

2025 | OKLAHOMA LEGISLATORS RETREAT

ISSUE BRIEF

FUNDING HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CARE AND LEARNING

The federal government has long sought to solve the child care crisis through providing subsidies to low-income families. In 1990, the [Child Care and Development Block Grant](#) (CCDBG) Act was developed to assist families with costs associated with child care. The CCDBG is intended to support families previously unable to access quality child care by providing eligibility for subsidies based on household income. Until 2014, the CCDBG required states to conduct a [Market Rate Survey](#) (MRS) to set subsidy rates. While the CCDBG funds do provide needed resources for families, [subsidies based on MRS](#) often leave child care providers without funding to cover expenses associated with operating a facility. These expenses (e.g., rent, utilities, insurance, educational items, food, salaries), in some instances, cost more than what child care providers receive in tuition and subsidies. Providers are also unable to increase tuition rates without the risk that private-pay families will be unable to afford the increase and families using subsidies will be unable to make up the difference between the rate increase and the subsidy amount received. While this funding source is beneficial for families, it can exacerbate challenges experienced by child care facility owners.

Cost Modeling

The [CCDBG Act of 2014](#) effectively expanded the options for states to ensure their subsidy rates could provide equal access for eligible children. One of those options, [cost models](#), is a methodology commonly used to estimate expenses and revenue for providers to reflect the true costs associated with operating a high-quality child care facility. Cost models take into account a variety of factors, including teacher salaries, staff-child ratios, operational expenses, curriculum materials, and administrative expenses. The [Bipartisan Policy Center](#) states that “cost modeling aggregates the estimated costs of delivering early childhood services, under specific parameters, and identifies potential sources for revenue.” By creating a detailed breakdown of expenses, program administrators can better articulate, and policymakers can better understand, the amount of funding needed to maintain high-quality care and sustain a viable child care business. Cost models can also help illustrate the financial trade-offs of different decisions, such as increasing teacher pay, reducing class size, or increasing enrollment.

In addition to being essential to policymaking decisions, cost model analyses can serve as a



foundation for equitable access to quality care. Analyses can provide evidence-based insights into how varying income levels, community needs, and program structures impact child care affordability and child care business sustainability. By leveraging these insights, [funding mechanisms](#) can be enhanced, braided, or utilized in ways that prioritize affordability, access, and program quality.

Oklahoma Early Childhood Funding

For grant year 2024, Oklahoma has been appropriated [\\$185.7 million](#) in federal CCDBG funds. The state matches CCDBG funds with \$13.5 million in state appropriations. These combined funds are utilized to provide child care assistance to low-income families primarily in the form of child care subsidies paid directly to providers.

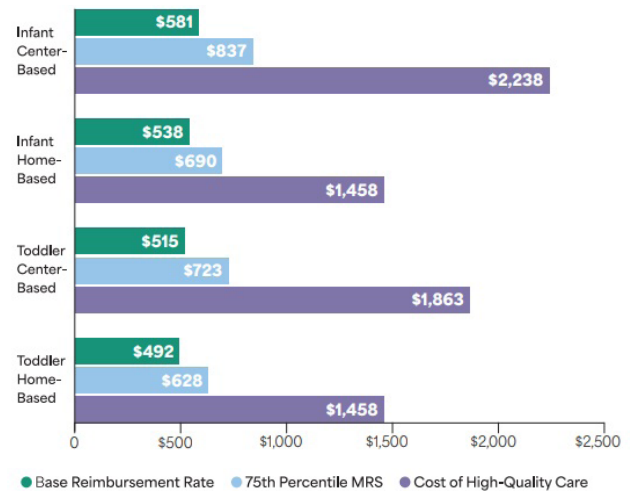
In 2024, an [Estimated Cost of Quality Early Childhood Care and Education in Oklahoma](#) study found that child care subsidy reimbursement rates were not sufficient to cover the cost of care. The study also revealed that child care providers across the state varied in their use of child care subsidies. As of 2024, 82,488 children ages zero to five years are eligible to receive CCDBG funding for child care subsidies, however only 25 percent (20,424) of those [children](#) are currently served.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Oklahoma applied American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to [increase](#) the child care subsidy rate by five dollars. The cost model study indicates that providers will be less likely to recover their costs of care currently subsidized from ARPA fund unless the increased subsidy rate continues or a new reimbursement rate schedule is created.

Examples from Other States

Georgia | Within the FY 2024-25 budget, the Georgia General Assembly increased funding for the Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program by \$9.3 million to raise [reimbursement rates](#) for child care providers to the 60th percentile of the market

Figure 1: Monthly Provider Reimbursement Rates in Oklahoma



Source

rate. This is double the amount initially included in the governor's proposed budget. The state is also funding an [incentive payment](#) for child care facilities that maintain high quality rating standards.

Virginia | A historic [commitment](#) by Governor Glenn Youngkin and the Virginia General Assembly has allocated \$1.1 billion over the coming biennium (FY25-26), which will be available for child care services to serve low- to moderate-income families. This includes \$46 million to expand the Virginia Preschool Initiative and \$7 million to expand the mixed delivery preschool program.

