



SREB

2014 Legislative Briefing

Summary

All SREB states, except Texas, met in regular session in 2014 and by late summer, all states had finished their work; many states already are gearing up for 2015. State general fund budgets rose for the most part — though slowly. Some states provided teacher salary increases and recognized that higher salaries at certain points in the salary schedule may draw new teachers or keep teachers who are already in the classroom.

The most debated issues across the SREB region likely related to educational standards and assessments. Some states are adopting new standards or reviewing those already adopted. Several states called for additional state oversight on changes to standards and assessments. As states begin to rely more on student assessment data for accountability purposes, actions addressed concerns over the collection and use of student data. Educator effectiveness is an important issue for states as they concentrate on raising student achievement. Most SREB states continue to develop and implement new evaluation systems, and legislatures adopted policies or amended existing ones to conform to the changes.

States remain focused on strengthening pathways for students through high school, leading to better college and career readiness. Legislation in 2014 aims to reinforce early childhood and early grades education, particularly in reading, with an eye toward preparing students to excel on new college and career readiness standards.

States also continued to address barriers to postsecondary education and completion. Legislative actions across the region target assistance for students traditionally under-represented in higher education, military personnel and transfer students.

A summary of each state's legislative and budget actions can be found in the 2014 *Final Legislative Report*, available at www.sreb.org.

State and education budgets, and related legislation

With the slowly growing economy in the SREB states, legislatures for the most part adopted budgets that provide some increases in state operating funds when compared to those adopted a year ago. State budgets for 2014-15 in half of the SREB states (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina and West Virginia) grew between 2 percent and 3 percent and another three states (Florida, Mississippi and South Carolina) increased state funding by 4 percent to 5 percent. Larger increases were adopted in Georgia (5.1 percent) and Virginia (5.4 percent), as well as over the biennium in Texas (16.7 percent). Oklahoma and Tennessee legislatures passed budgets with slight decreases.

State funding for elementary and secondary education continues to grow in most states. Budgets for 2014-15 provide increases of up to 3 percent in eight SREB states (Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas and Virginia). Legislatures approved increases of about 3 percent to 4 percent in Arkansas, Delaware, Kentucky and Mississippi while slight decreases were adopted in Tennessee and West Virginia. Budgets will provide larger increases in Georgia (7.2 percent) and South Carolina (6.6 percent).

For higher education, increases of up to 3 percent are seen in Alabama, North Carolina and Virginia, as well as for two-year colleges in Arkansas, Delaware State University, Delaware Technical Community College, the University System of Georgia, universities in South Carolina, career-tech institutions in Oklahoma and the University of Tennessee. Increases of 3 percent to 6 percent were approved in Louisiana and Mississippi, and for technical colleges in Georgia and South Carolina. Budgets provide larger increases over the biennium in Texas (9.7 percent), for universities in Florida (8.8 percent) and community colleges in Maryland (6 percent). Decreases were seen in Kentucky, Oklahoma, and West Virginia, as well as for universities in Arkansas, the University of Delaware, the Florida College System, and the Tennessee Board of Regents institutions.

In related legislation, Alabama proposes a constitutional amendment to prohibit, with exceptions, requirements that local school districts make expenditures in excess of \$50,000 without funding those costs. A bill in Georgia creates a committee to study local tax revenues that impact funds available to school districts.

Legislation in three states addressed special funds. Arkansas permitted any unused funds in the Open Enrollment Public Charter School Facilities Loan Fund at the end of 2013-14 to roll over to 2014-15, and legislation provides \$25 million for the fund in 2014-15. Louisiana created the Workforce and Innovation for a Stronger Economy Fund, which will receive \$40 million per year (subject to legislative appropriation), to support increased degree and certificate production and research in high-demand fields at public colleges and universities. West Virginia's Future Fund will support education and work force development beginning in 2020. Three percent of severance taxes from coal, limestone, sandstone, natural gas and oil will comprise the fund's revenue, and only the interest generated can be used for specified purposes.

In other actions, Florida legislation provides for three temporary sales tax holidays (for school supplies, hurricane supplies, and energy- and water-efficient products), provides sales tax exemptions, increases certain tax credits and lowers several tax rates, which is expected to lower general revenue receipts. Alabama passed the Small Business Tax Relief Act of 2014 to increase the liability amount under which a business is exempt to \$2,500 (from \$1,000).

