



# AESA State Examiner

May 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 includes 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 May 2026 examines state activity related to ***behavioral health and interconnected policies in special education and student discipline***.

***Behavioral Health & Related Challenges Facing Schools: What the Data Shows, What States Are Doing, and What it Could Mean for Educational Service Agencies***

### Overview

If you work for an educational service agency (ESA), you have likely heard the stories or witnessed the challenges firsthand. District superintendents and building principals describing classrooms where a single student in behavioral crisis disrupts learning for 25 others. Special education directors managing caseloads that no longer resemble what they were five years ago. Teachers leaving mid-year not because of pay, but because of what they encounter every day. What was once mostly anecdotal is showing up in the data. Federal civil rights data, national epidemiological surveys, and state-by-state legislative activity all point in the same direction: America's public schools are navigating significant behavioral and mental health challenges, and the systems designed to identify, support, and educate the most vulnerable students are under severe strain.

This month's article seeks to summarize what is known to provide ESA leaders with a grounded, data-informed picture of the challenge and a clear view of the policy landscape taking shape around it. For ESAs uniquely positioned at the intersection of school support, specialized programming, and policy implementation, the moment is both urgent and full of opportunity to serve.

### **The Behavioral Health Surge**

The numbers are striking. According to the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, **40% of high school students experienced persistent sadness or hopelessness in 2023** — up from roughly 26% a decade earlier. One in six youth ages 6–17 experiences a diagnosable mental health disorder each year, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) estimates that half of all lifetime mental health conditions begin by age 14. The American Academy of Pediatrics declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health in 2021. Three years later, the emergency has not abated.

From 2016 to 2021, the CDC documented statistically significant increases in the lifetime prevalence of anxiety disorders, depression, learning disabilities, and developmental delays among children ages 3–17. As of April 2022, 69% of public schools reported an increase in mental health concerns among students compared to pre-pandemic baselines. In the most recent national data available, nearly **1 in 5 public school students** — 18% — utilized school-based mental health services in 2024–25.

### **How This Surge Shows Up in School Records**

For those tracking school data systems, the behavioral health surge shows up most visibly in **Section 504 plan growth**. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act — a civil rights statute that entitles students with disabilities to accommodations in general education — has seen explosive enrollment growth, measured through the federal Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). Nationally, the share of students on 504-only plans grew from approximately **1.0–1.2% of public school enrollment in 2005–06 to approximately 4% by 2021–22** — a near-quadrupling in roughly 15 years.

The single greatest accelerant may be the **ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA)**, which broadly expanded the definition of disability to include conditions that substantially limit major life activities — including anxiety, depression, ADHD, and PTSD. Overnight, conditions that had been difficult to qualify under Section 504 became clearly eligible. Schools that had been cautious about 504 identification began writing plans with greater frequency, and the pipeline from mental health diagnosis to school accommodation grew substantially.

What the data does *not* show is a corresponding rise in the IEP disability category most directly associated with behavioral and emotional needs. The **Emotional Disturbance (ED)** category under IDEA — which covers students whose emotional or behavioral conditions adversely affect educational performance and require specially designed instruction — has actually **declined** as a share of students with disabilities, dropping from **7.1% in 2008–09** to just **4.35% in 2023–24**. In absolute numbers, ED identification fell from approximately **365,000 students in 2014–15** to about **327,000 in 2022–23**, even as behavioral health needs were escalating nationally.

This paradox has a structural explanation. Students with anxiety, depression, and even moderate ADHD are increasingly being routed to **Section 504** rather than IDEA — receiving accommodations (extended time, reduced workload, quiet testing) without the specially designed instruction that an IEP would require. This is less costly for schools, quicker to implement, and carries less procedural burden.

Whether it is always the appropriate level of support is a question the data cannot answer — but it is a question ESA leaders and advocates are uniquely positioned to ask.

### **What the Discipline Data Shows: A Complicated National Picture**

The formal discipline data presents what may seem like a reassuring picture at first glance: national rates of school-related violence, weapons possession, and student arrests have generally declined since peaks in the early 2010s. A detailed 2024 analysis of federal data described the 2021–22 school year as among the safest in a decade by most crime-related metrics.

