

MARCH 2021

# GOVERNORS' TOP EDUCATION PRIORITIES

## in 2021 State of the State Addresses

Bryan Kelley and Emily Brixey



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In 2020, the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) disrupted education systems, policymaking bodies and the daily lives of Americans throughout the United States. Unsurprisingly the pandemic and its repercussions played a central role in governors' 2021 State of the State addresses, as they related to education. In their addresses, governors reviewed the prior tumultuous year, praised state efforts to overcome new hurdles and presented their visions for the upcoming year. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on state finances; caused disruptions to schools that transitioned from in-person environments to remote learning; had serious, inequitably distributed implications for student achievement and the health of teachers, students and staff from early education through higher education; and prompted many new investments in workforce development projects.



**COVID has disrupted classrooms in New Mexico and indeed across our whole country. But dealing with the virus must not — and will not — derail our focus on improving outcomes in public education, on necessary long-term investments in family well-being and the health of school communities across the state.**

Michelle Lujan Grisham  
New Mexico Governor



Each year since 2005, Education Commission of the States has tracked, analyzed and identified trends in education policy accomplishments and proposals featured in governors' State of the State addresses. For the past two years, ECS has also partnered with the National Governors Association to review education proposals in these addresses. To date, 42 governors have delivered their 2021 State of the State address. After reviewing the addresses, ECS identified six high-level trends related to education:

At least 32 governors\* discussed school **FUNDING**, including the use of federal dollars to help support early, K-12 and higher education.

Governors in at least 29 states and the Virgin Islands highlighted **REMOTE LEARNING**, including praise for teachers and students transitioning to virtual environments and efforts to bridge the digital divides experienced by many students.

At least 24 governors emphasized the important role of **WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT** policies in their states.

At least 22 governors discussed **REOPENING SCHOOLS**, with an emphasis on efforts to get students back into physical classrooms while ensuring a safe environment.

Governors in at least 21 states addressed **STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND LEARNING LOSS**, whether it was concerns over COVID-related learning loss or the opportunity gaps that exist for certain student populations.

At least 18 governors mentioned the **PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH** of students, teachers and school workers, including concerns for safe school environments as well as the availability of mental health care for students.



[Click here](#) for ECS' complete summaries of education policy priorities outlined in each governor's State of the State address. [Click here](#) to access NGA's complete list of all State of the State addresses delivered to date in 2021.

\*The totals listed throughout this resource reflect ECS' best efforts to analyze and interpret governors' remarks.

# FUNDING

This year, governors had a lot to say about funding early learning, K-12 and higher education. Specifically, at least 32 governors discussed finance generally; at least 30 governors addressed K-12 funding; and at least eight governors mentioned higher education funding. Governors discussed how they utilized federal [CARES Act](#) dollars to help pay for the additional costs of educating students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many governors also highlighted programs in their state or proposed future programs to help equitably fund education and provide targeted dollars to support students with the greatest needs.



**(I)n many of our more affluent neighborhoods we teach kids how to fish and give them a speedboat, a graphite rod and a Fish Finder. And you know what? Those kids can fish. But in too many of our rural communities and communities of color we give kids a stick and a string ... and then we can't figure out why they don't catch as many fish. Education has always been called the great equalizer, but it can't be that way if our kids are not treated equally.**

Spencer Cox  
Utah Governor



## Delaware

Gov. John Carney



Highlighted the creation of the [Opportunity Funding program](#), Delaware's first weighted student funding system; noted that the new system is designed to ensure additional classroom support is available for students from low-income households, students classified as English learners and the educators who work with these students.

## Georgia

Gov. Brian Kemp



Recommended \$647 million to restore funding to school systems across the state, to fully fund enrollment growth and to hold schools harmless for enrollment reductions.

## Hawaii

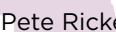
Gov. David Ige



Highlighted that the state directed \$31 million from federal CARES Act funds for computers and internet connectivity for students; highlighted the \$61 million in CARES Act funds spent on personal protective equipment for educational institutions, among other entities.

## Nebraska

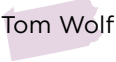
Gov. Pete Ricketts



Proposed fully funding state aid to K-12 education, with an additional \$42.7 million over the next two fiscal years.

## Pennsylvania

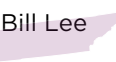
Gov. Tom Wolf



Announced a plan to alter state taxes to double the investment in education and to fund every school in every district fully and fairly.

