

The State Examiner: February 2024

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 (AESAs). It provides legislative monitoring, news articles, and related content gathered from our fifty states. The purpose of the monthly report is to ensure AESA members are aware of the latest state-level education legislative 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.

STATE LEGISLATIVE ISSUE MONITORING

In each edition of the *State Examiner*, AESA monitors state-level legislation impacting educational service agencies and their client schools and districts. This month's report for February 2024 will examine what is happening in statehouses around the country regarding **truancy and attendance**.

Chronic truancy, the persistent absence from school, poses a significant challenge to the individual state educational system in the United States, particularly in kindergarten through 12th grade. Despite numerous efforts to address this issue, it continues to affect students' academic success and overall well-being. Truancy not only impacts individual students but also strains educational resources and undermines the effectiveness of schools in fostering a conducive learning environment. Understanding the root causes, consequences, and potential solutions to chronic truancy is essential for educators, policymakers, and communities striving to ensure every student receives a quality education and has the opportunity to thrive.

Not surprisingly, K-12 absenteeism increased since the onset of COVID-19, and there is evidence it has contributed to lower academic achievement as measured by falling test scores. Improving engagement is key for student success and the broader economy.

The issue of school attendance and chronic absenteeism has taken on such a level of importance that the Council of Economic Advisors tackled the issue in a September 2023 blog post on the Biden-Harris White House website. The article not only outlined the problem with specific data and evidence, but also highlighted federal efforts to address the issue. These federal initiatives included:

- disseminating grant funds that can resource interventions and supports;
- offering technical assistance to States and districts;
- [investing](#) in comprehensive mental health programs for students;

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- establishing and strengthening the [National Partnership for Student Success](#), which marshals evidence-backed supports such as tutoring and mentoring to help keep students engaged and on-track; and
- encouraging use of remaining [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief](#) funds set aside for P-12 schools in the American Rescue Plan that can be used towards academic recovery, school attendance and engagement, and other efforts.

The issue is also being tackled by state legislatures across the country. State responses to chronic absenteeism and truancy over the past few years have varied, but several leading examples below demonstrate innovative approaches aimed at addressing this issue and promoting attendance recovery:

- **California's Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS):** California has implemented a comprehensive MTSS framework that includes strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism and improve attendance. This approach involves early identification of at-risk students, targeted interventions, and collaboration between schools, families, and community partners to address underlying barriers to attendance.
- **New York's Attendance Improvement and Dropout Prevention Initiatives:** New York has implemented various initiatives to improve attendance and prevent dropouts, including the "Every Student Present" campaign, which raises awareness about the importance of regular attendance and provides resources to support schools in tracking and addressing absenteeism.
- **Oregon's Chronic Absenteeism Reduction Initiative:** Oregon has launched a statewide initiative focused on reducing chronic absenteeism through data-driven interventions and targeted supports for students and families. The initiative emphasizes the importance of early intervention and collaboration between schools, districts, and community organizations to address barriers to attendance.
- **Texas's Truancy Prevention Programs:** Texas has implemented truancy prevention programs aimed at addressing the root causes of chronic absenteeism and promoting attendance recovery. These programs often involve alternative education options, mentorship, and support services for students at risk of truancy.
- **Massachusetts's Early Warning System and Intervention Program:** Massachusetts has developed an Early Warning System (EWS) to identify students at risk of chronic absenteeism and provide timely interventions to support attendance recovery. The program emphasizes the importance of data-driven decision-making and collaboration between schools, districts, and state agencies to address attendance challenges effectively.

These examples highlight the diverse approaches states are taking to address chronic absenteeism and truancy, underscoring the importance of proactive strategies, collaboration, and targeted supports in promoting attendance and academic success for all students.

But the work is not done. According to a review of research and legislative tracking by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), ninety-four bills were introduced in twenty-eight states during the 2023 and 2024 legislative sessions. Of those bills, 24 (26%) passed, 30 (32%) failed, and 39 (42%) are still pending and making their way through the legislative process.

