



The Consortium of State School Boards Associations Weekly Education Report

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The COSSBA Education Report, a weekly publication, provides an executive summary of public policy issues affecting American K-12 education and employment. **Please use the bookmarks below to navigate to your area of interest:**

1. News, Publications, & Updates on COSSBA Policy Priorities

• **Funding**

- **ED Awards \$256M in Innovation, Research Literacy Grants**: The Department of Education last Monday announced \$256 million in new Education Innovation and Research (EIR) grants to improve literacy nationwide, marking the first awards aligned with Secretary Linda McMahon's priorities of strengthening evidence-based literacy instruction.

2. Budget and Appropriations Wrap-up

• **Impact on State School Board Associations**

3. In Brief – Last Week in Washington

- **States, Governors are Key Gatekeepers in Workforce Pell Expansion**: Last week, the U.S. Department of Education concluded the first round of negotiated rulemaking to develop the regulatory framework for a significant expansion of the Pell Grant program through Workforce Pell.
- **‘1776 Award’ To Mark Nation’s 250th**: The Department of Education is marking the nation's 250th anniversary by launching the Presidential 1776 Award, a nationwide scholarship contest to recognize high school students with exceptional knowledge of the American founding and its principles.
- **“History Rocks” Tour Kicks-Off Ahead of America’s 250th Birthday**: This week, the Department of Education launched its "History Rocks" tour, a cross-

country initiative ahead of America's 250th anniversary aimed at celebrating and revitalizing the teaching of history and civics in local communities.

- **Experts Discuss Expanding HALO Student Pipeline, Pathways:** On Tuesday, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (GLR) and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute convened a webinar to address the persistent “leaky pipeline” undermining educational trajectories for high-achieving, low-income students, commonly referred to as “HALO students.”
- **CEF Highlights Education Programs, Proposed Interagency Transfers:** On Wednesday, the Committee for Education Funding (CEF) convened a virtual briefing titled, “Education in Jeopardy: Department of Education Programs with Interagency Agreements to be Administered in Other Agencies.”
- **ECS Examines Aligning Workforce Data with College, Career Readiness:** On Wednesday, the Education Commission of the States (ECS), in partnership with ACT, convened a webinar focused on aligning K–12, postsecondary, and workforce data to better define and measure college and career readiness.

4. New Publications

- **Pre-K Teach Pay, Benefits, and Intentions to Leave**
RAND (December 2025)
In this report, RAND describes the status of pre-kindergarten (pre-K) teacher pay, benefits, and intentions to leave.

5. In the News

- **Federal Cuts Hit Hard in Rural Districts That Rely on Grant Money**
Washington Times (December 18, 2025)
- **Congress Passes Bill Allowing Schools to Offer Whole Milk, Nondairy Options**
K-12 Dive (December 17, 2025)
- **Feds Announce Early Opt-In Process for New Federal School Choice Program**
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6. On The Floor of Congress This Week

- Senate and House in recess through January 5, 2026.

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- **Coalition of 20 State AGs Sue to Block \$100K H-1B Visa Fee**
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1. COSSBA Policy Priorities

FUNDING

ED AWARDS \$256M IN INNOVATION, RESEARCH LITERACY GRANTS

The Department of Education last Monday announced \$256 million in new Education Innovation and Research (EIR) grants to improve literacy nationwide, marking the first awards aligned with Secretary Linda McMahon's priorities of strengthening evidence-based literacy instruction, expanding education choice, and returning education authority to the states. Notably, 10 of the 24 awards went to state education agencies—the largest number of state-led literacy grants in any EIR competition and a significant increase over past years—while more than 65% of total funding (\$167 million) will support projects in rural communities, far exceeding the program's 25% rural requirement. The Department also highlighted that 18 of the 24 grantees are new to the EIR program, reflecting broader participation and innovation, and emphasized that the Mid-phase and Expansion tier awards will scale proven, evidence-based literacy interventions to drive measurable improvements in student outcomes.

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2. Budget and Appropriations Wrap-Up

Congress tried to make progress toward an FY 2026 appropriations endgame last week but left Capitol Hill with the annual spending process still unresolved and a clock that is now functionally set to January 30, 2026—the date the current continuing resolution (CR) expires for the nine unfinished regular bills. With the House largely focused last week on clearing out for the holidays and the Senate trying to assemble votes, the center of gravity was the Senate's push toward a five-bill "minibus" that would pair the House-passed Defense vehicle with additional Senate bills—including the FY 2026 Labor, Health and Human Services and Education package—and then tee up a tightly managed amendment process to avoid procedural roadblocks.