And yet — 72% of educators surveyed by EdWeek Research Center in December 2024 said students misbehave *more* than before the pandemic. Nearly half said behavior had gotten "a lot worse." The disconnect is real: formal criminal or safety metrics are stable or declining, but lower-level behavioral disruption — emotional dysregulation, defiance, outbursts, chronic non-compliance — is substantially higher by virtually every educator account. These are not incidents that rise to the level of a law enforcement report. They are the day-to-day fabric of what is making teaching unsustainable for many professionals, and what is making learning nearly impossible for many students.

Where the formal data does tell a clear and consistent story is in the disproportionate disciplinary treatment of students with disabilities. According to the most recent CRDC data (2021–22):

- Students with disabilities represent approximately **17% of public school enrollment** but account for **27–29% of all in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and school-related arrests.**
- Students with disabilities are **twice as likely to be suspended** as their non-disabled peers.
- **77% of students subjected to seclusion** are students with disabilities — with autism spectrum disorder heavily overrepresented.

By disability category, **Emotional Disturbance (ED)** carries by far the highest discipline rate of any IDEA category — suspended and expelled at rates 3–4 times the overall student average. **Other Health Impairment (OHI)**, which includes ADHD, is the second most frequently disciplined category. Students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) follow.

### **State Policy Responses: What Legislatures Are Doing**

The 2025 legislative sessions were among the most active in recent memory on these three interconnected issues. The political landscape is not simple: states are simultaneously investing in behavioral health infrastructure *and* expanding punitive discipline authority, often within the same statehouse, sometimes in the same bill.

### **Mental Health Investments**

More than 30 governors referenced student mental health in their 2025 State of the State addresses, and a Pew Charitable Trusts analysis found it among the top 5 cross-partisan education themes.

Legislative highlights include:

- **Nevada (SB 314):** Required all teacher licensure programs to include mental health coursework and mandated ongoing professional development in social-emotional learning for existing teachers and administrators.
- **Arkansas:** Passed a \$7 million initiative combining student device/phone restrictions with telehealth connections for mental health services.

- **California:** Enacted multiple bills (SB 14, SB 224, AB 309) requiring mental health absences to be treated as excused, mandating mental health literacy in secondary health curricula, and directing the state's Department of Education to create model referral protocols for all school systems.
- **New York:** Governor Hochul proposed expanded mental health investments in FY26, including school counselor pipeline funding, in parallel with cellphone restriction legislation.

### Special Education Funding Reform

This was arguably the highest-stakes arena in 2025. Two states led the way:

- **Texas** enacted the most significant state-level special education structural reform in the country in 2025. Senate Bill 568 shifted Texas from a **placement-based funding model** (where reimbursement is tied to where a student is educated) to a **service-intensity model** (where funding reflects the complexity and level of services required). This change — long advocated by disability rights organizations and equity researchers — removes the perverse incentive to place students in more restrictive settings to maximize reimbursement. Texas also created a parent-directed supplemental services grant of \$1,500 per eligible student.
- **Connecticut** passed HB 5001, a bill that invested \$30 million in a new Special Education Expansion and Development (SEED) grant to help districts build in-house capacity for students currently placed in costly out-of-district settings, regulated third-party private provider billing rates, raised developmental delay eligibility age to 8, and — critically — **required behavioral assessments and intervention plans before any out-of-district placement**. That last provision signals a meaningful shift toward early, in-district behavioral intervention as a policy priority.

### Discipline Legislation: A Divided Response

State discipline legislation in 2025 reflected genuine ideological tension. The authoritarian and the preventive impulse were both well-represented:

- On the side of **expanded removal authority**: **West Virginia** enacted a law allowing teachers to remove students who make threatening or intimidating statements. **Arkansas's** Teacher and Student Protection Act prevented a removed student from returning to the same teacher and/or class environment. **Texas** advanced legislation extending the permissible length of in-school suspension beyond previous limits and codifying teacher-initiated removal authority.
- On the side of **limiting punitive discipline**: **Colorado** clarified and restricted the permissible use of physical restraint. **Illinois** moved to limit preschool suspension authorization and duration. Multiple states — including **Maryland**, **Washington**, and **Michigan** — advanced or enacted bills restricting the use of suspensions for students in early grades.

