

# Top Five State Education Issues For 2020

Legislatures in 15 of the 16 SREB compact states will hold regular sessions in 2020. SREB surveyed state legislative and governors' staff, reviewed trends from recent legislative sessions and interim studies, and looked at legislative research requests received by SREB to compile a list of top education issues on 2020 legislative agendas, and possible responses to those issues.

Legislatures will address other education issues during their sessions, but workforce, postsecondary access and affordability, K-12 funding, strengthening the educator workforce, and school safety and climate are critical issues for SREB states.

## Workforce

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SREB's report *Unprepared and Unaware* notes that SREB states will be challenged to ensure their workforces are ready to meet the demands of an economy increasingly reliant on automation and artificial intelligence. If states don't meet this challenge, eighteen million adults could be unemployable because their skills won't match the available jobs. This issue affects both students beginning their educational journeys, who need to be prepared for the jobs of the future, and adults currently in the workforce whose jobs will disappear or be profoundly altered in the next ten years.

Several SREB states have acted to ensure that students graduate from high school prepared for their next step, whether that is earning a credential, a certificate or a two- or four-year degree. **Alabama** established the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship within the state department of commerce to register and regulate apprenticeship programs. **Florida** modified existing law to establish a new high school Career and Technical Education pathway leading to industry certification, and in 2020 could consider legislation that would provide a corporate income tax credit for businesses employing degree-seeking interns and change the kinds of workforce programs that school district career centers are authorized to conduct. In its school finance overhaul, **Texas** required districts to develop plans and goals for early childhood literacy and mathematics proficiency as well as for college, career and military readiness.

**Oklahoma** required individual career and academic plans for each high school student entering grade nine, beginning in 2019-20. The plans will allow students to explore postsecondary and career and educational opportunities, including military careers, apprenticeship programs and technology programs that lead to certification or licensure. **Maryland** allowed local school boards to award credit toward a high school diploma, postsecondary credential or both to a student receiving work-based training and instruction in a registered apprenticeship program. **Kentucky** extended eligibility for the merit-based Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship to students in registered apprenticeship programs or qualified workforce training programs. **Delaware** required the Delaware Advisory Council on Career and Technical Education to establish a schedule for monitoring and reporting on career and technical education programs.

**Three federal programs — the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Perkins V, and the Every Student Succeeds Act — provide state policymakers opportunities and federal funding to strengthen connections among K-12, postsecondary and workforce agencies. SREB resources for states on this alignment can be found at: <https://www.sreb.org/webinar/aligning-essa-perkins-v-and-wioa-across-lifespan>.**

## Postsecondary Access and Affordability

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To help more students afford postsecondary education, states have passed legislation to ensure students know what financial aid is available. **Texas** required students to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid before high school graduation starting with the class of 2022. **Louisiana** students must complete a FAFSA as part of an individual graduation plan and as a graduation requirement. **Tennessee** required students to complete a FAFSA to participate in the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program. Legislation to require students to complete the FAFSA has been prefiled in **Kentucky** for consideration in 2020.

### *Dual enrollment*

Students, their families, and policymakers share an interest in making dual enrollment programs, which potentially allow students to reduce the cost of college by earning college credit while in high school, more accessible and equitable. States have also expanded dual enrollment for career and technical education as one way to promote postsecondary-level courses focused on critical shortage career fields. **Virginia**'s State Board for Community Colleges will implement, in coordination with the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, the State Department of Education and the Virginia Association of School Superintendents, a plan to maintain the same level of standards in dual enrollment courses offered by local schools as in courses offered at community colleges and to determine how dual enrollment courses transfer to public colleges and universities. **Louisiana** established a Statewide Dual Enrollment Framework Task Force that will make recommendations to the legislature by October 1, 2020. Legislation prefiled for the 2020 legislative session includes a **Florida** bill establishing reporting requirements for postsecondary institutions participating in dual enrollment programs and prohibiting districts and state colleges from limiting participation.

