

Introduction

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF) is the nation's longest-standing education opportunity organization, committed to advancing education policies and practices that elevate learning for students from low-income families and students of color in the South. Since 1867, SEF has worked to disrupt systemic inequalities across the birth-through-postsecondary education continuum by providing technical assistance to build capacity, generating research-based solutions, shaping public policy, strengthening advocacy efforts, and developing transformational education leaders. SEF's nonpartisan research and policy work strengthens education, expands access to education, and addresses structural inequities.

SEF's 2026 policy agenda calls for bold legislative action to dismantle systemic injustices and ensure every child — regardless of race, income, or geography — has access to a world-class education. Our priorities are grounded in research and proven strategies that deliver measurable results. They reflect SEF's commitment to high-quality, affordable early learning; strong K-12 public schools; civil rights protections; community partnerships; accessible higher education; and education innovation.

As such, SEF, supported by community partners, school district leaders, and a broad network of education civil rights advocates, has issued the following set of state recommendations to strengthen educational opportunities for Black students, students of color, and students from low-income households across the South. The policies outlined in this document represent a starting point for lawmakers seeking to improve outcomes for historically underserved populations. It is intentionally non-exhaustive. But by adopting these strategies, policymakers can lead or sustain systemic change, strengthen communities, and create an education system that truly delivers on the promise of a transformative educational experience for all students.

✔ Create and Expand High-Quality Early Learning Opportunities for Children Birth to 5

High-quality, affordable early care and education (ECE) programs are essential for family stability and long-term success. Research shows that access to early learning improves academic readiness, cognitive development, and overall wellness, while reducing poverty-related gaps and mitigating future challenges such as criminal activity and health risks. These programs also strengthen the workforce by enabling parents, especially single parents and low-wage earners, to participate fully in the economy.

Significant state investment is critical to ensure universal access to affordable, high-quality ECE, particularly for underserved communities. Research demonstrates that such investments can yield annual returns of up to 13%, driving improvements in health, education, and employment and serving as a lever for economic mobility.

Because of this, SEF urges policymakers to (1) expand the availability, affordability, and quality of ECE programs so that more working families can secure care for their children, including free universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds, (2) reimagine sustainable funding models that ensure available, affordable, high-quality ECE for all families, particularly in underserved communities, and (3) address compensation and workforce well-being for early care and education employees and providers.

✔ Ensure All Public Schools are Adequately Resourced, Especially Those Located in Historically Underserved Communities

Despite constitutional guarantees of free public education, most Southern states have not fully funded or modernized K-12 school funding formulas to meet the needs of all learners. Adequate investment ensures that every child — regardless of zip code — has access to qualified educators, modern resources, and the services needed to help them excel. Adequate K-12 state funding not only closes opportunity gaps for historically underserved communities and students but also catalyzes economic mobility for those who have been underserved and discriminated against. More specifically, students who benefit most from adequate state investments in public schools include, but are not limited to, those living in poverty, those in rural areas, and those with special needs. Unfortunately, without robust state investment, public schools are losing ground to school privatization efforts that are ineffective and drain resources from students attending public schools.

SEF urges lawmakers to (1) modernize and fully fund school finance systems to ensure adequate resources (at least \$20k per student) to each learner in the public school system, including additional support for students living in poverty, in rural areas, with disabilities, or with incarcerated parents, (2) adopt fair revenue-sharing models so high-need schools receive funding based on the actual cost to educate higher needs students, and (3) expand broadband access to eliminate the digital divide and ensure learning continuity inside and outside of the classroom for all students regardless of where they live.

✔ Sunset All School Voucher Programs, Keep Public Funds in Public Schools

SEF has spent decades researching the impact of school voucher programs and advocating against them. Our work, along with that of other nationally renowned scholars, concludes that they are costly, inaccessible, hazardous, and ineffective. School vouchers, public funds that support access to private schools or private providers, undermine progress toward a transformative public education system that truly serves all of America's students.

All learners should have access to a high-quality education that empowers them to succeed in life. Public schools are uniquely equipped to create inclusive, meaningful, and dynamic learning experiences that benefit individual students and entire communities because they are free and accessible to all. Public schools are also the only educational institutions required by law to serve all students and protect their civil rights.

School vouchers are unaccountable to the public whose tax dollars support them and often subsidize affluent families who already send their children to private school. Given universal access to public schools and the federal civil rights protections guaranteed for public school students, the diversion of taxpayer dollars to support students in private schools is troubling.

