THE hunt institute

2025 OKLAHOMA LEGISLATORS RETREAT

ISSUE BRIEF

DECEMBER 2–3, 2025

AN OVERVIEW OF OKLAHOMA'S EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

Early Learning

Oklahoma is home to over 300,351 children aged five and under, with approximately 60 percent of these children having all available parents in the workforce. Providing early care and education access for these children is critical to their early development, workforce participation of their parents, and future growth of the state economy. Currently, Oklahoma has a child care gap of 34.2 percent, which means over 62,000 children do not have access to child care within a reasonable distance. This gap in available child care has an estimated annual economic impact of over $2.7 billion.

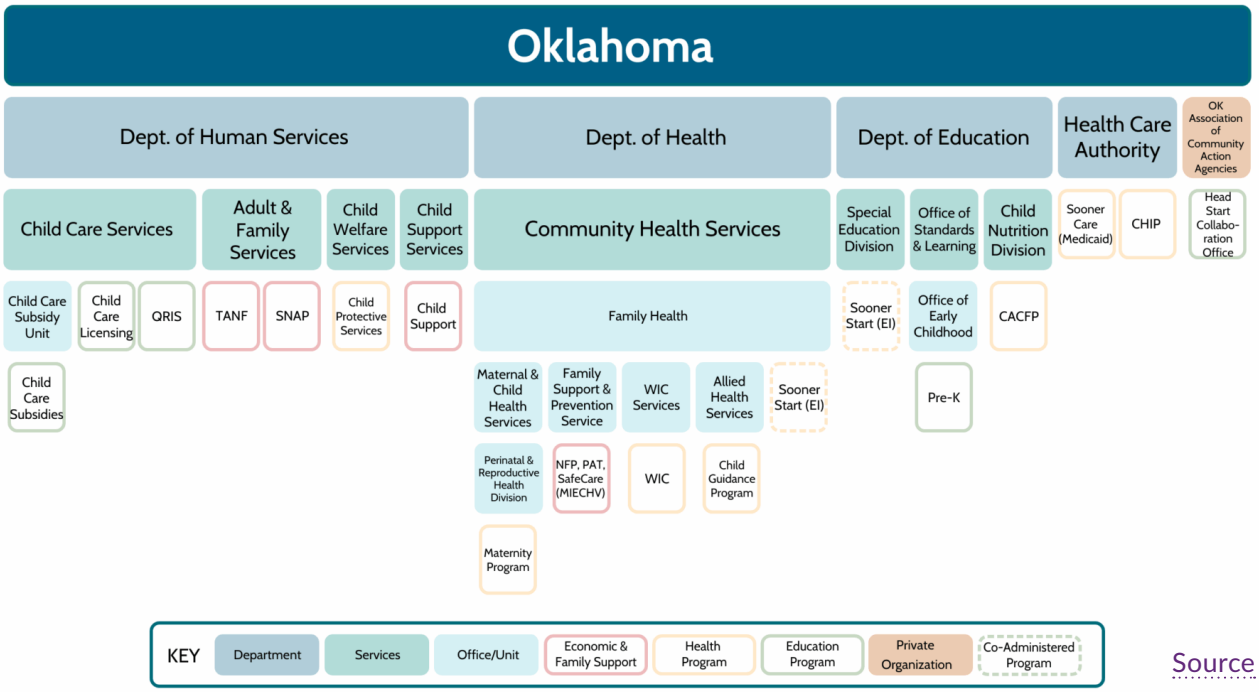
Governance

The current early childhood governance system within Oklahoma is classified as coordinated, where responsibility for early care and education programs are shared by the Department of Human Services, Department of Health, Department of Education and other agencies. Figure 1, below, shows how early childhood programming is coordinated across state agencies in Oklahoma.

Funding

Like in most other states, federal and state funding for early care and education reach only a fraction of eligible children in Oklahoma. Table 1, below, illustrates the reach of key programs like the child care subsidy through the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Early/Head Start and state-funded preschool.

Figure 1: Early Childhood Governance in Oklahoma



Source

Table 1: Reach of Key Early Care and Education Programs

CCDBG	Head Start Preschool	Early Head Start	State-funded Preschool
23%	30%	14%	36% (of three- and four-year olds)

Source

Table 2: Affordability of Child Care in Oklahoma

Annual price of center-based child care	Annual price of home-based child care	Portion of median income of married-couple family	Portion of median income of single-parent income
$10,809	$9,399	10.6%	34.2%

Source

Affordability

Reflecting national trends, child care expenses are high for families in Oklahoma. As shown in Table 2, the price of care exceeds 10 percent of the median annual income of a two adult household and 34 percent of a single parent household.