Compensation, benefits and personnel

Legislatures approved pay increases for teachers in Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina and West Virginia. Mississippi teachers will receive raises this year of \$1,500 and \$1,000 in 2015-16. West Virginia teachers will receive an across-the-board raise of \$1,000 in 2014-15. Both states also will raise beginning pay. Pay for a new teacher in Mississippi with a bachelor's degree will rise by \$2,500 (to \$33,390). In West Virginia, the Legislature expressed its intent to raise beginning teacher pay to \$43,000 (from \$31,675) by 2019. Kentucky teachers will see a 1 percent pay raise in 2014-15 and a 2 percent increase in 2015-16.

Raises for North Carolina teachers average 7 percent and vary based on a teacher's level of experience. Legislators changed the minimum salary schedule to reduce the number of steps in the schedule and to provide an additional increase in the years when teachers are more apt to leave the profession.

While Georgia did not specify a pay raise for teachers, the budget provided some added funding intended to permit local districts the flexibility to eliminate teacher furlough days and increase instructional days and teacher salaries.

A committee in Delaware will develop a plan for a new compensation structure and career pathway for teachers that will set base pay levels at each step in the pathway, provide teachers with opportunities to receive additional pay for assuming leadership roles and responsibilities, and establish senior leadership positions for the most effective teachers who previously have served in leadership roles.

In other actions, Florida will establish a bonus program for elementary schools and teachers who assist students in attaining new digital skills. Mississippi specified that employees who meet special certification requirements — such as those from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and other national boards — may qualify for a \$6,000 supplement for only one of the certifications. In addition, the Legislature intends to create a reward program to recognize high-performing teachers in low-performing schools. Georgia's budget includes funds equivalent to a 1 percent salary adjustment for state employees (including postsecondary faculty); these funds are for merit-based increases and for recruiting and retaining workers in critical positions.

Relative to employee benefits, a bill in Louisiana postpones the standard retirement age from 60 to 62 years of age for employees in the state and teachers' retirement systems for individuals hired on or after July 1, 2015. Half of the increased funding provided in the budget for Oklahoma public schools is earmarked for employee benefits. Mississippi's health insurance management board will report by December 1 of this year on whether to expand the current health insurance coverage for the treatment of autism spectrum disorders.

Teachers in several states get pay raises

Mississippi also took up personnel issues. The state board of education now may suspend or revoke the license of a superintendent or principal serving in a school district at the time the board places the district into conservatorship, and it specifies that a licensed employee of a low-performing district whose employment is terminated for good cause will not have the right to request a hearing on the termination.

Tennessee prohibits the commissioner of education from waiving any requirement that applies to school districts when those requirements concern educators' due process rights; teacher salary reductions; or employee rights, salaries, benefits or licensure. Virginia extends the period in which a teacher may request a hearing to 10 days (from five days), upon receiving notification of a recommendation of dismissal.

Estimated Changes to Tuition and Required Fees In-State Undergraduates at Public Institutions, SREB States, 2014-15

	Two-year colleges	Four-year colleges
Alabama	0.8% to 7.7%	-0.4% to 6.6%
Arkansas	0 to 12.6%	2.8% to 6%
Delaware	4.9%	0 to 1.9%
Florida		
State University System		0 to 1%
Florida College System	0%*	0%*
Georgia	4.7%*	1.8% to 7%
Kentucky	Up to 2%	up to 5%
Louisiana	0 to 12.9%	0 to 15.1%
Maryland	Up to 3 %	Up to 3%
Mississippi	0 to 13.3%	0 to 5.4%
North Carolina	0.7%*	-0.2% to 4.2%
Oklahoma	0 to 8.1%	0 to 8.3%
South Carolina	3% average	3.2% average
Tennessee		
University of Tennessee		3% to 7%
Board of Regents Colleges	5% to 6%	4% to 9%
Texas	NA	NA
Virginia	4.6% average**	5.2% average
West Virginia	3% to 10%	3% to 8.3%

* Tuition only

** Community college system only, does not include the 25.8 percent increase at Richard Bland College

NA indicates information not available

Postsecondary tuition and required fees

It is no surprise that the cost of attending a postsecondary institution continues to rise, but states are trying to moderate those increases. Maryland's increase in funding for colleges and universities, for example, is intended to limit tuition increases to 3 percent.