## Tennessee

Gov. Bill Lee



Proposed \$900 million in capital improvements to higher education campuses and state buildings in the upcoming budget — the largest capital maintenance budget in the state's history; proposed full funding for the Tennessee Higher Education Commission's [outcomes-based funding formula](#).



To learn more about state policy action in this area, see ECS' Policy Outline on [Funding Equity](#) and Policy Snapshot on [K-12 Funding Policy Responses to COVID-19](#). Please also see NGA's webinar on [equity in school funding responses](#) to the pandemic.

# REMOTE LEARNING

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted schools throughout the country to move from in-person learning environments to remote learning overnight. At least 30 governors spoke about remote learning in their State of the State addresses. Many governors praised the efforts of teachers and school personnel to transition to remote learning and expand access to remote learning. Additionally, governors called attention to the inequitable distribution of access to internet connections and devices that prohibits many students from connecting to virtual instruction. Several governors pledged to tackle this digital divide in the coming legislative session, notably by proposing increased investments in broadband.



**It's 2021, folks — having access to high-speed internet is no longer a luxury; it's a necessity.**

Tony Evers  
Wisconsin Governor



## Arkansas

Gov. Asa Hutchinson

Called for \$30 million to expand high-speed internet access to reduce the digital divide, noting that this must be done to provide education fairly in all areas of the state.

## Connecticut

Gov. Ned Lamont

Emphasized the need to close the digital divide during the COVID-19 pandemic and the foreseeable future; stated that computers, internet access and broadband are essential tools for student learning.

## Kentucky

Gov. Andy Beshear

Praised teachers for quickly transitioning to remote learning and called for an increase in funding for electronic instruction resources.

## New York

Gov. Andrew Cuomo

Proposed a mandate that internet service providers offer \$15 per month high-speed internet service to all low-income households; proposed a fund to subsidize broadband for the sake of the state's most vulnerable children.

## North Dakota

Gov. Doug Burgum

Praised the state's teachers, staff, and administrators for their ability to quickly and successfully transition to a distance learning model after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and praised higher education institutions for adapting to the challenges presented by the pandemic.

## Tennessee

Gov. Bill Lee

Proposed an investment of \$200 million to help achieve the goal of ensuring that every Tennessean has access to high-speed broadband and to improve educational outcomes in rural areas.



To learn more about state policy action in this area, see ECS' [Remote Learning](#) Key Issue page. Please also see NGA's [page of resources](#) on state strategies to expand access to broadband.

# WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Governors emphasized the important role that state policy plays in ensuring all individuals in the state have access to high-quality work and learning opportunities, including making sure that workers impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic are able to upskill or reskill. Governors across the states highlighted how workforce development programs both at the K-12 level and in higher education institutions can be leveraged to help fill high-demand occupations. In 2021, at least 24 governors talked about workforce development programs. Specifically, at least eight governors discussed career and technical education, and 21 governors spoke about postsecondary workforce development. Some governors highlighted how workforce development efforts can target certain populations to help ensure that all residents have access to good job opportunities.



**Our budget builds a stronger Montana workforce by prioritizing trades education. Many jobs require specialized skills, and we should ensure that Montanans have access to the training and education they need to acquire and refine those skills.**

Greg Gianforte  
Montana Governor



## Indiana

Gov. Eric Holcomb



Praised the “Workforce Ready” and “Employer Grant” [Programs](#) for connecting individuals to higher education opportunities in high-demand occupations, and praised the programs’ strategic efforts to increase participation by students of color.

## Iowa

Gov. Kim Reynolds



Called for the integration of work-based learning in K-12 curriculum and for continuing the work of the [Future Ready Iowa](#) program to connect people with the education and training needed to fill open jobs in the state.

## Missouri

Gov. Mike Parson



Proposed increasing funding for high-demand occupation training programs by \$21 million; praised the [Missouri One Start](#) workforce development program, which has trained 100,000 people through partnerships with over 400 companies.

## New Jersey

Gov. Phil Murphy



Praised the expansion of job training programs in the state; highlighted the state’s public-private partnerships — to train more people for the jobs of the future.

## Rhode Island

Gov. Gina Raimondo



Highlighted the 60% increase in the number of high-quality career and technical education programs in high schools; celebrated the opening of an education center that has provided skills for new jobs to over 3,000 students; highlighted the upcoming opening of another education center in 2021.

## U.S. Virgin Islands

Gov. Albert Bryan Jr.



Announced a plan to invest \$10 million in a Skills for Today on-the-job training program, to train 625 individuals over the next 24 months; the program will complement the registered apprenticeship program, which currently has sponsors in health care, hospitality and the marine industry.



