

The State Examiner: September 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 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.

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 2024 will examine school vouchers and related private school choice legislation.

Current Ed Choice Landscape

Private school vouchers and other education choice options have become increasingly prominent in the national discourse on K-12 education reform. In fact, since 1993, over 181 separate pieces of legislation have been passed and enacted across the United States dealing expressly with private school choice (in addition to charters and other school choice options). These initiatives, which include voucher programs, education savings accounts, and tax-credit scholarships, aim to provide families with alternatives to traditional public schools.

Proponents argue that these options promote competition, improve educational outcomes, and empower parents to choose the best educational environment for their children. However, critics contend that such programs divert crucial funding from public schools and may exacerbate educational inequities.

As these initiatives gain traction across various states, it is imperative for educators, policymakers, and the public to closely monitor the evolving landscape of education choice policies and their potential impact on the broader public education system.

Private School Vouchers

According to a recent analysis by Education Week, **twenty-nine** states and the District of Columbia have at least one private school choice program. Of those, **12** states have at least one private school choice

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program that's universally accessible to all K-12 students in the state (MT, AZ, UT, OK, IA, AR, IN, OH, WV, AL, NC, FL).

An additional **10** states and the District of Columbia have less expansive voucher programs (UT, OK, WI, LA, MS, IN, OH, MD, NC, GA, DC, PR); while **21** states have tax-credit scholarships (MT, NV, AZ, SD, IA, NE, UT, KS, AR, OK, LA, IN, OH, PA, VA, AL, SC, GA, FL, NH, RI); **16** have education savings accounts (MT, WY, AZ, UT, IA, LA, AR, MS, TN, AL, GA, FL, IN, WV, NC, NH); and **2** have tax-credit education savings accounts (MO, FL).

Those states *without* private school choice programs include Alaska, Hawaii, Washington, Idaho, Oregon, California, North Dakota, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Vermont, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Connecticut, Delaware, and Maine.

Legislative Monitoring on Private School Choice

During the current legislative session, the National Conference of State Legislatures has identified 420 bills in 42 states that deal with school choice. These include a multitude of options including charter schools, vouchers and related options.

As it relates to private school choice specifically, however, according to the Education Commission of the States 50-state database, 39 bills in 23 states were passed and enacted in 2024 and one bill was vetoed. Importantly, there are still 51 private education choice focused bills still pending across the country including in states that don't currently have those programs in place.

Of the bills introduced, there were also 130 bills that failed *sine die*. Meaning, that the legislature adjourned for the session without setting a future meeting date. These are bills that are often reintroduced in subsequent legislative sessions and public school advocates should monitor their respective states closely to see what bills re-emerge when their state legislatures reconvene.

Issues to Watch

As private school choice continues to expand, there are practical and legal implications and the issues outlined below are situations to be monitored as they can find their way into other states as well:

- **Colorado Has Private School Choice on the Ballot.** Colorado voters will [decide whether to enshrine in the state constitution](#) that all students “have a right to school choice.” If “yes” prevails, examples of school choice mentioned in the new addition to the constitution would include “neighborhood schools, charter schools, private schools, home schools, open-enrollment options, and future innovations in education.” The initiative needs support from 55 percent of voters to pass. As outlined above, Colorado does not currently have any private school choice programs in place.
- **Ohio Funding Private School Facilities to Accommodate Growing Numbers.** Ohio offers residents vouchers to attend private religious schools, a program it launched in 1997. But this summer, the state made history by offering grants directly to religious schools for renovating and constructing buildings to welcome even more students. Ohio first offered limited vouchers 27 years ago to students exclusively in Cleveland Municipal School District so they could find alternatives to some of that city's poorly funded and underperforming public schools. But in

2023, Ohio made its voucher program “universal,” giving tuition vouchers to any family that makes up to 450% of the poverty line (\$150,000 for a family of four). Last year, the voucher program educated 20,142 students at a cost of \$993.7 million. That’s up from the \$383.7 million Ohio spent on private religious education the year before, according to the [Dayton Daily News](#). Most of these funds went to families with students already enrolled in private schools, many of whom have never entered a public school building. Now the Republican-dominated legislature is arguing that private schools need facility support to accommodate the growth, a benefit not available to all public school entities including educational service agencies.