The Florida Legislature approved no tuition increases for 2014-15 and eliminated a previous automatic inflationary increase if legislators did not include a tuition increase in state appropriations. The Legislature eliminated for most institutions the tuition differential that permitted them to raise tuition above legislatively approved increases. Now, only preeminent research institutions that meet certain performance requirements may increase tuition above rates set by the Legislature, but the maximum total increase is limited to 6 percent (previously, 15 percent). Also the bill prohibits colleges and universities from denying in-state tuition status to a student solely based on the immigration status of that student's parents and allows a person to qualify for in-state tuition status if he or she marries an individual who possesses in-state tuition status.

Postsecondary financial aid

Three states are initiating efforts to financially assist students in their first two years of postsecondary education. Alabama will provide a state income tax credit to individuals and businesses who donate cash to the community college system's Career-Technical Dual Enrollment Program for scholarships. Georgia established a grant that will provide full tuition for technical college students who maintain a least a 3.5 grade-point average. The state budget also allocates funds to provide technical college students with low-interest loans when they have used all other forms of financial assistance.

Tennessee established a last-dollar scholarship program that will enable eligible high school graduates and GED recipients to attend community and technical colleges for free. To continue receiving a scholarship, students must meet progress or grade requirements and complete an associate degree or diploma within two and one-half years.

Maryland and Virginia addressed scholarships to assist students transferring from a two-year college to a four-year college. Under Maryland's 2+2 Transfer Scholarship Program, students with financial need must maintain a 2.5 grade-point-average (previously 3.0) and complete their bachelor's degrees within three years or six semesters, whichever is longer, to maintain eligibility for the annual \$1,000 award (previously \$3,000). Students seeking degrees in specified areas of study (such as nursing, education; and science, technology, engineering and math subjects) will receive awards of \$2,000. Virginia permits a student completing an associate degree to enroll in a four-year institution by the following spring (previously in the fall) and maintain eligibility for financial assistance under the need-based Two-Year College Transfer Grant Program.

Legislation creates the Kentucky Coal County College Completion Program to increase bachelor degree attainment in coal-producing counties where degree attainment rates traditionally are lower than in other areas of the commonwealth.

*States provide aid
for two-year
college students*

Mississippi and Tennessee amended aid programs. Mississippi established uniform terms for the conversion and repayment of all forgivable loans. Relative to teachers, the bill converts two scholarships into forgivable loans and creates two new scholarship programs. It also establishes a number of forgivable loan programs in medical and other fields.

Tennessee modifies award amounts for its HOPE Scholarship for students who first enroll in college in fall 2015. While HOPE awards at four-year institutions currently are \$2,000 per semester, award amounts for freshmen and sophomores will decrease to \$1,750 per semester, and amounts for juniors and seniors will increase to \$2,250 per semester. Per-semester awards for students at two-year institutions will increase from \$1,000 to \$1,500.

West Virginia is expanding the health science fields in which students may receive awards. Award recipients who do not finish their programs, or who fail to practice in underserved areas of the state within six months of completing their training, must repay the program award and interest accrued. Any student whose repayment is in arrears will not receive a license, renewal or reciprocity in another state based on licensure in West Virginia.

Educator effectiveness, evaluation and licensure

Over the past few years, most SREB state legislatures have enacted laws related to teacher and principal evaluation systems. As states continue to develop and implement these systems, legislatures have created new policies or amended existing laws to conform to changes in evaluation systems, especially in areas of certification and licensure, compensation (see section on Compensation, benefits and personnel) and professional development.

Relative to evaluation, Delaware extended to vocational-technical school districts and charter schools the authority (previously only available to school systems) to seek a waiver from the department of education to use a locally-developed educator evaluation system; the state also removed the prohibition against applying locally developed systems to educators holding their initial license. Advisory committees in Delaware and Louisiana will determine the fairness and effectiveness of educator evaluation systems. Oklahoma has determined that its evaluation system records are confidential and not subject to disclosure under its open records act.

The use of student growth data in educator evaluation also received attention. Louisiana specified that student growth measures used to evaluate educators may not include the test scores of any student with 10 or more unexcused absences in a semester. Maryland prohibits school districts from using student growth data on state assessments to make personnel decisions prior to 2016-17. Recognizing that the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System statistical estimates are not mathematically precise, the Legislature has prohibited the state board of education from requiring classroom observations to be aligned with the estimates.

