

October 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 October 2026 examines student mental health and related legislation.

Student Mental Health Takes Center Stage in State Capitols

Student mental health is a continuing area of concern and a primary legislative focus in state capitols across the United States. During and immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures, legislatures responded with one-time grants. In the current legislative sessions, as concern lingers, policy makers are writing mental health systems and supports into permanent law and school codes. They are funding staff, setting rules on cell phones and social media, requiring training and screening, and redefining excused absences. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures' (NCSL) student mental health legislation database, lawmakers have introduced **287 bills in 43 states and one of five U.S. territories** on the topic. For educational service agencies (ESAs), these bills matter because many of the new duties land on districts that may not be able to meet them on their own.

By the Numbers

Status (current session)	Bills
Introduced	**287**
Enacted	*70*
Adopted (resolutions)	*7*
Pending / carried over	*68*
Failed	*137*
Vetoed	*5*

Source: NCSL Student Mental Health Legislation Database; Education Commission of the States (ECS) State Education Policy Tracking (enacted and vetoed bills). Counts as of 11.7.2026.

Most of these bills are still pending or have died. That is typical: many legislatures adjourned months ago, and several full-time legislatures (New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, California, among others) remain in session or will carry bills forward. Enacted measures tend to fall into a few categories:

- student ID crisis-line requirements,
- phone restrictions,
- task forces and studies, and
- targeted funding.

Larger mandates that require ongoing spending, such as staffing ratios or universal screening, have had a tendency to stall.

What States Are Considering

- **Workforce and school-based services.** The most common goal is getting more counselors, psychologists, social workers, and licensed clinicians into schools. Bills include ratio targets, loan forgiveness, alternative licensure, Medicaid billing authority, and partnerships with community providers. New Jersey's A5235 would set up a "School-based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids" program in the Department of Children and Families. It would require districts to build mental health partnership programs. New Jersey's A1759 would pilot student assistance programs in selected districts.
- **Cell phones, social media, and digital wellbeing.** Phone-free school bills are often framed as mental health legislation, and they move faster than almost anything else on this list. Pennsylvania Governor Shapiro signed SB 1014, which requires schools to adopt a "bell-to-bell" cell phone policy. The Massachusetts House passed a bill pairing age verification for social media with a school phone ban. Some New Jersey bills would require instruction on social media and phone addiction in grades 6–12 or create a "Distraction Free Schools" grant.
- **Crisis response and suicide prevention.** States continue to require that student ID cards list the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline and other crisis resources. California's AB 727, for example, applies to grades 7–12 starting July 1, 2026. Other bills set suicide-prevention policies, threat-assessment protocols, and procedures for safety plans. Connecticut's 2026 enacted legislation addresses how minors' safety plans are reviewed and shared.
- **Mental health days and attendance.** Several states are considering whether to count mental health days as excused absences. Mississippi's HB 1462, the "Mississippi Mental Health Days Act," is one example. These bills interact with chronic absenteeism measures and accountability systems.
- **Training, literacy, and curriculum.** Bills require mental health first aid or youth mental health training for staff, school resource officers, and coaches. They also add mental health instruction to health standards. Florida continues to build on its required instruction in K–12 mental and emotional health.

- **Screening, consent, and parental rights.** Universal screening proposals often run into parental consent requirements. Some bills expand access to screening. Others require written opt-in before any survey, screening, or counseling.
- **Governance, task forces, and awareness.** Many bills create study commissions or youth mental health task forces. Mississippi's task force recommended workforce development, more behavioral health training for school officials and SROs, and action on phones in schools. Other bills are commemorative resolutions, such as California's Student Mental Health Awareness Week (ACR 174).

Why This Matters for ESAs and Their Client Districts

- **Capacity is the bottleneck.** Ratio targets and service mandates assume a clinical workforce that rural and small districts often cannot hire. ESAs that share psychologists, counselors, and social workers across districts are the practical way to comply. Advocates should ask that statutes name ESAs as eligible providers and grantees.
- **Medicaid and billing infrastructure.** Expanded school-based Medicaid billing helps only districts that can run the claiming process. ESAs that serve as billing consortia can turn new authority into actual revenue.
- **Training at scale.** Mandated staff training, such as suicide prevention, mental health first aid, and threat assessment, is a natural fit for regional professional development. Agencies should push for language that allows regional delivery and portable certification.
- **Policy and compliance support.** Phone policies, safety-plan protocols, screening consent, and excused-absence rules all require new board policies and procedures. ESAs can provide model policies and help districts comply without inconsistency.
- **Funding sustainability.** Federal relief dollars are gone, and many state grants are small or one-time. ESAs should track whether mandates come with recurring money and make the case for formula-based or regional funding over competitive grants.
- **Data and privacy.** Screening and referral bills raise questions under FERPA, HIPAA, and state privacy law. ESAs can serve as neutral data and compliance partners.