K-12 Education in Oklahoma

Oklahoma serves over 650,000 students across 500 school districts within the K-12 system. According to a 2025 analysis, Oklahoma ranks 50th in education when accounting for graduation rates, best schools per capita, dropout rates, student achievement, and safety measures. While some leaders question the validity of these findings, citing concerns over the prioritization of per pupil expenditure, Oklahoma falls behind on other measures including NAEP scores and teaching attractiveness indicators.

The state ranks 38th in student-teacher ratio, with approximately 16 students for every teacher. Oklahoma currently spends approximately $13,000 per pupil, which is below the national average of $18,000. While per-pupil expenditure does not directly improve student performance, research suggests that for every $1,000 reduction in per-pupil spending, the achievement gap between Black and White students widens by six percentage points.

Students in Oklahoma, like students across the country, struggle to achieve proficiency across subject areas according to national assessments. Oklahoma's students are trailing behind the national average, with less than a quarter of 4th-grade students achieving reading proficiency, meaning they can conclude the meanings of words in text using context clues (Figure 2). Oklahoma students perform slightly better in mathematics, with just over a quarter achieving proficiency, meaning they understand concepts like place value and can work with whole numbers and decimals (Figure 3).

Figure 2: State vs. National 4th Grade Reading NAEP Proficiency | 2011–2024

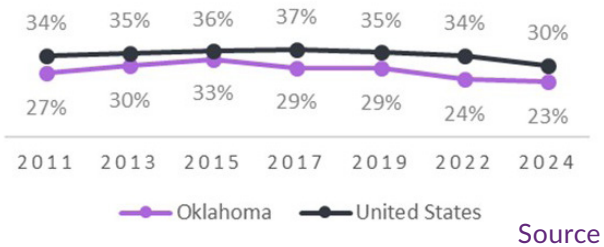


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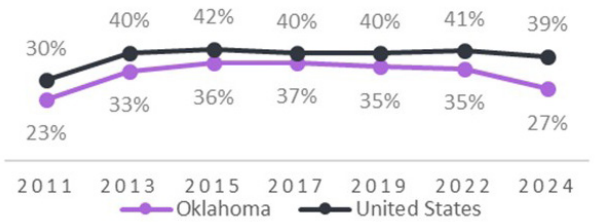
Figure 3: State v. National 4th Grade Mathematics NAEP Proficiency | 2011–2024

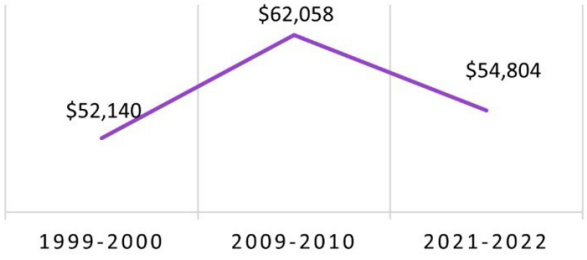


Source

Research shows that students with high-quality teachers outperform those without, regardless of demographic differences. According to national data, Oklahoma is in the bottom quartile for wage competitiveness for teachers and the purchasing power of teacher salaries has declined over the

past several years in the state (Figure 4). To address these challenges, Oklahoma has recently made investments in supporting teacher mentorship and awarding recognition to teachers who perform well. These efforts have the potential to strengthen teacher retention and improve student achievement over the long term.

Figure 4: Change in Oklahoma Teacher Salary Over Time | 1999–2022



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Higher Education

Higher education is a key driver of economic and social mobility in Oklahoma, where the majority of future jobs will require education beyond high school. 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. With 46 institutions serving over 168,000 students, the state's postsecondary system provides multiple pathways to credentials that connect residents to meaningful careers.

Postsecondary Attainment

Over the past decade, national and state leaders have worked to increase postsecondary attainment, resulting in an overall rise of more than 16 percentage points. As of fall 2024, undergraduate enrollment grew 4.7 percent for a total of 16 million students, approaching pre-pandemic levels. Despite the progress, certain challenges still remain, such as disparate funding for institutions, barriers to financial resources, and lack of intentional student support for all contribute to gaps in attainment rates.

