns that may not show up in the bill text.
- A clear explanation of what happens if the proposal passes, fails, or is changed.

For ESA leaders, this is especially important. Many legislative offices know education broadly, but they may not understand the day-to-day work of educational service agencies. Help staff see the connection

between policy and practice. Show them how decisions made in the statehouse affect real services, real budgets, and real students.

### **Foster and maintain relationships**

Relationships with staff should not be purely transactional. Check in when you do not need anything urgent. Send a note when their bill advances. Congratulate them on a committee assignment or new role. Invite them to visit your agency or program when it would help them see your work firsthand. These small efforts matter because advocacy is built on memory. Staff remember who was professional, who was helpful, and who treated them like a partner rather than a gatekeeper. Over time, that memory becomes influence.

### **A final reminder**

At the statehouse, staff are not an audience to impress. They are the people who help shape what becomes possible. If we want stronger policy outcomes for students and ESA communities, we need to invest in the relationships that make those outcomes possible.

That means being **prepared**, being **respectful**, being **useful**, and being **consistent**. It means understanding that good advocacy is not just about making the ask. It is about becoming the kind of person legislative staff want to hear from again.

For ESA leaders and advocates, that is not a side skill. It is the work.

## **CUSTOMIZED AESA ADVOCACY TRAINING**

AESA empowers education leaders to become effective advocates through its customized advocacy trainings, designed to meet a variety of needs and schedules. Whether you're seeking an in-depth exploration or a concise overview, AESA offers three levels of workshops to build your legislative knowledge and confidence:

- 1) The **comprehensive three-day workshop** provides a step-by-step immersion into state advocacy, covering the legislative landscape, policy and rule-making, and hands-on advocacy strategies.
- 2) For those with limited time, the **one-day workshop** delivers essential advocacy skills and actionable insights in a focused format.
- 3) Looking for a **customized training** solution? AESA can do that too. Additionally, AESA offers tailored, one-hour presentations ideal for regional or local events, with expert speakers addressing state-specific challenges in politics, finance, and education policy.

Each training is designed to equip participants with practical tools and strategies to make a meaningful impact in the state legislative process. For more information contact [Joan Wade, Executive Director](#).

### **AESA ADVOCACY GUIDE: Maximizing Impact**

Educational Service Agencies play a critical role in supporting schools and districts, yet their unique needs and challenges often require tailored advocacy approaches. The recently released AESA Advocacy

Guide recognizes the distinct position of ESAs and offers targeted strategies to help you navigate the complex landscape of education policy and funding.

Key Features of the toolkit include:

- Audience Analysis
- Message Development
- Channels & Content
- Advocacy Tactics

Advocacy is essential for ensuring that ESAs receive the support and recognition they deserve. With this specialized Advocacy Guide, you're equipped to lead impactful advocacy efforts that can make a real difference. [Download your copy today](#) and take the first step towards stronger, more effective advocacy for your ESA.

## SHARE YOUR ADVOCACY SUCCESS STORIES

AESA would like to highlight successful state-level advocacy campaigns. Share your triumphs in state advocacy with fellow members! Contribute to our newsletter by submitting your success stories – your experiences can enlighten and inspire others in navigating the often-complex landscape of state advocacy. Together, we can amplify our collective knowledge for the benefit of the entire AESA membership. Send your stories to [jwade@aesa.us](mailto:jwade@aesa.us).

## STAY CONNECTED & INVOLVED

Have feedback for the AESA state advocacy team? Would you like to see a particular issue area addressed in future issues? Send feedback to [jwade@aesa.us](mailto:jwade@aesa.us)

## JOIN THE CONVERSATION

