For state officials, knowing what lies around the corner is half the challenge, and the CSG Policy & Research team is committed to providing key insights and analysis on emerging issues across the policy spectrum to state officials. Each year, CSG policy experts take a look at the top issues facing states in education, energy and environment, fiscal and economic development, federal affairs, health, international affairs, interstate compacts, transportation and infrastructure, and workforce development.

Here’s a look at the most important topics on states’ education agendas in 2017.

**The Every Student Succeeds Act**
State education officials are being given greater control over everything from evaluating teacher performance to setting education standards, thanks to a comprehensive reform bill signed by President Barack Obama in December 2015. The legislation, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, reduced the federal government’s role in setting education policy and granted more authority to the states, a move that education officials are hopeful will lead to strides in fixing widening achievement gaps and other issues that have plagued the nation’s public schools. Going forward, states will not be expected to transition to the new requirements all at once. They have until the 2017-18 school year to implement their new accountability plans. The U.S. Department of Education has indicated that the transition period will be gradual, rather than signaling an abrupt end to the No Child Left Behind Act.

**Early Childhood/Child Care**
Affordable, high-quality and accessible child care is a challenge for many families. While studies show that early childhood education is important to cognitive development, programs can be relatively expensive, especially for low-income households. In addition, the availability of and access to child care varies significantly across the states, and is extremely limited in some areas. Access to high-quality, affordable child care is a critical education issue for the future, and will continue to be a challenge for parents and guardians to fully participate in the workforce, as discussed in a recently published five-part series of CSG research briefs. The Trump administration has committed to lowering the cost of child care for families and state leaders are eager to see strategies to improve access to high-quality child care as a workforce development issue for parents as well as an early childhood education issue for children.

**Skills and Apprenticeships**
Skills and apprenticeship programs are a focus area for state education leaders looking to improve post-high school opportunities for students. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, apprenticeship programs provide significant benefits for both businesses and employees. Apprentices are able to earn on average $50,000 per year while in employer-paid training programs that allow the apprentice to earn a two- or four-year degree. For businesses, there is typically a return of $1.47 for every dollar invested in apprenticeship programs. The programs also correlate with lower turnover rates and improved productivity, and provide a custom-trained and experienced workforce. As a result, apprenticeships are used to train more than 400,000 Americans in more than 1,000 occupations.

**Physical Activity in Schools**
The Every Student Succeeds Act passed in 2015 emphasizes the importance of a "well-rounded education," which specifically includes physical education and wellbeing. Since children and young adults spend a great deal of their time at school, educators must prioritize physical activity during the school day, which may increase academic performance and lower students’ risk for obesity and other health problems. Now that Congress has established physical activity as a national expectation for public education, it is up to states, districts and schools to decide how they are going to incorporate it into their curriculum. There are many resources for states to look toward as they explore strategies to incorporate physical activity into the school day. Two such resources are the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s physical activity step by step guide for schools and the American Academy of Pediatrics’ recommendations on physical activity and recess during the school day.

**College and Career Readiness**
For more than a decade, the federal government has closely linked college and career readiness with raising academic standards in English and mathematics. The Every Student Succeeds Act, however, gives states the flexibility to pursue the goal of college and career readiness in unique and well-rounded ways. As they implement ESSA, states must decide what knowledge and skills their public schools will prioritize in an attempt to prepare students for college and career. A number of resources are available to assist state officials in addressing college and career readiness, however, such as a 50 state analysis by the Education Commission of the States. This and many other resources available through CSG, the Council of Chief State School Officers and other state association organizations that provide state policymakers tools to develop and hone their state standards, curricula and assessments as part of their college- and career-readiness strategies.
Elizabeth Whitehouse serves a director of education and workforce development at The Council of State Governments. She focuses on workforce development initiatives and education policy across the P-20 spectrum, including early childhood, K-12, college and career readiness, occupations and licensing, the Every Student Succeeds Act, and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. She provides analysis on state and federal funding for education and workforce programs; develops and leads policy programming on trending subjects for state leaders; and publishes articles, research briefs, infographics and other materials on key education and workforce issues. Prior to joining CSG in 2015, Whitehouse served in Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear’s administration as deputy director of early childhood.

Get Involved

CSG provides state leaders a variety of regional and national opportunities to actively engage on issues of importance to their jurisdictions and constituents. CSG’s regional and national committees and task forces are designed to encourage multistate problem solving, the sharing of best practices, and networking among state officials and between the public and private sectors.

CSG’s Education and Workforce Development Public Policy Committee is co-chaired this year by Kentucky state Sen. Jimmy Higdon and New Jersey state Assemblymn. Troy Singleton. The committee focuses on such issues as preschool education, the role of technology in instruction, postsecondary degree attainment and the transition from school to sustainable employment.

The committee will hold its next meeting at the CSG 2017 National Conference, Dec. 14-16 in Las Vegas.