Currently, 37 percent of Oklahomans hold a postsecondary degree or credential. While the state has made progress, gaps in attainment persist for certain student populations, particularly for Black, Hispanic, and Native students, as well as for students with "some college but no degree." Addressing these gaps is critical to strengthening Oklahoma's workforce and economy.

Access

Oklahoma's colleges and universities increasingly serve diverse student populations, including first-generation students, working adults, veterans, and students with disabilities. Enrollment gaps

Figure 5: Oklahoma's Postsecondary Landscape

Oklahoma is home to 46 institutions of higher education. These institutions include:

13	17	13	2
2-Year Public Institutions	*4-Year Public Institutions*	*4-Year Private Nonprofit Institutions*	*For-Profit Institutions*

Source

In total, Oklahoma serves 184,218 postsecondary students

45%	45%	9%	<1%
are enrolled at 2-Year Public Institutions	*are enrolled at 4-Year Public Institutions*	*are enrolled at 4-Year Private Nonprofit Institutions*	*are enrolled at For-Profit Institutions*

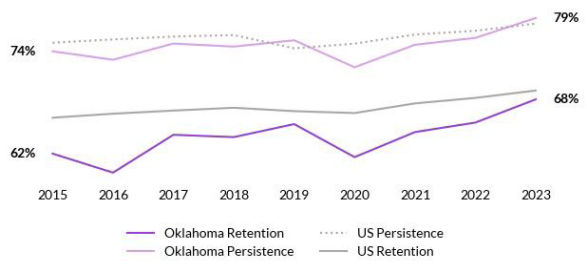
Source

persist across racial and ethnic groups, with Black and Hispanic students underrepresented in postsecondary education compared to white and Asian peers. The state is home to 44 Minority-Serving Institutions, which play a critical role in expanding opportunity and mobility for students of color and low-income students.

Student Support

Holistic student supports, or wraparound services, such as academic advising, financial guidance, mental health care, and childcare, are essential for student success. Research shows these services improve enrollment and retention, especially for first-generation and adult learners. Oklahoma's retention and persistence rates (Figure 6) demonstrate the importance of scaling such supports statewide.

Figure 6: Oklahoma Postsecondary Retention and Persistence Rates



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Affordability

Affordability remains a major barrier as Oklahoma ranks 43rd in FAFSA completion, leaving over $64 million in Pell Grants unclaimed in 2023. Tuition at public institutions has increased by 63 percent since 2014, while state appropriations have only grown by 20 percent, shifting costs onto students. The average Oklahoma student graduates with over $32,000 in loan debt, highlighting the urgent need for stronger financial aid access and state investment.

Policy Considerations

- In what ways could policymakers explore strengthening the early care and education sector to expand access to affordable, high-quality early care and education?
- What existing academic initiatives could be strengthened to support student achievement and raise student proficiency levels across the state?
- How can Oklahoma expand access to diverse postsecondary pathways while closing enrollment and attainment gaps?

THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF OKLAHOMA'S CHILD CARE LANDSCAPE

Oklahoma currently has a child care gap, estimated at 34.2 percent, caused by the demand for care far exceeding its supply. Rural areas of the state are estimated to have a bigger child care deficit than urban areas. The annual impact of the gap on the state economy is calculated to be $2.7 to $4.2 billion. While unregulated care does lessen the gap, there is no reliable data on this type of care.

Table 3: Oklahoma's Child Care Gap

Access to licensed child care spaces	109,534
Number of children (aged 0-5) with all parents working	60%
Estimated licensed child care gap	34.2%

Nationally, the child care gap is caused by a few intersecting factors, including the high cost of providing care, low wages of early educators, and fragmented governance of the early care and education sector.

The high cost of providing child care

A growing number of states are adopting cost modeling, a data-driven alternative to traditional market rate surveys, to determine the true cost of delivering high-quality early childhood care. Unlike market surveys, which reflect what the current market can bear, cost modeling calculates the baseline funding needed to sustain operations, pay staff living wages, and ensures program quality. This approach gives policymakers a clearer understanding of the investment required to stabilize the child care sector, expand access, improve outcomes, and address longstanding inequities in early childhood education. The cost-revenue imbalance underlying much of the sector limits existing providers from expanding services and discourages aspiring providers from entering the sector, causing bottlenecks in the provision of care.