To learn more about state policy action in this area, see ECS’ Policy Snapshot on [State Workforce Development Policies](#) and Policy Outline on [Upskilling and Reskilling](#). Please also see NGA’s [State Roadmap for Workforce Recovery](#).

# REOPENING SCHOOLS

As many students, teachers and parents continue to navigate the challenges of distance and hybrid learning models, governors highlighted the need to safely reopen schools. At least 22 governors discussed reopening schools. Governors not only highlighted the urgency of getting students back into the classroom, but many also noted that doing so safely was a top priority. In some cases, they noted the importance of maintaining local decision-making along with state-level guidance to help ensure safe in-person learning.



**I want you to know that we're going to get every Kansas student back in the classroom as soon as possible and provide their teachers with the tools and resources they need to get our kids back on track.**

Laura Kelly  
Kansas Governor



## Arizona

Gov. Doug Ducey



Called for students to return to in-person learning environments; when discussing possible COVID-19 pandemic response options, commented that children are still in need of schooling during a pandemic.

## Idaho

Gov. Brad Little



Praised school districts for maintaining full or partial in-person learning and thanked teachers for accommodating changes; highlighted a [guide](#) developed and used for local decision-making on safe school operations; noted the challenges parents faced to support students' online learning.

## Mississippi

Gov. Tate Reeves



Recognized that in-person education was essential for students during the pandemic.

## Nevada

Gov. Steve Sisolak



Prioritized getting students back into physical classrooms; highlighted the state's work to supply personal protective equipment, ensure rapid COVID-19 testing and prioritize educators for COVID-19 vaccinations.

## New Mexico

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham



Set a goal of having students back for in-person learning; praised the development of a solid epidemiologically sound in-person learning expansion plan; noted the importance of planning and union leadership in meeting this goal.

## Washington

Gov. Jay Inslee



Committed to getting students back into safe and healthy classrooms; acknowledged the disproportionate impacts the pandemic has had on students of color.



To learn more about state policy action in this area, see ECS' State Information Request on [Returning to In-Person Learning](#). Please also see NGA's brief on [COVID-19 K-12 School Opening and Closing Policies](#).

# STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND LEARNING LOSS

Student achievement and learning loss issues were addressed by at least 21 governors in their State of the State addresses. Many of these governors expressed concerns about the learning loss experienced by students whose education has been disrupted by responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with the shift from in-person to remote education. Some governors proposed policy solutions to understand this issue more fully and to promote an amelioration of such learning loss. At least eight governors identified gaps in opportunity that are tied to factors, such as a student’s race or zip code and the impact these opportunity gaps have on student achievement.



Across the board remote learning was always intended to be temporary. Take it from a former economics teacher, nothing replaces in-person instruction and, unfortunately, during COVID-19, many students have fallen behind.

Kay Ivey  
Alabama Governor



## Alaska

Gov. Mike Dunleavy



Announced a directive for the state department of education to establish summer camps to boost students’ reading, math and coding skills.

## Connecticut

Gov. Ned Lamont



Emphasized the importance of public schools and workforce development programs to ensure every child — regardless of zip code, race, color or creed — has the best opportunity at the starting line of life.

## Maryland

Gov. Larry Hogan



Proposed investment in targeted tutoring to further the vision that every single child in Maryland deserves a world-class education.

## Michigan

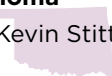
Gov. Gretchen Whitmer



Promised to reconvene the [Return to School Advisory Council](#) to provide guidance to policymakers, districts and schools about how to promote a comprehensive recovery to address learning loss.

## Oklahoma

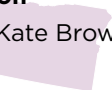
Gov. Kevin Stitt



Noted that distance learning widens the achievement gap and threatens Oklahoma’s goal of being a Top 10 state in education.

## Oregon

Gov. Kate Brown



Committed to making progress on closing the opportunity gap by ensuring 8,000 more children are eligible for home visiting, early head start and [preschool promise](#).



To learn more about state policy action in this area, see ECS’ State Information Request on [Learning Loss and Acceleration](#). Please also see NGA’s memo on [Summer Camps and Summer Learning Opportunities](#).

# PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

This year, at least 18 governors mentioned the health of students, teachers and school workers in their State of the State addresses. At least 12 governors addressed health considerations directly tied to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as efforts to increase COVID-19 testing capacities or promoting the administration of COVID-19 vaccines to teachers and school staff. Many governors expressed concerns that remote learning was negatively impacting the mental and behavioral health of students. Other governors highlighted recent efforts or proposed future policies to improve health concerns exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as food insecurity, student mental health, and the availability of school counselors and nurses.



