



AESA State Examiner

The State Examiner: September 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 September 2025 examines trends in state accountability systems.

K-12 Policy Shifts: Accountability Models and ESA Implications

At AESA's recent *Advocacy in Action* conference, David DeSchryver, SVP at White Board Advisors, shared the emerging policy and funding trends that are transforming U.S. K-12 education at the federal and state level:

- Accelerating Learning and Improving Achievement.
- Connecting Education and Workforce.
- Increasing Teacher Retention.
- Uncertain Federal Funding.
- Demographics and Enrollment.
- Parental Rights.
- Expanding Choice.
- Focusing on Evidence; and

- Reimagining School Accountability.

This month's article will focus on one of those trends - **state accountability systems** - and the broad range of policies emerging in statehouses across America to reimagine and reinvigorate these systems to focus on more than just compliance.

A Renewed Focus

District leaders face fiscal and operational challenges driven by declining enrollment, chronic absenteeism, stagnant achievement, and tightening budgets. The end of federal stimulus funding, rising personnel costs, and competition for limited resources have led to deeper cost analysis, facility consolidations, and staffing adjustments—even as school staffing is at historic highs while enrollment declines. Despite these pressures, states are innovating at the intersection of policy and student success. There is renewed focus on linking K-12, higher education, and workforce, evident in new accountability models, *Portrait of a Graduate* and related frameworks, and expanded competency-based credentialing. Each aims to equip students for postsecondary opportunities and the ever-evolving demands of modern society.

New Accountability and Success Measures

Traditional indicators of school quality and achievement have shifted. Increasingly, states use *Portrait of a Graduate* and related frameworks and expanded credentialing as central features in accountability. These go beyond test scores, incorporating critical thinking, collaboration, adaptability, and career readiness into graduation requirements and school ratings.

- In 2025, nearly every legislature took up bills related to college and career readiness, credentialing, or financial literacy—showing bipartisan momentum.
- 41 states and D.C. now use college and career indicators in accountability systems—a sharp pivot from reliance on test scores or postsecondary metrics.
- States like California, Washington, and North Carolina launched ambitious frameworks aligning district plans with statewide graduate profiles.
- Credentialing is expanding, with seals for career and college readiness, mandatory financial literacy, and work-based learning.
- By 2025, 29 states require financial literacy for high school graduation, and FAFSA completion is increasingly becoming mandatory.

State Spotlights

Five legislative or policy actions from 2024-2025 illustrate how states are operationalizing these priorities:

- **Oregon SB 141 (2025)**
 - Expands student progress metrics, including equity measures.
 - Employs year-round formative assessments.
 - Sets clearer district accountability targets and increased state intervention authority.
 - Links record-high K-12 budget to outcome improvements.

- **New York: Portrait of a Graduate (2025)**
 - Codifies competencies such as critical thinking, collaboration, civic/ethical responsibility.
 - Emphasizes culturally responsive education as an accountability expectation.
- **Texas Financial Literacy Requirement (HB 3926, 2025)**
 - Mandates a half-credit in personal finance for freshmen, covering credit, budgeting, and investing.
 - Connects academic achievement directly to real-world readiness.
- **Colorado Postsecondary & Workforce Readiness Program Reform (SB 315, 2025)**
 - Streamlines funding for postsecondary credits, industry credentials, and work-based learning.
 - Centralizes accountability for tracking workforce-aligned outcomes.
- **Kentucky Financial Literacy and Dual Enrollment Expansion (HB 193, 2025)**
 - Requires financial literacy for ninth grade and expands dual enrollment scholarships.
 - Allows greater flexibility and broader early college/career credit accumulation.

Implications for Districts

So, what does this mean for client districts of ESAs? Districts face the balancing act of adapting to new frameworks and a broader definition of student success. These changes signal real policy and operational consequences:

- Holistic accountability systems now include skills, critical thinking, and social-emotional competencies. Leaders must articulate visions, engage stakeholders, and align instructional practice.
- New reporting obligations demand upgrades to data infrastructure and deeper analytic capacity.
- Districts must track student progress beyond test scores—monitoring portfolios, work-based learning participation, and credentials.
- Fiscal pressures require staffing reviews, potential consolidations, and reallocating resources to programs that match new measures.
- Investments may shift toward career-technical pathways, social-emotional learning, and “upskilling” staff with training to meet higher expectations.

The Role of Educational Service Agencies (ESAs)

How can ESAs best assist? ESAs are uniquely positioned to help state education agencies and client districts manage transition to new policy models in the following ways:

- **Statewide Coordination and Technical Assistance:** ESAs bridge policy and local implementation by delivering professional learning, hosting communities of practice, and supporting districts to adapt.
- **Data Infrastructure & Reporting Support:** ESAs provide tools and training for collecting and analyzing new indicators like skills and credentials—ensuring accurate, actionable data.
- **Building Professional Capacity:** ESAs offer cohort learning, micro-credentialing, and workshops focused on performance assessment and social-emotional learning.