- **Kentucky Voters to Weight in on Private School Choice.** Voters will decide whether to [amend the state constitution](#) to explicitly allow the state to fund education options outside the public school system. The initiative needs a simple majority of votes in favor to pass.
- **Nebraskans Can Vote to Eliminate Private School Choice.** Voters will decide whether to [retain or repeal the state’s newly passed private school choice program](#), which allocates \$10 million a year for parents to spend on a wide range of private educational expenses. A simple majority will determine the existing law’s fate. This statewide initiative is the only one on any state ballot this fall that could, depending on the outcome, immediately eliminate an existing private school choice program.

Resources

For more information on enacted or pending legislation and issues coming from the states, check out the following resources:

- **Education Commission of the States Policy Watch List:** <https://www.ecs.org/state-education-policy-watch-list/>
- **Education Week Vouchers Explained:** <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/private-school-choice-in-the-2024-election-explained/2024/09>
- **National Conference of State Legislatures Searchable Database:** <https://www.ncsl.org/education/pre-k-12-education-legislation-database>

STATE BUDGET & FINANCE MONITORING

AESA monitors state level budget and finance news impacting preschool and primary and secondary education. These curated articles 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 2024 follows below.

[In an unprecedented move, Ohio is funding construction of private religious schools](#)

Route Fifty-Five

[North Carolina's Governor Vetoes Private School Vouchers and Immigration Enforcement Orders](#)

AP via U.S. News & World Report

[Advocates push priorities on overhaul of NY school aid formula](#)

Syracuse.com

[Education surplus reignites debate over school vouchers in Arizona](#)

KTVK/KPHO

[With COVID-19 relief gone, teachers are losing their jobs. It's a blow to diversity](#)

USA Today

[Unraveling impact of school choice program on education in Indiana](#)

Indy Star

[School vouchers were supposed to save taxpayer money. They blew a hole in Arizona's budget](#)

Dallas News

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:

[Biden-Harris Administration Announces New Centers to Advance Educational Opportunity, Foster Academic Achievement and Raise the Bar for Students](#)

ED.GOV

[Students from rural schools participate in DHR Health learning sessions](#)

KVEO-TV

[Bridging needs: Marshalltown schools' innovative approach to special education services for students with mental health conditions](#)

Times Republican

[New law bumps up teacher pay, but some Iowa Districts say they're still short on subs](#)

CBS2 Iowa

[An after-school program in Southwest Michigan is shining a 'light' on the mental health of students](#)

The 'Gander

[SNAPSHOT: Students get wired for success at Capital Region BOCES](#)

The Record

[Disability group's class-action suit says Ohio violated 500 local kids' rights](#)

Dayton Daily News

[Pa. awards learning grants](#)

Times News Online

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 reports from *The Pew Charitable Trust* and *The National Council on Teacher Quality*.

[How a Pandemic-Era Surge in Tax Collections Drove a Revenue Wave—and What It Means for Future State Budgets](#)

Pew Charitable Trust

Back-to-back years of historic growth in fiscal 2021 and 2022 brought state tax revenue to record highs and—more significantly—pushed collections well above their pre-pandemic trajectory. This surge, combined with unprecedented federal assistance, was central to a brief but extraordinary chapter in state finances defined by widespread budget surpluses and record growth in reserve levels. In response, state leaders jumped at the opportunity to deploy their windfalls for long-deferred priorities, such as phased-in tax cuts, taxpayer rebates, increased spending on children and families, and higher worker wages. This new report by Pew Charitable Trust examines these trends and what the impact of these policy decisions may be for state budgets, including K-12 education, as federal stimulus funds end and state economies begin to cool. Read more [here](#).

[Reimagine the Teacher Role](#)

National Council on Teacher Quality

This report from the National Council on Teacher Quality seeks to spark a conversation about how to advance state policies that can support teachers and evolve the teaching profession. It includes state profiles where readers can learn more about the policies in their respective state that help or hinder a district's ability to reimagine the teaching role and get recommendations for decision-makers looking to seed innovation.

Often used interchangeably with terms like “strategic staffing” or “strategic school staffing,” reimagining the teaching role involves disrupting traditional approaches to teaching in favor of innovative solutions like teacher teams to manage the instruction of larger classrooms, flexible scheduling, and new roles for teachers that allow them to advance in their careers while staying in the classroom, making the profession more sustainable—and ultimately leading to improved student outcomes. Read more [here](#).