Conclusion

The volume of bills, 287 in 44 jurisdictions, shows that student mental health has become a lasting part of state education policy. The enacted bills so far, though, lean toward lower-cost measures: phone policies, crisis-line notices, training, and task forces. The harder questions of who delivers services, who pays, and how rural districts gain access are still unresolved. That gap is where ESAs make the strongest case. As legislatures prepare for the 2027 sessions, state ESA networks should engage early. They should bring data on shared-service models and ask that new mental health statutes name ESAs as delivery partners and come with sustained funding.

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 October 2026 follows below:

- **Virginia lawmakers approve plan to advance new K-12 school funding formula**
  Virginia Mercury

- **Arkansas lawmakers adopt recommendations for per-student school funding**
  Arkansas Advocate

- **Tennessee should increase funding for economically disadvantaged students, key committee says**
  Chalkbeat Tennessee

- **Early Childhood Funding Is Increasingly in Voters' Hands**
  The 74

- **Ohio again spent more than a billion dollars on private school vouchers during latest fiscal year**
  Ohio Capital Journal

- **Shrinking enrollment pushes states to rethink school funding**
  Pluribus News

- **States' Financial Safety Nets Are Shrinking as Budget Pressures Grow**
  Governing

- **Dozens of Texas agencies say they can't afford to make state-mandated budget cuts**
  Community Impact

- **California has more revenue than expected thanks to AI. Should the state save it?**
  CalMatters / KPBS

- **Weak economy, vanishing federal aid limit CT's tax-cutting options**
  The Connecticut Mirror

- **State revenues projected to increase as Iowa's billion-dollar budget deficit remains**
  Iowa Capital Dispatch / Times-Republican

- **Wisconsin's budget surplus sits at $3.3 billion at end of 2026 fiscal year**
  WLUK / FOX 11

- **Colorado voters to consider replacing flat income tax**
  The Center Square

- **What Do the New Federal Scholarship Tax Credit Regulations Mean for States?**
  Education Commission of the States

- **Where Money From the Meta Settlement Is Going Within States**
  Education Commission of the States

- **Vermont school districts scramble to cover the increased cost of diesel**
  VTDigger

- **Colorado State Budget Deficit Grows to $1.6B as Medicaid Costs Soar**
  Colorado Sun

Key Takeaways for ESAs:
The bottom line for ESAs is that **sustainability** matters more than headline funding increases or state surpluses. Shrinking fiscal reserves, expiring federal aid, rising healthcare and transportation costs, and declining enrollment are creating pressures that additional appropriations alone may not resolve. ESAs should help districts distinguish recurring revenue from one-time resources, develop multiyear forecasts, and assess how enrollment changes, school-choice expansion and tax limitations could affect revenues and services. Regional purchasing, shared personnel and coordinated transportation can help protect student services, while clear financial analysis can help school boards explain difficult tradeoffs and evaluate consolidation or shared-service options without defaulting to across-the-board cuts.
At the same time, school-finance debates increasingly focus on how funding recognizes student needs—not simply how much states spend. Formula reviews and proposed investments in literacy, special education and economically disadvantaged students create opportunities for ESAs to strengthen district data, document service costs, model funding changes and inform legislative decisions. Regional expertise can also help districts translate targeted investments into stronger instruction and student outcomes. The strongest ESA response combines prudent financial planning, evidence-based advocacy and coordinated regional services that preserve equitable access across districts of different sizes and capacities.

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:

- **Five Things You Should Know About New AI Tutor Study**
  The 74

- **Cybersecurity incidents hit over 50% of schools and districts in past year**
  K-12 Dive

- **Virginia teachers balance AI innovation with student creativity amid rising academic pressure**
  Virginia Mercury

- **After pandemic laptop rush, Iowa schools weigh what's next**
  The Gazette

- **Gov. Shapiro signs bell-to-bell cell phone ban for all Pennsylvania schools**
  WHYY

- **Maine banned cellphones in schools to help teens focus and connect. Teachers and students say it's working**
  The Maine Monitor

- **Rhode Island study links sustained arts education — especially music — to lower chronic absenteeism**
  Rhode Island Current

- **Rural Missouri Literacy Coaching Program Boosts Scores, Inspires Statewide Model**
  The 74 / Yahoo News

- **Oklahoma lawmakers announce bipartisan reading caucus**
  KSWO

- **New Ohio bill proposes task force to address childcare, early childhood education**
  Ohio Capital Journal / Mahoning Matters

- **Maryland officials announce dramatic decrease in teacher vacancy rate**
  Maryland Matters

- **California is about to overhaul the way it runs K-12 schools. Will it fix a fragmented system?**
  CalMatters

