

Governors' Top Education Priorities in 2020 State of the State Addresses

Bryan Kelley and Erin Whinnery



In laying out policy priorities in their 2020 State of the State addresses, governors recognized the role the public education system plays in supporting strong economies. Often citing the need to align education with the 21st century’s knowledge economy, governors agreed that a high-quality education is the key to both an individual’s and the state’s success. **Alabama** Gov. Kay Ivey echoed the sentiments of many governors when she said, “For us to prepare today’s students for tomorrow’s opportunities, it is time we get serious.”



We are committed to go the distance because we know our children’s future is at risk. Education is the foundation of our economy and our quality of life. Everything, including our future, begins with how well we educate our children. And that is significantly affected by the kind of beginnings we provide for them. We cannot let them down.

Gov. David Ige
 HAWAII

Each year, Education Commission of the States tracks, analyzes and identifies trends in education policy accomplishments and proposals featured in governors’ State of the State addresses. To date, 43 governors have delivered their 2020 address. The top education priorities across the states and territories span the entire education spectrum, pre-K through the workforce.

Governors in at least* **34 states** emphasized the importance of **K-12 CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION** (CTE) and **WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS**.

Governors in at least **30 states** mentioned **K-12 SCHOOL FINANCE**, including **NEW INVESTMENTS** for certain **STUDENT POPULATIONS**.

At least **25 governors** highlighted **POSTSECONDARY AFFORDABILITY** as a top priority for their state.

At least **25 governors** recognized the value of investing in **TEACHERS** and addressed policy relevant to **TEACHER COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS**.

At least **19 governors** called attention to investments in **EARLY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES** for children in their states.

Governors in at least **18 states** highlighted the connections between **STUDENT HEALTH** and student performance.



[Click here](#) for complete summaries of education policy priorities outlined in each governor’s State of the State address.

*The counts listed throughout this resource reflect Education Commission of the States’ best efforts to analyze governors’ remarks.

CTE and Workforce Development

Workforce development efforts, ranging from K-12 CTE programs to workforce training centers, were a priority for many governors in 2020. This year, at least 34 governors included workforce development in their State of the State address. Many emphasized the role

of apprenticeship programs and work-based learning experiences in preparing individuals for the workforce, with some governors praising recent efforts and others announcing the launch of new investments and programs. Several governors called attention to the unique roles played by community colleges and workforce training centers in both preparing students and meeting employer needs.



Our goal is nothing short of meaningful career training for anyone who wants it.

Gov. Jay Inslee
WASHINGTON

Idaho

Gov. Brad Little

Proposed ongoing funding for the [Idaho Jobs Corps](#) community college program to connect 16- to 24-year-olds to in-demand jobs.

Illinois

Gov. J.B. Pritzker

Praised investments in the [Illinois Works](#) program to recruit construction apprentices in a way that ensured the jobs were inclusive and attracted a diverse workforce.

Indiana

Gov. Eric Holcomb

Highlighted that more than 23,000 people have enrolled in the [Workforce Ready Programs](#) in the past 3 years, with 10,000 of them having completed a certificate program as of the start of this year.

Maine

Gov. Janet Mills

Proposed increased funding for equipment upgrades that will help to train nearly 8,000 CTE students to address Maine's workforce shortage.

Mississippi

Gov. Tate Reeves

Proposed a \$100 million investment in workforce development, which will include training students in apprenticeships, expanding community college grants and assisting current workers.

New Jersey

Gov. Phil Murphy

Proposed Jobs NJ, a plan to align the education system with the needs of the workforce, provide ongoing job training and close equity gaps that serve as a barrier to job training and skills development.

To learn more about state policy actions in this area, visit our [Workforce Development Key Issue](#) page.

K-12 Finance

At least 30 governors spoke about K-12 school finance in their State of the State address. They celebrated increases in available funding or identified challenges to equitable funding. Many governors highlighted new investments for certain student populations (e.g., students designated as low income or with special education needs) and capital construction projects. Others spoke to tensions around increased local property taxes to fund K-12 education. Additionally, at least five governors specifically mentioned recent reviews of — or promised to soon review — the school funding formula.



Budgets serve as roadmaps for the future — which is why we made historic investments into our education system.

Gov. Chris Sununu
NEW HAMPSHIRE

Arizona

Gov. Doug Ducey

Highlighted results-based funding and proposed expanding it to continue to recognize the achievements and needs of schools designated as high-poverty.

Kansas

Gov. Laura Kelly

Highlighted **legislation** to end the legal battle over school finance and called it a critical first step in reevaluating every corner of the state's education ecosystem.