Several states took up issues relating to the licensing of educators. Beginning in 2016, teacher candidates seeking initial licensure in elementary education in Mississippi must pass a “rigorous test of scientifically research-based reading instruction and intervention and data-based decision-making principles.” Florida candidates for certification may

demonstrate mastery of subject-area knowledge by passing a national or international examination approved by the state board of education.

Tennessee legislation permits a teacher who received in his or her last three evaluations a rating of significantly above expectations to petition for a waiver of any requirement for renewal of the teacher's license. Another bill specifies that the state department of education may not base the decision to revoke or deny renewal of the license of a teacher, principal or supervisor on student growth data. Virginia will require each teacher seeking an initial license with an endorsement in career-technical education to have an industry certification in the appropriate area for which the endorsement is sought.

In other actions, Oklahoma will create a paid internship program at each college and university for prospective teachers and a fast-track certification program for special education instructors. Mississippi will conduct a pilot program in average- or low-performing districts that focuses on using data coaches to improve reading and literacy and on determining the effectiveness of data-focused professional development. Florida school districts may assign a newly-hired teacher to a low-performing school only if the teacher received an effective or highly-effective rating in the previous year and receives high quality mentoring during the first two years of employment with that district. Virginia legislation expands to 21 the number of members on the Advisory Board on Teacher Education and Licensure by adding another two members who are teacher preparation program faculty members.

Student data and parental rights

Given the rise in the use of technology in education, concerns about student privacy and the possible misuse of student data, states passed measures to limit data collection and manage its use. Several states prohibited the collection of certain data. Florida requires the use of student identification numbers in place of social security numbers. Florida and North Carolina prohibit the collection of information on political affiliation, voting history, religious affiliation and biometric information of a student or the student's family. Similarly, Tennessee prohibits the collection of social security numbers and biometric information, as well as juvenile delinquency and criminal records not included in a student's educational file. West Virginia also prohibits the collection of information about family firearm ownership. South Carolina prohibits the state department of education from collecting individual student data directly from students or families (except for information collected under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act).

In an effort to protect data, North Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia call for the development of data security plans. Both South Carolina and Virginia restrict the transmission of personally-identifiable student data to federal agencies. Virginia also prohibits colleges and universities from selling students' personal information, with exceptions.

Louisiana and West Virginia passed laws to help with data transparency. Louisiana requires state and local education agencies to make information available on their websites regarding the transfer of personally-identifiable student information. West Virginia will make publicly available an index of what student data is included in the state data system.

*Bills protect
student data*

Closely related to the collection and use of student data are bills that provide parents the right to review their child's data or weigh in on what can be shared. Louisiana and Tennessee laws establish parental rights for reviewing their children's student data. West Virginia and North Carolina will develop procedures for notifying parents and students of privacy rights and for notifying parents of their ability to opt out of sharing their children's data.

In other actions relating to parental rights, Florida will allow parents to challenge school districts' adoption of any particular instructional materials, while Louisiana parents are granted the right to examine instructional materials, and be notified if their children are provided medical services or are involved in a criminal or law enforcement action. Oklahoma officially recognizes all parental rights to parents of minor children without obstruction or interference from the state.

Standards and assessments

Several states passed bills addressing state educational standards, assessments to determine student performance and growth on those standards, and state oversight. Oklahoma and South Carolina have opted to put in place state-developed standards for their students. Oklahoma's state board of education will work in cooperation with other agencies to adopt new standards, for legislative review and approval, prior to 2016-17. South Carolina's new standards will take effect in 2015-16; the state board must obtain the consent of the Education Oversight Committee prior to making any changes to state educational standards and must obtain approval from the Legislature before implementing any standards not developed by the state department of education.

Tennessee legislation prohibits the state from adopting Common Core State Standards in any subject beyond math or English. It requires the state board of education — if it proposes changes to the state's standards or intends to join a testing consortium that requires the adoption of common standards in social studies or science — to provide at least 60 days of notice to the House and Senate education committees and on the board's website.

Maryland and North Carolina are calling for a review of state standards. Maryland created a workgroup to recommend best practices for the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments, as well as new curriculum resources needed to support implementation. A North Carolina commission will conduct a comprehensive review of state English and math standards and propose modifications that will increase student academic achievement and ensure that they are among the highest standards in the nation.

Also relative to assessments, Delaware removed references in law to multiple student assessments to provide for the state's transition to the Smarter Balanced Assessment System. Oklahoma will develop assessments prior to the 2017-18 school year for the new standards estimated to be in place for 2016-17.