### Implications for Educational Service Agencies

The convergence of rising mental health need, structural identification gaps, and contested discipline policy creates a set of compounding risks for schools and students that educational leaders must understand clearly. For ESAs, this landscape is at once daunting and defining. **ESAs exist precisely to do what individual districts, particularly smaller and rural ones, cannot do alone: provide specialized capacity, shared expertise, and cost-effective services at scale.** The behavioral health and special education crises are generating demand across every one of those dimensions.

- **The national policy environment is naming ESAs as part of the solution.** The Education Commission of the States' September 2025 special education funding report explicitly identified regional education service agencies as one of four primary state policy levers for serving

students with complex needs — specifically as a mechanism for building high-cost service capacity outside individual district budgets.

- **Programmatic opportunities are growing.** The single most underserved gap in the system right now is early behavioral identification and Tier 2/Tier 3 behavioral intervention. PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) coaching, functional behavioral assessments, behavior intervention plan development, trauma-informed practice training, and school-based mental health consultation are all services that ESAs can and, in many cases, already do provide — but demand is accelerating well beyond current capacity. ESAs that can document outcomes, build referral pipelines with districts, and demonstrate cost-effectiveness relative to out-of-district placements are in an exceptionally strong position.
- **The advocacy framing is bipartisan.** The data on behavioral health, discipline disproportionality, and identification gaps is simultaneously a fiscal argument (early intervention costs far less than out-of-district placement, incarceration, or adult mental health treatment) and a moral one (every student deserves appropriate identification and support). Investments in ESA behavioral health capacity serve conservative fiscal priorities and progressive equity priorities at the same time. That is a rare and valuable position in today's legislative environment.

### Five Takeaways for ESA Leaders

The evidence is no longer anecdotal. The behavioral health and special education challenge facing schools across the country is documented, persistent, and accelerating. ESA leaders who understand the data and the policy landscape are positioned to lead with both urgency and credibility.

1. **The 504 surge is behavioral health in disguise.** Fourfold growth in 504 plans over 15 years reflects a generation of students with anxiety, depression, ADHD, and trauma-related needs that the special education system is only partially capturing. ESAs should be assessing whether districts they serve have appropriate identification, evaluation, and support processes at the 504 and early IEP levels.
2. **The ED category undercount could be a structural problem, not a data quirk.** Declining ED identification in the face of rising behavioral health need may suggest some students are not receiving the level of support they need. ESAs can play a critical role in supporting districts in defensible, appropriate identification — and in building the behavioral intervention programming that makes IEP services viable.
3. **Discipline disproportionality is both a legal exposure and a human cost.** Students with disabilities are suspended at twice the rate of their non-disabled peers nationally. ESAs offering PBIS, restorative practice, and behavior support frameworks are directly addressing a documented legal risk and educational harm.
4. **The state and national policy environment is moving — and ESAs need to be in that conversation.** Texas and Connecticut enacted landmark special education reforms in 2025. The Education Commission of the States named regional ESAs as a policy solution. States' next budget cycles and legislative sessions are an opportunity to make the case for ESC investment using the same data and framing driving legislative action in peer states.
5. **Document, measure, and communicate outcomes.** The single most powerful thing ESAs can do in this environment is demonstrate that their behavioral health and special education programming works — in student outcomes, in cost-per-pupil comparisons, and in reduced restrictive placements.

ESA leaders cannot afford to sit on the sidelines of this crisis; the same data that documents rising behavioral health needs and special education strain also makes a compelling, bipartisan case for investing in regional capacity, early intervention, and evidence-based behavioral supports. By leaning

into their role as conveners, innovators, and policy partners, ESAs can help shift the trajectory from reactive discipline and costly placements to proactive identification, robust in-district services, and measurable gains for students and the educators who serve them.

