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Governors' Top Education Issues: 2015 State of the State addresses

By Stephanie Aragon and Julie Rowland

Education Commission of the States strives to keep its constituency apprised of education policy trends across the states. To provide a comprehensive overview of educational priorities outlined by governors, ECS summarized the education proposals and accomplishments detailed in every 2015 State of the State address delivered to date. Each state's full summary is available on [ECS' website](#). This report highlights the trends emerging from the addresses.

To date, governors in 37 states have presented their 2015 state of the state addresses. Although new investments in business, technology and infrastructure received considerable attention, improving education from preschool to college was, without a doubt, a top priority. Governors proposed an assortment of strategies to enhance education and ultimately boost the economic and social growth of their citizens.

“We know the greatest untapped asset in the state is the potential of a 3- and 4-year-old. ... Early learning is the best investment we can make in our future.”

*Washington Gov. Jay Inslee
2015 State of the State address*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Tying education deliverables to workplace needs remains a top economic development priority in many states.

Governors are intent on making college more affordable and accessible for underserved groups, including undocumented students.

Safe, well-funded early childcare and education was a common theme in State of the State addresses.



This ECS Education Trends report highlights the top six education priorities for governors in 2015:

- ◆ **Early Learning:** Widely considered crucial for long-term student success, early learning programs were on the minds of at least 11 governors.
- ◆ **School Finance:** As many states continue to bounce back from the recession, investing in K-12 education was addressed by 17 governors.
- ◆ **School Choice:** Choice policies, designed to increase education options for students and their families, were mentioned in at least eight of the governors’ addresses.
- ◆ **Teaching Quality:** A variety of approaches for ensuring that high-quality teachers are recruited and retained in every classroom, including raising teacher compensation and improving evaluation systems, were highlighted in 11 governors’ addresses.
- ◆ **Workforce Development/Career and Technical Education:** Training a qualified, skilled workforce that meets the needs of today’s employers was a top priority in at least 11 states.
- ◆ **Postsecondary Funding, Affordability and Access:** To help make college a reality for more students, proposals related to postsecondary funding, affordability and access were outlined by at least 15 governors.

Early Learning

Early learning increasingly finds itself at the center of state strategies to reduce the ever-increasing achievement gap and ensure long-term student success. In the past year alone, four states made first-time investments in pre-K programs for their 3- and 4-year-olds, and total state funding for pre-K increased by 12 percent nationwide. Today, only six states do not provide funding for preschool. President Obama proposed programs that promote high-quality childcare and universal preschool for all children in his 2015-16 budget.

Eleven governors promised funding to develop or expand preschool and kindergarten opportunities, especially for low-income families. Governors show particular interest in expanding access to full-day kindergarten and improving the overall quality of early learning programs.

“We know the greatest untapped asset in the state is the potential of a 3- and 4-year-old. The latest neuroscience research at the University of Washington shows that, at this age, children’s minds have a tremendous capacity for learning. Early learning is the best investment we can make in our future.”

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee

Highlights: Early Learning

<p>Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear</p>	<p>Proposed legislation to implement the goals of the All-STARs plan (Accelerating Learning Statewide Through an Advanced Rating System) that would address safety, continuing education for staff members, nutrition and age-appropriate curriculum in early learning programs.</p>
<p>Montana Gov. Steve Bullock</p>	<p>Committed to implement Early Edge, a program that offers state block grants to all communities to create or expand high-quality pre-K programs. Locally elected school districts can build a new program, partner with existing providers, or elect not to participate.</p>
<p>Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval</p>	<p>Proposed to increase preschool attendance and expand full-day kindergarten to every elementary school in the state.</p>

<p>Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe</p>	<p>Announced that communities that have exceeded their pre-K budgets will receive leftover funds not used in other divisions so they can offer more children early education opportunities. Committed to increase the number of day care facilities across the state that are licensed and properly inspected by state and local governments.</p>
<p>Washington Gov. Jay Inslee</p>	<p>Proposed to make the largest-ever state investment in early learning, which would give 6,000 more low-income children the opportunity to attend high-quality preschools. Committed to fully fund class-size reductions in kindergarten through third grade and to provide all-day kindergarten across the state.</p>

School Finance

As many states strive to bring K-12 funding up to pre-recession levels, increasing school funding was a popular pledge among governors. School construction and expansion, as well as teacher compensation, were top areas identified for investments. Several governors also emphasized the importance of local control over spending. At least two governors promised that school funding would not be cut.

With school finance systems the subject of a number of lawsuits in states such as Texas, Kansas, New York, Washington and South Carolina, at least four state leaders are focused on replacing or simplifying their state’s funding formula.

“We all know that education is the key that opens the door to success. It has the power to lift a family out of poverty and despair. It has the power to turn dreams into reality. And it has the potential to do so much more for our own children. But before education can transform them, we must transform our school system.”