Oklahoma

Gov. Kevin Stitt

Proposed reviewing the **school funding formula** and allowing voters to unlock more local dollars.

Pennsylvania

Gov. Tom Wolf

Proposed \$435 million in new investments in public education, including a \$100 million increase in the **fair funding formula**, an additional \$25 million increase for special education and a \$30 million increase for high-quality early childhood education.

Utah

Gov. Gary Herbert

Discussed the need for tax modernization to have sustainable funding for public education.

Wisconsin

Gov. Tony Evers

Invested more than \$500 million in K-12 education, including the state's first special education increase in 10 years, and highlighted his use of **veto authority** to add almost \$100 million more in per-pupil aid to the state budget.

To learn more about state policy actions in this area, visit our [School Funding Key Issue](#) page.

Postsecondary Affordability

Many governors recognized that well-paying careers increasingly require some form of education after high school. At least 25 governors spoke to the importance of affordable postsecondary opportunities in their 2020 State of the State address. Generally, such proposals take one of two approaches: addressing the cost of college tuition or increasing access to financial aid resources. Additionally, at least nine governors either recognized current efforts or proposed new programs to make college tuition-free for qualifying students.

“And so the model of where we think about a four-year-model, on-campus thing is being challenged. ... The economics are shifting. As costs increase, students seek more affordable options.”

Gov. Doug Burgum
NORTH DAKOTA

Connecticut
Gov. Ned Lamont

Highlighted a new initiative from the [University of Connecticut](#) whereby students of families earning less than \$50,000 will receive free tuition and community colleges will be debt-free for recent high school graduates.

Idaho
Gov. Brad Little

Commended [tuition freezes](#) for resident undergraduate students in 2020 as part of strategic efforts to make college more accessible to Idahoans.

Iowa
Gov. Kim Reynolds

Proposed a \$2.8 million increase in funding for the [Last Dollar Scholarship program](#).

Louisiana
Gov. John Bel Edwards

Committed to funding the TOPS and Go Grants scholarships at the highest level ever and proposed more than \$30 million in his budget to do so.

Michigan
Gov. Gretchen Whitmer

Proposed passing Michigan Reconnect legislation, which would provide tuition-free skills training and degree programs for adult learners.

Virginia
Gov. Ralph Northam

Proposed an additional \$1,000 stipend for transportation, child care or other nontuition postsecondary costs for Pell Grant recipients who wish to enter a high-demand field and commit to community service.

To learn more about state policy actions in this area, visit our [Postsecondary Affordability Key Issue](#) page.

Teacher Compensation and Benefits

Many governors acknowledged the hard work and contributions of teachers. At least 25 governors discussed teacher compensation and recruitment/retention efforts in their 2020 State of the State address. Although several governors acknowledged they face teacher shortages and high turnover rates, many praised recent increases in teacher pay or commitment to future pay increases as ways to address these two challenges. Others specifically addressed increases in minimum salaries for teachers. A few governors highlighted or proposed loan forgiveness or scholarship programs as a potential way to recruit and retain their teacher workforce.

“These [teacher salary increases] are critical investments. They will help attract the best and the brightest young people into the profession and keep our highly successful and experienced teachers where they are needed the most: in the classroom.”

Gov. Henry McMaster
SOUTH CAROLINA

Alaska

Gov. Mike Dunleavy

Directed the state commissioner of education to assemble a working group made up of teachers, administrators and others to review the root causes of teacher retention and recruitment issues — including working conditions and benefits — in order to develop a plan to address the issue.

Delaware

Gov. John Carney

Praised the enactment of a [parental leave policy](#) for educators, which enables parents to spend 12 weeks at home with their newborn babies.

Florida

Gov. Ron DeSantis

Proposed a budget that places an emphasis on bonuses for teachers and principals in Title I schools, with bonuses of up to \$7,500 and \$10,000, respectively.

Georgia

Gov. Brian Kemp

Proposed including a \$2,000 pay raise for all public school educators in the budget, with the goal of enhancing teacher recruitment and retention and improving educational outcomes.

Kentucky

Gov. Andy Beshear

Emphasized that a pension should be treated as a promise, recognized the service of educators and committed to fully funding teacher pension obligations in the budget.

Maine

Gov. Janet Mills

Called for increased funding for the [Educators for Maine Loan Forgiveness program](#) to incentivize teachers to work in underserved areas.

To learn more about state policy actions in this area, visit our [Teaching Key Issue](#) page.