South Carolina prohibits the use of the Smarter Balanced assessments and requires the department of education to implement a new assessment system for English and math in grades three through eight. The state also will develop and implement assessments for

social studies and science in grades four through eight and administer a college-readiness assessment to students in grade 11. Students will take these assessments beginning in 2014-15. The state eliminated the requirement that students take an exit exam to obtain their high school diplomas and required the state board of education to select tests eligible candidates may successfully complete to earn a high school equivalency.

North Carolina's state board of education was required to report to a joint legislative committee by July 15 on the acquisition of new assessments to measure student achievement under the state's current educational standards, and the state board may not purchase the assessments without legislative authorization. Tennessee will continue to administer its current state tests through 2014-15. Prior to the 2015-16 school year, the state department of education will contract, through competitive bidding, with one or more entities to provide English and math assessments aligned to state standards.

Virginia is limiting to 17 the number of Standards of Learning assessments that may be administered to students in grades three through eight and specifying what assessments will be administered. Each school district must certify annually that it has provided instruction and administered an alternative assessment to students in each subject area in which the standard assessment was not administered.

Education accountability

SREB states have a long history of working to improve school accountability dating back to the first two states in the region (Florida and South Carolina) that required school report cards as early as the 1970s. South Carolina continues its work by calling for the Education Oversight Committee to develop and recommend a single accountability system that meets federal and state accountability requirements by the fall of 2016.

Mississippi legislation creates a school recognition program to provide rewards to high-performing schools and schools that improve by at least one letter grade on the state's A to F grading scale beginning in 2016-17. Virginia will delay for two years to October 1, 2016 its A to F grading scale for schools. North Carolina legislation modifies the statewide school performance grading system by applying a less rigorous grading scale for school performance grades from the 2013-14 school year and extending this modified scale to all years by proviso language in the state budget.

Based on Florida school and district grades in 2014-15, the state board of education will establish required levels of performance beginning in 2015-16. Each school must assess at least 95 percent of students for the purposes of determining school grades. The bill also modifies the measures used to derive a school's grade. Louisiana will equally recognize International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement and dual enrollment courses for purposes of determining school performance scores and grades.

Other bills call for a Virginia committee to make recommendations on its assessments, student growth measures, ideas for innovative teaching in the classroom, and alignment between the state standards, assessments and school performance report cards. West Virginia is providing extra support for increased audits in preparation for the new school grading system.

*Bills change student
assessments*

*Actions fine-tune
accountability
systems*

Mississippi amended a 2010 law to specify that a school rated as failing for two consecutive years (previously three years) is classified as a New Start School under the Recovery School District. The local school board may petition the state board of education for an additional year for a failing school by submitting a comprehensive improvement plan. When the school achieves an accountability rating of C or better for two consecutive years, the local school board will resume control of the school.

At-risk students

Dropout prevention and recovery was a topic of legislation, and Florida and Mississippi will focus on middle grades students. Florida requires each middle school to implement an early warning system to identify students at risk of dropping out. Mississippi will implement a dropout prevention and recovery pilot program in low-performing districts.

Louisiana permits a school district or charter school that provides high school instruction to offer a dropout-recovery program for students who have been withdrawn from school for at least 30 days. Also, a school district may not deny admission or readmission to a student who voluntarily withdrew from school, is pregnant, a parent or married. North Carolina will establish a two-year dropout prevention and recovery pilot program and select an established charter school that will deliver the pilot program services.

Other bills require on-site educational services to students requiring inpatient psychiatric treatment beginning on the 11th day following admission (Oklahoma) and authorize each local district to enroll a refugee or legal alien in high school until the student graduates or until the end of the school year in which the student reaches age 21 (Kentucky).

Students with special needs

Laws addressing educational services for students with disabilities passed in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia. A Florida bill establishes Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts for students with disabilities, which may be used to pay for educational purposes specified in a student's Individualized Education Program, or the costs of enrolling the student in a private school, postsecondary institution or online courses.

North Carolina and Oklahoma amended laws that provide scholarships to allow students with disabilities to attend a school of their choice. North Carolina specifies that awards are provided so that a student may receive special education on a daily basis at either a non-public school or at a public school outside of the student's home district. In place of the previous eligibility requirement that a student needs an Individualized Education Plan, the bill requires the student to be "a child with a disability." Oklahoma removed the program eligibility requirement that a student receiving a Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship for Students with Disabilities must have spent the prior year in attendance at a public school.