- **Community and Stakeholder Engagement:** ESAs convene visioning sessions and coordinate with business, higher education, and community partners to align local Portrait of a Graduate efforts with state policy.

Conclusion: Advocacy and Implementation

State-level innovation in 2024-2025 has redefined K-12 accountability, with direct implications for district practice and ESA support. Advocacy demands proactive implementation and ongoing communication of successes and challenges. Sustained engagement will help translate reforms into lasting student opportunities and outcomes.

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 September 2025 follows below.

[State Lawmakers Weigh Breaking Oregon's Link to the Federal Tax Code](#)

KATU2

[PA Budget Impasse Approaches 3 Months](#)

Trib Live

[New Texas DOGE Office Opens](#)

The Center Square

[Public School Funding Remains Source of Debate in Arkansas' Freedom Accounts Program](#)

Arkansas Democrat Gazette

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

Education Week

[Summary of FY 2026 Enacted State Budget](#)

NASBO

[State Funding for Schools is a Mess this Year, too. Here's Why.](#)

Education Week

[Red States Leang into Cost Cutting Brand with DOGE Copycats](#)

Washington Examiner

[States Bracing for Budget Disruptions](#)

The Bond Buyer

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:

[In 2025, States Continued to Be More Active Than Congress](#)

Governing

[More States Guarantee Students the Right to School Day Religious Instruction Off Campus](#)

Stateline

[These 4 trends are shaping the 2025-26 school year](#)

K-12 Dive

[Sans Safeguards, AI in Education Risks Deepening Inequality](#)

Government Technology

[Five Take Aways from Disappointing NAEP Results](#)

K-12 Dive

[The Gender Gap in Math Widened in the Pandemic. Schools Are Trying to Make Up Lost Ground](#)

AP News

[How 12 Innovative Teams Make Learning Happen in Communities, Not Just in Schools](#)

The 74

[School District Transportation Challenges Impacting Academics, Attendance](#)

K-12 Dive

[FCC Removes School Bus Wi-Fi, Hotspots from E-Rate](#)

K-12 Dive

[Michigan Chronic Absenteeism Inches Down but Remains Higher Than Pre-Pandemic](#)

Bridge Michigan

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 a report from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL):

- [NCSL Releases New Framework: Principles for Funding Every Student's Success](#) - A new report designed to present a comprehensive framework for designing and evaluating state education finance systems was released today by the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#) (NCSL). The "Principles of a Sound State Education Finance System" is written to help state policymakers strengthen and evaluate their education funding systems.

The report outlines a comprehensive framework grounded in six interdependent principles- Lodestar (vision), equity, adequacy, efficiency, accountability and stability-that together create the foundation of a fair, durable, and effective state education finance system.

These reports matter for ESAs because the NCSL framework and its principles provide a research-based, nationally vetted standard for evaluating and improving state education finance systems, which directly impacts resource allocation, program implementation, and long-term educational outcomes. As the association that represents state legislatures, this NCSL report is likely to garner significant attention from state lawmakers. The report aims to focus on vision, equity, adequacy, efficiency, accountability, and stability. Engaging with these principles, ESAs may want to investigate where they factor into the framework and consider how to inform policymakers and ensure that funding structures strengthen ESA capacity to advance meaningful and sustainable improvements in their regions.

SEPTEMBER 2025 MONTHLY ADVOCACY TIP

The Importance of Storytelling in Advocacy

Effective marketing and communications are central to powerful educational advocacy, and Educational Service Agencies (ESAs) are uniquely positioned to leverage authentic, real-life and impactful stories from the frontline to create meaningful policy change and improved outcomes. By grounding advocacy in knowledge and real-life examples, ESAs can transform policy aspirations into actionable, effective implementation for educators and students.

Integrating Best Practices for Marketing and Communications in Advocacy

Research and expert recommendations highlight several best practices for effective communications in the Pre-K-12 education sector:

- Align messaging with the institution's mission, values, and audience needs.
- Segment communications by stakeholder group (executive, legislative, agency policymakers and other interest groups) to maximize relevance and engagement.
- Utilize a mix of channels—email, social media, website updates, and earned media—to reach audiences where they are most receptive.
- Develop a proactive plan for crisis and reputation management and continually measure impact for ongoing improvement.
- Ensure internal alignment on messaging so all ESA spokespeople reinforce consistent narratives.

These practices help build trust, encourage participation, and position the ESC as a thought leader in education.

