

Southern Education Foundation

Public Policy Priorities

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF) urges state lawmakers throughout the South to prioritize the following recommendations to improve access to rich learning experiences and social development for historically underserved student populations such as students of color and students from low-income families. To achieve this, we believe states must revolutionize public investments to address perpetual inequities in the public education system. We hope policymakers and like-minded advocates use this publication to inspire action and policy improvements to support children from birth through postsecondary completion.

Invest in Statewide Infrastructure to Improve Early Childhood Education



Decades of independent research shows that thoughtful investments in accessible, high-quality early childhood education can help increase children's academic readiness, cognitive development, and overall wellness.¹ Young learners, defined as children ages birth-to-5, who have high-quality early learning experiences are also more likely to see longer-term benefits such as higher rates of college enrollment and employment in adulthood, yielding annual returns on public investments as much as 13%. SEF urges policymakers to consider the following actions in early childhood education policy to ensure that states invest in strong starts for all students and the future of our society.



Increase investments for high-quality, evidence-based, mixed-delivery early-learning systems that incorporate both home- and center-based child care, such as Home Visiting programs, allowing parents to choose the arrangement that best fits their needs. States should expand these programs so that 50% or more of eligible families can access these services.



Increase state investments in child care to bolster availability and increase affordability for low-income families.

- Expand flexibility for additional funding to state subsidy programs to increase reimbursements to child-care providers, expand eligibility for more children, add more available child-care slots, and lower copayments for families to ensure they do not pay more than 7% of their discretionary income on early learning programs.
- Consider implementing dedicated early childhood revenue streams, such as a millage, sales tax, or child tax credits, public/private partnerships, and philanthropic support.



Maintain a high-quality early-learning workforce and establish a strong recruitment pipeline.

- Equalize the salary, benefits, and overall compensation among pre-K educators and other early learning professional educators to those in the public K-12 sector.
- Provide evidence-based professional learning, mentoring, coaching, and other strategies to support educators' well-being across the birth-to-5 continuum.

Prioritize Investments That Strengthen Public Education

Despite constitutional mandates in most southern states to provide a free and adequately supported public education system, most states have not fully funded or updated their K-12 school funding formulas to meet the needs of all young learners. Recently, there have been widespread advancements and expansions of private school voucher programs that diminish the available resources for public education.

Some states, however, are working to address their education funding formulas to improve public education.¹ SEF encourages policymakers to prioritize the young learners most in need of support, redesign how per-student allocations are distributed to account for disparities in local tax revenues, and strengthen investments in public education for all students.



Adopt adequate and equitable school funding formulas that enables districts to meet the academic mastery goals for students as outlined by each state Department of Education.



Prioritize investments for schools with high concentrations of students living in poverty and historically underserved student groups, including students of color, English-language learners, students with disabilities, those experiencing homelessness, foster youths, youths with migrant parents, students with incarcerated parents, and students living in rural communities.

- Ensure school funding systems can provide a minimum of \$20,000² per student each year to meet the comprehensive needs of these historically underserved students.



Eliminate the development and stop the expansion of school vouchers, including education savings accounts and tax-credit scholarships that fund private schools with taxpayer dollars. Voucher programs siphon resources away from public schools into private schools that are inaccessible for most families, especially rural ones, and can turn students away based on religious beliefs, disability status, and ability to pay.



¹ See the Maryland Blueprint Concentration of Poverty Grants, the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement Formula, and North Carolina Supreme Court Ruling to Fund *Leandro* Plan.

² [The Real Shame of the Nation](https://www.shankerinstitute.org/sites/default/files/The%20Real%20Shame%20of%20the%20Nation.pdf), Shanker Institute
<https://www.shankerinstitute.org/sites/default/files/The%20Real%20Shame%20of%20the%20Nation.pdf>.