Arkansas saw the most activity with six separate pieces of legislation that addressed the issues of attendance generally and, more specifically, issues related to chronic absenteeism and truancy. Other states with multiple legislative measures included Maine (2), Texas (3), and California (4). The list is rounded out by individual bills in Arizona, Delaware, Illinois, Kentucky, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, and Virginia.

The bills that have passed cover a number of key topics that seek to both clarify attendance requirements and address absenteeism:

- Defining excused absences for religious purposes, career exploration, mental or behavioral health reason, pregnancy or parenting reasons, voting or accompanying a parent to vote, or participation in 4-H.
- Clarifying roles of truancy officers and school resource officers.
- Establishing school year start and end dates.
- Setting procedures for documenting attempts to service notice to parents about attendance.
- Requiring local boards of education to establish policies and procedures to address chronic absenteeism.

Clearly, chronic truancy remains a persistent issue in American schools, with far-reaching consequences for students, schools, and society at large. And it is clearly still a front-and-center issue of concern for most legislators. Addressing this challenge requires a multi-faceted approach that encompasses early intervention, community engagement, and targeted support for at-risk students and families. One can see how these approaches are manifesting themselves in the various legislative responses. Educational Service Agencies can, and often do, play a significant role in supporting schools and school districts in addressing this issue and other non-academic barriers that contribute to it.

AESA and its members should continue to monitor and inform legislative and administrative agency efforts and related policies and seek opportunities to assist in implementing evidence-based strategies and fostering collaboration among stakeholders. Solid policy, coupled with an effective implementation strategy, can help reduce chronic truancy rates and create a more equitable and inclusive educational system where every student has the opportunity to succeed regardless of where they live and attend school.

To access other state government policy and fiscal resources to monitor education and education funding related issues across the fifty states, including those related to truancy and chronic absenteeism, check out:

- National Governors Association - <https://www.nga.org/>
- Education Commission of the States: <https://www.ecs.org/>

STATE BUDGET & FINANCE MONITORING

AESA monitors state level budget and finance news impacting preschool and primary and secondary education. The latest state budget and finance-related news for February 2024 follows below.

Center for Budget and Policy Priorities Argues States Should Reverse Tax-Cut Spree, Take Brighter Path in 2024

States' fiscal path forward remains highly uncertain, particularly for states that enacted permanent tax rate cuts according to some analysts. Large rainy-day funds could help ease the transition to slower revenue growth. However, if the economy falters and if revenue collections continue to deteriorate, states will be forced to grapple with the need for more revenue or spending cuts in the coming years. These realities come at the same time state and local governments, including school districts, will be experiencing a fiscal cliff with the expiration of COVID era federal stimulus dollars.

According to a recent analysis by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, twenty-six states cut personal and corporate income tax rates over the past three years. Those states stand to collect an estimated \$111 billion less over the next five years than they otherwise would have, with the price tag in lost revenues hitting nearly \$30 billion a year by 2028.

If expected economic activity does not increase and produce additional tax revenue as tax-cut proponents suggest, it will have the effect of creating fiscal pressures on state and local governments resulting in budget cuts or tax increases, or worse yet, an increasing divide between "have" and "have not" communities.

To learn more about fiscal conditions in the states and the impact of tax reform efforts go to:

<http://tinyurl.com/2n49jzee>

STATEHOUSE NEWS: EDUCATION POLICY

Below is a representative sample of news coming out of the states or impacting the states that will be of interest to ESAs and their client schools and districts:

[Expansion of teacher apprenticeship program awaits Evers' decision](#)

The Center Square – 26 February 2024

[Federal grant to help refugees fill local workforce needs](#)

Central Penn Business Journal – 26 February 2024

[Few scores could spell big change to Iowa AEAs](#)

The Gazette – 25 February 2024

[Alaska House agrees to \\$680 increase in base student allocation](#)

The Center Square – 26 February 2024

[Inside Iowa Politics: Why more students not fully vaccinated](#)

KCRG.Com – 23 February 2024

[Schools Prioritize Reading Intervention. But What About Math?](#)

EducationWeek – 23 February 2024

[High School Students Think They Are Ready for College. But They Aren't](#)
EducationWeek – 21 February 2024

[U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights Releases New Resources on Students with Disabilities](#)
U.S. Department of Education – 21 February 2024