Low wages of early educators

Early educators are one of the lowest paid groups in the country and earn far less than teachers in K-12 schools. In many states, they also earn less than the living wage for an individual. In Oklahoma, early educators earn approximately $26,000 per year. Early educators entering the field face significant financial stress and high levels of burnout. The national rate of attrition in the early childhood workforce is estimated to be 20 percent, leading to widespread understaffing of centers, causing further decreases in the supply of care.

Fragmented governance

States are moving toward unifying governance of the early care and education sector. However, in many states, including Oklahoma, two or more departments may coordinate early care and education programs, potentially leading to fragmentation of funding and governance. Unified governance has been shown to help improve the stability of the child care sector, which in turn helps providers retain staff and expand services.

Solutions to Address the Child Care Gap

States, including Oklahoma, have developed a variety of solutions to better support providers in expanding their centers and attracting new providers to the sector. While these solutions are effective, most states are unable to fund them at scale, diluting their impact on closing the child care gap.

- Stabilization grant programs, like the Oklahoma Child Care Desert Startup Grants in 2022, help incentivize child care providers to stay in the sector and help them improve facilities and provide staff bonuses.
- Improved subsidy reimbursement rates, as specified by Oklahoma HB 1849, are better aligned with the true cost of providing care and incentivize providers to care for children from lower-income families.
- Early educator professional development programs like the Oklahoma Registry Certificate of Achievement and Stipend Program and compensation programs like the Child Care Wage Supplement Program, provide scholarships and wage supplements for early educators and help improve retention of this workforce.
- Grow Your Own programs encourage the development of high-quality home-based child care and Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care programs, especially in rural and remote areas. This can help increase the supply of flexible, affordable, and culturally and linguistically aligned child care in underserved regions.

State Examples

States possess a range of policy mechanisms and fiscal instruments to influence resource allocation within the child care sector. The following section provides example approaches of state-level investments and policy structures used to support their child care delivery system.

Stabilization grants | To sustain the positive impact of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)-funded child care stabilization grant program, some states used state appropriations for stabilization grants and incentives for child care providers:

- **Georgia |** In 2024, the state appropriated nearly $23 million for teacher salary increases for its mixed-delivery preschool program.
- **Massachusetts |** The Commonwealth allocated $475 million to Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) child care stabilization grants.
- **North Carolina |** The state provided stop-gap funding of $67.5 million to continue the Child Care Stabilization Grant program through December 2024.

Increased subsidy reimbursement rates | Some states increased subsidy reimbursement rates to ensure that they are more in alignment with the cost of providing care. Arkansas, New Mexico, New York, South Carolina, and Virginia are examples of states that increased subsidy reimbursement rates for providers.

Inclusion of home-based and FFN child care providers | To address the child care deficit in rural and remote areas, states are investing in developing the home-based child care and FFN sector through technical assistance, grants, and networking opportunities. Nevada and Louisiana are examples of states that aim to rapidly expand child care supply through subsidy coverage and other services to such providers.

Policy Considerations

- What short-term strategies could policymakers explore to strengthen existing child care providers, support expansion opportunities, and encourage new entrants into the child care sector?
- Which approaches could help ensure reimbursement rates accurately reflect the true cost of providing care across different types of providers?
- What policy options could be considered to enhance educator development, compensation, and overall workforce stability in the child care sector statewide?

