

# “America’s Cornerstone” Advocacy Agenda

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*2026 Legislative and Policy Agenda*



**Dear Members:**

As leaders of the National School Boards Association, we are proud to present NSBA's 2026 "America's Cornerstone" Advocacy Agenda.

Public schools remain the foundation of our democracy and the heartbeat of our communities. Every day, locally elected school boards govern school systems that educate tens of millions of students to serve all children, meet diverse needs, and prepare the next generation for college, careers, and civic life. In a time of rapid social, economic, and technological change, the role of public education has never been more essential.

This agenda reflects our unwavering commitment to protecting local governance, strengthening federal partnerships, and ensuring that public schools are adequately resourced to educate the whole child. From fully funding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and strengthening Title I, to supporting the educator workforce, promoting digital access and cybersecurity, prioritizing student health and safety, and opposing policies that divert funds from public schools, NSBA will continue to advocate with clarity, courage, and purpose.

Together with our state associations and member school districts, we stand united in advancing policies that reinforce public education as America's cornerstone. We look forward to working alongside you to elevate the voice of locally elected school board leaders and to ensure every student, in every community, has access to a high-quality public education.

With appreciation for your leadership and service,

**Leonard Lockhart**  
President, NSBA Board of Directors  
Vice President, Windsor Board of Education (CT)



**Verjeana McCotter-Jacobs, Esq.**  
Executive Director & CEO  
National School Boards Association



# America's Cornerstone

Public schools are educating the most diverse student population in history, with too many children who live in poverty, struggle to learn English, or face challenges at home that pose obstacles to learning. These issues are not excuses; they are the reality in which public schools operate.

In 2026, public schools serve as community anchors, providing academic instruction alongside mental and behavioral health supports, nutrition, safety, and stability for students and families navigating unprecedented social, economic, and technological change.

Our public schools have been advancing education despite societal failures to address critical social issues and federal mandates that limit school boards' ability to innovate. Unlike non-public schools, community-based public schools are accountable to their neighborhoods. They cannot cherry-pick students or deny needed services, and they willingly accept the immense responsibility of educating every child every day.

Neighborhood public schools serve all students despite enormous headwinds, including budget cuts, persistent underfunding, efforts to privatize K-12 education, educator shortages, rising operational costs, and growing student mental health needs. When schools are adequately resourced and supported, student achievement rises and gaps narrow.

Public schools expand advanced placement, career and technical education, work-based learning, dual enrollment, and innovative instructional models, including responsible uses of technology and artificial intelligence (AI) governed by local boards. Despite progress, work remains: some schools struggle, and students require additional supports. Evidence shows low-performing schools can improve with strategic community investment. Strengthening public education requires targeted investments, curriculum enhancements, technology modernization, and access to specialized personnel.

The National School Boards Association (NSBA), together with its member state associations and member public school districts, which represent locally elected school board officials serving millions of public school students, works to ensure local governance, student safety, and sufficient resources to educate the whole child. As the only national organization representing school boards, no organization is better positioned to advance policies that protect democratic local control while promoting excellence for all students.

For more than 80 years, NSBA has positioned public education as a cornerstone of American democracy. NSBA continues to advocate for strong public schools, ensuring federal support and state and local flexibility while protecting civil rights.



The NSBA Legislative Agenda was developed through direct input from member states, with school board leaders across the country contributing their perspectives and priorities through NSBA's annual survey. This inclusive process ensures that the agenda reflects the collective voice of our membership and aligns with the needs and challenges of local school communities nationwide.

# Advancing Public Education Through Federal Policy: NSBA Advocacy & Government Relations

## **Federal Policy Monitoring & Response**

NSBA provides timely, plain-language updates on Congressional and Administration actions affecting public education, including appropriations, legislation, and regulations. By anticipating emerging federal proposals, NSBA helps school boards prepare for and respond to policy opportunities and risks. Core tools include a real-time legislative tracker, concise federal action alerts, and a quarterly priorities scorecard highlighting progress on key education issues.

## **Proactive Federal Policy Making & Shaping**

NSBA actively shapes federal education policy by engaging Congress and the Administration to protect and advance public school priorities. This work includes advocating for strong federal investments, participating in coalitions, responding to proposed regulations, and elevating the voices of local school board leaders. Annual appropriations advocacy, coordinated Capitol Hill engagement, formal comment letters, and member testimony ensure public education perspectives are reflected in federal decision-making.

## **Member Engagement & Mobilization**

NSBA equips school board members with the information and tools they need to advocate effectively at the federal level. Through regular policy briefings, action alerts, and easy-to-use advocacy resources, members stay informed and ready to engage when it matters most. Learning sessions and advocacy preparation translate complex federal policy into practical, actionable guidance for local leaders.

