

2025 Progress Across 50 States and DC: Kindergarten through Third Grade

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This analysis of the year in early childhood state policy advocacy relies on data from a survey of early childhood policy advocates in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, conducted May 2025 through December 2025. The survey asked them for highlights from the year, so the results are representative and not comprehensive. Policy "wins" include legislation, funding increases, executive actions, and regulatory changes.

The survey was developed and executed by Dr. Lisa Kerber of Frontera Strategy. Frontera supports advocacy efforts nationwide by providing qualitative and quantitative research services, including needs assessments and environmental scans, program and policy evaluation, statistical analyses, and survey research for associations, foundations, and nonprofit service organizations active in state capitols.

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Increased Funding and Expansion of Early Literacy

Delaware

\$8M investment in early literacy in grades K-3

State funding: Relatively large increase of state funding

Kentucky

HB 240 represents a significant policy shift aimed at early identification and intervention for students struggling with literacy. The bill mandates the administration of universal screeners and outlines criteria for student retention based on not making adequate academic progress by the end of kindergarten and first grade. For students retained in kindergarten or first grade, schools must reevaluate and adjust their reading improvement plans to address specific learning needs and support academic development. Students who spend an additional year in the same grade can advance through the primary program when it is determined to be in their best interest, allowing for individualized progression based on readiness. While the intent of this bill is to promote early literacy and positive academic outcomes, there are potential harmful impacts to young students due to retention, which makes this only a qualified win.

Target population: Kindergarten and first grade students in Kentucky public schools

Quantify: As kindergarten retention under the measure does not affect overall district enrollment for state funding calculations, no short-term state fiscal impact is expected; however, there are potential future yet indeterminable state costs at full implementation related to supporting an additional year of education for retained students.

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Montana

HB 338 adds numeracy to early literacy targeted intervention programs (passed in 2023 via House Bill 352). It also adds flexibility to the timing of screenings for early intervention programs, allowing children to be screened on or before September 10, rather than only in April, May, and June.

Target population: Four- to eight-year olds falling behind on their literacy and numeracy skills (families gain access to publicly offered early learning intervention programming)

State funding: No change in state funding related to this win

Quantify: By offering numeracy in addition to literacy, the early intervention programs will reach a greater number of children and provide a higher quality of early learning.

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New York

This year the state delivered increased funding for public schools across the state. The state also made changes to the funding formula that better reflect the changing student demographics in various school districts. This win will ensure the continuity of programs in light of the potential federal cuts to public schools and took pressure off school districts to make difficult choices among their early learning programs and others funded with school aid.

Target population: These changes benefited all public school students, in particular those in low-income communities of color.

State funding: Relatively large increase of state funding

Quantify: \$1.4 billion in additional Foundation Aid. This funding will help ensure that 2.4 million public school students, of whom 60% are economically disadvantaged, receive their constitutionally granted right to “a sound basic education.” This was the first year that the amount of foundation aid increase was not challenged, after the 2007 implementation of the formula, as well as the first time that a formula updated was implemented.

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Tennessee

The state funding formula for K-12 schools increased by \$244 million (including pay raises for teachers toward minimum salary of \$50k by 2026) and \$198.4 million to provide K-12 teachers with a one-time \$2,000 bonus.

Target population: Children attending public schools

State funding: Relatively large increase of state funding

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Washington

House Bill 1314 enhances the Early Learning Facilities (ELF) Grant and Loan Program. Signed into law in 2025, this legislation aims to increase the availability of safe, high-quality early learning spaces by expanding funding options and eligibility criteria. HB 1314 broadens the scope of the ELF program to include emergency grants, reduces matching fund requirements, and allows loans and grants to support the conversion of part-day Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) slots to full or extended-day slots. Additionally, the bill extends eligibility to state-tribal education compact schools, enhancing access for Indigenous communities. The legislation also emphasizes leveraging private and local government investments to maximize the impact of state funds. This policy addresses the critical need for additional early learning facilities to accommodate growing demand. By improving access to funding and reducing barriers for providers, HB 1314 supports the expansion of early education opportunities, which are essential for preparing children for success in school and life. This win was also tied to a \$69 million investment in the Capital Budget for the Early Learning Facilities Fund.

Target population: Children with low incomes (households with income below the poverty threshold) and under-resourced communities and students in tribal compact schools and rural areas

State funding: Relatively large increase of state funding

Quantify: This policy bill was associated with a specific budget ask that allowed the ELF Fund to receive approximately \$69 million on the Capital Budget.

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Striving for Equity

Families with Lower Incomes

Alabama

The RAISE Act (SB305) allocates \$375 million over three years (fiscal years 2026, 2027 and 2028) to create a new funding system for public K-12 schools aimed at better meeting students' diverse needs. Before the RAISE Act, Alabama's funding approach prioritized student numbers over individual needs, widening gaps between wealthy and low-resource areas. Local funding often comes from property taxes, allowing affluent areas to generate more revenue and achieve better student outcomes. This lack of fair funding negatively impacts underserved groups, including low-income families, English language learners, students with disabilities, and students of color. Each year, the RAISE Fund will determine the amount of funding each student group receives based on factors such as poverty, English language learners, charter school students, and gifted students.