CREDENTIALING AND RETAINING HIGH-QUALITY TEACHERS

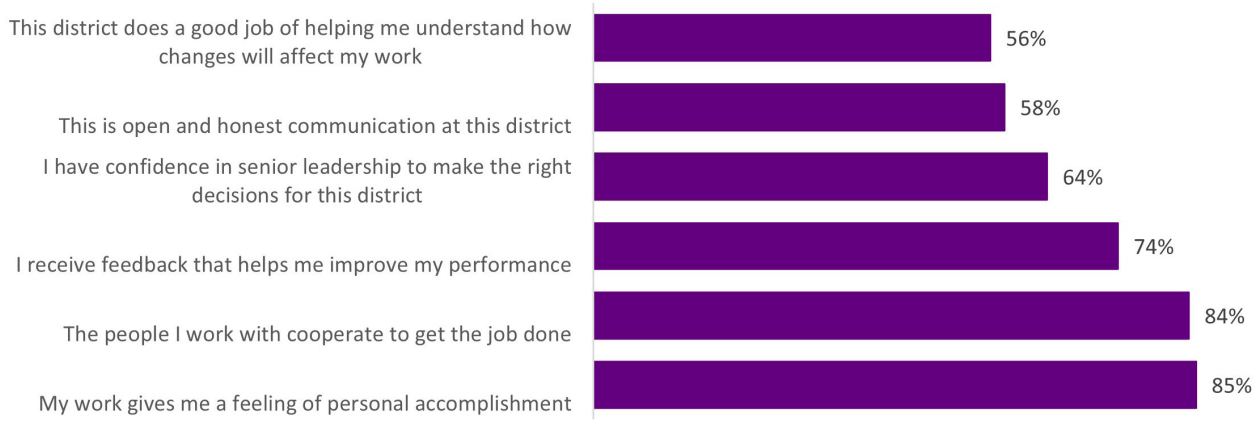
Research indicates that teachers are the most important school-based factor for student growth and achievement. Students taught by highly effective, excellent educators are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, be employed, and earn higher wages. Further research shows that state policies on educator licensing, hiring, and professional development impact teacher qualifications. As such, teacher preparation and certification strongly correlate with student achievement in math and reading. This demonstrates the importance of policy in ensuring that all students have access to high-quality teachers.

Like other states, Oklahoma struggles to fill classroom vacancies with qualified educators. Nearly 60 percent of schools struggled to fill school vacancies during the 2020-2021 school year. In the 2022-2023 school year, teacher turnover rates in Oklahoma reached 24 percent, one of the highest in the country. While turnover rates have recently declined, the 2024-2025 Oklahoma Educator Engagement Survey offers insight into some potential drivers of turnover in the state. It is important to note that the percentage of educators who feel they receive effective feedback is similar to that of educators who say they received early mentorship in their career, 74 and 75 percent, respectively (Figure 7).

Promising Practices in Oklahoma

Due to high turnover and vacancy rates over the past several years, Oklahoma turned to emergency certifications for teachers with bachelor's degrees, issuing more than 4,600 certifications during the 2023-2024 school year. In 2022, legislators approved letting adjunct teachers with relevant work experience teach full-time at the approval of local school boards. Efforts are ongoing to balance the need for additional educators with the goal of maintaining high instructional standards. Students taught by emergency-licensed teachers scored significantly lower in math and science than students taught by non-emergency-licensed teachers.

Figure 7: Oklahoma Educator Engagement Survey | 2024–2025



Source

First Class Teacher Induction

Emergency credentialing is not Oklahoma's only approach to address the teacher shortage. The Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) offers the First Class Teacher Induction program, a three-year program focused on supporting beginning teachers as they establish their careers. The timing of this program is critical, as the most significant performance gains for educators occur within their first three to seven years of their career. During their first year, teachers participate in professional learning provided by OSDE, mentors, and Catapult Learning. First-year teachers are assigned site-based mentors to support acclamation to school culture and climate, policy and practice, and overall wellness. During years two and three, teachers are matched with virtual instructional coaches who engage in coaching cycles, classroom management learning, and instructional practice. Throughout the program, teachers can access professional learning communities and technology tools that enable the development of their craft. Both beginning teachers and coaches are compensated for their participation in the program. While there are no direct studies examining the impact of this program, similar programs focused on early career teacher mentorship positively impact teacher retention and improve teacher effectiveness.

Teacher Empowerment Program

The Teacher Empowerment Program focuses on recognizing and rewarding high-performing teachers. OSDE has allocated nearly $58 million for the third year of the program to award the top 10 percent of the highest-quality teachers within a school district. Teachers may be recognized for advanced, lead, and master designations annually and receive between $3,000 and $10,000 depending on their designation. Teachers in schools with over 40 percent economically disadvantaged students will receive additional compensation.

While there are no current studies of the impact of this program, performance pay programs have mixed reviews. Additional compensation for high-performing teachers is shown to boost morale and improve teacher retention, both of which impact student achievement long-term. However, other studies show no overall correlation and indicate that program design impacts effectiveness.

