

Advance Early Childhood Learning Experiences

Independent research dating back to the 1960s shows that thoughtful investments in accessible, high-quality, early childhood education from birth to age 5 can increase children’s academic readiness, mastery of knowledge, skills, and overall wellness. Young learners, defined as children ages birth-5, who have high-quality early learning experiences are also more likely than others to see long-term benefits such as higher rates of employment in adulthood and college enrollment, yielding an annual return of between 7% to 13% on public investments. As states consider improving their early learning systems, SEF urges policymakers to consider the following early childhood education policies.



How state leaders can take action

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Allocate adequate funding across the developmental continuum, from birth to elementary school, to ensure infants, toddlers, young children, and their families can participate in high-quality programs and services from birth to age 5, underscoring the need for full access and true affordability for families. For example, states should invest more in child-care subsidies, prenatal health care, universal child developmental delay screenings, paid family leave, full-day child care, and universal preschool.
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Support a high-quality early childhood educator workforce with evidence-based professional learning, mentoring, coaching, and other strategies to support educators’ well-being across the birth-to-5 continuum.
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Eliminate pay disparity for early learning educators by investing in greater supports, professional learning opportunities for infant and toddler educators, and comparable salary and benefits to educators teaching in K-12 schools. States should also codify pre-K programs so that all early learning educators, regardless of program setting, can earn a similar salary and benefits package.
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Ensure your state’s early learning standards are culturally responsive and sustaining, celebrating the diversity of families and communities within their local contexts.
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Increase support for and coordination between community-based early childcare centers, the state, and local school districts.

STATE SUCCESS STORIES

ALABAMA

Since 2006, the state of Alabama has met all 10 of the National Institute for Early Education Research’s quality standard benchmarks for state pre-K programs. The state is one of the few in the South with universal preschool eligibility for all 4-year-olds. Alabama has committed to supporting the development of rich learning experiences by implementing its [First Class Pre-K Program](#) and [Classroom Guidelines](#).

Support Equitable K-12 Resource Allocation

K-12 state education funding systems across the South are complex, highly variable, and in many instances unequal. Despite mandates in most southern states' constitutions to provide a free and adequately supported public education system, too often states do not fully fund or update K-12 school funding formulas to meet the unique individual needs of each learner. Policymakers should ensure that school funding systems fully support the comprehensive needs of historically underserved student subgroups, such as Black students, rural students, students with disabilities, English learners, and others. SEF encourages policymakers to prioritize the students most in need of support and redesign the distribution of per student allocation to account for local tax revenues and improve support for all students.



How state leaders can take action



Adopt adequate and equitable school funding formulas that prioritize high-need schools and support all young learners in accessing the whole-child and academic learning opportunities they need to succeed. For example, states can calculate district funding beginning with a uniform base level of dollars per student and then adjust or add a student weight based on specific learner needs (e.g., poverty, limited English proficiency, homelessness, children of incarcerated parents, special needs, and others).



Target additional resources, programs, and supports, specifically for the unique needs of schools that educate a high percentage of students from low-income families, such as the [Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program](#) recommended by Maryland's Kirwan Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education.



Ensure that state funding is invested across local school districts so that per-student allocations are more equitable and that high-need schools are funded based on the actual cost of providing a high-quality education for all students.



Distribute state funds based on the needs of students and the goals outlined in each state's respective Every Student Succeeds Act plan. Funding students based on present-day needs and future college- and career-ready expectations can be done by blending federal, state, and local funding resources to reduce fragmentation and improve alignment across programs and funding streams.

STATE SUCCESS STORIES



TENNESSEE

In the spring of 2022, Tennessee's legislature passed and Governor Bill Lee signed into law the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA) [act](#). Under the new law, Tennessee's K-12 public schools will transition to a student-based funding approach and the state will invest an estimated \$9 billion in additional education funding. As part of the transition to the new school funding system, the state will provide extra funding for specific subgroups of students such as those who live in low-income households.



MARYLAND

The Kirwan Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education was a multi-year [initiative](#) to research and fund policy reforms, such as the Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program to provide grants to schools with a high concentration of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, to improve the quality of Maryland's public education system.

Prioritize Public Education and Eliminate School Privatization Efforts

School vouchers, education savings accounts, tax-credit scholarships, and other school privatization efforts divert funding and critical resources away from the public education system. School privatization programs can contribute to racial and socioeconomic segregation in schools and across states, and these programs, in some cases, operate under alternative reporting, admissions, and accountability requirements when compared to traditional public schools. Private schools receiving public funding can also limit access to specific populations of students. In many situations, families waive their federal civil rights protections when they enroll in a school voucher program. No large-scale research shows evidence of long-term academic benefits for students living in low-income families from school privatization programs. In fact, some studies present worse outcomes for students in voucher programs than in local public schools. SEF urges states to adopt the recommendations below to ensure all students in the public education system are equally well-served.