Early Learning

This year, many governors emphasized the importance of early learning opportunities for children in their states. At least 19 governors addressed early learning in their 2020 State of the State address. Several governors praised recent investments in, and expansions of, early learning. Additionally, at least 13 governors proposed expansions of preschool, pre-K or kindergarten access, either universally or for targeted populations. Several governors highlighted the importance of early childhood education for achievements and outcomes later in life, including career readiness.

Early childhood education isn't just about giving our kids a great start in life. Every dollar invested in high-quality preschool produces a \$7 return on investment due to higher earnings, lower special education needs, greater tax revenues, less dependency on public assistance and lower crime rates.

Gov. Jared Polis
COLORADO

Delaware

Gov. John Carney

Praised the **First Chance Initiative**, which promotes learning readiness through literacy, health and parent-child engagement programs in partnership with food banks, libraries and other nonprofits.

Hawai'i

Gov. David Ige

Declared that by the end of this decade, every 3- and 4-year-old in Hawai'i should have the opportunity to attend child care or a preschool program.

Iowa

Gov. Kim Reynolds

Called for the expansion of **Early Childhood Tax Credits** in an effort to make child care more affordable.

Missouri

Gov. Mike Parson

Discussed a \$33.5 million federal preschool development grant aimed at creating a more effective, high-quality early learning system.

Rhode Island

Gov. Gina Raimondo

Proposed an increase of more than 50% in the number of high-quality public pre-K classrooms throughout the state.

South Carolina

Gov. Henry McMaster

Called for the expansion of the **full-day, 4-year-old kindergarten program** to serve all children from families with lower incomes.

To learn more about state policy actions in this area, visit our [Early Childhood Education Key Issue](#) page.

Student Health

At least 18 governors remarked on the need to address students' mental and physical health, as well as the connections between health and student outcomes. Proposed investments in student health include increasing access to school-based, mental- or behavioral-health resources and expanding school meal programs. Several governors expressed concerns about environmental issues and risky student behavior, such as lead in schools and youth vaping.



We know that environmental factors directly affect student performance. And we know how to fix this problem.

Gov. Tom Wolf
PENNSYLVANIA



California

Gov. Gavin Newsom

Highlighted a [bipartisan, statewide school bond](#) measure that, if approved by voters, may mean more school buildings free of lead and toxic mold.



Massachusetts

Gov. Charlie Baker

Praised the development of a [legal framework](#) to regulate and respond to vaping by teens.



New York

Gov. Andrew Cuomo

Proposed increasing the number of community schools and after-school services as part of an increase in wraparound health services.



Tennessee

Gov. Bill Lee

Voiced his intention to expand the [school-based behavioral health liaison program](#) to all 95 counties, up from 36, to help teachers and schools support students' mental health.



West Virginia

Gov. Jim Justice

Proposed an additional \$2 million for the [state department of education's backpack program](#), which provides students experiencing food insecurity with weekend meals.



Wisconsin

Gov. Tony Evers

Praised the [Farm to School program](#) and announced a new Farm to Fork program to expand intrastate produce commerce to universities and technical colleges.

To learn more about state policy actions in this area, visit our [School Climate Key Issue](#) page.



About the Authors

Bryan Kelley



As a policy researcher, Bryan works on tracking legislation, answering information requests and contributing to other policy team projects. Prior to joining Education Commission of the States, he worked in public policy research at the National Conference of State Legislatures in Denver and AcademyHealth in Washington, D.C.; he also earned a master's degree from the University of Manchester and a bachelor's degree from Colorado College. When Bryan is not busy researching education policy, he can be found hiking around Colorado, trying a new cafe or brewery, or planning his next vacation destination with his wife. Contact Bryan at bkelly@ecs.org or **303.299.3696**.

Erin Whinnery



As a project manager, Erin supports the foundational research services at Education Commission of the States and has a particular interest in the areas of postsecondary access and success. Before joining the organization, Erin earned her master's degree in higher education administration from the University of Denver and a bachelor's degree in English from Boston College. On weekends, Erin is an amateur crafter and quilter. Contact Erin at ewhinnery@ecs.org or **303.299.3654**.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank Lexi Anderson, Emily Brixey, Ben Erwin, Alyssa Evans, Cassidy Francies, Tiffany McDole, Eric Syverson — all of Education Commission of the States — for their contributions to this resource.

About NGA



Founded in 1908, the National Governors Association is the voice of the nation's governors and one of the most respected public policy organizations in the country. The association's members are the governors of the 55 states, territories and commonwealths. Members come to the association from across the political spectrum, but NGA itself is boldly nonpartisan.