*Sources for this article include the U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC); the National Center for Education Statistics; the CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey; the Education Commission of the States; the National Conference of State Legislatures; the Pew Charitable Trusts; Children's Defense Fund; the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce; the Center for Learner Equity; and the Learning Policy Institute.*

## 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 May 2026 follows below.

### [Alaska lawmakers approve one-time funding for K-12 schools, plus energy relief](#)

Alaska Beacon

### [Population Growth Slowed Across Most States in 2025](#)

Governing

### [13.7% April Wisconsin tax collections increase led to higher revenue estimate](#)

The Center Square

### [Minnesota lawmakers approve property tax refund](#)

KSTP.com

### [Gov. Kim Reynolds signs property tax law projected to save \\$4.2 billion over 6 years](#)

Iowa Capital Dispatch

### [Governor says his administration has identified ways state government could save \\$168 million](#)

WV MetroNews

### [Wisconsin Senate fails to pass tax relief, education deal](#)

Channel 3000

### [House votes 149-9 to approve annual state budget bill](#)

Commonwealth Beacon

### [Minnesota voters will decide if schools can draw more from \\$2.3B fund established in 1858, without raising taxes](#)

CBS News

## 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:

[Educators testify against a bill that would ban diversity and inclusion efforts in Ohio K-12 schools](#)

Ohio Capital Journal

[Senate Passes Education Reform Bill with Voluntary School District Mergers](#)

VT Digger

[SNAP Enrollment Has Dropped in Every State](#)

Governing

[Oregon Gov. Tina Kotek orders schools to maintain instructional hours: What happens now?](#)

OPB

[Ohio Bill Would Require Increased Accountability for Schools Using Private School Vouchers](#)

Ohio Capital Journal

[Alaska Senate advances bill to expand early interventions for children with developmental delays](#)

Alaska Beacon

[Georgia governor signs high school cell phone ban, K-3 literacy bills into law](#)

WABE

[Maine Raises Teacher Pay to Tackle Staffing Shortages](#)

Governing

## 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 and policy briefs from researchers at Wallace and the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL).

**[The Principal Effect](#):** This report shows how principals are essential to addressing critical issues such as teacher retention and student absenteeism and provides a road map for policymakers. The report draws on decades of research to explain how principals play a key role in improving schools and how policymakers can invest in developing and supporting strong leaders. It particularly references the 2021 synthesis report [How Principals Affect Students and Schools](#), which affirmed that principals have a pronounced positive effect on the schools they lead. Find the report [here](#).

[Reach Higher Together](#). This report from Columbia University’s Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) takes a close look at a range of school districts across the country that gave every educator access to the same high-quality curriculum—and then invested seriously in the professional learning, leadership development, assessment practices, and community engagement needed to make it work. The report finds these districts saw real gains in student outcomes, particularly for kids who had long been underserved. Read the report [here](#).

Educational service agency leaders will find both “The Principal Effect” and “Reach Higher Together” highly relevant because they translate decades of research into concrete system-level levers ESAs can influence: leadership pipelines, professional learning, and coherent instructional systems. “The Principal Effect” underscores that principals are among the most powerful in-school drivers of teacher retention, student attendance, and overall school improvement, providing a research-based roadmap for how systems can strategically develop and support building leaders rather than treating principal preparation as a local, ad hoc responsibility. “Reach Higher Together” complements this by showing that when districts align high-quality curriculum with serious investments in professional learning, leadership development, assessment practices, and community engagement, student outcomes improve—especially for historically underserved students. Together, these reports suggest that ESAs are uniquely positioned to serve as regional hubs for principal development, instructional coherence, and cross-district support; for school districts and ESAs, the implications include rethinking how to braid funding, technical assistance, and coaching around principals and instructional teams, and how to use research-based models to scale equitable access to strong leadership and rigorous curriculum across all schools in a region.

## MAY 2026 MONTHLY ADVOCACY TIP

### The Third Leg of Advocacy: The Role of Campaign Contributions in a Balanced Government Relations Strategy

Effective advocacy rests on a three-legged stool: relationships, policy education, and campaign contributions. Remove any one of those legs and the stool wobbles and may topple. Yet of the three, campaign contributions remain the least discussed, the most misunderstood, and the one that makes the most well-intentioned education leaders most uncomfortable. Campaign contributions and finance can feel foreign, even unseemly, to professionals whose careers have been spent building cooperative relationships and delivering instructional support rather than writing checks to politicians.

