



AESA State Examiner

The State Examiner: July 2025

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 report curated by the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESA). It provides legislative monitoring, news articles, and related content gathered from 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 educational service agencies and their client schools and districts. This month's report for July 2025 reflects on legislation passed in 2025 and forecasting what to expect this fall and into 2026.

Top Education Policy Battles of 2025: A State Legislative Round-Up

As new state fiscal years begin, summer vacations are coming to an end, and the 2025-2026 academic year is ready to kickoff, educational service agency (ESA) staff and stakeholders are well positioned to assess which priorities have shaped state education policy thus far in 2025.

According to data from Education Commission of the States, 874 education and related bills have been passed and enacted in 2025. Education funding and equity remain at the forefront as states navigate delays and complications in federal Title programs and other essential grants, especially for high-need districts. At the same time, governors and legislators are showing strong interest in modernizing teaching roles, expanding real-world learning opportunities, and

safeguarding student well-being—viewing these as foundational strategies to accelerate learning recovery and improve student outcomes.

With notable legislative activity around topics such as social media and cell phone use, school safety, college affordability, K-12 governance, funding models, teacher licensure, and early learning and childcare, this edition of the *State Examiner* spotlights legislation from the nation's most active state legislative bodies including Arkansas (74), Virginia (65), Texas (46), Washington (36), Illinois (35), Tennessee (34), Utah (31), Montana (31), Oregon (30), North Dakota (27), and Oklahoma (27).

Social Media and Cell Phones

- **Arkansas:** The “Bell to Bell, No Cell Act” now bans student cell phone use throughout the school day, supporting distraction-free learning environments. Exceptions apply for emergencies and medical needs, with funding available for phone lockers or locking pouches.
- **Texas:** The legislature enacted a ban on cell phone usage during instructional time across public schools, part of broader classroom discipline reforms.
- **Washington:** No direct ban, but policymakers continue to weigh digital distraction policies.
- **Illinois:** Governor Pritzker proposed and advanced a law requiring every school district to adopt strict limits on personal device use during instructional hours.
- **Utah:** SB 178 prohibits student cell phone and smartwatch use during classroom hours in public schools, aiming to reduce distractions.
- **Montana:** No major new cell phone legislation recorded as of this session.
- **Oregon:** Governor Tina Kotek signed Executive Order 25-09 mandating a prohibition on cell phone use during the school day in K-12 public schools, with a full policy rollout required by January 1, 2026.

School Safety

- **Arkansas:** Act 229 requires public schools to provide age-appropriate firearm safety instruction, and Eli's Law (Act 908) mandates audio recording in locker rooms for enhanced safety.
- **Texas:** A comprehensive new law boosts security including increased funding per student for safety measures and encourages best-practice crisis management plans.
- **Washington:** HB 1644 establishes new penalties and expanded protections in workplaces for minors. Other legislative efforts target safe school climates.
- **Illinois:** Continued investments in security measures and mandates for clear school safety protocols.
- **Utah:** Passed a \$25 million assessment of school safety needs (HB40) and discipline amendments to improve school climate.
- **Montana:** Focus on safe physical environments through funding formulas and local control.

- **Oregon:** Legislative debates on school safety, with some proposals stalling but others, like student mental health supports, advancing.

College Affordability

- **Arkansas:** The ACCESS Act aligns K-12, postsecondary, and workforce pathways, supporting more affordable and navigable routes to college degrees.
- **Texas:** Major changes include a statewide program for private school vouchers and significant boosts to public education funding, with future effects on affordability.
- **Washington:** HB 1556 created tuition waivers for recent high school completers at community and technical colleges; “Partner Promise Scholarships” aim to make college more accessible.
- **Illinois:** Actively exploring a direct admission program to public institutions and proposed expanded access to affordable community college degrees.
- **Montana:** Ongoing equalization through guaranteed tax base aid to lower barriers for disadvantaged students.
- **Oregon:** Higher education funding remained pressured, with advocates warning that state investments haven’t matched college cost increases.

K12 Governance

- **Arkansas:** The state paused school letter grade evaluations while revamping accountability under the LEARNS Act and granted more local discretion in device policy implementation.
- **Texas:** Education governance shifts notably via school choice, funding mechanisms, and increased state involvement in local curriculum matters.
- **Washington:** Governance reforms included expanded local input on board appointments and streamlined preparation pathways for teachers.
- **Montana:** Constitutionally embedded local governance for school boards, with both legislative and Board of Public Education oversight.
- **Oregon:** Debates continue on state versus local control, especially on issues like book bans and funding models.