Leveraging Frontline Stories for Advocacy

Stories from the ESA frontline bring the agency or network mission to life and demonstrate real impact. The AESA Advocacy Toolkit specifically encourages using tailored, personal stories in advocacy efforts to engage stakeholders and legislators. By focusing on students' or educators' journeys, challenges, and triumphs, ESAs can highlight needs and illustrate the benefits of policy decisions in a way that is relatable and memorable.

Sharing stories that humanize equity gaps, celebrate successes, or spotlight transformational partnerships not only builds emotional connection, but can also inspire institutional and policy changes. Those who have successfully tapped into voters and policymakers' emotions have had the most electoral and policy successes in recent years.

Storytelling's Impact on Learning and Advocacy

Research underscores the powerful effects of storytelling on both learning and advocacy:

- Stories help audiences remember complex information, build trust, and relate to key messages on a personal level.
- Combining storytelling with supporting data amplifies advocacy, enabling decision-makers to see both the human and strategic rationale for action.

In advocacy, telling stories tied to impact and supplemented by data has been shown to move audiences to action and influence policymakers.

Practical Guidance from the AESA Advocacy Toolkit

The AESA Advocacy Toolkit provides actionable strategies for using stories effectively:

- Conduct audience analysis to ensure communication is relevant and tailored.
- Build relationships by sharing personal stories in meetings or statehouse visits.
- Integrate clear, concise messaging with a focus on outcomes and impact.
- Use visual and narrative communication to add depth and resonance to advocacy efforts.

ESCs can use the toolkit to craft narratives that not only describe what they do, but also vividly demonstrate how policy influences daily experiences and student outcomes. One can also use the template below to craft a story to drive home an important policy argument and set the stage for the big "ask."

Advocacy Storytelling Template

Purpose: Empower advocates to craft memorable, actionable stories that build empathy, frame the problem, and deliver a convincing call-to-action in any setting.

1. Set the Stage

- Briefly introduce yourself and establish the context.
- Make it personal—share your role, relationship to the issue, or the setting.

Prompt:

Who are you, and why are you connected to this issue?

2. Present the Challenge or Problem

- Clearly describe the main obstacle, need, or barrier faced.
- Use concrete examples and emotional detail to engage the listener.

Prompt:

What is the specific problem or challenge? Why does it matter?

3. Convey the Struggle and Impact

- Share vivid details about the struggles faced, emotional or practical hardships, and past attempts to overcome them.
- Highlight the personal or community impact of the issue.

Prompt:

How has this problem affected you or those you serve?

4. Highlight the Turning Point or Solution

- Describe a pivotal moment, breakthrough, or solution that points toward hope or improvement.
- This can be a realization, a policy decision, or a community effort.

Prompt:

What changed, or what could change, to improve the situation?

5. Share the Outcome or Resolution

- State the results if the solution has been implemented, or the desired outcome if not.
- Connect the story to broader benefits—why does this matter to the listener?

Prompt:

What difference did the change make, or what difference could it make?

6. Make the Ask and Tie Back to Advocacy

- End with a clear, actionable ask or call to action: what do you want the listener to do next?
- Relate it to policy, funding, community support, or other outcomes.

Prompt:

What specific action do you want your audience to take?

Example Story Outline for an Elevator Speech

1. **Introduction:**

"My name is Taylor and I'm an educational service provider in rural (state)."

2. **Problem:**

"In my service territory, too many students can't access mental health support, and their learning suffers."

3. **Struggle:**

"I've watched promising students fall behind and families despair because resources just aren't there."

4. **Turning Point:**

"When our ESC piloted telehealth counseling, attendance and engagement shot up by 10% in one school year."

5. **Outcome:**

"Now, hundreds of students have regular support—and their grades, test scores, and confidence have improved."

6. **Ask:**

“With increased state investment, every student in our region could thrive. Please support increased ESA funding for mental health services.”

Additional Tips

- **Practice brevity:** Elevator pitches should fit within 60–90 seconds.
- **Keep it conversational:** Use clear, jargon-free language and universal themes.
- **Emphasize both emotion and solution:** Facts move minds, but stories move hearts and actions.
- **Test and revise:** Solicit feedback for clarity and resonance with different audiences.

This template is intentionally flexible for written, spoken, or multimedia communications, enabling ESA and other education advocates to adapt for testimony, legislative visits, media outreach, and beyond.

Bottom Line Conclusion

Engagement that is grounded in both knowledge and real-life stories is instrumental in moving policy from aspiration to implementation. When ESAs proactively surface and amplify frontline stories using proven communication strategies—and support them with data—their advocacy gains credibility and drives change that matters for educators and students alike.

Stay tuned for next month’s article, which will focus on advocacy as a learned habit and discipline that must be adopted by all education stakeholders looking to impact the state policy and funding debate.

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

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