But here is the fundamental truth that every education stakeholder and ESA leader needs to understand and internalize: campaign contributions are not just transactional. They are not a bribe. They are not a quid pro quo. At their most principled, they are an exercise of one of the most constitutionally protected rights Americans possess — the freedom of speech. They are an expression of institutional values, a signal about what matters, a seat at a table that will be occupied whether ESA leaders choose to participate or not. The only question is who will be sitting in that seat if education stakeholders and ESA leaders choose to stay away.

#### What Is Campaign Finance — and Why Does It Matter?

Campaign finance refers to the raising and spending of money in connection with political campaigns and elections. At the federal level, it is regulated primarily by the Federal Election Commission (FEC), whose jurisdiction covers contributions to federal candidates, political parties, and political action

committees (PACs). At the state level, each state has its own set of laws, agencies, and disclosure requirements governing contributions to state legislative and executive branch candidates — and these vary enormously from one state to the next.

Understanding campaign finance also means understanding its legal architecture. There are important distinctions between:

- **Direct contributions to candidates:** Money given directly to a candidate's official campaign committee, subject to strict limits under both federal and state law.
- **Contributions to political parties:** Donations to state or national party committees, also subject to limits and disclosure requirements.
- **Political Action Committees (PACs):** Organizations that raise and spend money to elect or defeat candidates, funded by voluntary contributions from members, employees, or affiliates of a sponsoring organization.
- **Super PACs:** Independent expenditure-only committees that can raise unlimited money from corporations, unions, associations, and individuals, but cannot contribute directly to candidates or coordinate with campaigns.
- **527 organizations:** Tax-exempt political organizations that may engage in voter mobilization, issue advocacy, and other political activities, named for their section of the Internal Revenue Code.

Each of these vehicles operates under different rules, and the permissibility of any given activity for a public ESA or its affiliated association will depend heavily on your state's specific statutes. ***Always consult your state's campaign finance laws and your organization's legal counsel before making any contribution or establishing any contribution vehicle.***

### **Campaign Finance as Free Speech: The Constitutional Dimension**

Perhaps the most important — and most underappreciated — dimension of campaign contributions is their status as constitutionally protected speech under the First Amendment.

The landmark 2010 Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* established that the government cannot restrict independent expenditures by corporations, associations, and other organizations on the grounds that such spending constitutes political speech. The majority opinion held that limits on independent spending from corporations and other outside groups equate to limits on speech and thus violate the First Amendment. The Court reasoned that people do not lose their speech rights because they choose to organize collectively — whether as a corporation, a labor union, an advocacy group, or a nonprofit association. The government cannot, the Court held, discriminate against classes of speakers based on the form of organization they have chosen to adopt.

The implication for educational associations is significant. When an ESA association, or the individual leaders of member agencies, choose to support a candidate through a lawful campaign contribution, they are not just writing a check. They are making a constitutionally protected statement about their values, their policy priorities, and their vision for public education.

For ESA leaders who have felt uncomfortable with campaign contributions because they seem "political" in an unbecoming way, this constitutional framing offers an important reorientation. Exercising a First Amendment right is not unseemly. It is democratic participation at its most direct. The question is not whether to participate in the political conversation — but how to do so thoughtfully, strategically, and in full compliance with the law.

# The Three-Legged Stool of Effective Advocacy

REMOVE ANY ONE LEG AND THE STOOL WOBBLER.



Relationships create trust.

Policy education informs decisions.

Campaign contributions help determine who is making those decisions.