Hawaii Gov. David Ige

Highlights: School Finance – Increase or maintain current funding

<p>California Gov. Jerry Brown</p>	<p>Called for an increase of \$65.7 billion for schools, a 39 percent increase in four years.</p>
<p>Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper</p>	<p>Proposed a \$200 million investment from the State Education Fund intended as a one-time increase for school districts to allocate as determined by the local boards.</p>
<p>Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal</p>	<p>Asked a subset of the Education Reform Commission to examine the most appropriate ways to modernize Georgia’s quality basic education funding formula. Proposed to create a formula driven by student need that provides local school and district leaders with real control and flexibility that will go into effect as early as the 2016-17 school year.</p>
<p>Hawaii Gov. David Ige</p>	<p>Requested an increase for the funding formula and asked that principals decide how to spend the funding increase.</p>

Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback	Called for the creation of a new school finance formula that focuses on improving student achievement and school accountability. Encouraged the legislature to repeal the existing school finance formula and appropriate money directly to districts.
North Dakota Gov. Jack Dalrymple	Committed to add \$300 million to the school construction revolving loan program and to address the needs of schools experiencing rapid growth by expanding a grant program that provides growth management grants to schools.
Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin	Proposed to provide more data on school spending, limit unfunded mandates and phase out or eliminate contradictory incentives built into the school funding formula, such as the small school grants and the phantom student provision.

School Choice

School choice programs are designed to increase education options for all students and their families. The variety of programs offer parents an opportunity to select their child's school based on considerations other than geographic proximity. Magnet, charter and home schools compete with traditional public schools for student enrollment, while vouchers, open enrollment policies, and tax credits and deductions encourage parents to look outside their neighborhood for the school that best fits their child's needs. Choice policies were mentioned in at least eight of the governors' addresses.

"We will ensure every child – regardless of background or birthright – has access to a quality education. We will continue to empower families to make the choice that is right for their sons and daughters."

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker

Highlights: School Choice

Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey	Proposed making open enrollment and parental choice a reality. Introduced plans to create the Arizona Public School Achievement District so that quality schools that are at capacity or have waiting lists can apply for use of empty schools and empty classrooms.
Indiana Gov. Mike Pence	Proposed adjusting funding to expand charter schools. Also recommended raising the caps on the amount of money choice schools receive per student and on the choice scholarship tax credit program.
New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie	Asked the legislature to pass the Opportunity Scholarship Act, a tax credit-funded program designed to offer children in the state's lowest-performing districts scholarships to attend the school of their choice.
New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo	Proposed expanding charter schools. Recommended adding another 100 slots to the charter cap, allowing the cap to be statewide and eliminating any artificial limits on where charter schools can open. Also proposed giving students in failing schools a preference in the charter school lottery.
Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker	Asked the legislature to pass a law ensuring objective information about every school receiving state funds is provided to parents so that they can make informed choices about their students' schooling.

Teaching Quality

Teachers are the most important school-based factor in student success, and efforts to ensure high-quality teachers in every classroom continue to be on the top of governors’ priority lists.

Governors emphasized improving teacher recruitment, effectiveness and compensation. While several governors highlighted plans to inspire teachers to join and remain in underserved districts and courses, others seek to increase teachers’ salaries and opportunities for teacher leadership roles.

“The status quo is comfortable – each teacher paid the same, every evaluation identical and the misguided belief that all teachers should be simply labeled as meeting competency. Those are comfortable notions. But, they do not center on the one question we should be asking above all others when it comes to education: Are our kids learning?”

New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez

Highlights: Teaching Quality

Delaware Gov. Jack Markell	Proposed creating a compensation program to raise teachers’ salaries and allow them to take on leadership responsibilities.
Indiana Gov. Mike Pence	Recommended providing \$63 million in performance bonuses to teachers.
New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez	Called for improvements to the teaching evaluation program. Recommended raising teacher salaries by \$2,000 per year and providing teachers with preloaded \$100 debit cards to purchase classroom supplies. Also proposed providing two-year stipends to bilingual, special education, math and science teachers willing to teach in rural districts, and allowing adjunct teachers, such as researchers and scientists, to teach difficult subjects like chemistry or calculus. Recommended creating a mentorship program to pair teachers in struggling schools with teachers in schools doing well.
New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo	Proposed significant overhauls to teacher policies, including changes to teacher evaluations that would eliminate the use of local exams and base 50 percent of the teacher evaluation on state exams while the other 50 percent of evaluations would be limited to independent classroom observations. Teachers may not be rated effective or highly effective unless they are rated effective both in the test and the observation categories. Related to effectiveness ratings, the governor proposed to pay any teacher who gets a highly effective rating a \$20,000 bonus and to grant tenure only when a teacher achieves five consecutive years of effective ratings.
South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley	Proposed a new initiative that will help rural schools get, and keep, highly qualified teachers. Initiative includes: undergraduate and graduate tuition assistance, student loan repayment and salary advances for teachers who teach in rural districts.
Washington Gov. Jay Inslee	Committed to give teachers their first cost-of-living allowance since 2008.
West Virginia Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin	Proposed legislation to expand opportunities for skilled workers who have a passion for teaching but may not have a teaching background.