**States' concerns about dual enrollment, including escalating costs, funding levels, transferability and application of credit, quality of courses, faculty preparation, and accreditation led SREB to convene makers to address these challenges. SREB's Dual Enrollment Initiative will examine how dual enrollment programs can achieve higher enrollments and completion rates for underrepresented students. For more information, go to: <https://www.sreb.org/dual-enrollment-initiative>.**

### *Workforce-driven financial aid*

Some states have designed career pathways to help students of all ages move efficiently through education and training and into the workforce. Features of workforce-focused financial aid may include targeting certain career fields, outlining a process or designating a specific state agency to identify high-demand fields, and accountability measures. In 2019, enacted bills relating to postsecondary education and the workforce covered a wide range of issues, including: apprenticeships, collaboration across agencies, data collection use, career pathways, studies of workforce training needs, workforce program evaluation, identification of high-demand jobs, scholarships and other financial aid, promoting innovation and entrepreneurship, and micro-credentials.

- **Florida** governor Ron DeSantis announced in October 2019 that all 28 state colleges support the Last Mile College Completion program, which helps students who left college with 12 or fewer credit hours remaining complete a first associate or baccalaureate degree. And in the upcoming session, the legislature could consider funding for the LaunchCode Florida Tech Career and Veteran Initiative.

- **Arkansas** established a grant program to provide last-dollar assistance to eligible students seeking a two-year degree or certification in certain high-demand fields.
- **Georgia** allowed students who obtained a high school diploma through dual coursework eligibility to receive a HOPE Grant toward an associate degree.
- **Maryland** established the Workforce Development Sequence Scholarship for students in job skills programs at community colleges.
- **Tennessee** expanded Tennessee Reconnect to include adults returning to community college to earn a two-year degree; created the Tennessee Middle College Scholarship, which allows high school juniors to enter a postsecondary institution and earn a high school diploma and associate degree in two years; and provided National Guard members with last-dollar assistance toward a first bachelor's degree.
- **West Virginia** established a last-dollar financial aid program, WV Invests, for students in high-demand fields (as determined by the West Virginia Department of Commerce) at community and technical colleges and four-year state colleges and universities offering associate degrees.
- **Louisiana** legislators urged the continuation of a pilot program to provide public post-secondary education scholarships in programs that lead to high-demand, high-paying occupations for adults who have earned alternative high school diplomas.
- **Virginia's** community college system developed a 15-credit-hour, one-semester Passport Program and a 30-credit-hour, two-semester Uniform Certificate of General Studies Program. Credits earned under either program transfer to all Virginia four-year colleges and universities.
- **Oklahoma** encouraged enrollment in postsecondary courses by increasing the number of credit hours for which a high school senior can receive a tuition waiver from six to 18 hours annually. High school juniors can receive a tuition waiver for up to nine credit hours.

Legislation has also been filed in advance of **Florida's** 2020 session to establish the Florida Sunshine Scholarship Program, a last-dollar scholarship program for students pursuing an associate degree or career certificate, and to change the kinds of workforce education programs that school district career centers are authorized to conduct.

## K-12 Funding

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School funding is a persistent, difficult and generally contentious issue. Recent and ongoing efforts to rewrite school finance systems in several SREB states illustrate a variety of approaches to statewide school finance. However, some common priorities for K-12 expenditures include directing additional funding to at-risk students, especially younger students, and increasing compensation and support for teachers.

**Maryland's** Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education (the Kirwan Commission) was established in 2016. A commission work group produced a plan to gradually increase state- and county-level funding for education in each year of the coming decade, until overall funding increases by almost \$4 billion. The commission's final recommendation will be incorporated into its report to the governor and legislature, and legislative action based on the report is expected in the 2020 legislative session. Additional funding would go to priorities identified by the commission such as expanding prekindergarten, putting more counselors and mental health professionals in schools, giving extra support to schools with large numbers of students in poverty, and increasing teacher salaries.