- **WV public school enrollment continues to slide as officials warn of cuts, closures**
  The Herald-Dispatch / HD Media

- **What Exactly Are Homeschools and Microschools?**
  Education Commission of the States

- **Special education disputes continue to rise**
  K-12 Dive

- **Pressure Mounts on Mamdani Administration To Address Growing Number of Small Schools**
  The City Reporter

- **Philadelphia City Councilmembers, union leaders call on Mayor Parker to prevent school closures**
  Chalkbeat Philadelphia

Key Takeaways for ESAs:
The national news stories curated in this month's State Examiner underscore that **implementation**—not simply adopting new policies or purchasing technology—will determine whether these changes improve student outcomes. AI tutoring research shows promise but does not yet establish broad achievement gains, while cybersecurity threats and evolving screen-time and cellphone policies demand stronger safeguards, educator training and clear family communication. ESAs can help districts evaluate evidence, vet vendors, coordinate cybersecurity services and develop practical policies that protect student privacy, preserve accessibility and keep technology focused on learning. A second takeaway is that ESAs should help districts manage structural change without losing sight of student access, engagement and community trust. Enrollment declines and consolidation debates highlight opportunities for shared staffing, courses and specialized services, but governance mergers and school closures are distinct decisions whose educational benefits, transportation implications and financial consequences require careful analysis. ***The bottom line is to position regional collaboration as a means of preserving instructional quality and equitable access—not merely reducing costs—and demonstrate results through student growth, attendance, service availability and stronger family-school relationships.***

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 resources 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 the Learning Policy Institute, ERS, and Rand.

- **Investments to Support Students Experiencing Homelessness: A Decade of Policy, A Decade of Progress in Washington State.** The report examines Washington's complementary investments in school-based supports and housing partnerships, alongside its decision to codify federal McKinney-Vento protections in state law. It documents improvements in student identification, school stability, and graduation outcomes, while identifying continued funding needs. The statewide four-year graduation rate for students experiencing homelessness increased by 10 percentage points between 2014–15 and 2023–24. Access the full report **here**.

- **Teacher Residencies in California: Enrollment, Preparation, and Outcomes of Residency-Prepared Teachers**. This report examines California's expanding teacher-residency pipeline and the employment and retention of residency-prepared teachers. Residency enrollment grew from just over 400 new candidates in 2018–19 to approximately 2,000 in 2024–25. The analysis finds higher entry into public-school teaching and stronger early-career retention than several other preparation pathways. These are comparative findings, not proof that residencies alone caused the differences. Access the full report **here**.

- **Enrollment Decline in New England: Why It's Happening, Why It Matters, and What to Do Next.** ERS examines declining enrollment across New England and its implications for school-system planning. Its resource directory notes that all six New England states experienced above-average enrollment declines relative to the national decline since 2019. The regional focus makes this especially useful for examining how demographic shifts cross district boundaries. Access the full report **here**.

- **Difficulty Supporting Student Mental Health Strains Teacher Well-Being.** Young people face significant mental health challenges, and teachers are increasingly on the front lines. Schools often lack adequate access to counselors and other mental health professionals, and classroom teachers have stepped into the gap—checking in on students, building social and emotional skills, connecting families to services, and more. RAND researchers drew on a nationally representative survey of 829 kindergarten through 12th-grade public school teachers to examine how teachers support student mental health and well-being, the school- and teacher-level characteristics associated with teachers' provision of supports, and the consequences for teachers' work environment and well-being. This research pulls its findings from the 2026 State of the American Teacher Survey which can be accessed **here**.

Key Takeaways for ESAs:

These reports underscore the value of **coordination** in addressing challenges beyond any single district's capacity. Washington's experience supporting students experiencing homelessness highlights the importance of connecting schools, housing organizations, and community services. ESAs can train liaisons, strengthen student identification, and coordinate partnerships that support school stability. Improved graduation outcomes support sustained investment, although attendance gaps and funding

needs remain. California's teacher-residency findings associate intensive preparation and district–university partnerships with higher entry into teaching and stronger early-career retention. ESAs can build regional residency partnerships, prepare mentors, pool recruitment, and track outcomes, while recognizing that the study does not establish causation. The enrollment and mental-health reports likewise suggest that ESAs should help districts redesign service delivery rather than stretch existing models. ERS's New England analysis shows how declining enrollment leaves fixed costs but fewer resources for coursework and specialized supports. Shared services and regional partnerships offer responses, with ESAs supporting enrollment forecasting, financial analysis, and collaborative programming. RAND's examination of teachers' student mental-health responsibilities highlights the need to support educators without expecting them to replace mental-health professionals. ESAs can coordinate shared specialists, referral networks, and training to help teachers recognize concerns and connect students to care. Together, ***these reports support advocacy for state investments that strengthen regional capacity, preserve student access, and support educators.***

OCTOBER 2026 MONTHLY ADVOCACY TIP

The First 30 Days After an Election: How to Build Trusted Relationship with New Policymakers

Advocacy is more than transactional, it is a highly relational endeavor. A key to success is building relationships with decision makers when you don't need them. Elections signal an important opportunity to connect with incoming policy makers. Relationship-building should begin once election results are known—not after bills have been introduced or budget decisions are underway. For educational service agencies (ESAs), the first 30 days post-election offer an opportunity to become a trusted resource before the next policy debate takes shape. The first ask should be for a conversation, not a commitment.