Policy Considerations

- How can policymakers support child care funding that prioritizes underserved populations, including rural areas, low-income families, and children with special needs?
- What are some ways to address the staffing crisis in the child care sector and support the workforce through competitive wages and benefits?
- Are there methods for identifying reliable and long-term funding streams to support child care programs without creating budget volatility?

EMBEDDING QUALITY INTO EARLY LEARNING

Optimal brain development during a child's earliest years of life has a [long-term](#) impact on emotional and physical health, social skills, and cognitive and linguistic capacities. This development happens through interactions with family members and early educators. Consistent exposure to nurturing, language-rich environments with family and highly qualified early educators allows young children to develop robust networks of [neural connectivity](#). This impacts their academic and life success far beyond the preschool years. An intergenerational analysis of outcomes stemming from HighScope's [Perry Preschool Project](#) (an initiative that researched the effects of high-quality preschool interventions on life outcomes) found that high-quality child care improved participants' health, cognitive and social-emotional skills, and influenced outcomes for later success.

There are more than [307,000](#) children under five years of age in Oklahoma. With 60 percent of the state's parents in the workforce, there is high demand for high-quality, affordable child care. Unfortunately, the demand far exceeds the supply. Oklahoma's childcare gap could be as high as [52 percent](#), meaning potentially more than 90,000 children of working parents could lack access to care.

Early educators are termed "the workforce [behind](#) the workforce," and serve a critical role of providing developmentally appropriate, social, emotional, and academic instruction. Though early educators support both the youngest learners and their families, the average hourly wage for an early educator in Oklahoma is only [\\$11.67](#), while the hourly living wage for an individual in the state is [\\$19.33](#). Low wages and the demanding nature of caring for young children can cause [attrition](#) within this critical workforce, calculated nationally at a loss of 14.9 percent annually between 2010 and 2022. Attrition causes children to experience lapses in care and reduces available capacity for child care facilities. Oklahoma loses an estimated [\\$1.2 billion](#) in income annually due to the child care gap.

Fostering Quality Child Care in Oklahoma

Ensuring quality requires that both early educators and child care settings meet established standards aligned to developmentally appropriate early education practices. Oklahoma's Quality Rating and Improvement System, [the Stars Program](#), aims to measure and boost quality through improved curriculum and regular assessment. Participation in the Stars Program is voluntary for licensed child care centers and family child care homes. Participants can receive increased child care subsidy reimbursements based on their star rating.

Preparing a High-Quality Early Educator Workforce

Oklahoma's minimum criteria for early educators (see Table 1 on page 4) requires that all classifications of early educators (e.g., directors, teachers, and assistant teachers) have training and experience to work in licensed child care settings including annual training hours of professional development. Early educators can apply twice a year to receive a [Certificate of Achievement Stipend](#) from Oklahoma's Center for Early Childhood Professional Development to recognize and reward early education professionals for their commitment to professional development. Each stipend amount is limited to \$600.



Table 1: Qualifications for Early Educators in Licensed Settings

Role	Minimum Age Requirement	Qualifications	Annual Training Hours
Director	21	Have achieved a Bronze Level Oklahoma <u>Director's</u> Credential	20
Teaching Personnel (Master teachers, teachers, assistant teachers, and substitutes)	18	High School Diploma or Equivalent and achieved <u>a Level Four</u> on the Oklahoma Professional Development Ladder. One Master Teacher is required for every 60 children.	20
All other staff working with children	18	High School Diploma or Equivalent and complete the <u>Entry Level Child Care Training</u> within 90 days of hire.	20

Source

Policy Considerations

- How can policymakers support increased wages, professional development opportunities, and credentialing pathways to address workforce shortages and improve the quality and availability of child care in Oklahoma?
- How could lawmakers increase offerings of scholarships or financial support for early educators to encourage professional development and educational attainment through the Oklahoma Professional Development Ladder?
- What types of collaborations between businesses and government could lead to innovative solutions, such as employer-sponsored child care or community-based child care initiatives?



EVIDENCE-BASED LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Early literacy proficiency is critical to later success, both in school and in life. Students who lack reading proficiency by the end of the third grade are [four times](#) more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers—and the number is even higher for students living in poverty. Low literacy skills can also have a lasting impact into adulthood, [43 percent](#) of adults with low literacy skills live in poverty. Despite robust research detailing the importance of reading proficiency and decades of efforts to improve early literacy instruction, the United States still faces challenges in effectively teaching children to read.

The Beginnings of the Science of Reading

In 1997, the Director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) convened the [National Reading Panel](#) (NRP) at the request of the U.S. Congress. The NRP aimed to “assess the status of research-based knowledge,” in an effort some viewed as an opportunity to settle the [Reading Wars](#). The Panel conducted a meta-analysis of reading research and identified five pillars of instruction that contribute to reading development:

- Phonemic Awareness: the ability to hear and manipulate the smallest unit of sound in spoken words
- Phonics: letter-sound relationships
- Oral Reading Fluency: reading with appropriate accuracy, speed, and expression
- Vocabulary: understanding the meaning of words and phrases in print
- Comprehension: the process of making meaning of text

The findings and meta-analysis from the NRP are a critical component of the evidence-based literacy instruction. The science of reading represents the collection of evidence-based practices learned

from decades of research across various disciplines including education, psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience. As the [Defining Movement Coalition](#) explains, the science of reading is, “a vast, interdisciplinary body of science-based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing.” As of 2020, [32 states](#) required educator preparation programs (EPPs) to address the science of reading for at least some teacher candidates.