**North Carolina** and **South Carolina** have both engaged in multi-year studies of their funding formulas. North Carolina's Joint Legislative Task Force on Education Finance Reform has studied moving to a formula that weights funding amounts based on student characteristics, rather than the current, flat per-student amount. In South Carolina, in response to a request from the governor and legislative leaders, the Office of Revenue and Fiscal Affairs recently published a report presenting a new education funding model. It divides a common set of services and programs into three major categories — instruction, facilities and transportation, and district services — with each category consisting of several funding programs driven by a formula. For equity purposes, the model allocates teacher funding based on two different student-teacher ratios, with a lower ratio provided for students affected by poverty. The proposed funding model would redistribute \$4.2 billion in state funding provided to school districts, constituting 77.5% of the total cost of the model. Local funding would comprise the remaining 22.5%.

In **Texas**, the 2019 session saw legislators approving long-discussed school finance reforms, which reduced property taxes that go into the Foundation School Fund and limit local property tax increases. The legislation also:

- increased state funding directed to economically disadvantaged schools;
- expanded state student transportation, dual credit and work-based funding to all districts;
- created a separate funding allotment for fast-growing school districts;
- increased, and rolled several forms of categorical funding into, the basic per-student allotment;
- created funding allotments for economically disadvantaged students, Limited English Proficient students in kindergarten through grade three, and dyslexic students;
- increased the statewide minimum teacher salary schedule, and mandated that at least 30% of any year-over-year allotment increase go to full-time employee salary increases;
- created the Teacher Incentive Allotment — teachers will be designated as Master, Exemplary or Recognized based on district appraisals, allowing them to earn incentives from \$3,000 to \$32,000 per year based on the designation level and the economic disadvantage rating of their school, with additional weight for rural schools;
- created a statewide teacher mentoring program, along with a dedicated funding allotment; and
- required districts to offer full-day prekindergarten for children age 4.

## The Educator Workforce

As it becomes increasingly difficult for states to recruit and retain teachers, governors and legislators are trying to balance state policies that make it possible for schools to fill empty positions while maintaining high standards or increasing standards for the profession. Schools now face shortages not only in traditionally hard-to-fill subjects like STEM or special education but in most subject areas. Meeting the needs of newly certified teachers or teachers with emergency certifications is also a challenge.

In the last few years, statewide strikes, protests, and walkouts have occurred in **West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, North Carolina,** and **Virginia**, along with actions in local districts. Teachers have sought increases in their pay and overall funding for education.

Most SREB states enacted teacher pay raises in their 2019 sessions. In some states, the raise was a flat dollar figure across the board, while in others it was a percentage increase.

Alabama	4%
Arkansas	\$1,000
Delaware	2%
Florida	\$2,000 – legislators appropriated funds sufficient for the increase, but actual salaries are determined locally, via collective-bargaining
Georgia	\$3,000 – only applies to teachers whose salaries are paid through formula funding; some districts with waivers may not be required to provide increase
Louisiana	\$1,000
Mississippi	\$1,500
Oklahoma	\$1,220 – districts could provide differentiated raises as long as they averaged \$1,220
South Carolina	4% to 10.6%
Tennessee	2.5% – legislators appropriated formula funds for the increases, but local districts determine allocations and some teachers are paid with non-formula funds
Texas	\$5,500 to \$9,000 increase in statewide minimum salary schedule steps
Virginia	3% on July 1, 2019, plus an additional 2% on September 1, 2019
West Virginia	5% average

**South Carolina** raised the minimum starting salary by \$3,000 (9.4%) to \$35,000 and provided increases of 4% for teachers with five or more years of experience and 6.1% to 10.6% for those with less than five years of experience.

**Maryland** legislators passed legislation enacting interim recommendations of the Kirwan Commission. It included \$75 million for the statewide Teacher Salary Incentive Grant Program, divided across the state's 24 districts. Districts may receive the grant funds if they negotiate and fund an average salary increase of at least 3% in 2019-20 and continue to fund it in 2020-21. Districts also must prioritize starting teachers and those with less than five years of experience for additional salary increases. **North Carolina** legislators approved a teacher salary increase of 3.5% over the 2019-21 biennium, but the governor vetoed the full appropriations act, which included the increase. Legislators eventually approved, and the governor signed, several bills to provide appropriations for the 2019-20 year.