## **Strategic Partnerships & Visibility**

NSBA expands its national influence by collaborating with aligned organizations and elevating school board leadership in prominent policy conversations. By co-hosting events, contributing research, and participating in major conferences and forums, NSBA amplifies its message and reinforces its role as a trusted voice for public education. Member stories and local impact showcase the value of school board leadership and strengthen NSBA's visibility and credibility across the education policy landscape.



# NSBA Federal Advocacy Priorities

NSBA will work to:

- Fully Fund and Modernize the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- Expand, Strengthen, and Retain the Educator Workforce
- Strengthen Investments in ESEA Title I and Career & Technical Education (CTE)
- Promote Digital Access, Digital Literacy, and Cybersecurity
- Prioritize Student Health, Wellness, and Safety
- Oppose School Vouchers

## **Fully Fund and Modernize the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**

NSBA strongly supports full funding and modernization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and urges Congress to prioritize this commitment in the FY26 Labor-HHS-Education appropriations process. For nearly 50 years, IDEA has guaranteed students with disabilities the right to a free and appropriate public education, but chronic federal underfunding has weakened its implementation. Although Congress originally pledged to cover up to 40 percent of the additional costs of special education, the federal share has remained at roughly 14 percent, leaving states and local school districts to shoulder the majority of the financial burden.

NSBA emphasizes that fully funding IDEA would significantly strengthen public schools' ability to serve students with disabilities. Adequate funding would allow districts to hire and retain qualified special education teachers and support staff, expand access to essential instructional resources and

assistive technologies, and relieve pressure on local budgets. This would ensure that services for students with disabilities do not depend on a community's ZIP code and that all students have access to the supports they need to succeed.

In addition to full funding, NSBA calls on Congress to modernize IDEA to reflect current educational and technological realities. This includes supporting data-driven practices, accessible digital learning tools, and comprehensive professional development for educators. NSBA views these investments as both a legal and moral obligation and as a critical step toward strengthening accountability, improving outcomes for students with disabilities, and securing a stronger future for public education nationwide.

## **Expand, Strengthen, and Retain the Educator Workforce**

NSBA strongly advocates for robust and sustained federal investment in expanding, strengthening, and retaining the educator workforce, with particular emphasis on continued funding for ESEA Title II, Part A in the FY26 Labor-HHS-Education appropriations. NSBA underscores that Title II, Part A is the only dedicated federal funding stream for educator professional development and is essential for helping school districts recruit, support, and retain high-quality educators. Persistent workforce shortages and increasing demands on educators make this funding critical to improving student achievement and ensuring educators are equipped to meet the needs of today's classrooms.

The association urges Congress to reject proposed eliminations of Title II, Part A, and to support full funding consistent with the Senate's FY26 Labor-HHS-Education proposal. Adequate funding



would enable districts to invest in high-quality, evidence-based professional learning, including training aligned with the science of reading, effective and responsible integration of artificial intelligence in instruction, and strong civics education. These investments are vital to preparing educators to navigate evolving instructional expectations and to deliver high-quality teaching across all subject areas.

In addition to sustaining existing programs, NSBA supports innovative approaches to addressing long-term workforce challenges. The association encourages Congress to use the reauthorization of the National Apprenticeship Act as an opportunity to expand educator apprenticeship pathways by explicitly recognizing education careers as apprenticeable occupations, establishing a public-sector funding set-aside, and providing clear implementation guidance. NSBA believes these strategies, particu-

larly those supporting paraprofessionals in earning teaching credentials, would help districts build a stable, diverse, and highly qualified educator workforce essential to the success of public schools nationwide.

### **Strengthen Investments in ESEA Title I and Career & Technical Education (CTE)**

The association strongly supports robust federal investments in ESEA Title I and Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs in the FY26 Labor-HHS-Education appropriations. NSBA emphasizes that these programs are foundational to ensuring that all students, regardless of income level or geographic location, have access to high-quality instruction and meaningful pathways to postsecondary education and careers.

Title I, in particular, remains the cornerstone of federal K-12 education funding, providing critical

resources to schools serving students from low-income families.

NSBA urges Congress to reject proposed cuts to Title I and instead strengthen funding to meet growing student needs more effectively. Title I funds support evidence-based interventions such as tutoring, literacy programs, and extended learning opportunities, which are essential for closing opportunity gaps and improving outcomes in core academic areas like reading and math. NSBA cautions that reductions in Title I funding would undermine schools' ability to deliver targeted supports and would disproportionately harm students who rely most on these services.

