

Legislative and Policy Agenda **2026**

WHO WE ARE

The Arizona Education Association is made up of more than 22,000 public school educators across Arizona. We are teachers, bus drivers, librarians, school counselors, cafeteria workers, school nurses, and more. We have more than 100 local affiliates in almost every school district in the state and are the state's second-largest labor union. We are part of the National Education Association, which is 3 million members strong — the largest labor union in the world. Unlike other organizations involved in public education, which may set their priorities based on the preferences of donors or small groups of activists, our union makes decisions democratically. Our legislative priorities are set by our members at our annual 600-person Delegate Assembly, with decisions made by an elected board of directors during the rest of the year.

Every person on our board of directors is a current AEA member and union educator. Most continue to teach and work with students full-time, squeezing their board duties into evenings and weekends already full of coaching, lesson planning, and grading. Their commitment comes from a deep dedication to the cause of public education and the well-being of Arizona's students. The Arizona Education Association doesn't just speak for Arizona's educators — we are Arizona's educators. And as such, we need to be at the table whenever decisions are made that affect public education, our colleagues, and our students.

AEA'S MISSION AND VALUES

Quality Public Education for All

We believe that every child is entitled to a free, quality, public education. All children deserve the chance to grow, to learn, and to reach their potential regardless of their background or abilities.

Fairness, Equity, and Respect for All

We believe that every person is entitled to be treated fairly and with respect. Students and school employees should be honored for their culture, history, language, religion, physical condition, ethnicity, and learning styles. Their contributions enrich our society.

Teaching as an Esteemed Profession

Because of the power of teaching and its value to the future, to our society and to our children, we work to enhance the esteem with which teaching is held by society.

Education Support Professionals as Valued Partners

Education Support Professionals are librarians, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, security guards, classroom aides, maintenance managers, groundskeepers, speech-language pathologists and all the other professionals who play a key role in educating our students but do not serve as certified educators. We believe that Education Support Professionals are integral partners in all areas of the learning process and are valued within public education.

Learning as a Community Commitment

Schools are the heart of communities. They reflect communities and grow with them. Schools and other civic institutions must work together to help children — and the society around them — meet their full potential.

Educators play a vital role in our communities — **they shape our future generations, contribute to building a healthy society, and provide spaces for learning and growth.** AEA is committed to ensuring educators are rightfully respected and trusted as professionals, which includes empowering them to work collectively and leverage their expertise determine a curriculum that ensures accurate and honest education; ensuring the safety of everyone in our schools; and ensuring educators are considered when developing legislation to continue building positive, healthy, and supportive learning environments.

Strengthening Arizona's Education Workforce

Market Driven Compensation to Stabilize the Education Workforce: Every educator deserves dignity, respect, and compensation that reflects the higher learning preparation and expertise critical role they play in student success. Salaries must be **fair, competitive, and adjusted annually to keep pace with inflation**, ensuring that all educators can sustain a stable standard of living and remain in the profession they love.

Health Insurance: Guarantee Affordable, High-quality Healthcare Coverage for all public-school employees and their families. Accessible health benefits are a cornerstone of workforce stability and a necessary component to recruiting and retaining talented professionals across all school roles.

Retirement Security for Arizona Educators: Protect and sustain the solvency and stability of the ASRS-defined benefit pension plan for public school and state employees. Preserving this commitment strengthens the state's ability to retain experienced educators throughout their careers.

Robust Mentoring Programs: Establish a funding weight for school districts to implement a robust mentoring program that supports new educators in the first three years of the profession.

Investments in Educator Preparation and Professional Development: Invest in career pathways and skill-based training for educators to improve measurable student outcomes. High quality training and continuing learning opportunities are essential to ensure every student is led by effective, well-supported professionals who are prepared to meet their evolving needs.

Protecting Public Education: A Call for State Leadership

As federal policies shift and programs like IDEA and Title I face possible cuts, the future of public education depends on strong state leadership. Now more than ever, our state must step up to defend public schools, protect educators, and ensure every student has access to high quality public education.

Why This Matters NOW

The federal government is turning away from its historic role in supporting public education – reducing oversight, shifting funds toward private options, and reducing support for students with special needs. These changes put students, educators, and communities at risk. That is why the state must act — not — react to protect what matters most: strong public schools that serve all children, not just a privileged few. When the federal government steps back, the state must step up. Because public education is not just good policy, it is a moral and economic commitment to Arizona's future.

Investing in Future-Ready Arizona Students

As Arizona navigates a careful fiscal environment and shifting federal education priorities, our state must remain committed to smart, targeted investments that put students first. Responsible budgeting should not come at the expense of opportunity. Sustained investment in programs that directly impact student learning, well-being, and readiness is essential to Arizona's long-term economic and civic future.

Student Centered Funding Priorities: Protect and Sustain Key Funding Weights — including special education, the opportunity weight for schools serving under-resourced communities, and annual inflation Adjustment District Additional Assistance to ensure resources reach the students and schools that need it most.

Restore Full state Funding for Full-day Kindergarten recognizing its proven impact on early learning and long-term academic achievement.

Invest in Student Well-Being and Intervention Specialists Including School Counselors and Social Workers at levels consistent with current research recommendations, ensuring students have access to the mental health and academic support needed to thrive to reduce barriers to learning.

Strengthen and Expand Career and Technical Education (CTE) by restoring 9th grade CTE program funding and expanding program access to 7th and 8th grade, helping students develop skills that connect learning to workforce readiness.

Preserve Culturally Relevant and Bilingual Education Programs, rejecting legislation that limits access to inclusive learning environments that respect and support Arizona's diverse student population.

How We Pay for It

Rein in Private School Vouchers and Tax Credits: Take immediate action to prevent the Arizona legislature from diverting critical revenue away from public schools through private school vouchers and tax credits (for instance, ESA vouchers and student tuition organizations).

ACTIONS NEEDED IN 2026 TO DEFEND OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

STOP UNFUNDED MANDATES: We call on all our elected officials to block any legislation that would create additional unfunded mandates or requirements for educators, and to repeal any current unfunded mandates. As it is, unmanageable workloads are contributing to educator burnout and to our state's retention crisis.

PREVENT ATTACKS ON EDUCATORS, OUR STUDENTS, AND OUR COMMUNITIES: We call on our legislature and Governor Katie Hobbs to vigorously defend and affirm that all educators, students, and community members have a safe, inclusive environment free from discrimination for every individual regardless of ability, identity, race, and or immigration status.

REINFORCE SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: We ask the legislature to prioritize school safety through research-based, supportive behavioral interventions that promote student success, avoid punitive approaches towards students that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, and adopt measures that reduce and prevent the presence of guns on campus.

NO CUTS, NO LAY-OFFS, NO CLOSURES: Our state's elected leaders need to ensure that tax cuts and the out-of-control ESA voucher program do not result in school closures, educator lay-offs, or funding cuts to public education or other critical programs. While some school closures are also being driven by declining birth rates and resulting enrollment drops, lawmakers must not allow harmful policies to compound these demographic challenges. We expect lawmakers of both parties to exercise leadership in ensuring that ESA vouchers and tax cuts are not prioritized over our state's existing funding commitments to public schools.

LET VOTERS LEAD – TRUSTING ARIZONANS TO FUND PUBLIC SCHOOLS: Arizona policymakers should preserve and strengthen voter's ability to decide on school funding measures such as bonds, overrides, Proposition 123, and the Aggregate Expenditure Limit (AEL) to reflect actual education costs. These tools give communities direct accountability and flexibility to meet today's education needs, while ensuring that school funding decisions remain transparent, locally driven, and responsive to the realities of operating modern public schools.