Mississippi | Literacy-Based Promotion Act

The Magnolia State has been a [national leader](#) and trailblazer with respect to incorporating the science of reading into instruction and teacher preparation. In collaboration with the Barksdale Reading Institute, the University of Mississippi’s Center for Excellence in Literacy Instruction, and others, state leaders began taking steps to embed the science of reading across education sectors in 2013. These efforts [included](#):

- Funding professional development for teachers in the science of reading
- Embedding the science view of reading in professional learning
- Providing instructional coaches to K-3 classroom teachers in schools identified as most in need
- Providing mentoring related to the science of reading to faculty members of teacher preparation programs

Since making these changes, Mississippi’s students have shown considerable reading progress. The state ranked first for reading gains on the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and fourth grade reading [scores](#) grew by four points from 2017 to 2019, tying the national average - despite average reading scores declining nationally during that same timeframe. Post-pandemic, Mississippi was also one of the [few states](#) that saw no significant declines in NAEP reading scores among fourth grade students.

Oklahoma | Strong Readers Act

Oklahoma's [Strong Readers Act](#) is designed to ensure that students develop foundational literacy skills aligned to the science of reading, particularly by the end of third grade, through comprehensive and early assessments. The law [requires](#) universal screening of all K-3 students at the beginning, middle, and end of each school year to identify those at risk of reading difficulties, using tools like the [Amira Screening Assessment](#) to provide real-time data for targeted interventions. For students who do not meet reading

benchmarks, schools collaborate with parents to develop a [Student Literacy Intervention Plan](#) (SLIP), which details specific instructional supports and strategies to improve literacy. Additionally, the legislation [includes](#) a strong focus on teacher professional development in literacy instruction and the early identification of students showing signs of dyslexia, ensuring teachers are equipped to provide the necessary interventions even before a formal diagnosis is made. Table 2, below, outlines how Oklahoma's law compares to that of Mississippi.

Table 2: Oklahoma's Strong Readers Act vs. Mississippi's Literacy-Based Promotion Act

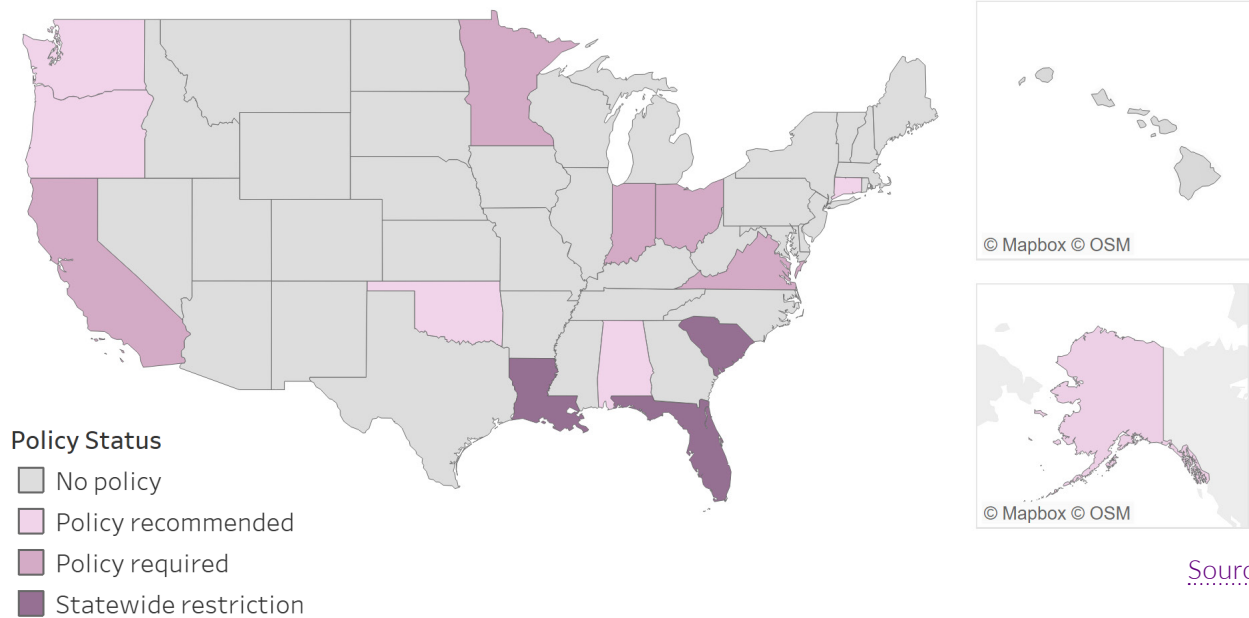
Policy	Oklahoma	Mississippi
Focus	Early screening for reading difficulties in K-3 students, with additional monitoring for students through grade five. Focus on preventing and remediating reading difficulties early. Source 1 , Source 2	Emphasizes reading proficiency by third grade, with mandatory retention of students who do not meet proficiency. Source 1 , Source 2
Screening Tools	Utilizes the Amira screening tool to assess reading ability, identify dyslexia, and provide personalized instruction. Real-time feedback and adaptive assessments are key features. Source	State-mandated reading assessments determine if third graders can advance to fourth grade. Frequent assessments throughout the year identify at-risk students. Source
Intervention Support	Provides tiered interventions: Core instruction (Tier 1), supplemental instruction (Tier 2), and intensive interventions (Tier 3), with a focus on dyslexia screening. Source	Offers intensive interventions like additional reading support and summer programs for students failing to meet reading benchmarks, ensuring mastery before promotion. Source
Teacher Professional Development	Emphasizes teacher training in the science of reading and mandates ongoing professional development to enhance reading instruction. Source	Prioritizes professional development for teachers, focusing on evidence-based reading strategies, with literacy coaches in schools. Source
Parent Involvement	Requires schools to provide regular updates to parents on their child's reading progress and offers resources for reading at home. Source	Actively involves parents, ensuring they are aware of their child's progress and providing support plans if their child struggles with reading. Source