Policy Considerations

- What role should the state play in strengthening teacher preparation, licensing, and ongoing professional learning? Who should be included in legislative change regarding teacher credentialing?
- How should Oklahoma balance the immediate need to fill classrooms with the long-term goal of maintaining teacher quality?
- What data should the state collect and report annually to better track teacher shortages, turnover, and the impact of state investments on student learning?

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN EDUCATION

Artificial Intelligence (AI), which combines computer science and robust datasets to make predictions and classifications based on available data, has rapidly developed over the past several years and has quickly become embedded in society. From social media to smart home devices and television streaming suggestions, AI has supplemented life and culture for some time now.

New advancements in AI, such as ChatGPT, call into question the use of AI and its effects on important aspects of life, such as education. In short, AI has the potential to, and already is, fundamentally changing how we educate students. According to recent assessments, the World Economic Forum projects large-scale changes to the labor market over the next five years due to advancements in AI. The U.S. Department of Education published a report about the importance of developing AI policies for classrooms in 2023. States and districts nationwide are working hard to develop policies and guidance for students and educators.

Current AI Trends in K-12 & Higher Education

If harnessed correctly, AI has the power to transform education. Below are some examples of ways AI has been incorporated across the education continuum.

- Personalized K-12 Learning Experience | AI can adapt to students' level of education, learning speed, and educational goals. This allows for interventions such as intelligent tutoring systems.
- Technology-Enhanced Assessment | AI can assess student performance on assignments more timely and accurately while also analyzing student behavior, engagement, and learning outcomes. These assessments provide the opportunity to tailor intervention for students earlier in their learning.
- Automation of Administrative Tasks | AI can be used to schedule meetings, plan lessons, and perform other activities that are estimated to make up 20 to 40 percent of a teacher's working hours. If utilized correctly, teachers could reallocate their time to activities that better support student learning.
- Strengthening Retention and Completion | Across the nation, IHEs have implemented chatbots to support students. Students can text the chatbot and get connected to individual interventions such as tutoring, food banks, or mental health services, which has resulted in increased retention and graduation.

Considerations for Future AI Policy

While AI can positively impact education across the continuum, pitfalls in this technology still exist. Policymakers should consider several aspects when seeking to promote AI, while also providing guardrails.

- Adverse Outcomes | AI operates on available data, so there may be adverse outcomes if the data are flawed or biased. The quality, age, and population should all be considered to avoid harm. For example, an AI learning system trained on students in only one state may not be as applicable to students in another state.
- Data Privacy | Policymakers should consider how to ensure individuals are protected from ill-use of their personal information in AI. These safeguards are critical when using K-12 student data.
- Cheating and Plagiarism | Educators have expressed increasing concerns that students could use AI to write papers and complete assignments, undermining learning.

AI is arguably the most significant disruptor to education in modern times and is already being used by today's students. Rather than fight its use, educators and policymakers can embrace its potential in a way that ensures equitable access and benefits. Assignments may have to evolve to combat cheating. Still, just as programs such as spell-check and Grammarly redirected the focus of teachers and professors on content rather than grammar, AI can be harnessed to ensure student comprehension and learning.

Oklahoma's AI Guidance

The OSDE released updated Guidance and Considerations for Using Artificial Intelligence in Oklahoma K-12 Schools in July 2025. The guidance provides a range of resources on AI from understanding AI and AI Literacy to benefits of application and implementation frameworks for the K-12 setting. Tools that use student demographics or collect sensitive information are considered high risk and are to be used with user consent with continuous data monitoring, while AI tools that do not use personal information are considered lower risk and come with less oversight with de-identified data. OSDE also provides resources on AI tools including Khanmigo, AI Toolbox, and SchoolAI.

States Leading in AI for Education

Since the 2022 ChatGPT debut, states have gone from having zero AI guidance to 28 states having published AI guidance for K-12 education settings. As leading states like Arkansas, Georgia, and Illinois share results from their AI Task Forces, others are digging into legislation. States like Texas and Connecticut introduced bills banning the replacement of direct instruction from teachers with AI.