**Our focus must turn to ensuring our students have the academic and social-emotional support needed as they rebound from the stresses of the pandemic.**

Phil Murphy  
New Jersey Governor



**Delaware**  
Gov. John Carney Highlighted the [First Chance Initiative](#) team that helped ensure students had access to food when schools were closed.

**Massachusetts**  
Gov. Charlie Baker Praised state efforts to work with lab partners to develop a weekly COVID-19 testing program for kids, teachers and staff.

**New Mexico**  
Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham Stated that no educator or school worker should have to choose between their health and the students they serve, and called for an 800% increase in funding for suicide prevention services and programs for both youth and adults.

**South Carolina**  
Gov. Henry McMaster Referred to his budget's funding allocation to give every student access to a mental health counselor and to place a school nurse in every school in the state.

**Virginia**  
Gov. Ralph Northam Stated that vaccinating teachers and K-12 students is another important step in reopening schools; proposed \$26 million to increase the number of school counselors.

**West Virginia**  
Gov. Jim Justice Announced a partnership with the [West Virginia Drug Intervention Institute](#) to bring evidence-based prevention programs for opioid and substance abuse to all students in West Virginia schools.



To learn more about this state policy action area, see ECS' [Glossary of Student Mental Wellness Concepts](#) Policy Outline and [Student Mental Health](#) Policy Snapshot. Please also see NGA's page on [Vaccine Communication Resources](#).



# HONORABLE MENTIONS

While they did not land in the Top 6 themes this year, **teacher compensation and early learning came in seventh and eighth within governors' State of the State addresses.**

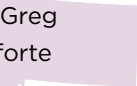
## AT LEAST 17 GOVERNORS SPOKE ABOUT TEACHER COMPENSATION.

**Kentucky**  
Gov. Andy Beshear



Proposed a \$1,000 salary increase for all school employees and stated he would restore the teacher loan forgiveness program.

**Montana**  
Gov. Greg Gianforte



Proposed a budget that includes \$2.5 million in incentives for schools to improve starting teacher pay.

**Virginia**  
Gov. Ralph Northam



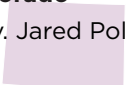
Supported efforts to turn a recent one-time bonus into a permanent pay raise; proposed a grant to address pay equity for early childhood educators.



To learn more about this state policy area, see ECS' Key Issue page on the [Teaching Profession](#) and 50-State Comparison on [Teacher Recruitment and Retention](#).

## AT LEAST 17 GOVERNORS MENTIONED EARLY LEARNING.

**Colorado**  
Gov. Jared Polis



Praised Colorado's child care, kindergarten and preschool services as reasons why the state is one of the best places in America to raise a family; celebrated the passing of a referendum to fund universal preschool.

**Iowa**  
Gov. Kim Reynolds



Highlighted the [Childcare Challenge Fund](#), established last year, and called for \$3 million in funding for it; pledged to allocate \$25 million of child care development block grants to further promote child care startups.

**Missouri**  
Gov. Mike Parson



Highlighted the creation of the [Office of Childhood](#), consolidating several different programs and divisions across three state agencies to strengthen the state's early childhood system.



To learn more about this state policy area, see ECS' Key Issue page on [Pre-K](#) and 50-State Comparison on [State K-3 Policies](#). Please also see NGA's resource on [Child Care Reopening and Recovery](#).

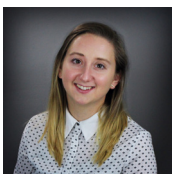
# About the Authors

## Bryan Kelley



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

## Emily Brixey



As a policy researcher, Emily works on answering information requests and collecting data related to state education policy. Prior to joining Education Commission of the States, Emily started pursuing her doctorate in public affairs and worked as a budget analyst at the Oregon Capitol. Emily earned her bachelor's degree in economics from Willamette University and is currently working on her dissertation at the University of Colorado School of Public Affairs. Contact Emily at [ebrixey@ecs.org](mailto:ebrixey@ecs.org).

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The authors also extend a special thanks to Jon Alfuth for his contributions to this resource. Jon is a policy analyst at the NGA Center for Best Practices, where he works on K-12, postsecondary and education-workforce alignment issues. Prior to his experience at NGA, Jon worked on Capitol Hill and at the U.S. Department of Education. Jon began his professional career as a K-12 teacher in Memphis, Tennessee, where he taught high school math for five years. Contact Jon at [jalfuth@nga.org](mailto:jalfuth@nga.org).



## About NGA

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



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