Policy Considerations

- What should policymakers consider in prioritizing funding and resources for early literacy initiatives, particularly focusing on evidence-based practices derived from the science of reading?
- How can policymakers require teacher candidates receive instruction in the science of reading to ensure new educators are well-prepared to support early literacy development?
- How can policymakers ensure schools have the resources to identify and support students who are struggling with reading at an early stage?



Figure 2: National Landscape on Cell Phone Bans



CELL PHONE POLICIES IN K-12 SCHOOLS

Impact of Cell Phones on Youth Mental Health

Young children's social and emotional development is critical to their long-term health and well-being. Mental health can significantly impact young children's ability to learn, establish healthy connections with others, manage their emotions, and grow into capable adults. Mental health challenges can begin early in life, with 10-16 percent of young children experiencing mental health conditions, including PTSD and anxiety.

The widespread use of smartphones for communication, learning, and entertainment often fosters a sense of dependency among users and can significantly impact their mental health, particularly among young people. In addition to the impact on mental health, a 2022 study found a significant correlation between eye strain, back pain, neck pain, and weight gain among high-usage cell phone users.

A similar study of high school students' risk behavior in Oklahoma found that 43 percent of students felt sad or hopeless, with 15.7 percent citing that they were electronically bullied. Figure 2 demonstrates which states have school cell phone policies and the types of policies in those states.

Cell Phone Policies in Public Education

In September 2024, Governor Stitt signed an Executive Order, the [Oklahoma Phone-Free School Challenge](#), calling on students, teachers, and superintendents statewide to propose solutions for managing cell phone use in schools. Rather than enforcing a mandate, the executive order aims to empower local communities to create their own solutions for addressing concerns like classroom distractions, bullying, and learning disruptions. Participants had until November 29, 2024, to submit their ideas, which were reviewed for inclusion in the [Oklahoma Phone-Free Schools best practices report](#).

Oklahoma is not the only state considering ways to restrict cell phone usage for students, given its impact on well-being and mental health. Several [states](#) have introduced, passed, or are considering legislation aimed at restricting cell phones in schools.

Examples from Other States

Indiana | Indiana [law](#) mandates that school districts implement policies prohibiting students from using wireless devices during class time. The law applies to cell phones, tablets, laptops, and gaming devices. Exemptions are allowed for educational purposes with a teacher's permission, in emergencies, or to manage health care needs. Additionally, students with disabilities or those with individualized education plans (IEPs) can use technology as necessary.

South Carolina | South Carolina's 2024-25 budget [included](#) a requirement for school districts to adopt a cell phone policy to qualify for state funding. The policy [requires](#), at a minimum, that students keep phones and connected devices, such as smartwatches, turned off and stored in backpacks or lockers during school hours. Districts were required to implement the policy by January 2025. However, it also includes exceptions for students whose IEP or 504 plan necessitates access to a personal device. Districts have the flexibility to impose stricter rules and determine the consequences of policy violations.

Virginia | Governor Glenn Youngkin's [Executive Order 33](#) established cell phone-free education in K-12 public schools. Guidance on implementation from the Virginia Department of Education [further defines](#) that phones should be turned off and stored from the start of the school day through the final bell.

Policy Considerations

- What steps can be taken to address the diverse needs of students, including those who rely on cell phones for health, communication, or accessibility, to ensure the policy is equitable?

- How can parents and the broader community be involved in the process of implementing cell phone restrictions?
- What guidelines should be established to address parental concerns about communication during the school day?



TEACHER AND STUDENT WELLNESS

Teacher and Student Well-being: National Context

Since the pandemic, students have increasingly experienced struggles with [mental health and emotional and behavioral regulation](#). This has impacted classrooms, with schools reporting increased [behavioral challenges](#) and [physical violence](#) compared to pre-pandemic levels. Reported instances of physical violence rose from 42 percent pre-pandemic to 56 percent. [Research](#) also indicates that 38 percent of teachers believe there is significantly more disruptive behavior compared to three years ago (see Figure 3).