Florida students with disabilities must begin postsecondary goals and career transition planning prior to turning 14 years of age. Georgia urges the state board of education to integrate Braille instruction into the classroom. South Carolina permits the establishment of alternative education campuses, which are charter schools that serve students with severe limitations.

Programs aim to help at-risk students

Options aid students with disabilities

Virginia requires a free and appropriate special education for each student with a disability who attends a full-time virtual school program in one district but resides in another district. The bill releases the district where the student resides from responsibility for educating the student and requires it to transfer state and federal funds received on behalf of the student to the district providing the educational program.

West Virginia requires each county board of education to adopt a policy that allows a student with a disability, under certain circumstances, to participate in a graduation ceremony with his or her classmates. Participation in the ceremony will not negate further services the student is eligible to receive.

Early education

Success in school depends on a good start for children in their early years and in the early grades. West Virginia legislation creates a comprehensive system of support for early literacy aimed at closing the reading achievement gap by third grade and incorporates associated issues such as school readiness, absenteeism, summer learning loss, intervention services, extended-day and -year reading programs, and family engagement. The bill intends that all children have access to quality early learning with an emphasis on school readiness and health.

Laws in Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi and South Carolina addressed the needs of children before they enter kindergarten. If sufficient funding is available, Louisiana will provide every child (previously only children from disadvantaged families) access to LA 4 Early Childhood programs. Public schools may charge tuition to students who are not considered at-risk and must use a portion of their increased funding to collaborate with prekindergarten programs in the community.

Maryland, too, is expanding eligibility for the state-supported prekindergarten program to families who earn up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level (previously 185 percent) and is requiring an advisory council to submit a statewide strategic report on early childhood education and care. A Louisiana bill establishes a local enrollment coordination process for early childhood education. Legislation reauthorizes the South Carolina First Steps to Readiness, which uses local partnerships to provide public and private funding for early childhood development and education services. South Carolina also will establish for at-risk four-year-olds a full-day prekindergarten program that will focus on reading.

To address the transition from early education to kindergarten, the Mississippi Department of Education will adopt a common statewide kindergarten readiness assessment. South Carolina requires the state superintendent to ensure that, beginning in 2014-15, every student entering a publicly-funded prekindergarten or kindergarten takes a readiness assessment.

Reading is the key to success throughout a student's educational pathway. South Carolina will develop and implement a comprehensive state proficiency plan to improve reading achievement, and each district must prepare an annual reading proficiency plan for prekindergarten through grade 12. The bill requires intensive intervention to any student in kindergarten through grade three who does not demonstrate proficiency in

*States expand
prekindergarten
programs*

*Laws focus on
success in reading
for young students*

reading and for districts to employ a reading and literacy coach in each elementary school. Beginning in 2017-18, districts must retain students in third grade if they fail to demonstrate reading proficiency.

Florida and Oklahoma adjusted grade-retention policies. Florida created a good cause exemption for students not reading at grade level in grade three. Oklahoma authorizes schools, through 2014-15, to grant probationary promotion to students who do not qualify. The state department of education will conduct a study on reading instruction and retention of students and issue annual reports beginning in 2015 that include best practices to help students become successful readers and recommendations for changes to the existing Reading Sufficiency Act.

Charters school, school choice and online educational opportunities

Providing families with choice in the educational decisions for their children continues to receive attention in SREB states. Relative to charter schools, Delaware, as a part of the charter school approval process, will consider potential positive or negative impacts the school might have on the existing schools and community from which the school might draw students. North Carolina charter schools meeting performance and other standards will be able to expand by one grade level without specific approval. South Carolina requires charter school sponsors to adopt national standards for quality charter schools.

Concern over charter schools that don't meet performance standards led to state actions. North Carolina will develop procedures for a competitive bid process for an entity to assume management of a low-performing charter school and procedures for fast-track replication of high-quality charter schools currently operating. South Carolina will permanently close charter schools that receive the lowest performance rating level for three consecutive years. In Tennessee, a local school board authorizing a startup charter school that is later identified under the state's accountability system as a priority school will revoke or automatically deny renewal of the school's charter. The same rules will apply, beginning in 2015, to a conversion charter or a school authorized by the achievement school district.