How state leaders can take action



Eliminate and prevent school voucher programs, education savings accounts, tax-credit scholarship programs, and other efforts such as micro-schools that fund private schools using public dollars. Research on these programs show no consistent long-term benefits, while targeted investments in high-quality public school programs hold clear benefits for students, communities, and states.



Establish universal accountability for schools receiving public funds and annual evaluations of the impact of school vouchers, tax credits, and education savings account programs. This should include information on the race/ethnicity, disability status, and family income of students using taxpayer dollars to attend private schools. These evaluations should be publicly available and annually reported.

Ensure Learning Systems Support Whole-Child Success

From students' social-emotional and cognitive skills to their academic content mastery, a whole-child approach to teaching and learning supports and nurtures all areas of development. SEF supports a comprehensive, integrated system of support encompassing elements such as health care, nutrition, and social-emotional support, which boost overall student success and allow learners to fully develop. We envision an ecosystem of student support of which schools are one part. As policymakers consider strategies to ensure schools support whole-child success for all learners, SEF urges states to consider the policy recommendations outlined below.



How state leaders can take action



Invest in community schools with integrated student supports, enriched and expanded learning opportunities, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practices to better serve the holistic needs of children and families, such as after-school, tutoring and arts programs. States can do this by: (1) developing and supporting community schools through state funding, policy guidance, and technical assistance, and (2) adopting and supporting evidence-based integrated student support service initiatives.



Establish integrated support systems that use an asset-based approach to address students' social, emotional, academic, physical, and mental health needs; develop partnerships and provide individualized supports that meet the holistic needs of students and their families and caregivers.



Ensure authentic engagement of students, families, and communities in schools through school, district, and state policies that encourage: (1) meaningful involvement from families and community members in all steps of developing a community school and (2) create opportunities for educators and school staff to learn from the experiences of caregivers and communities.



Establish coordinating bodies to advance whole-child support through state and local children and youth cabinets and strategic task forces to identify current state capacity and needs and provide guidance for whole-child services.

STATE SUCCESS STORIES

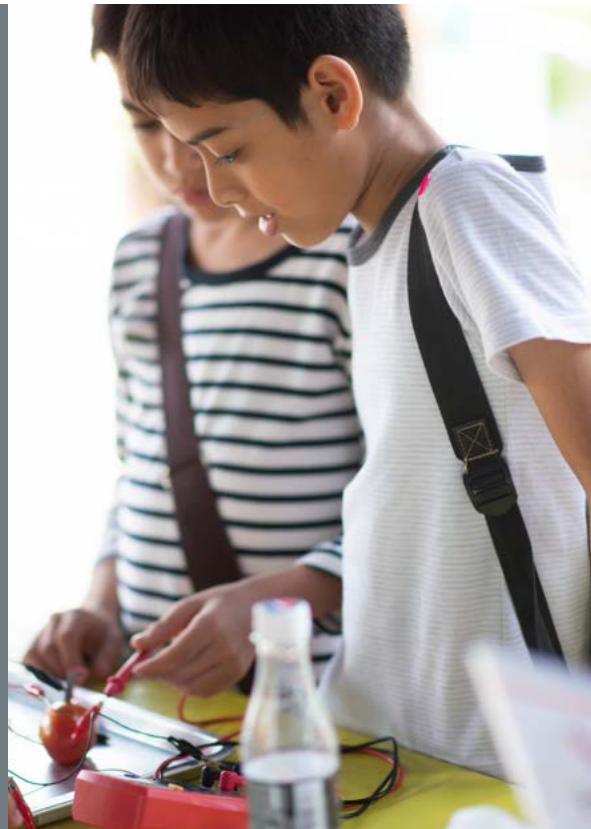


GEORGIA

The Georgia Department of Education created a [Whole Child Toolkit](#) — a one-stop online resource to support statewide efforts to ensure students are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. The toolkit website offers links and information on a variety of topics that often require coordination across local or state agencies, including students' mental health, nutrition, and safety, plus school climate, the fine arts, social studies and civics, after-school programs, and early childhood care and education. The interactive site also includes information to help districts and schools understand federal programs, guidance on how to adopt a whole-child approach to education, direction for implementing a community schools strategy.

Ensure Education Environments Are Equitable and Just

While learning science shows all students can learn at similar levels, students of color, especially Black and Latinx students, have often fared worse on nearly every traditional measure of success in education than their white peers. What are often referred to as achievement gaps or outcome gaps are evidence of gaps in learning opportunities that many students face in their schools and communities. Content mastery disparities, especially those disaggregated by race and ethnicity, can reflect the deficiencies of the traditional education system, not of any individual learner. Too often, the education system has failed to adopt many evidence-based practices into classrooms and schools, bring promising practices to scale, and address long-standing discriminatory policies that could make the system truly just and fair. SEF urges states to consider the following policy recommendations to transform classrooms and schools into learning environments that prepare all K-12 learners, especially those of color, for success in college, careers, and civic engagement.