In addition, NSBA calls for significantly increased investment in Career and Technical Education through the Perkins CTE State Grants. High-quality CTE programs prepare students for in-demand careers by integrating academic instruction with hands-on learning, industry credentials, and work-based experiences. NSBA also supports strengthened partnerships among schools, employers, and postsecondary institutions to modernize CTE offerings and expand access to emerging fields. Together, full funding for Title I and CTE represents an investment in student success, workforce readiness, and the long-term economic vitality of communities across the nation.

### **Promote Digital Access, Digital Literacy, and Cybersecurity**

NSBA emphasizes the urgent need for federal leadership to strengthen digital access, digital literacy, and cybersecurity in K-12 public schools. NSBA warns that school districts are increasingly targeted by sophisticated cyberattacks, including ransomware incidents that can disrupt operations and compromise sensitive student and staff data. Many districts lack the resources and expertise to defend against these growing threats, making federal support essential to safeguarding school networks and ensuring continuity of learning.

The association strongly supports the Federal Communications Commission's three-year, \$200 million Cybersecurity Pilot Program as a critical step toward identifying effective, scalable cybersecurity solutions for schools. The association urges continued support for the pilot and rigorous evaluation of its outcomes so successful tools and practices can inform future updates and expansions of E-rate-supported cybersecurity investments. In parallel, NSBA calls for sustained and strengthened E-rate funding to ensure all schools have access to affordable, high-capacity broadband necessary for modern digital instruction, including emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

Beyond connectivity at school, NSBA stresses the importance of reliable home internet access for students. The expiration of the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) has left millions of low-income families without broadband, limiting students' ability to complete homework, participate in remote learning, and access essential online resources. NSBA urges Congress to restore and sustain the ACP while continuing to invest in E-rate and cybersecurity initiatives, underscoring that secure, high-quality internet access is no longer optional but fundamental to educational access and national success.

### **Prioritize Student Health, Wellness, and Safety**

NSBA asserts that student health, wellness, and safety are foundational to academic success and long-term outcomes, not ancillary supports. NSBA urges Congress to adopt robust federal policies and funding strategies that ensure students feel safe, healthy, and supported both in and out of the classroom. The association emphasizes that addressing physical health, mental well-being, nutrition, and school safety is essential to improving student engagement, achievement, and attendance, particularly as districts work to combat chronic absenteeism nationwide.

NSBA strongly supports expanding school-based Medicaid services by increasing federal support and



technical assistance to states and allowing greater flexibility to cover all medically necessary services for Medicaid-enrolled students. This includes broadening eligible provider lists to address mental health workforce shortages. NSBA also calls for decisive action to address food insecurity by making universal school meals permanent and continuing support for programs such as Summer EBT to ensure students have consistent access to nutrition year-round. In addition, NSBA urges Congress to restore and increase funding for mental health initiatives authorized under the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act and to strengthen grant and loan forgiveness programs that help recruit and retain school-based mental health professionals in high-need districts.

Further, NSBA advocates for sustained investment in evidence-based school safety initiatives, including STOP School Violence Act grants that support threat assessment, anonymous reporting systems, staff training, and positive school climate strategies. The association also supports H.R. 5123 to improve indoor air quality in schools, citing clear links between healthy learning environments, reduced absenteeism, and improved academic performance.

Coordinated federal investments in health care access, nutrition, mental health, safety, and indoor air quality are essential to ensuring students can attend school regularly, fully engage in learning, and succeed, benefiting not only individual students but the nation's future as a whole.

### **Oppose School Vouchers**

NSBA firmly opposes school voucher programs and other private school choice initiatives that divert public funds to private institutions. NSBA maintains that these programs weaken the public education system by redirecting limited resources away from schools that serve the vast majority of students and that are required to meet rigorous standards for transparency, accountability, and open enrollment. The association argues that public funds should be used to strength-

en public schools, which remain the cornerstone of access to high-quality education for all children.

At the same time, NSBA recognizes and appreciates congressional action to ensure that public schools are eligible to participate in the new federal tax credit for schools included in the passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBA). NSBA views this inclusion as an important acknowledgment of the essential role public schools play in communities nationwide. However, the association cautions that eligibility alone is insufficient and stresses the importance of careful implementation to prevent private schools from disproportionately benefiting from the program, as has occurred in other mixed public-private initiatives.

NSBA urges strong congressional oversight and clear guidance from the U.S. Treasury Department to ensure the tax credit is implemented fairly. This includes explicit guardrails, transparent procedures, and targeted outreach to public school districts, particularly those serving high-need communities, to ensure they can fully access and benefit from the credit.

NSBA emphasizes that federal policy must reinforce, not undermine, public education and that any incentive program should strengthen public schools rather than shift advantages toward the private sector.