School Funding

- **Arkansas:** Act 909 boosts per-pupil funding by 5%, with further increases targeting insurance costs and literacy grants.
- **Texas:** Delivered \$8.5 billion extra in public education funding, including increased allotments for special education and charters.
- **Washington:** K-12 and early learning budget saw new appropriations, with targeted spending on equity and access.
- **Illinois:** Proposed an additional \$350 million for K-12 and conducted major budget negotiations into the summer.
- **Utah:** Reallocated over \$266 million and updated formulas to channel more resources to enrollment-based and flexible allocations.

- **Montana:** Sustained equalization efforts via guaranteeing comparable opportunities through the funding formula and enhanced state aid to districts in greatest need.
- **Oregon:** A record-high K-12 funding package passed despite fiscal challenges.

Teacher Licensure

- **Arkansas:** Reforms shortened teacher licensing waiver periods from five years to one, expediting certification processes.
- **Washington:** Established new requirements for teacher residency and apprenticeship models to increase the educator pipeline.
- **Utah:** Enacted policy changes easing licensure requirements for alternative educator pathways.
- **Montana, Illinois, Texas, Oregon:** Various bills to raise minimums, offer incentives, or streamline licensure continuing to be considered, but no major overhaul in 2025.

Early Learning & Child Care

- **Arkansas:** LEARNS Act continues programs focused on early childhood, aligning Pre-K through workforce aspirations and literacy supports.
- **Texas:** Passed new early childhood readiness and parental support programs with significant investments in early literacy and numeracy.
- **Washington:** HB 1351 lowered the age of eligibility for state-funded early childhood education, while HB 1314 made early learning facility grants more accessible.
- **Illinois:** Sustained and expanded investments in childcare and universal pre-K as part of broader education funding.
- **Utah:** Multiple bills updated early learning frameworks, especially for low-income and rural children.
- **Montana:** Maintains constitutional commitment to equality in early opportunity, with legislative adjustments in formula funding for early grades.
- **Oregon:** Childcare and preschool programs faced budget pressure but continued to receive targeted funds for expansion and quality improvements.

To learn more about these bills and access links to the legislative text, consult Education Commission of the State's legislative tracking tool at: <https://www.ecs.org/state-education-policy-tracking-new/>

Looking Ahead

This year's legislative responses reflect states' sense of urgency on disruptive technology in schools, the intertwined challenges of student safety and well-being, rising college and childcare costs, and persistent concerns around education funding, equity, and workforce needs.

As state legislatures transition into the fall 2025 policy season and set sights on 2026, a clear set of K-12 priorities is emerging in response to ongoing fiscal, academic, and workforce pressures.

Key issues poised to shape legislative agendas include:

- updating and stabilizing K-12 funding formulas to address continued uncertainty in federal support;
- expanding workforce development and CTE pathways for high-demand careers;
- addressing ongoing teacher shortages, compensation, and licensure challenges;
- improving student achievement and attendance through supports like targeted tutoring; enhancing mental health and safety initiatives; and
- navigating active debates on curriculum, parental rights, and the role of technology—especially concerning cell phones and AI in schools.

School leaders and educational service agencies will continue to play a critical role in mobilizing resources, advocating for sustainable funding, and adapting programs as these priorities carry forward into 2026 and beyond.

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 2025 follows below.

[State DOGEs tackle local spending, property taxes](#)

Route Fifty

[What a Changing State Budget and Policy Landscape Will Mean for K-12 Spending](#)

Education Week

[Education Department tells states to seek waivers from ESEA](#)

K12 Drive

[Govs Warn State Agencies to Brace for Budget Cuts](#)

Pluribus News

[Two Dozen States Sue Trump Over \\$6.8 Billion School Funding Freeze](#)

Education Week

[State Face Tough Choices as Budgets Tighten](#)

Stateline

[CT teachers and advocates complain about cuts to public schools, blame state lawmakers](#)

WSHU Public Radio

['Uncertainty' swirls around federal funding cuts' state and local impact](#)

Route Fifty

[A 'Tsunami' of Uncertainty Is Crashing into Federal Funding for Schools](#)
Education Week

[States Brace for Added Burdens of Trump's Tax and Spending Law](#)
New York Times

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:

[Is New Jersey's revamped mental health program for students working?](#)
Chalkbeat Newark

[State ed board moves millions in career and tech education funding to K-12 schools](#)
Iowa Capital Dispatch

[A Framework For State Leaders To Advance Summer Learning](#)
Education Commission of the States

[School District Regionalization Innovation and Results](#)
Rockefeller Institute of Government

[Alaska K-3 students improve in reading, state assessment shows](#)
Alaska Beacon

[Mercer County ESC Business Advisory Council Recognized](#)
WCSM Radio

[All states can now access ESSER late liquidation funds](#)
K-12 Drive

[U.S. Public Trust in Higher Ed Rises From Recent Low](#)
Gallup

[More than half the states have issued AI guidance for schools. Pennsylvania is not one of them.](#)
Pennsylvania Capital-Start

[3rd graders flagged for retention make small but meaningful gains, study finds](#)
K-12 Drive

[Michigan lawmaker pushes for cursive writing instruction in schools](#)
WDIV

STATE & NATIONAL REPORTS IMPACTING EDUCATION

AESA monitors state and national reports 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 survey results from EdNext, Annie E. Casey, Stanford University and RAND:

- [School Enrollment Shifts 5 Years After Pandemic](#) - In spring 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic caused school closures throughout the United States—a seismic disruption with immediate effects on enrollment. What happened in the years since? Did those trends hold? In this study, EdNext conducts an analysis of the pandemic’s longer-term impact on school enrollment patterns and find a substantial shift away from public schools. The study focuses on the state of Massachusetts, where fall 2024 enrollment counts were readily available, but the study shows that trends similar to those documented for the Bay State are evident in national data through fall 2023.
- [Kids Count](#) – The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Kids Count annual report explores state trends in child well-being through comprehensive data analysis. This year’s *Data Book* tells a mixed story — steady progress in some areas, setbacks in others and opportunities to do better for kids and families. Since 2019, seven of the 16 key indicators have improved, six have worsened and three have stayed the same. For the full report click [here](#).
- Rapid Survey: [Experiences of material hardship have ripple effects on young children’s development](#) – Since the launch of the RAPID survey in April 2020, Stanford University researchers have collected data from parents of children under age 6 to better understand the contexts and circumstances shaping early childhood development. Findings indicate that a chain reaction of hardship is not only closely linked to young children’s emotional distress but also impacts their overall development, including cognitive, motor, language, and social-emotional growth. To see the survey results look [here](#).
- [Teacher Well-Being, Pay, and Intentions to Leave in 2025 Findings from the State of the American Teacher Survey](#) This RAND report presents selected findings from the 2025 State of the American Teacher survey, an annual survey of kindergarten through grade 12 public school teachers across the United States. The findings focus on teacher well-being and a set of high-interest factors related to teacher retention: sources of job-related stress, pay, hours worked, and teachers’ intentions to leave their current jobs. Learn more [here](#).

JULY 2025 MONTHLY ADVOCACY TIP

Advancing Educational Service Agencies - The Power of Research in State-Level Advocacy Building: “Do Your Research & Know Your Legislators”

In the ever-changing and dynamic world of state government and politics, effective engagement and advocacy begins well before the first meeting with a legislator, staff member or other influential policymakers.

The most influential (and impactful) advocates recognize that real impact depends on knowing *who* you are talking to, *what* matters to them, and *how* past actions shape their perspectives. This first article in our 2025-2026 academic year series explores why and how “Doing Your Research and Knowing Your Legislators” is essential for building relationships, shaping credible messages, and driving positive policy change for educational service agencies (ESAs) and their constituents.

Why Research Matters

Legislators juggle countless priorities and requests. When you demonstrate a deep understanding of their committee work, policy interests, and voting history on education, your message resonates more powerfully. Being informed shows respect for their time and positions you as a resource rather than simply a petitioner. This credibility fosters trust—critical for sustained advocacy success. After all, despite public perception, government and policy making is more *relational* than *transactional*.

Strategies & Tactics

1. Identify Relevant Legislators

- Start with lawmakers representing your ESA region and those serving on key education and budget committees.
- Expand your map to include influential committee chairs, vice-chairs, and ranking minority members with oversight of education funding, policy development, workforce or any other initiatives that have a nexus with pre-k to 12th grade education.