The bottom line at week's end: despite a flurry of activity from the Senate last week, Congress is still staring at a narrow runway to enact all 12 regular appropriations bills before the CR expires on January 30, 2026. Here's hoping the New Year proves fruitful.

How does this impact State School Board Associations?

Within that minibus, the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education measure remains one of the biggest, most politically sensitive pieces. The Senate Appropriations Committee had already reported its FY 2026 Labor–HHS–Education bill on a bipartisan vote earlier in the year, describing it as a \$200.1 billion discretionary package that would essentially level fund the Department of Education and its programs, rejecting the cuts proposed by the White House and their Republican House colleagues.

A major Labor–HHS–Education flashpoint last week centered on oversight of the Department of Education's (ED) use of interagency agreements (IAAs)—an issue Democrats have framed as a backdoor way to shift or outsource core functions. In that context, Senate negotiators were reported to be preparing to accept a limited set of amendments, including one from Senators Patty Murray (D-WA) and Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) aimed at tightening transparency and controls around ED's IAAs with other agencies. While the contours were technical, the politics were not: Murray has argued the appropriations process must include stronger accountability when an administration "is

intent on ignoring Congress [and] breaking the law,” and Baldwin said the bill should “rein in” efforts she views as undermining programs families rely on. Republicans, for their part, emphasized that any path forward depends on avoiding an open-ended floor fight. As Majority Leader John Thune (R-SD) put it in the context of the broader minibus logjam, “the Appropriations Committee has done a lot of work already, and it’s hard to unwind that”—a nod to both the procedural leverage points in the Senate and the reluctance to reopen carefully balanced packages.

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3. In Brief – Last Week in Washington

STATES, GOVERNORS KEY GATEKEEPERS IN WORKFORCE PELL EXPANSION

Last week, the U.S. Department of Education concluded the first round of negotiated rulemaking to develop the regulatory framework for a significant expansion of the Pell Grant program through Workforce Pell. Enacted this summer as part of the One Big, Beautiful Bill, Workforce Pell broadens federal student aid by extending Pell eligibility to short-term, career-focused training programs lasting as little as 8 to 15 weeks for adult learners and others seeking rapid entry or re-entry into the workforce. The Accountability in Higher Education and Access through Demand-driven Workforce Pell (AHEAD) Committee, which is overseeing the expansion, reached consensus on draft regulations outlining how Workforce Pell will be implemented, with a strong emphasis on state roles in approving eligible programs and calculating performance and outcome metrics. Under the proposed framework, governors and other designated state entities would have substantial authority to determine which short-term programs qualify for Workforce Pell funding, reflecting the department’s effort to balance federal oversight with state flexibility and responsiveness to labor-market needs. At the same time, key issues remain unresolved, including how non-credit programs will connect to longer-term educational pathways, how accountability standards will be enforced across sectors, and how equity and quality safeguards will operate in practice. The AHEAD Committee is scheduled to reconvene in early January to consider accountability proposals—an area that Undersecretary Nicholas Kent has signaled will undergo a significant recalibration. Kent has argued that accountability has historically been unevenly applied, with nondegree programs and proprietary institutions facing heightened scrutiny while degree programs at public and nonprofit institutions often escape comparable oversight, adding that this disparate approach to accountability “ends now.” For more information on negotiated rulemaking, please see [here](#).

'1776 AWARD' TO MARK NATION'S 250TH

The Department of Education is marking the nation's 250th anniversary by launching the Presidential 1776 Award, a nationwide scholarship contest to recognize high school students with exceptional knowledge of the American founding and its principles. [According to the Department](#), the award aims to highlight exemplary civics understanding and is a central piece of its educational efforts for the Semi quincentennial. Students will compete in three rounds of multiple-choice and verbal examinations developed by the James Madison Memorial Fellowship Foundation, culminating in national finals in Washington, D.C. in June 2026, where three winners will share \$250,000 in total scholarships.

"HISTORY ROCKS" TOUR KICKS-OFF AHEAD OF AMERICA'S 250TH BIRTHDAY

Last week, the Department of Education launched its "History Rocks" tour, a cross-country initiative ahead of America's 250th anniversary aimed at celebrating and revitalizing the teaching of history and civics in local communities. As part of her "Returning Education to the States Tour," Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited historic sites like Fort Hill in Clemson, South Carolina, and a public school in Cambridge, Maryland, to highlight the tour's mission. In South Carolina, she emphasized the importance of state and local control in education to preserve and teach authentic American history. In Cambridge, at a "1776 Roadshow" event held by the nonprofit 1776 Action, she delivered a keynote address on the essential role of civic learning in a constitutional republic, arguing for a focus on founding principles and historical literacy over what the department terms "activist curricula." Both events framed the "History Rocks" tour as a direct, celebratory effort to engage students and communities with their history on the ground, promoting what the administration views as a return to patriotic education in the lead-up to the nation's 250th anniversary. Additional information on the Department's "History Rocks!" tour and America 250 can be found [here](#).