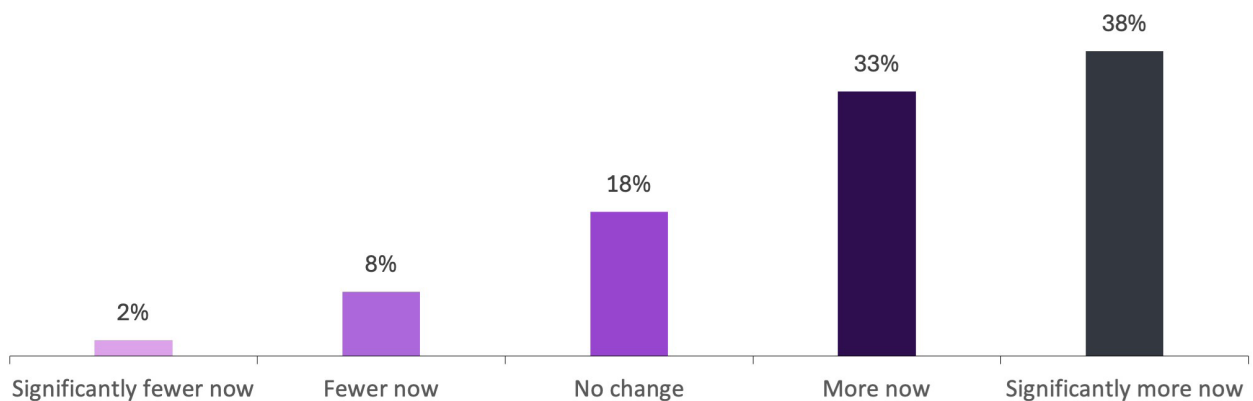
Over [40 percent](#) of teachers feel that they are not fully prepared to manage behavior challenges. Many teachers report feeling [very often or always](#) [burned out](#), and teacher stress is positively correlated with job [attrition](#). To combat the problem, some states have convened task forces to study teacher well-being, with stakeholders providing recommendations on improvements and next steps. The 2023 [Governor's Educator Retention Task](#)

[Force in Arizona](#) focused their recommendations on improving working conditions for educators such as increasing staffing support and addressing school safety concerns. Similarly, the [Missouri Recruitment and Retention Blue Ribbon Commission](#) suggested recommendations to improve school culture and climate through teacher pay and classroom support.

In addition to mental health, physical wellness [plays](#) a vital role in an individual's overall health. Sedentary behavior has been [strongly linked](#) to various medical problems, emphasizing the importance of movement and reduced sitting time. Regular physical activity has [significant health benefits](#), and experts [recommend](#) that adults achieve at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity each week.

Schools are uniquely positioned to promote physical activity by fostering an environment that provides numerous opportunities for students to move throughout the day. A [Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program](#) (CSPAP) serves as the national framework to support physical education and youth physical activity. CSPAP emphasizes the integration of five key components: physical education, physical activity during school, physical activity before and after school, staff involvement, and family and community engagement.

Figure 3: Percent of Teachers Who Perceive a Change in the Frequency of Disruptive Behaviours in their School Over the Last 3 Years



[Source](#)

Teacher and Student Well-being: Oklahoma

Like the rest of the nation, Oklahoma school districts are recording increased [challenges with behavior](#) and mental health compared to pre-pandemic levels. In 2021, [44 percent](#) of Oklahoma high schoolers reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for the past two or more weeks, as indicated in Figure 4. Additionally, research indicates that the percentage of Oklahoma teachers leaving the profession has [increased annually](#) since the pandemic.

[Oklahoma statute](#) requires teachers to be trained in supporting and recognizing student mental health needs, as well as suicide awareness and prevention. State law also requires each school district to create a protocol for action in the event a student experiences a [mental health crisis](#). Although there are provisions to support student mental health, there are few for teachers. Introduced in 2022, [House Bill 4109](#) proposed provisions for mental health benefits for educators through training, support, referrals, and interventions.