Louisiana passed three bills relating to choice. The Public School Choice Act permits parents or legal guardians to enroll their children in the public school of their choice if the students' assigned school received a performance grade of D or F in the most recent school year. The school in which they seek to enroll their children must have received a grade of A, B or C in the most recent school year and have sufficient enrollment capacity.

Louisiana's Course Choice program allowed students in low-performing schools and students in higher-performing schools where desired courses weren't available to take free classes provided by state authorized course providers. Legislation in 2014 expands the program to all students with district approval and eliminates the requirement that participating students enroll in a least one course at the public school in which they are enrolled.

*Actions provide
options for students*

Finally, the Louisiana Scholarship Program provides, for students enrolled in low-performing public K-12 schools, scholarships to attend participating private schools. The bill permits any public or private entity to make a directed donation to a private school for the purpose of providing a scholarship under the program to a specific student.

Florida will expand student eligibility to receive a scholarship under its tax credit scholarship program, beginning in 2016-17, to include students whose family income is 185 percent to 260 percent of the federal poverty level (previously 185 percent and below). The maximum amounts permitted for newly-eligible students decline as a student's family income increases.

Legislatures continue to amend online and virtual education laws as technology and the programs change. Maryland clarified the definition of a fully online distance education program as one offered by an out-of-state institution where 51 percent or more of the program is offered electronically. The Virginia Department of Education may contract with one or more school districts to develop online courses and make them available to other districts and must establish the Virtual Learning Advisory Committee. The North Carolina budget establishes a virtual charter school pilot program that will begin enrolling students in kindergarten through grade 12 beginning in 2015-16. Alabama clarifies that a student who withdraws from school to enroll in an accredited, state-authorized online school is not classified as a dropout.

College and career readiness

Career-focused students were the subject of much of the college- and career-readiness legislation passed during 2014 sessions, though Florida and Oklahoma amended general high school curriculum requirements. Florida clarified specific credit requirements for high school graduation in English, math, science and social studies, based on the year a student enters grade nine. Oklahoma's bill adds a science, technology, engineering and math course to the list of courses that satisfy the math requirements under the state high school curriculum.

Recognizing that staying on track for high school graduation begins long before a student enters grade 9, Louisiana and Maryland bills addressed issues relating to the middle grades and to high school planning. Maryland created a task force to improve student achievement in the middle grades and to develop a plan to redesign the middle grades. Career-major students in Louisiana will develop a plan that identifies courses required through grade 10, and by the end of grade 10, will outline graduation requirements relevant to students' postsecondary goals.

Louisiana also revised career major programs offered to public school students. Public schools must offer a career major program recognized by all public colleges and universities in the state (previously, only by community and technical colleges). Schools must align their career-major programs to state and regional work force demands, and to partner with local business, industry, economic development agencies and postsecondary education leaders to review and expand the career-major options provided.

Georgia and Maryland, too, are calling for partnerships with business and industry. In Georgia, legislation encourages local school systems to work with industry partners to provide opportunities for experience in work-based learning programs. Maryland is establishing the Summer Career Academy Pilot Program to provide students employment opportunities and career counseling — plus a stipend and possibly a scholarship upon completion of the program.

In other bills, Virginia will develop a model for establishing a high school with a career-technical education focus as a Governor's Career and Technical Education School. West Virginia's Workforce Investment Council will provide information and guidance to local work force investment boards and staff so they may better educate the populace about careers and higher-paying jobs. Mississippi requires school counselors to spend a minimum of 80 percent of their contractual time in direct service activities to students, parents, school staff and the community.

College completion

One way of helping meet goals of increasing college completion is to provide high school students the opportunity to earn college credit before graduation. Florida permits school districts and state and community colleges to establish collegiate high school pathways that allow high school students to earn a full year of college credit. The Advanced Kentucky effort will improve participation in rigorous college-level instruction in high school, especially for traditionally under-represented student populations.

State actions help military personnel in completing their studies. Postsecondary authorities in North Carolina will develop a joint plan for a uniform system of granting course credits based on students' military training and experience. The authorities also will study the creation of programs that provide maximum credit for military training and experience toward meeting licensing, certification and credential standards. Oklahoma will assist students who must withdraw from classes during periods of active military duty without impacting their admission status or grade-point average.

As part of the Kentucky Coal County Completion Program, community colleges located in designated counties may receive grants to improve student support services and other programs necessary to increase student success and degree completion.