- **California** | California Superintendent Tony Thurmond launched a professional training initiative on a variety of topics, including AI-focused professional learning for educators and administrators. This initiative aims to educate educators on the benefits and limitations of the tool and has produced panels and working groups featuring experts in AI and leveraging stakeholders like the Computer Science Teachers Association. The California Department of Education (CDE) provides a variety of resources on AI, including the CDE AI Resource Kit and a webinar series on AI, which explores topics such as prompting, impact on mental health, and maximizing workflow. California legislators passed a bill that would prohibit developers from producing a product that is intended to collect or process a student's identifying information.
- **Connecticut** | A bill Concerning Artificial Intelligence, which passed Connecticut's Senate but died in the House, would have established a regulatory sandbox program to plan for the implementation of AI on a community and economic level and develop regulations around its use. The bill also required an AI training academy for higher education institutions and offers implementation strategies for early learning and K-12. This approach to regulation allows for a strategic state-level rollout designed to limit the negative impact of AI on education and the labor force.
- **Ohio** | Ohio's Department of Education and Workforce, (ODEW), has launched the AI Education Project (aiEDU) with Innovate Ohio. Together, they produced the AI K-12 Toolkit with resources for parents, teachers, and policymakers, as well as a step-by-step approach for policy development. ODEW also released Ohio's AI in Education Coalition: AI Strategy Report. The coalition is comprised of industry representatives, school districts, and other stakeholders to develop a plan for ensuring Ohio's students are competitive in the growing AI industry.

Policy Considerations

- How will student data be protected from misuse when interacting with AI systems?
- What safeguards are needed to ensure AI used in classrooms is transparent, reliable, and free from harmful bias?
- Should states adopt a "regulatory sandbox" approach to test AI in education before full-scale implementation?

EXPANDING PATHWAYS TO THE WORKFORCE

Across the United States, aligning postsecondary credentials and degree pathways with workforce needs has become a priority. With an overwhelming majority of future jobs projected to 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.

Postsecondary Pathways

Looking for direct workforce alignment, it is important for Oklahoma to consider strategies to strengthen its economy by preparing students for meaningful careers. Multiple postsecondary pathways provide on-ramps to many life or family sustaining careers.

As the demographics of higher education and workforce needs continue to change, there is a growing recognition of the value different types of credentials provide for students. Postsecondary pathways are the varying opportunities students may pursue to become college and career ready and are often associated with increased median wages.

The full scope of postsecondary pathways includes:

- Workforce Training Programs | A program that focuses on learning or upgrading basic skills in order to enhance job performance, promote career development, or train for a new job.
- Industry Credentials | Vocational certifications, licenses, or badges that are recognized by local, state, or national business and industry partners. Industry credentials help prepare individuals to work in a specific industry, often in an entry-level position and/ or advance their career through skill mastery. These credentials typically are not for college credit but may be evaluated by colleges and universities for awarding credit for prior learning.
- Certificates | Awards that usually require less than one or two years to complete and prepare individuals for middle-skill jobs (such as nurses and welders). These short-term credentials quickly prepare individuals for jobs that are important to local economies. Many certificates can be applied toward a higher-level certificate or degree, such as an associate degree. These credentials build, or stack, upon one another, which allow students to use prior knowledge and continue their education at their own pace.
- Associate Degrees | An undergraduate academic program that aims to give students basic knowledge and skills that can be used toward employment or further study. Most associate degrees can be conferred in two years and are often completed at a community college.
- Bachelor's Degrees | Undergraduate academic degree awarded by a college or university usually after four years of study. A bachelor's degree is a prerequisite for further courses in graduate education.
- Graduate Education | Academic or professional degrees, certificates, diplomas, or other qualifications pursued by postsecondary students who have earned an undergraduate degree. Graduate education provides students with more advanced learning in a specialized discipline making them an expert in that topic of study.

Oklahoma's Workforce Demand

Oklahoma's economy is projected to need thousands of additional workers in engineering, health sciences, and advanced manufacturing over the next decade. The Oklahoma Works "Critical Occupations List" highlights persistent shortages in STEM fields, particularly engineering, where employers cite difficulty recruiting qualified candidates. To address this, some institutions have developed articulation agreements to streamline transfer and reduce credit loss, such as the Rose State College partnership with both the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University in

mechanical engineering. These models ensure that students who begin at a two-year college can complete a four-year degree efficiently, without duplicating coursework.

At the same time, Oklahoma students are increasingly pursuing industry credentials and certificates through CareerTech and community colleges. However, availability varies significantly by region, and rural students often face barriers in accessing high-demand programs. Additionally, employers report uneven alignment between credentials earned and the skills needed in the workplace. Addressing these gaps will require coordinated investment across secondary schools, higher education institutions, and employers.