SEPTEMBER 2024 MONTHLY ADVOCACY TIP

In the data-driven world of K-12 education, where test scores and statistics often dominate policy discussions, the power of personal stories can sometimes be overlooked. Yet, it is these narratives that can serve as a crucial bridge between cold, hard facts and the human experiences they represent.

As ESAs advocate for better educational policies and practices at statehouses across the country, it is essential to recognize that while data provides the backbone of our arguments, personal stories give them heart and soul. They are the connective tissue. By weaving together compelling personal stories

with statistics, ESAs and their networks can create an advocacy approach that resonates with both policymakers and the public at-large.

The combination of storytelling and data not only humanizes complex education policy and implementation issues but also provides context to the numbers, making advocacy efforts more relatable, memorable, and ultimately, more effective. In this month's State Examiner Advocacy Tip, we'll explore how personal stories can amplify data-driven arguments and inspire meaningful change in K-12 education.

The Power of Personal Stories

Educational service agency (ESA) leaders, staff, and governing board members play a crucial role in shaping educational policies and practices. As we navigate the complex and often contentious landscape of education reform and funding, one of our most powerful tools often goes underutilized: personal stories. ESAs have powerful stories to tell. This is particularly true because ESAs often work with the most complex students with the most complex needs. And ESAs uniquely sit at the intersection of *policy development and deployment* (as extensions of state education agencies) and *implementation and impact evaluation* (as direct providers to districts, schools and students).

Why Stories Matter

Personal narratives have the unique ability to humanize complex policy and funding issues and create emotional connections with legislators and the public at-large. By sharing real-life experiences, we can transform abstract concepts into relatable, impactful accounts that resonate with key state, regional and local decision-makers and other education stakeholders alike.

Crafting Compelling Stories

When sharing ESA stories, consider the following elements:

- **Authenticity:** Focus on genuine experiences that highlight the impact of ESAs on students, educators, and communities.
- **Specificity:** Include concrete details that bring your story to life and make it memorable.
- **Emotion:** Don't shy away from expressing the feelings associated with your experiences – both challenges and triumphs.
- **Connection:** Clearly link your story to the policy or issue at hand, demonstrating real-world implications.
- **Impact:** Share the progress that was made with tangible evidence of impact.

Engaging Legislators and the Public

Personal stories can be powerful tools in various advocacy settings:

- **Legislative meetings:** Begin your conversations with a brief, impactful anecdote that illustrates your point.
- **Public hearings:** Use personal testimonies to provide context and urgency to policy discussions.
- **Media outreach:** Offer compelling stories to journalists to help them humanize their reporting on education issues.
- **Digital:** leverage the power of social media or your organization's website with short video vignettes or blog posts.

Example

The examples below illustrate the difference between the two approaches and how one can enhance their arguments by using personal stories:

Formal Argument: The “ABC” Educational Service Agency provides cost-effective, quality preschool services to students with disabilities by sharing costs across multiple smaller districts that might not otherwise be able to provide services on their own. Last year, the ESA provided preschool services at a cost of 15% less than the client districts providing it themselves or outsourcing to a third-party, private provider.

Personal Story: At 2 years old, Jane was nonresponsive to us saying her name, did not show any signs of verbal communication, and had little interest in any of the toys put in front of her. She was ultimately diagnosed with autism. As parents, we were unclear of how to navigate the system and concerned about what this meant for her future. Because of the early intervention services through the “ABC” ESA’s “Achieve” program, Jane will be attending kindergarten this year without the assistance of a full-time aide, and we feel positive about her future.

The formal argument is supported by research (facts and figures) whereas the personal story humanizes and “puts a face” to the issue; both are important.

Call to Action

ESA members are encouraged to reflect on their experiences and consider how their stories can contribute to their advocacy efforts. Whether it's a student whose life was changed by an ESA program, an educator who found innovative solutions through ESA resources, or a community that thrived due to ESA support – your story matters. Tell it.

Remember, behind every policy and budget decision are real people with real needs. By sharing ESA stories, we give voice to those we serve and strengthen the case for continued support and investment in ESA programs and services. Harness the power of personal narratives to drive meaningful change in education. Your ESA story could be the key to unlocking hearts, minds, and resources for the benefit of students across your region and state.

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

STAY CONNECTED