# NSBA Federal Advocacy Support and Programming

## **NSBA Legislative Committee**

NSBA's Legislative Committee plays a central role in shaping and advancing the organization's federal advocacy agenda on behalf of locally governed public schools. Composed of school board members from across the country, the committee reviews and recommends NSBA's legislative priorities, monitors federal policy developments, and provides guidance on emerging issues affecting public education. By elevating the voices and perspectives of local school leaders, the Legislative Committee helps ensure that NSBA's positions reflect the real-world needs of school districts and students, while promoting policies that strengthen public education, protect local governance, and advance equity and opportunity for all learners. The NSBA Legislative Committee meets monthly to take official positions on federal legislation, leveraging the NSBA-adopted bylaws and resolutions. The committee also reviews the annual membership survey to determine NSBA's federal priorities.

## **NSBA Advocacy Institute**

NSBA's Advocacy Institute is a premier annual event that equips school board members and public education leaders with the knowledge and skills needed to advocate effectively for strong federal education policies. The Institute provides participants with in-depth briefings on current legislative and regulatory issues, federal education funding priorities, and emerging policy trends that affect locally governed public schools. Through keynote sessions, workshops, and strategy discussions, attendees learn practical approaches to engaging with policymak-

ers and communicating district priorities. A key component of the Institute is NSBA's Day on Capitol Hill, where participants meet directly with members of Congress and their staff to advocate for policies that support public schools, students, and communities nationwide.

## **NSBA Policy Hour**

NSBA's Policy Hour is a webinar series designed to keep school board members informed and engaged on the latest developments in federal education policy and advocacy. Offered as a member benefit, these sessions bring together education leaders, legal experts, and policy advocates to break down complex issues, from federal budget processes to proposed changes in major laws like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, so that local board members can understand potential impacts on their districts and students.

Each Policy Hour session provides timely analysis, practical insights, and strategies that help boards stay current on fast-changing policy landscapes and develop informed responses. The series has addressed topics such as navigating federal voucher program rulemakings and federal budget updates, giving participants actionable knowledge to support informed advocacy efforts at the national level.

## **NSBA Master Legislative Tracker**

The Master Legislative Tracker is a centralized, continuously updated resource designed to provide a clear, comprehensive view of all federal legislation introduced this Congress, along with NSBA's official



positions on each bill. Organized for ease of use, the tracker connects every position to the relevant beliefs and resolutions that inform it, ensuring alignment and transparency across our advocacy work. Updated each Friday with newly filed bills, this dynamic tool serves as a one stop reference to help staff and partners stay informed, coordinated, and well equipped to engage on behalf of public education.

### **NSBA Policy Leadership Cohorts**

The NSBA Policy Leadership Cohorts bring together school board members, education leaders,

and subject matter experts to engage in collaborative, forward thinking work on the most pressing policy issues facing public education. Each cohort provides a focused space for members to deepen their understanding of complex topics, exchange practical strategies, and help shape NSBA's national policy positions. Through regular meetings, shared learning, and collective problem solving, the cohorts strengthen members' capacity to lead effectively while ensuring that NSBA's advocacy remains informed, responsive, and aligned with the needs of students and local school communities.

## ABOUT NSBA

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Founded in 1940, the National School Boards Association's (NSBA) purpose is to ensure each student everywhere has access to excellent and equitable public education governed by high-performing school board leaders and supported by the community.

With members spread across the United States, the Virgin Islands, and Canada, NSBA is the only national organization representing school boards. Along with its member state associations and member public school districts representing locally elected school board officials serving millions of public school students, NSBA believes that public education is a civil right necessary to the dignity and freedom of the American people and that each child, regardless of their ability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, identity, or citizenship, deserves equitable access to an education that maximizes their individual potential.

A nonpartisan association, NSBA leads through working with members, affiliates, and stakeholders to advocate for high-quality public education and school board governance with the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

NSBA's resources and networks include the Center for Public Education (CPE), the Conference of State Association Legislative Staff (CSALS), Council of School Attorneys (COSA), Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE), National American Indian and Alaska Native Council of School Board Members (AIAN), National Black Council of School Board Members (NBC), National Hispanic Council of School Board Members (NHC), and the National School Boards Action Center (NSBAC).

NSBA's public policy agenda is determined by a Delegate Assembly made up of local school board members who represent their state associations of school boards. NSBA's Board of Directors translates this policy into action. Programs and services are administered by NSBA's Executive Director and CEO, and by professional staff headquartered within the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area in Alexandria, Virginia.

### NSBA Officers and Executive Director

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### NSBA Legislative Committee Members

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For more information about NSBA, its Advocacy Agenda, and insight into key public policy areas, please contact:

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No group is better positioned or has been as successful as the National School Boards Association and its state association members to bring about policies that ensure all children can receive a high-quality education.



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