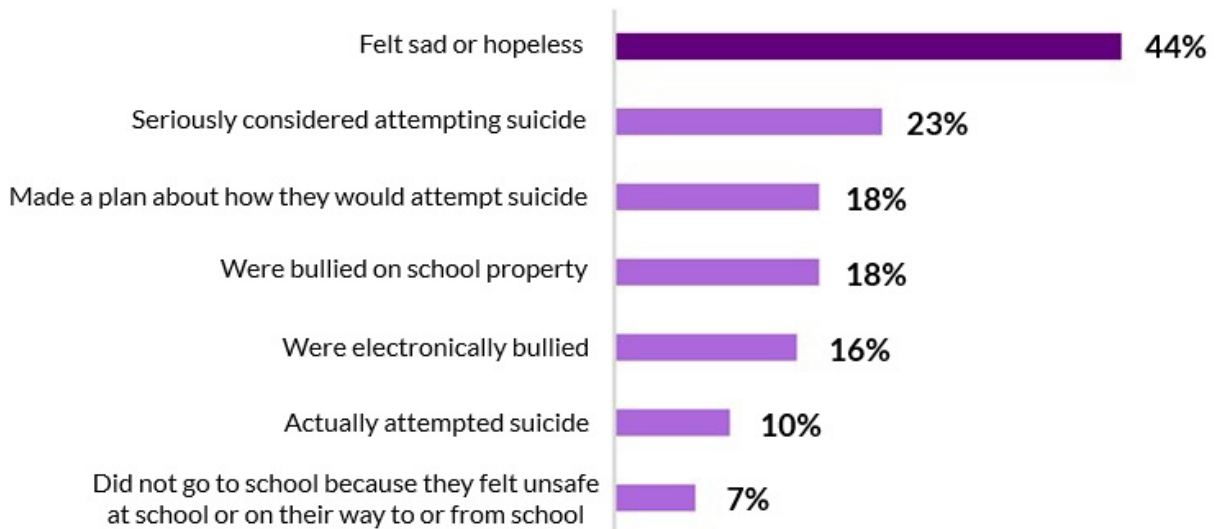
Examples from Other States

Maine | The Maine Department of Education, in partnership with [The Regulated Classroom](#), created a program to support [educator well-being](#) in the classroom. The program uses federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding to create a train-the-trainer model to coach teachers on regulating their stress and creating a safe environment for learning.

Mississippi | The Mississippi legislature passed the [School Safety Act of 2019](#) to implement evidence-based curriculum in schools to help students manage stress and anxiety. This act creates [three pilot programs](#) in six school districts to test the effects of the curriculum before state-wide implementation, coordinating mental health professionals and using evidence-based practices to improve mental health. The act also provides mental health resources and training for educators.

Utah | In 2019, Utah increased funding for [mental health experts](#) to address suicides and physical violence among students. The state implemented [legislation](#) to increase mental health screenings and

Figure 4: 2021 Oklahoma High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey



Source

provide financial assistance for counseling. Utah also passed a [resolution](#) in 2023 to address the low staffing ratios for mental health experts and call for higher staffing and retention.

Policy Considerations

- How can the state increase access to mental and physical health support services for both students and teachers?
- What steps can be taken to implement evidence-based mental health support curricula, allowing students to better understand and manage their emotions and behavior?
- How can the state increase teachers' efficacy in managing student behavior, lowering the stress and burnout that leads to attrition?



SUPPORTING PERSISTENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

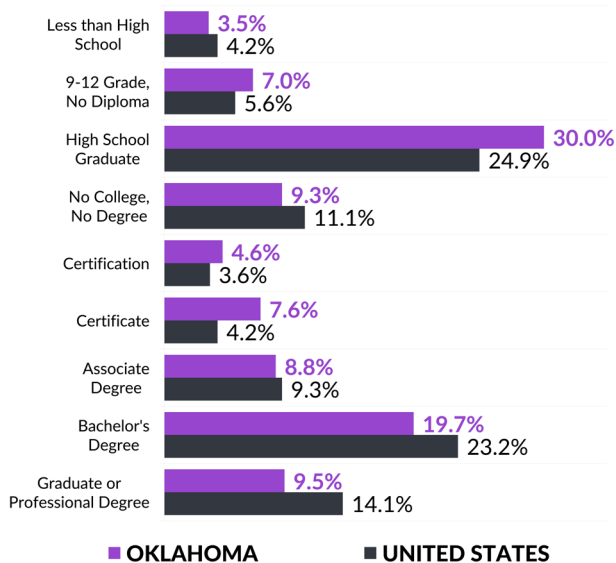
Over the past decade, policymakers and higher education leaders have made strides in raising the overall postsecondary attainment rate by over 16 percentage points, but racial equity gaps and students with some credits but no degree or credential still exist. As of fall 2023, national undergraduate enrollment grew by just over one percent, the first increase since the COVID-19 pandemic, yet still over a million seats remain open from prior to the pandemic. Inequities such as disparate funding for institutions serving larger proportions of students of color, systemic racism in the admissions process, barriers to financial resources for undocumented students, and lack of

intentional student support for students of color all contribute to racial gaps in attainment rates.

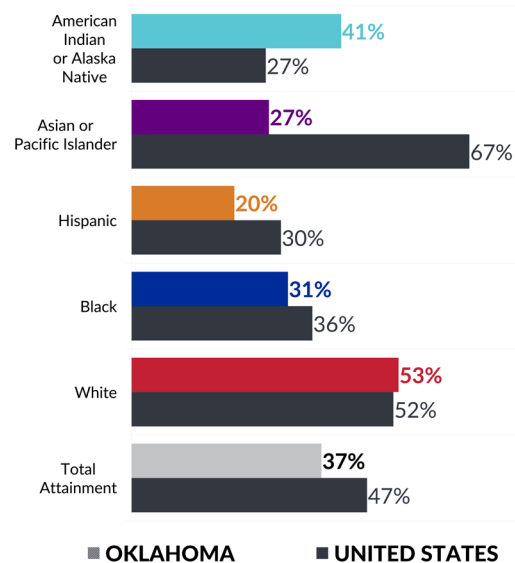
Oklahoma faces a critical challenge in meeting its Blueprint 2030 strategic goal of producing 100,000 degrees and credentials in STEM and critical occupations by 2030. With only 37.5 percent of adults in the state holding an associate degree or higher, significant gaps remain in postsecondary attainment (see Figure 5). By 2031, 72 percent of all jobs in the U.S. are expected to require some form of education beyond high school, making higher education more important now than ever. Ensuring students can persist through coursework and successfully complete postsecondary programs is essential to building a skilled workforce and supporting Oklahoma's economic growth.