2. Gather Legislative Profiles

- Use official state legislative websites or advocacy databases, free sites like Ballotpedia, or subscription-based tools like OpenStates or VoteSmart to compile:
 - Legislative biographies
 - Committee assignments (especially related to education and appropriations)
 - Stated policy interests
 - Recent legislative priorities, sponsored bills, and public statements
 - Voting records on ESA-relevant issues
 - Campaign donor lists (these are people that can become key partners and allies)

3. Analyze Voting Patterns & Public Engagement

- Track how legislators have voted on core ESA issues: funding, services for special populations, educator professional development, school health, school safety, student support services, and more.
- Review news releases, social media, town hall appearances, and interview transcripts for statements that give insight into their evolving priorities.

4. Map Connections and Build Coalitions

- Identify which legislators have overlapping interests or represent organizations allied with ESA goals (e.g., school boards, school superintendents, educational technology advocates, related services personnel).
- Understand any affiliations with statewide education task forces, special legislative initiatives, or issue-specific caucuses.
- Secure partnerships with like-minded organizations or coalitions.

5. Tailor Your Messaging

- Craft communications referencing their specific committee roles and past votes.
- Frame ESA initiatives in the context of issues you know the legislator cares about, using their own language where appropriate.
- Importantly, appeal to their own interests.
- And, lastly, be specific in your “ask”.

Measuring Success

To ensure research-driven advocacy is more than a one-time effort, set benchmarks and review progress regularly:

| Success Measure | Example Goal | Evaluation Method |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| Number of legislator profiles created | Develop in-depth profiles for 100% of ESC-area legislators and all education committee members or other committees of interest (e.g., appropriations) | Review and update profiles every 6 months or at the end of each legislative session. |
| Tailored outreach efforts | At least 80% of advocacy emails/meetings reference specific legislator interests or votes | Review meeting reports and correspondence |
| Legislator engagement | Secure at least 5 new meetings through targeted outreach | Track and analyze scheduling data |
| Policymaker Responsiveness | Receive personalized feedback from legislators or other key policymakers in 50% of responses | Collect and review response samples |

Breaks in legislative session or other key times in the policy making calendar can provide a good opportunity to review progress and adjust tactics and strategies as needed.

Recommendations for Advocacy Teams

- Assign advocates to monitor specific legislators and regularly share intelligence with the broader team.
- Use shared digital platforms (like Google Sheets or a CRM) for tracking legislator data and updating profiles.
- Schedule monthly “legislative briefing” calls to keep all advocates informed on shifting interests or developments.

- Debrief after all major advocacy activities to refine legislator profiles and adjust messaging as needed.

Conclusion: Laying the Foundation

Learning about lawmakers' roles, history, and commitments isn't just a best practice—it's the cornerstone of relationship-driven advocacy. Relationships matter. And the best time to build them is when you do not need something. By dedicating time to research and preparation, ESA advocates multiply their effectiveness, building bridges that last far beyond a single legislative session.

Stay tuned for next month's article, where we dive into leveraging powerful stories from the ESA frontline to deepen advocacy impact. Your engagement, grounded in knowledge, is what transforms policy aspirations into reality for educators and students.

ADVOCACY IN ACTION PRE-CONFERENCE

Before the main conference kicks off, we're offering a special Pre-Conference Session on September 17, 2025, from 1:00-4:00 pm. This session will focus specifically on state-level advocacy, providing you with essential tools and insights to advocate effectively within your state.

Pre-Conference Highlights:

Session 1: Executive Branch Education Priorities & Working with Governors

Explore how governors are shaping state education agendas and how ESAs can effectively engage with executive branch leaders to advance shared priorities.

Session 2: State Education Policy Trends & Working with State Education Agencies

Gain insights into emerging policy trends across the nation and learn how to partner with state education agencies to influence and implement effective policy.

Session 3: Advocacy Success Stories – A Panel Discussion

Join a lively panel of education leaders sharing firsthand stories of successful advocacy at the state and local level. Panelists represent a range of roles, including ESA leadership, lobbying, association management, and consulting.

Session 4: Advocacy in Action – Monitoring and Influencing State Policy

This session provides a toolkit for advocacy: learn how to monitor legislation, analyze policy implications, and craft strategic responses. Walk away with tangible tools to stay ahead of state policy changes and guide your agency's advocacy efforts.

To Attend:

When [registering](#) for the conference, be sure to add the \$100 Pre-Conference Session under the Additional Items section.

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. 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. For those with limited time, the one-day workshop delivers essential advocacy skills and actionable insights in a focused format. 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