

State of the States

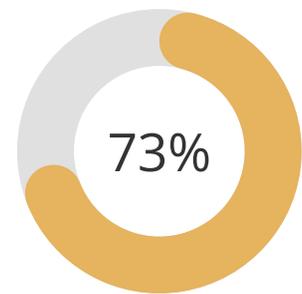
2026

Emerging trends, policy shifts, and indicators shaping the American states in the year ahead

INTRODUCTION:

The 2026 state legislative season is in full swing for 35 states, and there are emerging trends that impact Community Schools, family engagement, and related whole-child and youth development strategies. 46 governors are promoting one or more new education priorities, namely, workforce alignment and career and technical education (CTE), school funding, teacher pay, school choice, and cell phone bans.

**Note: Not all states have a legislative session in 2026*



Governors Shared New Education Priorities

STATE-LEVEL EDUCATION PRIORITIES:

Governors continue to champion cradle-to-career strategies, with several states moving from the proposal to implementation stage on childcare, postsecondary access, and school funding reform. States like California, Colorado, Michigan, and New Mexico, now provide free **preschool or pre-K**, with Massachusetts and Kentucky exploring their own proposals to implement free early learning opportunities. Connecticut will launch universal free pre-K in 2027. **Workforce development and CTE** were the hottest topics, with 100% of governors discussing various achievements and priorities, while **school funding reform** remained a consistent priority — from Maryland's \$10 billion public school investment to Delaware and Vermont's calls for needs-based funding formulas. Governors are also tying **postsecondary access** to workforce needs, with Kentucky, Michigan, New Mexico, and Colorado all expanding tuition-free community college. In Iowa, Indiana, Alabama, and Tennessee, **school choice** has moved from proposal to implementation, with their governors reporting that universal or near-universal ESA programs now serve students. **Cell phone and social media restrictions** are the defining bipartisan education action call of 2026, with 16 governors addressing the issue and 35 states having enacted limiting legislation.

GOVERNORS' TOP EDUCATION ISSUE AREAS

Across 42 governor addresses, the following eight education topics emerged as the most prominently and consistently discussed priorities of 2026.

Workforce Development & CTE

Cell Phone Bans & Social Media

Teacher Pay, Recruitment & Retention

Public School Funding & Formula Reform

School Choice, Vouchers, & Educational Savings Accounts

Literacy & Math Improvement

Early Childhood & Pre-K

Special Education Funding

NOTABLE TRENDS ACROSS STATES IN 2026

Workforce Development & CTE

In 2025, we saw the emergence of workforce development and career & technical education (CTE) as a top education priority. This year, governors discussed the impact of their implemented plans, and their next steps for further expansion.

School Choice / Educational Savings Accounts / Vouchers

In 2025, 20+ governors announced their plans for school choice initiatives or expansion. This year, 10 governors supportive of school choice shared their progress, called for expansion, or called for legislation to pass school choice programs.

Federal Funding Instability

This year, multiple governors discussed the harmful impacts of frozen or rescinded federal funds on education and families, and pitched whole-child Initiatives including funding for food security, housing, and increasing investment in public schools.

Upcoming Midterm Elections: 39 Gubernatorial Seats

Many governors were reflective of their achievements as governor in this year's State of the State addresses. In the 2026 Midterm elections, there will be 39 gubernatorial elections, with 18 incumbent Governors running for reelection and 21 governors who are term-limited or not seeking reelection.

Northeast

2026

Northeast priorities included workforce development & CTE, early childhood education, cellphone & social media restrictions, and school funding formula reform.

- **Maryland's** Governor Wes Moore proposed a historic \$10B for public schools, and a new Academic Excellence Program to provide educators with academic coaches. Moore uplifted the impact of the ENOUGH initiative to address childhood poverty and develop local solutions.
- **Delaware** Governor Matt Meyer announced nearly \$50M in federal early childhood education funding and \$8.7M for literacy in grades 4-8. Meyer called on the state legislature to pass a new K-12 funding formula, designed by the Public Education Funding Commission, to ensure equitable educational opportunity, and align with the federal funds received.
- Ned Lamont, **Connecticut's** Governor, established a Blue Ribbon Commission on K-12 education to examine funding, special education, and fiscal accountability.
- **Vermont** Governor Phil Scott called on the state legislature to approve Act 73, which consolidates school districts, expands CTE and Pre-K, and closes the teacher salary gap, framing it as a cradle-to-career commitment to every Vermont child. This follows Scott's 2025 call for formula funding reform.

Midwest

2026

Midwest priorities included workforce development & CTE, early childhood & childcare, cell phone & social media restrictions, and literacy & reading improvement.

- **Michigan's** Governor Gretchen Whitmer's final year of her term will focus on education, housing, and healthcare. She proposed action on early childhood literacy, tutoring services, and mental health.
- **Ohio's** Governor Mike DeWine announced a statewide attendance dashboard launching April 15, 2026, and called to increase career tech program capacity due to a 13,000-student waitlist.
- Governor JB Pritzker of **Illinois** proposed HB5511, *the Children's Social Media Safety Act*, which would generate \$200M annually for K-12 education from social media company operating fees. Pritzker also proposed a Vocational Training Grant Program to expand specialized workforce programs in school districts and regional vocational centers.

South

2026

Southern priorities included workforce development & CTE, literacy & reading improvement, early childhood & childcare, and teacher pay & recruitment.

- **Tennessee** Governor Bill Lee proposed an additional \$340M directed to public schools and an expansion of the Education Freedom Scholarship Program. Lee also proposed additional funding for at-risk youth employment programs and reentry support by nonprofits.
- Governor Andy Beshear of **Kentucky** proposed \$159M for mandatory raises for educators, \$560M for teacher retirement, and universal Pre-K as a workforce strategy. Gov. Beshear also announced he is working with the Kentucky Community and Technical College System for a reentry campus.
- Jeff Landry, **Louisiana's** Governor, called for increases to vocational and technical education funding in reflection of workforce needs. Landry also announced his support for Amendment 3, which pays down debt on the teacher's retirement system and provides a permanent pay raise for educators by repealing three education funds on quality and excellence.

West

2026

Western priorities included workforce development & CTE, early childhood & childcare, school funding & federal funding protection, and literacy & reading improvement.

- In **California**, Governor Gavin Newsom named Community Schools as one of his most significant achievements, proposing an additional \$1B for expansion. Newsom also proposed that the State Board of Education and the CA Department of Education consolidate policymaking to unify the early childhood-to-college strategy.
- **Colorado's** Governor Jared Polis called for a unified department for workforce development to better access Colorado's 110 workforce programs and resources.
- **New Mexico's** Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham proposed an additional \$160M to cement universal childcare, and called for literacy and math requirements for high school graduation, public school accountability measures, and the establishment of a new Office of Special Education.
- Governor Bob Ferguson of **Washington** signed an executive order establishing the "Washington Completes FAFSA" campaign, convened by the Governor's Office and led by the Washington Student Achievement Council, that includes two youth.