[Few Teachers Learn About 'Science of Reading' in Their Prep Programs. Some Colleges Are Working on That](#)
EducationWeek – 16 February 2024

[Meet Anne: The robot inspiring students to get into nursing \(Questar III BOCES\)](#)
WRGB Albany – 9 February 2024

[Lamont, CT legislature appear headed for a showdown over education](#)
CT Mirror – 7 February 2024

NATIONAL REPORTS IMPACTING EDUCATION

AESA monitors 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 from the Federal Reserve of St. Louis, the Congressional Budget Office, Rand, and Education Week.

The Fiscal Strength of State and Local Governments: Governments posting strong surpluses, still spending pandemic funds

A recent report and blog post by the Federal Reserve of St. Louis explores whether the fiscal positions of state and local governments have returned to pre-pandemic trends. According to the report, total state cash balances as a percentage of expenditures were roughly in the 10% to 15% range during the years immediately preceding the pandemic. This value increased dramatically during the pandemic, peaking at 38% in 2022, before falling to 34% in 2023. This value is expected to decline further to 23% in 2024. Despite the decline, states as a whole retain strong surpluses.

For the report go to: <http://tinyurl.com/47ssbmus>

More summary information is available in the following article: <http://tinyurl.com/37bpkzmz9>

CBO Projects Slowing Economy

Strong state surpluses may help offset reduced government spending amidst a slowing economy if forecasts play out as projected by a February report by the Congressional Budget Office. According to CBO, in calendar year 2023, the U.S. economy grew faster than it did in 2022, even as inflation slowed. But economic growth is projected to slow in 2024 amid increased unemployment and lower inflation.

CBO expects the Federal Reserve to respond by reducing interest rates, starting in the middle of the year. In CBO's projections, economic growth rebounds in 2025 and then moderates in later years. A surge in immigration that began in 2022 continues through 2026, expanding the labor force and increasing economic output.

As CBO looks to 2034 and beyond, however, the long-term outlook for the budget is challenging according to the report. In CBO's projections, deficits grow in relation to gross domestic product (GDP) as increases in outlays (largely driven by rising interest costs and greater spending for the major health care programs) outpace increases in revenues. Those growing deficits boost federal debt dramatically over the next three decades. In 2054, debt held by the public is projected to reach 172 percent of GDP—far larger than it has ever been—and be on track to rise even further. These realities may also play themselves out at the state level as increasing spending on healthcare and related human service related programs will create pressures on other areas of general state government including primary and secondary education.

These budget and related fiscal dynamics should continue to be monitored by education advocates.

To learn more, go to: <http://tinyurl.com/4acr558f>

Elementary and Middle School Opportunity Structures That Factor into Students' Math Learning: Findings from the American Mathematics Educator Study

Tracking, or grouping students according to their perceived ability, is a common feature in high school math. But a new study by Rand finds that it is widespread as early as elementary and middle school, too.

Researchers use data from the RAND American Mathematics Educator Study surveys to investigate three school structures—referred to as school opportunity structures throughout this report—that may affect kindergarten through eighth grade students' mathematics learning including 1) tracking, 2) teacher qualifications and assignments, and 3) supports for struggling students.

The report includes six key findings and three policy recommendations. The lone state-level policy recommendation suggests states and school systems provide opportunities for teachers to build their knowledge of mathematics pedagogy and content, particularly at the elementary level.

To read the report, go to: <http://tinyurl.com/z637mpkj>

Schools Are Using AI. But Are They on the Right Track?

With rapid advancements in technology, particularly artificial intelligence or AI, the unexpected pace of change has made many educators nervous. This EdWeek special report provides a road map to navigate the rising role of artificial intelligence in K-12 education.

The multi-article report on AI in education tackles two core areas of importance:

- 1) Ed Tech Policy; and
- 2) Classroom Technology.

To read the report and other AI-related reporting by EdWeek, go to: <http://tinyurl.com/32wd3rpm>.