State actions to increase teacher salaries will continue. In October the governor in **Florida** announced a proposal to increase the minimum teacher salary for Florida teachers to \$47,500, which would make Florida second in the nation for starting teacher pay. Legislative discussion of this proposal in advance of the 2020 session focused on how additional funding for teacher salaries should be allocated.

**Georgia** Governor Brian Kemp has stated he plans to seek an additional teacher pay increase in 2020. **Louisiana's** legislature requested that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education develop a 10-year plan to increase teacher salaries and make Louisiana's average salary the highest in the nation.

Educator preparation programs were a legislative priority in several states recently. Legislators approved laws calling for preparation programs to address reading and literacy development (**Arkansas, Florida and Oklahoma**), dyslexia and other learning disabilities (**North Carolina**) and digital or computer science training (**Oklahoma and Virginia**). Relative to licensure, **Georgia and West Virginia** permitted military spouses to teach on a temporary basis, while **Texas and Virginia** exempted teachers licensed in other states from certain assessment requirements. **Louisiana and Oklahoma** permitted the re-employment of retired school personnel, including teachers, and **North Carolina** permitted higher education faculty to serve as adjunct instructors in core subjects.

**Oklahoma** created lead and master teacher certification levels to recognize highly rated teachers with years of experience. **Tennessee** modified teacher preparation program requirements, requiring field experiences and clinical practice, and required programs to assign each student candidate to an effective educator for guidance and instruction. Programs must report the number of graduates rated below (or significantly below) expectations in their first year as teacher, and legislators specified conditions under which the state will place a teacher preparation program on probation. **Florida** revamped its Best and Brightest Teachers Scholarship to create three types of awards: one-time recruitment awards for new teachers who are content experts, retention awards for teachers who have been at an improving schools for at least two years, and recognition awards for instructional personnel rated effective or highly effective.

**SREB's Education Human Capital Roundtables convene policymakers around challenges in strengthening the educator workforce. Roundtables use data, research and the group's experience to identify both barriers and innovative solutions. Education leaders in North Carolina and Alabama are now engaged in this process; roundtables will begin this winter in Oklahoma and Mississippi. For more information, go to: <https://www.sreb.org/education-human-capital-roundtables>.**

**SREB's Teacher Preparation Commission called for more practice-based preparation for teachers, informed by close partnerships with local K-12 schools and by data systems that show what is and isn't working to produce effective teachers. Access the Teacher Preparation Commission report here: <https://www.sreb.org/publication/state-policies-improve-teacher-preparation>.**

## School Safety and School Climate

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Protecting children in our schools continues to be a major focus of state regulation and legislation, especially in response to school shootings. At the same time, the safety discussion has broadened with legislators' awareness of the need to focus on students' social and emotional development, resulting in policies and programs to instill order and safety while encouraging student success.

In recent sessions legislators have addressed many aspects of school safety, including threat notification and reporting, active shooter drills, alert levels, first aid training, and training and employment requirements for school resource officers. Legislatures also enacted bills addressing multiple aspects of school safety or providing grants to make school facilities safer:

- **Florida** enacted the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act in 2018 to address gun violence on school campuses, creating the Office of Safe Schools within the state department of education — charged with risk assessment, coordinating technical assistance and establishing a School Safety Awareness Program — while the department was required to establish a mental health awareness and training program for school personnel. Funding was provided for districts to keep at least one resource officer at each school. In 2019, Florida legislators approved a bill, based on recommendations of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission, that identified four safe-school officer options and required sheriff's offices to assist school boards in complying with the requirements for each type. Each school board must adopt and train personnel on an active assailant response plan and use the Florida Safe Schools Assessment tool. For 2020, legislation has been filed that would require each public school building to have panic alarms.
- **Delaware** enacted the Joseph E. Miro School Safety Act requiring that all newly constructed and renovated schools include a secure entrance and other safety features in visitor screening areas, as well as classroom doors that can be locked on the outside. Legislators also established the \$5 million Delaware School Safety and Security fund to provide grants for public schools to make safety upgrades.
- **Maryland** legislators passed the Maryland Safe to Learn Act, requiring all public schools to have a trained school resource officer or coverage by local law enforcement by the beginning of the 2019-20 school year. It also required schools to identify a mental health services coordinator and a school security coordinator and conduct a safety evaluation of all its school facilities. School resource officers and school security employees must complete training based on a curriculum established by the Center for School Safety.
- **North Carolina** established a school safety grants program in 2018, with separate categories for hiring of school resource officers, providing crisis services for students, training that helps students develop healthy responses to trauma and stress, purchasing safety equipment, and employing additional mental health support personnel.