Workforce Development / Career and Technical Education

The success of a state’s economy corresponds to the availability of a skilled workforce. Unfortunately, employers in many states are having a difficult time filling vacant positions with trained and knowledgeable workers. To combat this problem, many state leaders have acknowledged the importance of career and technical education programs and workforce development initiatives. Training a qualified, skilled workforce that meets the needs of employers was a top priority in at least 11 states.

“Parents . . . understand the importance of providing their children the opportunity to move beyond high school, but struggle to afford it. It matters to our employers, who need qualified applicants to fill many open jobs. It matters to all of us because the future success of these students means the future success of our entire state.”

Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin

Highlights: Workforce Development / Career and Technical Education

<p>Delaware Gov. Jack Markell</p>	<p>Introduced an initiative called Pathways to Prosperity, offering high school students specialized training and the ability to graduate with industry-recognized certificates and college credits in the IT, hospitality, manufacturing, financial services and healthcare industries.</p>
<p>Idaho Gov. C.L. “Butch” Otter</p>	<p>Asked the legislature to approve \$5 million for Industry Sector Grants to build partnerships between industry and the education system.</p>
<p>Indiana Gov. Mike Pence</p>	<p>Proposed devoting \$20 million a year to improve and create more career and vocational programs in high schools.</p>
<p>Montana Gov. Steve Bullock</p>	<p>Committed to continue training women on college campuses and at job service centers on how to prepare for interviews, negotiate for pay and sell their strengths to prospective employers.</p>
<p>Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts</p>	<p>Proposed funding a pilot program – \$250,000 each year – to form a public-private partnership to create a career and vocational training program.</p>
<p>New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo</p>	<p>Proposed linking community colleges with the employers in their regions. Also recommended identifying specific jobs that are available and then educating and training individuals for those jobs.</p>
<p>South Dakota Gov. Dennis Daugaard</p>	<p>Committed to providing scholarships to students entering high-need workforce programs at in-state technical institutes provided that students work in South Dakota for three years. The program is estimated to provide about 300 scholarships from 2015-20 and about 50 per year after 2020.</p>
<p>Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin</p>	<p>Planned to partner with businesses and Vermont Tech to create a free associate degree in Engineering Technology, without additional cost to the Education Fund.</p>

Postsecondary Funding, Affordability and Access

Increasing tuition rates at our nation’s postsecondary institutions have placed college out of reach for many students. Research shows that students who do not pursue education beyond high school face limited career opportunities. Making college accessible and affordable to all students, as well as ensuring that state institutions are properly funded, remains a top education priority in many states. At least 15 governors outlined proposals related to postsecondary funding, affordability and access.

“We must look at our community college and university balance sheets to make sure we’re making investments in the programs that will prepare our students for the global economy and close North Carolina’s skills gap.”

North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory

Highlights: Postsecondary Funding

<p>Idaho Gov. C.L. “Butch” Otter</p>	<p>Recommended providing more pronounced, targeted and sustainable investments in such programs as the computer science initiative at Boise State University, an employee readiness initiative at the University of Idaho, career path internships at Idaho State University and the Complete College Idaho program.</p>
<p>Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon</p>	<p>Proposed investing an additional \$25 million for colleges and universities, based on how well they meet strong performance standards. Planned to continue providing state-of-the-art facilities that will prepare students for high-tech jobs, and to fund renovations at Mizzou’s College of Engineering to add classroom and lab space.</p>
<p>Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe</p>	<p>Proposed refusing any additional cuts to higher education.</p>
<p>Wyoming Gov. Matthew Mead</p>	<p>Requested funding for the University of Wyoming to cover or improve the High Altitude Sports Performance Training Center, unconventional oil and gas reservoirs research, an entrepreneurship initiative, science initiative, literacy program and athletic competitiveness.</p>

Highlights: Postsecondary Affordability

<p>Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper</p>	<p>Asked the legislature to allocate an additional \$30 million to the new Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative to support a network of state-matched scholarship funds across the state. Also proposed reducing the cost of higher education to help meet the goal that 55 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds hold a post-high school credential by 2020. Asked to cap undergraduate tuition growth at no more than 6 percent.</p>
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Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad	Planned to freeze tuition for the third year in a row. Also, recommended providing affordable world-class education at Regents universities by offering select degrees for \$10,000 and providing more assistance to Iowa students with financial needs attending independent colleges and universities. Proposed legislation creating the Iowa Student Debt Reorganization Tax Credit, which allows individuals to volunteer for worthy causes in exchange for contributions made toward their student debt.
Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts	Recommended allocating \$120,000 per year for a total of more than \$488,000 of tuition assistance for those who serve in the Nebraska National Guard.
New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo	Proposed paying the debt of new college graduates for the first two years following graduation.
Washington Gov. Jay Inslee	Proposed freezing tuition and boosting financial aid so that 17,000 more students can get scholarships.

Highlights: Postsecondary Access

Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter	Challenged local leaders to establish community colleges in the underserved communities of Idaho where no broad-based community college programs currently exist.
New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo	Asked the legislature to pass the DREAM Act for \$27 million to extend tuition benefits to undocumented youth.
Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe	Asked the legislature to pass the Virginia DREAM Act to extend tuition benefits to undocumented youth.

Authors

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