EXPERTS DISCUSS EXPANDING HALO STUDENT PIPELINE, PATHWAYS

Last Tuesday, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (GLR) and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute convened a webinar to address the persistent "leaky pipeline" undermining educational trajectories for high-achieving, low-income students, commonly referred to as "HALO students." Moderated by Michael Petrilli, President of the Fordham Institute, the session brought together national and state-level leaders to discuss key research findings and practical strategies for expanding access to postsecondary pathways. Aaron Churchill, Ohio Research Director at the Fordham Institute, framed the discussion with an overview of HALO students' experiences, citing recent findings that these students are significantly less likely than their more affluent peers to receive gifted services or complete advanced coursework. Strategies discussed ranged from expanding advanced placement and early college options for HALO students, to automatic enrollment programs for advanced courses. Panelists included Brenda Berg with BEST NC, Aaron Daffern, Dallas Independent School District, Dr. Stephane Lavertu from The Ohio State University, Dr. Jonathan Plucker with Johns Hopkins University, and David Taylor, Superintendent of Dayton Early College Academy. Plucker highlighted test results demonstrating that while many students remain below or just at grade-level proficiency, a subset of "high fliers" continues to excel when given appropriate support. Plucker emphasized that evidence-based tools and resources must be given directly to educators to accelerate equitable opportunities: "We know how to do this...we're just not getting these resources into educators' hands." Berg discussed automatic enrollment policies in North Carolina that place students earning top scores on state end-of-course exams directly into advanced coursework, with opt-outs available only to parents. Across panelists, a central suggestion emerged: strategically aligning advanced coursework opportunities, automatic enrollment policies, and systematic supports to help plug the leaky pipeline and expand opportunities for HALO students, both in and outside of the traditional classroom setting.

CEF HIGHLIGHTS EDUCATION PROGRAMS, PROPOSED INTERAGENCY TRANSFERS

On Wednesday, the Committee for Education Funding (CEF) convened a virtual briefing titled, "Education in Jeopardy: Department of Education Programs with Interagency Agreements to be Administered in Other Agencies." The discussion focused on the Administration's proposal to

shift more than \$30 billion in Department of Education programs to the Department of Labor and other federal agencies through interagency agreements, and the potential consequences of this restructuring as Congress considers FY 2026 appropriations. CEF emphasized that these interagency agreements would neither strengthen teaching and learning nor advance the stated goal of returning education to the states. Instead, speakers warned that the approach would create duplicative administrative layers, increase inefficiencies, and complicate grant administration for states, districts, and institutions that rely on consistent federal support. CEF's Sarah Abernathy opened the briefing by noting a significant decline in Department of Education funding in the current fiscal year. She highlighted that ongoing staff layoffs and program defunding undermine public education and weaken the Department's capacity to effectively administer critical programs. Dr. Melissa Sadorf of the National Rural Education Association described the disproportionate harm to rural schools, where federal funding delays have stalled hiring, frozen instructional initiatives, and created widespread uncertainty for students and educators. Kay Rigling, former Deputy Assistant General Counsel for the Department of Education, spoke from personal experience, stressing that staff expertise is being eliminated while Title I funds—most urgently needed in elementary schools—are not being deployed effectively. Additional speakers addressed impacts on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, career and technical education, adult education, and other K–12 and higher education programs. Collectively, participants underscored the importance of maintaining strong, centralized administration of education programs within the Department of Education at a critical moment for federal education policy.

ECS EXAMINES ALIGNING WORKFORCE DATA WITH COLLEGE, CAREER READINESS

On Wednesday, the Education Commission of the States (ECS), in partnership with ACT, convened a webinar focused on aligning K–12, postsecondary, and workforce data to better define and measure college and career readiness, highlighting how states are expanding beyond single test metrics to include multiple indicators such as advanced coursework, work-based learning, industry-recognized credentials, and longitudinal data systems. ECS outlined national trends showing that at least 37 states now incorporate college- and career-readiness measures into accountability systems, with growing emphasis on data alignment across education and workforce pathways. State leaders from Alabama and New Mexico shared case studies: Shanthia Washington with the Alabama State Department of Education described a proposed accountability model that integrates ACT academic performance with ACT WorkKeys National Career Readiness Certificates to capture both cognitive and applied skills, aiming to more accurately reflect readiness for college or careers; Lynn Vasquez with the New Mexico Public Education Department discussed its current use of ACT and WorkKeys within ESSA-required accountability indicators, ongoing data-sharing efforts with its Department of Workforce Solutions, and plans, shaped by equity considerations and stakeholder engagement following a state sufficiency lawsuit, to redesign its accountability framework to better reflect community values, workforce needs, and student-centered pathways. Across the discussion, panelists emphasized the importance of stakeholder co-creation, transparency, alignment with state priorities and ESSA guardrails, and robust data systems to ensure accountability models authentically signal student preparedness for success after high school.