Figure 5: Oklahoma Postsecondary Attainment

Oklahoma Postsecondary Attainment by Credential Type



Oklahoma Postsecondary Attainment by Race/Ethnicity



37.5%

of individuals in Oklahoma have a postsecondary degree or credential

Source

Student Supports

Wraparound services in higher education address students' holistic needs—academic, health, socioemotional, financial, and logistical—to support degree attainment. Originating from the medical [systems-of-care model](#), these services are especially vital for first-generation and adult learners facing barriers to education.

[Research](#) from the University of Chicago Poverty Lab found that community college students utilizing wraparound services experienced a 13 percent increase in full-time enrollment and an 11 percent rise in retention from term to term. Institutions use two main measures to determine if students are successful during their higher education journey:

- **Retention Rates** | Retention rates measure the percentage of students who are continually enrolled at the **same** higher education institution through the fall semesters of their first and second years.
- **Persistence Rates** | Persistence rates measure the percentage of students who are continually enrolled at **any** higher education institution through the fall semesters of their first and second years.

Oklahoma's retention and persistence rates currently fall below the national average (see Figure 6).

Supports for Postsecondary Persistence in Oklahoma

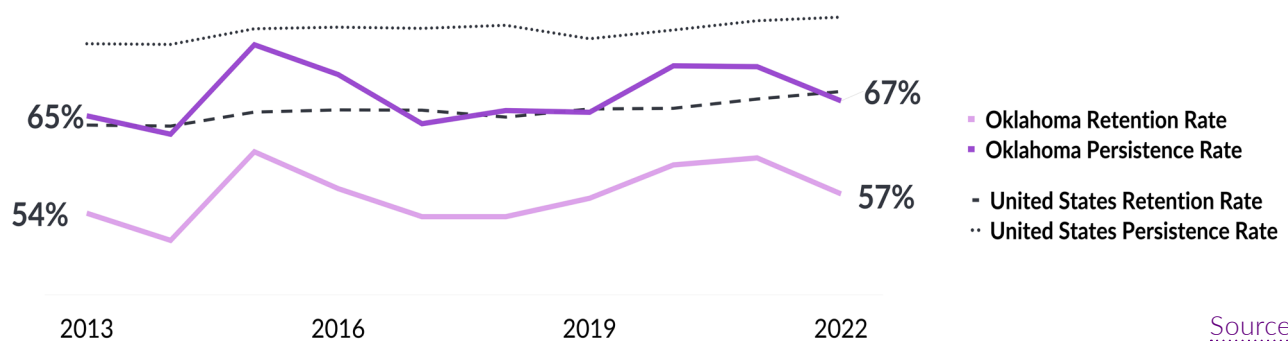
While these programs have shown progress, ongoing investment and expansion of targeted supports, especially for minority, rural, and first-generation college students, is needed to support overall persistence rates across Oklahoma which directly impacts the economic growth of the state.

GEAR UP Programs | Oklahoma State University and its affiliates administer [GEAR UP \(Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs\)](#), which supports underprivileged students from middle school through their transition to higher education. This program emphasizes college readiness and persistence by offering mentoring, tutoring, and financial aid counseling.

Tribal College Efforts | Institutions such as the [College of the Muscogee Nation](#) provide culturally specific academic support and retention services, particularly for Native American students, addressing barriers unique to this demographic.

Higher Education Institutions' Initiatives | Universities across the state, like the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University, have implemented programs to improve retention, such as [first-year experience programs](#), [supplemental instruction](#), and targeted [advising for at-risk students](#). These initiatives aim to improve academic outcomes and student engagement.

Figure 6: Oklahoma Postsecondary Retention and Persistence Rates



Federal and State Funding | Oklahoma has benefited from federal programs like the [Rural Postsecondary and Economic Development \(RPED\) grants](#), which foster career pathways and community college retention efforts for rural students. Additionally, workforce alignment programs help students transition smoothly from education to employment.

National Supports for Postsecondary Persistence

Across the nation, innovative strategies to enhance postsecondary student persistence and completion have been implemented to meet the needs of diverse students. The following highlight the critical role of structured pathways, financial incentives, and targeted support services in improving outcomes in higher education.

California | Community colleges adopted the [Guided Pathways](#) framework to improve student outcomes and persistence. By restructuring courses into coherent pathways aligned with career goals and integrating academic advising, the program has increased completion rates statewide. With over two million students impacted, this initiative is among the most comprehensive efforts in the country.

Georgia | [HOPE](#) (Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally) Scholarship in Georgia provides financial support for students achieving high academic standards. Since its inception, it has improved college persistence and degree completion rates, especially among underserved populations. This program showcases the importance of linking financial incentives with academic excellence.

Indiana | The state supports low-income students through the [21st Century Scholars Program](#), which offers full-tuition scholarships and pre-college readiness activities. Scholars who participate in the program's mentoring and academic support services are twice as likely to persist and graduate compared to their peers. This targeted approach has become a model for states aiming to close equity gaps in higher education.