Begin with congratulations

During the first week, send a brief, nonpartisan message welcoming each newly elected policymaker serving your region. In unresolved races, wait until the outcome is clear. Identify your ESA, explain whom it serves, and offer help. Include incoming staff when contacts become available; they are more than just gatekeepers and can be critical to advancing policy priorities. Apply the same approach across party lines.

Provide local orientation

During days 5–10, share a one-page regional brief. Explain the difference between the policymaker's legislative district and the school districts your ESA serves. Identify overlapping communities, core services, and a named contact. Avoid an organizational directory or a lengthy legislative platform; new members need a useful introduction, not an information dump.

Lead with ESA- and district-level facts

Include three verified facts tied to the policymaker's constituents: students served, a documented district challenge, and a measurable example of ESA support. Pair those facts with one short local story. Explain how shared specialists, professional learning, or regional purchasing help districts provide services they could struggle to sustain independently.

Schedule a listening meeting

During days 10–20, request a 20-minute conversation. Ask: What did you hear from educators, families and employers during the campaign? Which education issues would you like to understand better? How can we provide useful information? Keep your opening brief and leave most of the meeting for

discussion. AESA's advocacy training stresses audience research, concise materials, and listening before decisions are locked in.

Make the ESA's role visible
During days 15–30, offer a focused ESA or district-program tour, scheduled around the policymaker's availability. Choose one service connected to an expressed interest. Include a district leader and a staff member who can explain implementation.

Follow through and build trust
Within two business days of each interaction, send a thank-you, answer outstanding questions, and confirm the next step. Assign an ESA relationship owner and record interests, staff contacts, commitments, and follow-up dates. If calendars prevent a visit within 30 days, secure a date and continue providing useful information.

This month's action list
Identify every new policymaker serving your region; prepare one tailored local brief; and assign an owner to each contact sequence. Measure progress by completed conversations, promises kept, and useful follow-up. Trust grows when an ESA listens carefully, provides reliable information, and remains helpful between legislative crises.

Practical tools: From introduction to follow-through

Suggested working templates. Tailor timing to election results, transition schedules, and office preferences.

1. Thirty-day contact sequence

Timing	Action	Completion measure
Days 1–5	Congratulations and ESA introduction	Message sent; relationship owner assigned
Days 5–10	Local orientation brief and three district facts	Tailored brief delivered; sources checked
Days 10–20	Listening meeting, including staff	Interests and questions documented
Days 15–30	Targeted ESA/program tour	Visit completed or date confirmed
After every contact	Thank-you and follow-up plan	Questions answered; next action assigned

2. Congratulations and meeting request
Subject: Congratulations and a local education resource
Dear [Title/Last Name]:
Congratulations on your election to represent [district]. [ESA] helps [school districts/communities] provide [two relevant services]. We would welcome a brief conversation to learn about your priorities and introduce the regional resources available to schools and students in your district. May we arrange a 20-minute meeting with you and the appropriate staff member?
[Name, title, direct contact]

3. One-page local orientation brief
Legislative district / communities: _____
School districts served within that area: _____
ESA role in one sentence: _____

Three verified local facts (source, date, geography): _____
One district challenge and student-centered story: _____
ESA response and measurable result: _____
Issue on which we can provide expertise: _____
Relationship owner and contact information: _____

4. Listening meeting and tour invitation
Meeting agenda:

- 2-minute introduction;
- 12 minutes listening and questions;
- 4 minutes connecting local needs with ESA expertise;
- 2 minutes agreeing on follow-up.

Invitation:
"You identified [issue] as a priority. We invite you and your staff to visit [program] to see how [ESA] and [district partners] address that need. We propose a 30–45-minute visit on [options], with time for questions. Please suggest another date if needed."

5. Relationship and follow-up tracker
Policymaker / staff contact: _____
ESA owner / local district connection: _____
Contact date / interests / questions: _____
Promise made / responsible person / due date: _____
Next action / preferred communication method: _____
Status: Not contacted / Introduced / Meeting scheduled / Visit scheduled / Follow-up complete

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

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

JOIN THE CONVERSATION