States should focus on strengthening the public education system through research-based strategies that improve student well-being and academic success. We urge state lawmakers to (1) eliminate school voucher programs that divert public funds to private schools and reinvest the savings into efforts that support public schools, such as professional development for educators, mental health supports for students, and expanded learning opportunities, none of which, by design, require learners and their families to leave their neighborhood schools, and (2) if elimination is not possible, limit voucher eligibility to low-income students and those with at least one year of prior public school attendance.

✔ Address Lingering Issues Around Racial Segregation in Public Education

Over 70 years after the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the promise of equal education remains unfulfilled. Segregation and systemic inequity still cast a long shadow over America's schools, especially for Black students. Despite progress since 1954, the current-day saturation of segregation tells a sobering story: 81% of Black students nationwide, and 82% of Black students in the South, attend schools where the majority of students are children of color — a rate even higher than in the late 1960s. Racial stratification has led to unequal access to resources for students in schools that enroll a majority of students of color. Today, there are close to 130 school districts under federal desegregation orders. These realities demand urgent action to dismantle entrenched patterns of resource inequality and discrimination.

To ensure students receive the resources they deserve, we need robust, up-to-date data to identify and address racial disparities in classrooms nationwide. The Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) is one of the most powerful tools we have to protect students' rights and guide strategic investments. Yet cuts to federal staffing and funding threaten the Department of Education's ability to enforce civil rights and guarantee equal access to education.

Given our nation's checkered history of upholding school desegregation laws, we call on states to (1) support efforts to desegregate schools and assist districts in transitioning to unitary status with 21st-century strategies and targeted resources, (2) create a statewide School Desegregation Committee to develop applicable recommendations to fully desegregate schools by law and in practice, (3) incentivize civil rights data collection and reporting to ensure transparency and accountability, and (4) develop explicit state goals to address opportunity gaps by including commitments to racial justice in accountability and school improvement plans.

✔ Cultivate Strong Community Relationships and Partnerships

Research suggests that strengthening ties between schools and communities is a critical component of effective school improvement. District and school leaders who authentically engage parents and caregivers in school programming and on local school advisory teams help parents feel more committed to the school and the work that happens inside its walls each day. Leaders who foster collaboration, provide educators with ongoing platforms to voice concerns and feedback, and intentionally engage parents and communities are more likely to transform the entire education system.

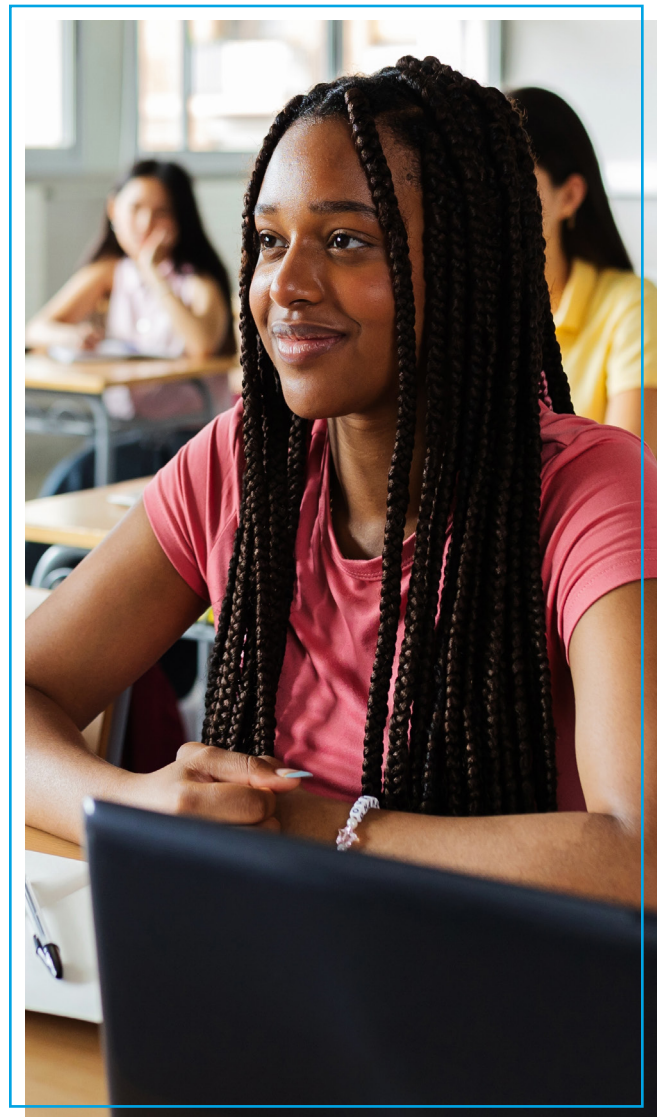
Districts must also make wraparound supports available for students and families. Students cannot learn to their full potential when they are hungry, exhausted, or ill, or when their parents lack the resources to support them at home. Districts should ensure schools can support the entire community by offering services such as Know Your Rights training for undocumented families, English as a Second Language programs, job training, and reentry services. States should (1) provide opportunities to engage parents in school programming and on local school advisory teams, (2) offer professional development to prepare new and aspiring district and school leaders to fully support evolving educator needs, and (3) ensure wraparound supports are included in school board policies and resolutions to help ensure students', parents', and communities' essential needs are met.