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4. New Publications

Pre-K Teacher Pay, Benefits, and Intentions to Leave

RAND (December 18, 2025)

In this report, RAND describes the status of pre-kindergarten (pre-K) teacher pay, benefits, and intentions to leave. It derived these results from surveys of nationally representative samples of pre-K teachers in U.S. public schools that were conducted in spring 2024 and spring 2025.

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5. In the News

Federal Cuts Hit Hard in Rural Districts That Rely on Grant Money

Washington Times (December 18, 2025)

Congress Passes Bill Allowing Schools to Offer Whole Milk, Nondairy Options

K-12 Dive (December 17, 2025)

Feds Announce Early Opt-In Process for New Federal School Choice Program

K-12 Dive (December 16, 2025)

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6. On The Floor of Congress This Week

The House and Senate are in recess through January 5, 2026.

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7. Court Report

COALITION OF 20 STATE AGS SUE TO BLOCK \$100K H-1B VISA FEE

A coalition of 20 states, led by Democratic attorneys general, filed a lawsuit in federal court in Massachusetts challenging the Administration's \$100,000 supplemental fee for each new H-1B visa petition as arbitrary and capricious in violation of the Administrative Procedure Act. The states argue that the fee will severely restrict the ability of public agencies, including K-12 schools (citing specifically Chicago Public Schools and Baltimore City Public Schools), to hire qualified workers in critical shortage areas, such as bilingual teachers.

DOJ SUES MINNEAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has sued Minneapolis Public Schools in federal court in Minnesota, alleging that the district violated Title VII by enacting collective bargaining provisions that discriminate against teachers based on race, color, sex, and national origin. For example, DOJ challenges provisions of the district's 2023-2025 collective bargaining agreement (CBA) that prioritize teachers from "underrepresented populations" over others in layoffs, involuntary reassignments, and reinstatements. The DOJ seeks a declaratory judgment that the CBA violates Title VII and a permanent injunction against the use of similar contractual language in the future.

DOJ SEEKS TO JOIN LAWSUIT AGAINST VIRGINIA SCHOOL DISTRICT'S

The DOJ has moved to intervene in a pending federal case challenging Loudoun County Public Schools' (VA) policy allowing students to use locker rooms consistent with their gender identity. The underlying case involves two male high school students who objected on religious grounds to sharing a boys' locker room with a transgender student. After the students expressed their objections and declined to use the locker room, the district disciplined them for violating student conduct and anti-harassment rules. The DOJ contends that the disciplinary action (not the policy) violates the Free Exercise Clause and the Equal Protection Clause.

OK SUPREME COURT VOIDS 2025 STATE SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

A group of Oklahoma parents, public school teachers, clergy, and taxpayers challenged the Oklahoma State Board of Education's approval of the 2025 Oklahoma Academic Standards for Social Studies, arguing the process violated the Oklahoma Open Meeting Act and that the standards themselves included problematic content. The standards contained numerous references to religious content and contested claims about the 2020 election and COVID-19 origins. The petitioners sought original jurisdiction directly in the Oklahoma Supreme Court and obtained a temporary stay preventing the new standards' enactment while the court considered the matter. The Court, by a narrow 5–4 vote, held that the State Board violated the Open Meeting Act because the final version of the standards was materially different from the draft publicly posted and was provided to board members less than 24 hours before the vote, failing to give adequate public notice as required. The Court declined to resolve or weigh in on the substantive issues.

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8. Links for Up-to-Date Information on Hearings, Legislation, and Events

[U.S. House and Senate 2026 Schedule](#)

[U.S. Department of Education](#)

[U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions](#)

[U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor](#)

[U.S. Senate Budget Committee](#)

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8. About BPAG

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- leveraging our expertise and passion;
- strategizing intelligent solutions; and,
- Creating meaningful impact.

Our team includes long-term insiders in education policy from Pre-K through higher education, innovative thinkers and savvy strategists that provide a comprehensive array of customized client services. We have the knowledge, skills, and relationships that are necessary for successful advocacy at all levels. From grassroots to grass tops and everything in between, our broad-based legislative practice approaches every project with the same degree of determination and professionalism. BPAG provides expertise in a variety of services:

- Government Relations

- Research and Analysis
- Advocacy Training
- Association Management
- Strategic Communications
- Policy Events

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