- **Kentucky** specified the Center for School Safety as the central point for data analysis, research and information dissemination about school safety and school security programs. It required each school district to appoint a school safety resource officer as funding and officers become available and will provide an anonymous tool for individuals to report unsafe and potentially harmful activities.
- **Texas** established a school safety allotment in formula funding to districts and required each school district to: implement a trauma-informed care policy; include instruction on mental health, skills to manage emotions, and suicide prevention in its K-12 health curriculum; provide instruction on “digital citizenship,” particularly related to cyber-bullying; and establish a threat assessment and safe and supportive school team for each school. The Texas Education Agency is required to establish a program for student safety, crisis response and recovery, along with supports for school climate and behavioral and mental health.
- **Mississippi’s** School Safety Act of 2019 requires active shooter drills and annual safety training for school employees, who must also complete training or professional development on mental health and suicide prevention every two years. The department of education must establish evidence-based pilot programs for stress and anxiety management for K-5 students in six districts. The state Office of Homeland Security is required to establish a training program for school threat assessment officers, while the Mississippi Department of Mental Health will provide mental health services and training to districts.

### *School discipline, school climate and counseling*

**Texas** required teacher preparation programs to include instruction on recognition of mental health issues among students, strategies to maintain positive relationships between students, and grief- and trauma-informed strategies to support student success. Legislators also required at least 25% of teacher continuing education to concern classroom effectiveness, digital learning, and identifying students at risk of dropping out or with special needs. **Virginia** required school counselors to spend at least 80% of their time directly counseling students and passed legislation to reduce the maximum number of students per school counselor. **Kentucky** required high school and middle grades teachers, school principals and guidance counselors to receive at least one hour of suicide prevention training every two years, beginning with the 2018-19 school year. **Georgia** required county student attendance committees to begin recommending school climate policies to increase student achievement, improve student and teacher morale and decrease student suspensions, expulsions and dropouts. Each school public safety plan must include strategies for training school staff on violence prevention, school security and threat assessment, and mental health awareness. **Delaware** now allows police officers and emergency care providers to transmit the name of a child present at the scene of a traumatic event to the child’s school district or charter school. Prefiled legislation for the 2020 session in **Florida** would allow each district and charter governing board to count one mental health day each semester as an excused absence.

Several SREB states, concerned about the impact of suspensions, expulsions and other forms of disciplinary actions, have enacted restrictions on such forms of discipline. **Texas** required districts to annually report to the commissioner of education on all out-of-school suspensions for the prior school year, including demographic data, and prohibited districts from placing a homeless student

in out-of-school suspension. Texas also prohibited any school employee from using any disciplinary techniques or interventions that involve intentionally inflicting significant physical or emotional discomfort or pain on a student. **Delaware** directed the state department of education to report annually on student discipline and required schools with large out-of-school suspension gaps between racial subgroups, or with high rates of out-of-school suspensions, to submit plans for reducing them. **Georgia** prohibited schools from suspending a student in prekindergarten through grade three for more than five days in a school year or from expelling such a student (in most cases) without first providing that student with a tiered system of data-based academic and behavioral interventions. The **Maryland** State Department of Education is required to disaggregate reported student discipline data by race, ethnicity, gender, disability status, socioeconomic status and English language proficiency.

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The Southern Regional Education Board is a sixteen-state education compact. Its mission is to guide and support states as they advance all levels of education to improve the social and economic vitality of the SREB region. SREB works by analyzing and publishing data, research, and promising practices; convening and engaging decision-makers in education, government, and business; and supporting action in states and schools through policy and practice.

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