Tennessee | The state launched the "[Drive to 55](#)" campaign to ensure 55 percent of adults have a postsecondary credential by 2025. The Tennessee Promise program provides tuition-free access to community colleges and technical schools, paired with mentoring and support services, significantly improving retention rates. The initiative has inspired other states to implement similar tuition-free models for community colleges.

Texas | The state aims to have 60 percent of adults aged 25–34 earn a postsecondary credential by 2030 through its "[60x30TX](#)" initiative. The initiative focuses on strengthening workforce-aligned programs, providing financial aid, and improving postsecondary pathways for non-traditional students. Texas's model demonstrates the importance of aligning educational goals with economic needs.

Policy Considerations

- How can Oklahoma strengthen pathways from high school to postsecondary institutions to improve credential attainment, particularly for underserved populations?
- What strategies can be implemented to reduce barriers to degree completion for non-traditional and part-time students, ensuring equitable attainment outcomes?
- How can Oklahoma utilize data and predictive analytics to identify at-risk students early and provide targeted interventions to boost postsecondary attainment rates?



ALIGNING HIGHER EDUCATION TO WORKFORCE NEEDS

Across the United States, aligning postsecondary credentials and degree pathways with workforce needs has become a priority. By 2031, it is projected that [72 percent](#) of jobs will require education or training beyond high school, with a growing emphasis on industry-recognized credentials and workforce readiness. However, national trends reveal a gap between the skills employers demand and those that education systems currently emphasize.

Efforts such as the [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\)](#) and partnerships like the [National Governors Association's Workforce Innovation Network](#) have highlighted best practices for fostering collaboration between educational institutions and industry. These include improving data-sharing practices, enhancing work-based learning opportunities, and aligning credentialing systems to common standards.

State of Oklahoma

Oklahoma faces unique challenges and opportunities in addressing workforce alignment. The state's [economy is diverse](#), with strong industries in energy, manufacturing, and healthcare. However, the state has struggled with [workforce shortages](#), particularly in sectors requiring middle- and high-skill credentials.

[Oklahoma's Learn Anywhere](#) initiative and the [CareerTech system](#) demonstrate the state's commitment to bridging the gap between education and workforce needs. Despite these efforts, challenges such as insufficient industry representation in curriculum design and uneven collaboration between K-12, postsecondary institutions, and regional employers persist. Addressing these gaps requires leveraging state-specific resources and fostering deeper partnerships across sectors.

Moreover, Oklahoma must contend with a [gap that exists within their state](#) between the labor market

demands and people who have the necessary credentials to fill those jobs. Closing these gaps is essential for ensuring that all Oklahomans can participate in and contribute to the state's economic growth. Efforts to expand access to [career and technical education \(CTE\)](#) and strengthen dual, or [concurrent enrollment opportunities](#), have shown promise, but scaling these initiatives will require coordinated action and sustained investment.

Oklahoma has also begun exploring ways to integrate [industry-recognized credentials](#) into existing degree pathways to provide students with more flexible and marketable qualifications. Building on these initiatives will require robust partnerships between education systems and employers, as well as policy frameworks that prioritize innovation and [workforce alignment](#).

To build a sustainable talent pipeline that meets evolving workforce demands, Oklahoma can draw inspiration from other states that have successfully fostered collaboration between education and industry. These models provide valuable lessons and actionable strategies that can be adapted to Oklahoma's unique context.

Examples from Other States

Colorado | [CareerWise](#) is a youth apprenticeship program connecting high school students with industries in need of skilled workers. Students earn credentials aligned with industry standards while gaining hands-on experience.

Georgia | [High Demand Career Initiative](#) (HDCI) bridges the gap between business needs and workforce development efforts. The HDCI facilitates direct engagement between employers, education systems, and workforce agencies to identify and address skills shortages in key industries. By mapping career pathways and fostering cross-sector collaboration, Georgia has successfully aligned its educational programs with the state's economic priorities.

Indiana | The [Workforce Ready Grant](#) provides free tuition for certificate programs in high-demand fields, ensuring that residents acquire skills that meet employer needs.

Missouri | Since 2017, the [Missouri Innovation Campus \(MIC\) Program](#), a collaboration between the University of Central Missouri, Lee's Summit R-7 School District, Metropolitan Community College, and more than 70 Kansas City area businesses, is transforming how students obtain a bachelor's degree while also providing career-ready skills.

Policy Considerations

- How can the state incentivize partnerships between higher education institutions and regional employers to ensure programs meet workforce needs?
- What policies can enhance collaboration between K-12, postsecondary institutions, and industry leaders to create seamless pathways for students?
- How can Oklahoma leverage data to predict workforce trends and ensure alignment of credentials with emerging industries?





Established in 2001, [The Hunt Institute](#) honors the legacy of James B. Hunt, Jr., the former governor of North Carolina who distinguished himself as an ardent champion of education.

The Hunt Institute brings together people and resources to inspire and inform elected officials and policymakers about key issues in education, resulting in visionary leaders who are prepared to take strategic action for greater educational outcomes and student success.

In 2016, The Hunt Institute became an independent, nonprofit entity and joined forces with Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy to pursue research, educational partnerships, and events related to improving education policy.

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