FEBRUARY 2024 MONTHLY ADVOCACY TIP

Providing effective public testimony before a legislative committee or task force is a critical component of advocacy campaigns. Being on the public record can be a powerful tool for influencing change. But it can also be an intimidating process for the uninitiated. This month's advocacy tip focuses on making your visit to legislative committees a positive and impactful experience.

Effective Advocacy Tips: The Art of Public Testimony

Whether you are a seasoned advocate or testifying for the first time, ***effective preparation, delivery, and follow-up are essential to attaining a positive outcome and affecting the change you are seeking***. Here are tips to help you make the most of your public testimony and your time with state policymakers:

Preparation:

1. **Contacting Committee Chair:** Committees often require registering in advance to testify. Know the rules of your legislative bodies.
2. **Research and Understand the Issue:** Know the bill or issue inside out, including who supports or opposes it and why.
3. **Know your Audience:** Tailor your message to resonate with their priorities. Familiarize yourself with the committee members, legislative staff, and the bill's sponsor. Research their recent work; context matters.
4. **Craft a clear and Concise Message:** Focus on the 2-3 key points you want to convey. Below are a few core components that can serve as an outline for your testimony.
5. **Practice Your Testimony:** Rehearse your testimony aloud to gauge timing and delivery. This can also help settle any nerves.
6. **Prepare for Questions:** Be ready to answer questions from the committee members. Prepare thoughtful, evidence-based responses.

As you prepare, consider a few core components to include in your written or oral testimony. The bullets below can serve as a structured outline for crafting your message:

- **Introduction:** Greet the committee and introduce yourself. State your name, residence, and connection to the issue.
- **Identify the issue or problem statement:** Develop 2-3 Key Points and focus on conveying key messages clearly and providing supporting evidence or data.
- **Position Statement:** Clearly state whether you support or oppose the bill or issue. Be sure to include your "ask" on the front end of your testimony – be clear about the action you want policymakers to take.
- **Personal Story or Expertise:** Share a relevant personal story or your expertise. Storytelling can be impactful.
- **Recommendations:** Summarize your recommendations and then provide explanations/rationale and the benefits of implementing the proposed solution.
- **Conclusion:** Wrap up with a closing statement, summarize your position, and reiterate your call to action by asking lawmakers to make a specific vote for or against the measure.

This structured outline for testimony provides a clear and organized framework to effectively communicate your message, ensuring that your testimony is focused, coherent, and impactful.

Delivery:

1. *Arrive Early:* If your state’s committees allow same day testimony, arrive early and sign up to testify if required.
2. *Be Clear and Concise:* Start with a greeting, state your name, affiliation, and position on the bill.
3. *Use Personal Stories:* Share firsthand experiences or stories to make your testimony more compelling.
4. *Stick to the Facts:* Present irrefutable facts and avoid jargon or acronyms.
5. *Be Respectful:* Address the committee chair and members courteously and follow the testimony structure.
6. *Time Management:* Keep your testimony within the allotted time, usually 2-3 minutes. Committees may have time limits particularly during busy times like budget season or on issues with a high number of witnesses. Stay on topic to ensure your message is heard and understood.
7. *Promise to follow up:* If you do not know the answer to a question do not fake it. Promise to get information back to the committee through the chair’s office.

In both written and oral testimony, clarity, brevity, personalization, and gratitude are essential components to effectively convey your message before a public body.

Follow-Up:

1. *Submit Written Testimony:* Provide a written copy of your testimony to the committee, adhering to any submission guidelines.
2. *Provide Requested Data:* Follow up on any commitments made during the testimony including any additional information requested.
3. *Keep the Conversation Going:* Stay engaged with the legislative process from legislative action to agency implementation. Forge relationships and become the “go-to” expert for your legislators or committee chairs.
4. *Engage on social media:* Share your experience and the importance of the issue on social media platforms and other appropriate communication channels.

Testifying before legislative committee or other public bodies can be intimidating and nerve wracking. This is particularly true for first-timers or those that do not lobby for a living. But, by following these guidelines, advocates can deliver effective public testimony that resonates with legislative committees and other policymakers to further their advocacy campaign goals. By following these tips, you can maximize the impact of your public testimony and contribute to meaningful change through effective advocacy.

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

STAY CONNECTED