Importantly, data from the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education show that a significant share of graduates remain in the state after completing their degrees, particularly in high-demand fields like health care and engineering, underscoring the value of strengthening pathways that directly contribute to the state's workforce.

Figure 8: Oklahomans Who Remain in State Post-graduation

93.4%

Oklahomans Who Remain and Work in OK One Year After Graduation From a Public College or University

Source

Workforce Development Partnership

In July 2025, Governor Stitt announced a new partnership with the State of Oklahoma and America Achieves, a national nonprofit, to reform and align the state's talent development infrastructure with regional economic demand. The core mechanism is a public-private strategy designed to bridge the skills gap and expand the middle class by focusing on tangible outcomes. Oklahoma is one of the first two states (alongside Maryland) to enter this type of partnership focused on workforce development.

The initiative has two primary focus areas:

- **Oklahoma Good Jobs Fund |** The state is launching an initial $19 million fund to support scalable, evidence-based workforce solutions. This funding is composed of $4.5 million in public funds from the Oklahoma Workforce Commission and a significant commitment of at least $15 million in aligned philanthropic support. The purpose of this blended funding model is to pilot high-impact programs and industry partnerships in high-growth sectors such as manufacturing, advanced air mobility, and healthcare.
- **Modernizing State Talent Systems |** The partnership seeks to undertake systemic reform by building a more integrated and responsive talent system. This effort addresses chronic challenges in workforce development, such as fragmented governance structures, misalignment between training supply and employer demand, and a lack of real-time labor market data.

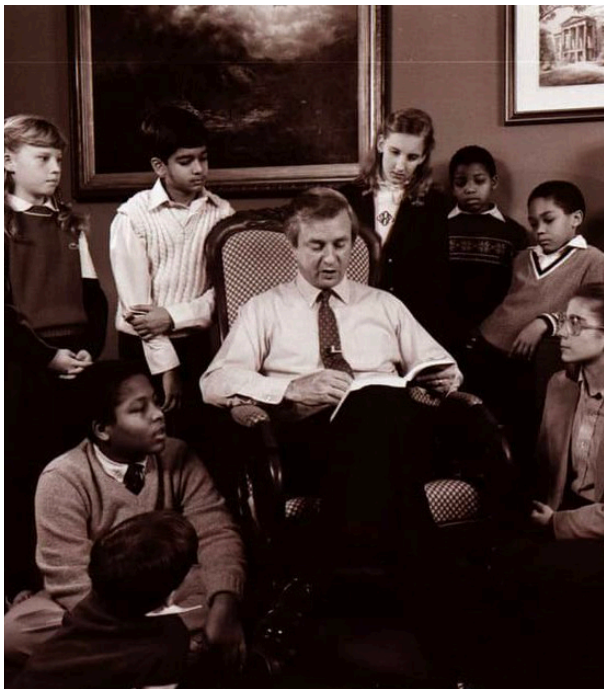
National Context

Other states' experiences highlight the importance of aligning funding, employer engagement, and credential portability to create seamless pathways. Some examples include:

- **Colorado |** Colorado has scaled apprenticeship and work-based learning programs that blend high school coursework, community college training, and employer partnerships. Many of these apprenticeships lead directly to employment with family-sustaining wages. Further, they have worked to advance their stackable credential pathways in direct alignment with work in apprenticeship and work-based learning programs.
- **Tennessee |** The Tennessee Promise program offers free tuition for community college, paired with clear transfer pathways to four-year institutions. By combining affordability with structured degree pipelines, the state has raised credential completion and improved workforce alignment.
- **North Carolina |** North Carolina's Career & College Promise (CCP) allows high school students to enroll in college classes (at community colleges or universities) while in high school, earning credit toward certificates, diplomas, or associate degrees. The program provides Career & Technical Education (CTE) pathways as well as college transfer pathways.

Policy Considerations

- What strategies can expand access to postsecondary pathways, particularly for rural students who face barriers to high-demand programs?
- How can state policymakers ensure that multiple postsecondary pathways, including certificates, credentials, and degrees, are valued equally and clearly communicated to students and families as viable routes to economic mobility?
- How can the state strengthen the portability and stackability of credentials to ensure students can seamlessly progress from certificates to degrees and into meaningful careers?



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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