Protect Students' Right to Learn

All students deserve the right to learn the full story of America's diverse past and present. Policies that restrict the teaching of truthful and accurate curricula and that censor classroom discussions about topics such as race and racism harm *all* students and provide them with an incomplete and unbalanced education. Instead of promoting culture-war policies that create division and distrust, lawmakers should ensure that every student can learn and thrive inside and outside the classroom.



Invest in more professional learning opportunities to ensure that educators effectively and accurately navigate and teach culturally inclusive curricula.



Advance policies that encourage the full, accurate teaching of history, including Black history and African American studies.



Protect students' civil rights by encouraging classrooms to be supportive and welcoming environments for all students' unique identities and experiences.



Increase Access to Higher Education by Making College More Affordable for Students in Low-Income Households

Over the last half-century, the maximum Pell Grant award, the federal government's primary higher education student-aid program, went from covering an average of 80% of annual tuition at four-year state colleges and universities to less than 30% of those costs today⁵ — even though nearly 60% of Black students and about half of other students of color use Pell Grants to pay for college. At the same time, more than 60% of states have lowered their investments in higher education, forcing many students and families to take out additional student loans or pay more upfront costs to pursue a degree or another postsecondary credential.

The decreased purchasing power of Pell Grants combined with the lowering of state investments in higher education has made college much more costly for low- and middle-class families. To improve students' access to college, state lawmakers should immediately boost needs-based aid for students and adopt the critical recommendations below — and help students with the greatest needs in our region get “to and through” college.



Make the first two years of college tuition-free in all public two- and four-year institutions, supporting students as if they are in their 13th and 14th years of public schooling.



Incentivize institutions to streamline and ease burdensome regulatory requirements to offer student aid to students.



Convene a diverse set of partners annually — including students — to develop new ways to improve college access. Identify policy barriers and potential incentives to increase college access, affordability, and degree completion.

Elevate and Invest in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

The roughly 100 HBCUs nationwide represent only 3% of all two- and four-year colleges and universities but serve nearly 20% of Black undergraduate students and graduate nearly half of all Black educators across the United States. HBCUs have an especially integral role in the South: 90% of HBCUs are concentrated across 10 southern states³ and make an economic impact of \$15 billion a year.⁴ Controlling for socioeconomic status and academic preparation, HBCUs outperform non-HBCUs in retaining and graduating Black students by 14 percentage points. SEF urges lawmakers to embrace the following policy recommendations to build upon the success of HBCUs. These steps include strengthening postsecondary pathways for students, significantly boosting financial investments in HBCUs, and improving the capacity of these historic institutions, which excel despite many decades of underfunding.



Policy recommendations for building on HBCUs' success:



Address the longstanding state funding disparities between HBCUs and non-HBCUs who enroll similar student populations.



Establish a bipartisan, bicameral HBCU caucus in your state as a forum to regularly discuss and assess the latest research, policy solutions, budgets, and program changes and that can respond to the needs of HBCUs.



Establish a state HBCU higher education subcommittee to consistently hear from these institutions, and consider legislation and policy solutions to support HBCUs and their students.



Establish legislation to enable economic innovation and opportunity zones in communities where HBCUs are based and the surrounding areas.



Establish a state HBCU endowment fund to strengthen the long-term financial stability and operational capacity of HBCUs.

3 [HBCUs: Born in the North but Most Needed in the South](https://uncf.org/programs/hbcuimpact#:~:text=These%20institutions%20generate%20134%2C090%20jobs,the%20nation's%20largest%20private%20employers), column by Ernie Suggs, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 2018
<https://uncf.org/programs/hbcuimpact#:~:text=These%20institutions%20generate%20134%2C090%20jobs,the%20nation's%20largest%20private%20employers>

4 [The HBCU Effect Research Series](#), UNCF, 2024.

5 [Pell Grants — a Key Tool for Expanding College Access and Economic Opportunity — Need Strengthening, Not Cuts](#), a report by Spiro Protosaltis and Sharon Parrott, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017.



The Southern Education Foundation, founded in 1867, is a nonprofit organization supported by partners and donors working for justice in education, especially for students of color and students living in low-income families across the South.