How state leaders can take action

Prepare and retain excellent teachers by supporting a more diverse educator workforce



Ensure students of color, and other historically underserved students, are taught by diverse, well-prepared, fully-licensed educators who are more representative of the students they serve and can understand the students and communities they serve. States should develop or support grow-your-own programs for prospective educators to recruit and retain a more diverse workforce in education.



Implement evidence-based strategies that support comprehensive educator preparation, recruitment, professional learning, and retention. States can: (1) build high-retention, supportive pathways into teaching by establishing or expanding teacher residencies, public service scholarships, and loan forgiveness programs at HBCUs and other higher education institutions, (2) create more proactive educator hiring and induction strategies, and (3) improve teaching conditions through improved school leadership.

STATE SUCCESS STORIES



TENNESSEE

Tennessee was the first state approved by the U.S. Department of Labor to establish a permanent grow-your-own model. The [Teacher Residency program](#) in the Clarksville-Montgomery County School System in partnership with Austin Peay State University was the first registered apprenticeship program for teachers in the country. Tennessee is also the first state to sponsor Teacher Occupation Apprenticeship programs between school districts and educator-preparation programs. This approach could improve the state's and nation's efforts to extend the teacher pipeline and address teacher shortages.

Improve the safety and well-being of every student through culturally-relevant practices



Adopt restorative and educative approaches to school discipline, replacing exclusionary practices with more trauma-informed and healing-oriented approaches. States can do this by: (1) replacing zero-tolerance policies and the use of suspensions and expulsions for low-level offenses with evidence-based approaches such as social-emotional-learning programs and restorative school discipline practices proven to make schools safer for all learners; (2) investing in mental and behavioral health services; and (3) providing high-quality training for all school staff and others interacting with youth on restorative practices to help reduce disparities.



Promote a culturally relevant, rich, rigorous curriculum that prepares all students for success in college and the workforce. States can do this by: (1) offering guidance for teachers on using more authentic learning and assessment strategies; (2) providing curriculum tools for professional learning; (3) building educators' capacity for more inclusive, identity-safe, and culturally responsive teaching practices; and (4) designing state assessments that emphasize applied learning and complex problem-solving. States should also ensure that curriculum standards in all subjects and grade levels accurately represent all histories, narratives, and backgrounds.

STATE SUCCESS STORIES



SOUTH CAROLINA

In 2021, the South Carolina Department of Education issued revised teaching standards that support more responsive and inclusive practices. These standards incorporate research showing how culturally responsive teaching can increase student engagement. These standards for teaching encourage educators to build on students' strengths such as their cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and home language.



NEW MEXICO

The [New Mexico's Black Education Act](#) was created to improve education for Black students in New Mexico's traditional public and charter schools and in postsecondary institutions. The law calls for steps to improve graduation rates for African-American students in high school and postsecondary institutions.



Additional Resources

LEGISLATION TO CONSIDER

Early Childhood Education

- Alabama - [HJR 176](#): Creates a joint legislative study commission on expanding access to quality pre-K early education programs. (Enacted in 2021)
- Florida - [HB 419](#): Requires students enrolled in the state's Voluntary Pre-K Education Program to participate in a specified screening and progress monitoring program. (Enacted 2021)
- Louisiana - [SB 47](#): Requires all school districts in Louisiana to come up with a plan to implement universal pre-K for 4 year olds. No funding was added but all districts will be required to consider how they would add these classes if they had the funds. (Enacted 2022)
- Oklahoma - [HB 1773](#): The Teacher Preparation Act requires early childhood educators to study the overarching framework and implementation of multi-tiered support systems designed to address the core academic and non-academic needs of students. (Enacted 2021)

Resource Equity

- New Mexico - [SB 17](#): Allows the state department of education to use state data to identify schools that educate the highest concentrations of students in low-income households so that schools can receive additional state funding to implement whole-child supports and research-based literacy interventions.

Whole-Child Supports

- Oklahoma - [SB 1517](#): This bill would create the Oklahoma Task Force on Trauma-Informed Care to study and make recommendations to the state legislature on best practices for children and youth who have experienced trauma.
- Maryland - [Blueprint for Maryland's Future](#): Allows for Concentration of Poverty Grants to be awarded annually to schools that qualify to establish and support community schools throughout the state.

Advancing Racial Equity

- Minnesota - The legislature created the House Select Committee on Racial Justice and issued a [report](#) outlining recommendations to address the challenges in education that Black, indigenous, and other people of color face in Minnesota.



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.

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