## The Three Legs of the Advocacy Stool: Why Contributions Complete the Picture

To understand why campaign contributions matter, it helps to place them in the context of a comprehensive advocacy approach. Effective government relations for ESAs, as for any public entity or association, typically relies on three interconnected strategies:

1. **The First Leg: Relationships and Engagement.** This is the day-to-day work of advocacy — meeting with legislators and their staff, attending community events, building personal credibility as a trusted source of information on education policy.
2. **The Second Leg: Policy Education and Testimony.** This is the technical work of advocacy — providing data about the populations ESAs serve, documenting the cost-effectiveness of regional service delivery models, presenting fiscal impact analyses, testifying on budget bills, and equipping legislators with the factual basis for policy decisions.
3. **The Third Leg: Campaign Contributions.** This is where ESA leaders most often hesitate — and yet it is perhaps the most important leg for determining who will be in the room when the key decisions are made. Relationships and policy education work best when they are directed toward legislators who are already sympathetic to ESA interests. Campaign contributions are one of the most direct and effective tools for ensuring that more such legislators win office and retain their seats.

The reason contributions complete the stool is simple: legislators and their staff are people with limited time and hundreds of competing demands on their attention. Research consistently shows that

members of the public and organizational leaders who contribute to a legislator's campaign earn access — not a guaranteed policy outcome, but access. The ability to get a meeting, to have a phone call returned, to be invited to provide input before a bill is marked up rather than after. That access is the opening through which relationship-building and policy education can operate. Without it, the other two legs become far less effective.

This is not corruption. It is the reality of democratic governance, and it is why every sector with a stake in public policy — from agriculture to technology to healthcare to energy — participates in campaign finance as a core element of its government relations strategy.

### **Navigating the Legal Landscape: A State-by-State Imperative**

Before any ESA leader or their affiliated association considers making a campaign contribution, it is essential to understand the legal framework of your specific state. Key questions that every ESA leader should be able to answer before engaging in campaign finance activity include:

- **What is the status of your organization?**
- **Does your state permit ESA-affiliated associations or foundations to form PACs?**
- **What are the contribution limits in your state?**
- **What are the disclosure requirements?**
- **Are there restrictions on the timing of contributions?**
- **What rules apply to your ESA's employees?**

### **A Framework for Principled Decision-Making**

Even after navigating the legal questions, ESA leaders often face a more personal challenge: how do you decide which candidates to support? This question is not merely strategic — it touches on institutional identity, professional relationships, and the complex political landscapes that ESA leaders must navigate in their diverse communities. A few principles can guide this decision-making:

- Focus on issues, not parties
- Research the candidate's record
- Consider the competitive landscape
- Think in electoral cycles, not single elections

### **The Reputational Dimension: Addressing the "Unseemly" Concern**

It is worth addressing directly the discomfort that many ESA leaders feel about campaign contributions. That discomfort is not irrational — it reflects a genuine tension between the nonpartisan professional identity of most ESA leaders and the inherently partisan nature of electoral politics.

But consider the alternative. Every sector with a significant stake in public policy participates in campaign finance. Healthcare, technology, agriculture, energy, finance, school choice — all invest systematically in candidates who will make the policy decisions that affect them. When education organizations choose not to participate, they do not make the political process cleaner. They simply cede influence to others who will not be as reluctant.

The public education ecosystem has learned this lesson the hard way in some states. In state after state where traditional public education advocates underinvested in political relationships and campaign support, the policy landscape shifted — often dramatically — in directions that weakened public education funding, expanded unaccountable choice programs, and diminished the infrastructure that

ESAs depend on to serve their member districts. These outcomes were not inevitable. They were at least partly the consequence of an advocacy strategy that was missing its third leg.

### **Conclusion: Completing the Stool**

In the end, for ESA leaders concerned about perception, the answer is not to avoid campaign contributions — it is to make them transparently, in accordance with a clear institutional policy, and in a way that can be publicly defended based on education policy alignment. Participate — thoughtfully, legally, and confidently — knowing that ESA values of equity, access, collaboration, and the quiet work of making public education function for every student are worth investing in.

*This article is intended for educational and informational purposes and does not constitute legal advice. ESA leaders and their associations should always consult with qualified legal counsel regarding the campaign finance laws applicable in their specific states before engaging in any campaign finance activity. State laws vary significantly and change frequently.*

## **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 [info@aesa.us](mailto:info@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 [info@aesa.us](mailto:info@aesa.us)

## JOIN THE CONVERSATION