In other actions, Tennessee higher education authorities will develop transfer pathways for at least 50 undergraduate majors with the highest demand and for which such a pathway is feasible. Virginia requires each local school board to post on its website an annual notice of the availability of postsecondary education and employment data published by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, and requires each college and university to provide on its website a link to the data. Kentucky's Center for Education and Workforce Statistics, in cooperation with education agencies, will make available information on the employment and earnings of Kentucky's public postsecondary institution graduates.

Health and safety

Laws in Kentucky, Mississippi and Virginia recognize how critical time can be in addressing allergic reactions or symptoms of diabetes by permitting students to treat themselves, with parental consent. Mississippi's bill also permits schools to maintain a supply of auto-injectable epinephrine; local boards policies will authorize trained personnel to administer epinephrine in crisis situations. The Virginia Department of Education will update its manual relating to training school employees on diabetes-related issues. Alabama school districts will implement a state-developed anaphylaxis preparedness program and develop guidelines that will allow employees to assist in the care of students with diabetes.

School safety planning was a topic of discussion. The new South Carolina school safety task force will make recommendations to the General Assembly by this December. Tennessee will protect students by prohibiting public inspection of school safety and security plans, and school district meetings concerning the plans are not subject to open meetings laws. Higher education institutional violence prevention committees must establish policies and procedures that require faculty and staff to report threatening behavior and that address the notification of family members, when appropriate, of these situations.

In other bills, students in Florida who simulate a firearm or weapon while playing, wear clothing or accessories that depict a firearm or weapon, or express an opinion regarding Second Amendment rights are not subject to disciplinary action or criminal referral. Oklahoma permits an individual to store a licensed handgun in a locked motor vehicle parked on school property if it is hidden from view. Virginia school districts may offer after-school hunter safety education for students in grades seven through 12, and districts are not required to expel students for certain weapons or drug offenses.

Other K-12 and higher education issues

Relative to curriculum requirements, a Georgia resolution asks state education authorities to require that high school students complete a financial literacy class. Tennessee and South Carolina districts will provide instruction in cursive writing. South Carolina also will require students to memorize multiplication tables.

Bills in several states require training for board members and others in positions of authority. Georgia requires both initial and annual governance training for charter school board members. Kentucky increases training requirements for school board members and district superintendents and requires a school district financial officer to present annual financial reports to the department of education and a monthly financial report to the local board. Tennessee restructured how members are appointed to the State Textbook Commission, requires training for those members, and provides greater transparency and public input in the textbook selection process.

Actions change the responsibilities, authority or oversight of some agencies. Louisiana will permit a local school district to implement school curriculum, content and methodology for required subjects in lieu of those approved or recommended by the state. West Virginia grants dual jurisdiction for the purpose of enforcing compulsory attendance

*Policies support
student health
and safety*

policies to the county school board in which a student lives and the county board in which he or she attends school. The Maryland Department of Education will submit any proposed flexibility waiver request under the federal No Child Left Behind Act to the Legislative Policy Committee at least 30 days prior to its submission to the U.S. Department of Education.

South Carolina transferred oversight of Regional Education Centers from the Education and Economic Development Coordinating Council to the state department of commerce. Oklahoma consolidated the Teacher Preparation Commission into the Office of Education Quality and Accountability. Delaware established the Prison Education Program in the state department of education to provide educational services for the state department of correction. The Alabama Department of Education is prohibited from licensing or regulating private or religious schools offering K-12 education, and legislation applies the same teacher certification requirements for public school teachers to private and religious school teachers.

Relative to higher education, Alabama's new Workforce Council will advise state policy-makers on ways to address work force development needs and streamline the state's current efforts. Another bill permits the chancellor of the community college system to appoint an interim president at a community college for any term that the chancellor deems in the best interests of that college. Also, a bill prohibits public institutions of higher education from denying admission to or discriminating against students due to their attendance at a private or religious school or in a home school environment. The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia may enter into reciprocity agreements that permit accredited degree-granting institutions in Virginia to offer postsecondary distance education. Mississippi transferred responsibility for administering student aid programs from the Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning to the newly-expanded Postsecondary Education Financial Assistance Board.

More detailed information on legislation passed during 2014 sessions is available in SREB's 2014 *Final Legislative Report*. These summaries of SREB states' final legislative actions are available upon request. All SREB reports are available at www.sreb.org.

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