✔ Scale and Replicate Proven Education Technology and AI in the Classroom

States and local communities are rapidly adopting and scaling system-wide technologies powered by artificial intelligence (AI) in classrooms. Yet public policy decisions about education technology are too often made without strong evidence of their effectiveness or their impact on student learning. Research shows that AI can exacerbate disparities and produce harmful outcomes just as easily as it can reduce them and generate positive results. As schools incorporate innovative technologies, these efforts must be guided by transparency, careful attention to the needs and outcomes of students, educators, and families, and a commitment to evidence-based practice. Above all, education technology must support developmentally appropriate learning — particularly in early childhood and elementary settings.

While there is still much to be discovered in this space, educator capacity-building and AI literacy should be centered in policy decisions if states want to encourage greater technology use in the classroom. Lawmakers need to consider phased implementation with continuous improvement by piloting projects, measuring impact, and building on successes, so that AI complements rather than replaces essential relationships and high-quality instruction. The advent of educational technology should also not jeopardize the economic and environmental well-being of rural and historically marginalized communities, which, again, research suggests may be the case if not implemented thoughtfully and with attention to outcomes for these communities.

We encourage states to (1) create an AI task force to determine in what ways this new technology should be incorporated into the classroom and (2) embed inclusive design, child development science, system and practitioner supports, and community feedback in the implementation of AI in classrooms.



✔ Ensure All High School Graduates Can Access, Persist in, and Complete a High-Quality Postsecondary Pathway Leading to Economic Mobility

Direct public investment in our students' future has long fueled the nation's economic growth and strengthened our global competitiveness. Today, mounting evidence shows that 13 years of schooling is simply not long enough to prepare students for success in a rapidly evolving economy. Jobs requiring education beyond high school are projected to grow significantly faster over the next decade than those that do not. Yet access alone is not the central challenge. Nationally, nearly 1 in 3 students who begin college do not return for their second year, and close to 40 percent of first-time students fail to complete a credential within six years.

College affordability remains a major barrier to accessing a postsecondary education. Additionally, the purchasing power of Pell Grants, the primary source of aid for low-income students attending college, has declined sharply since the program's inception. In 1975, the maximum Pell Grant covered more than 75% of the average cost of attendance at public four-year institutions; today, it covers only about 25%. At the same time, over 60% of states have reduced investments in higher education, forcing students and families to shoulder higher costs or take on significant debt.

However, tuition costs and grant aid alone do not fully explain why some students are not completing a postsecondary credential. Many leave college because of unmet basic needs and relatively small financial disruptions. Emergency financial aid and flexible completion grants are critical tools to prevent minor financial setbacks from derailing long-term educational attainment. As students consider their postsecondary options, they greatly benefit from one-on-one advising to help identify clear academic and career pathways that connect majors to high-demand industries and economic mobility. Aligning programs with regional workforce needs is essential to ensure students are earning credentials with long-term value.

To ensure access to quality, affordable postsecondary education that helps students persist through their studies on-time each year, SEF urges lawmakers to (1) invest in state need-based financial aid programs that help all students from low-income backgrounds earn credentials without incurring excessive debt, (2) scale proven academic preparation and student success programs that recruit and retain first-generation college students, (3) provide flexible grants, such as completion grants, to mission-based institutions, (4) increase funding for HBCUs and community colleges to increase their capacity to serve low-income students, and (5) invest in and partner with community-based organizations that already have deep relationships with students, families, and institutions that play a critical role in addressing persistent barriers to degree attainment.

Conclusion

Together, these priorities advance a bold vision for a birth-through-postsecondary education system that reflects and meets the needs of children, families, and educators across the South. Each year of delayed reform means lost learning opportunities; missed chances to support local communities that are forced to do more with less; and, as recent evidence suggests, expands racial and economic disparities.

We urge policymakers to act now by directing transformational change to make our schools work for everyone. SEF stands ready to partner today on concrete steps so learners are not left waiting for another legislative session, another school year, or another generation of leaders to strengthen the public education system our children and communities innately deserve.