Target population: Publicly funded K-12 schools statewide

State funding: Relatively large increase of state funding

Quantify: Lawmakers budgeted \$375 million for the next three fiscal years, beginning in FY 2026. Current projections show that high-needs districts could receive up to \$400 more per student. Additional funding for high-need districts includes: \$37 million for high-poverty schools, \$49 million for special education, \$17 million for English learners (totaling \$33 million), an additional \$1.3 million for gifted students (totaling \$12 million), and \$1.2 million for charter schools. There are 739,873 students enrolled in Alabama's public K-12 schools, according to the 2024 Alabama Kids Count Data Book. Alabama students included in some of the high-needs categories enumerated in the bill include: 58.6% eligible for direct certification, 18% have disabilities, and 5.8% are English language learners.

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Eligibility to be Defined by SMI Instead of FPL

Florida

HB 859 resets eligibility for the School Readiness program to the State Median Income (SMI) as opposed to the Federal Poverty Level. It changes the definition of "economically disadvantaged" to mean those making 55% of the SMI or less (equating to \$53,921) and allows eligibility to be determined by income at or below 55% of the SMI. It also creates a uniform waitlist for Early Learning Coalitions, factoring in household income. Finally, it requires the state's Early Learning Estimating Conference to factor in historical population changes and enrollment when calculating future investments in the SR program.

Target population: Families in the affordability gap, making more than 150% of the federal poverty level but less than 55% of the state median income

State funding: No change in state funding related to this win

Quantify: The initial Senate version of the bill allowed for those making 65% SMI or less to qualify for SR, which would have allowed thousands more children (pending funding) into the program. The current change may allow more families to be eligible for the program – a first step.

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Out-of-School Time for Rural Areas

Arizona

The budget includes a proposal from Governor Hobbs’ Bright Futures AZ initiatives for a \$3 million appropriation to support an out-of-school grant program (youth ages 5-12) for eligible families. Thirty percent of these funds are reserved for rural communities.

Target population: Children who are five to twelve years of age, who require child care during periods of time when school instruction is not being conducted, and who come from households earning \$150,000 or less a year. 30% of the funds are for rural communities.

State funding: Relatively small increase of state funding

Quantify: \$3 million for the grant program

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Prohibiting Electronic and Wireless Devices

Alabama

House Bill 166, the “the Freeing Our Classrooms of Unnecessary Screens for Safety” (FOCUS) Act, prohibits a student from using, operating, or possessing a wireless communications device on public elementary or secondary school grounds during the instructional day, subject to certain exceptions and written policies adopted by a local board of education to implement this act. It requires each local board of education to adopt an internet safety policy that addresses student access to the internet on district-owned devices. It also requires students to receive instruction on the risks and benefits of social media and how to use social media safely before entering the 8th grade.

Target population: Applies to students in K-12 public schools.

State funding: No change in state funding related to this win

Quantify: The law was enacted to arm school districts with tools to increase focus during classroom instructional time by decreasing the distractions caused by the use of cell phones and other digital devices. Exceptions are provided in the law.

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Students with Special Needs

Washington

Senate Bill 5263 overhauls special education funding. It fixes a past mistake by ensuring that the Early Support for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT) program, which provides early intervention services to children between birth to age three, gets the same funding support as preschool special education. Through this bill, the multiplier increased from 1.15 to 1.2. The bill also creates test sites to help stop the use of isolation rooms for young students in pre-K through 5th grade by the year 2031. This bill also: 1) Eliminates the longstanding 16% enrollment cap on state-funded special education services (in other words limiting the number of students school districts could serve under state funding), ensuring that all students with disabilities receive the support they need, addressing inequities and unmet needs, 2) Increases the funding multiplier for K-12 students (to 1.16), and 3) Lowers the eligibility threshold for safety net funding, making it more accessible for districts with fewer resources or higher concentrations of students in need. This win represents a significant step toward the state's constitutional obligation to provide equitable education for all students.

Target population: Students with disabilities are the primary beneficiary population (birth through 12th grade)

State funding: Relatively large increase of state funding

Quantify: The reforms should result in \$870 million in increased funding over the next four years, supporting inclusive classrooms and better outcomes for students with disabilities.

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Improved Approach to School Discipline

West Virginia

Harmful provisions of SB 199, a problematic school discipline bill, were revised before passage. Lawmakers changed the bill to support a more balanced approach to school discipline with additional supports for children and reduce the likelihood of overly punitive measures affecting young learners, including school suspensions, which was the initial framework for the proposed legislation.

Target population: Elementary and middle school students, particularly those at risk of exclusionary discipline.

State funding: No change in state funding related to this win

Quantify: While not tied to a specific funding line, the revised bill helps reduce suspensions and encourages supportive practices in schools statewide.

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Reduced Ratios

California

California implemented reduced ratios for Transitional Kindergarten (TK) from 12:1 to 10:1 and will ensure TK teachers complete educational requirements focused on early childhood development. TK teachers will also receive targeted funding to support their students in language development needs and a new screening tool by March 2026 to identify multilingual learners.

Target population: All children enrolled in TK will benefit, about 177,570 children

State funding: Relatively large increase of state funding

Quantify: \$1.2 billion ongoing was added to pay for lower ratios

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