College Access and Affordability
As a highly educated workforce becomes even more critical to the nation’s economic success, the average cost of a college education has steadily increased. Since the Great Recession ended, states have been grappling with controlling tuition costs through a combination of tuition freezes, increased student aid and additional state funding. However, recent data shows that the average annual tuition at public colleges and universities increased by 29 percent between 2008 and 2015, with some states seeing an increase of more than 60 percent. In fact, tuition at public four-year colleges and universities has increased faster than inflation every year since 1980. Finding innovative tuition and financial aid policies that keep postsecondary education affordable will be essential to ensuring the nation’s prosperity and preparing students for the 21st century workforce.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act Reauthorization
The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which provides reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and replaces the No Child Left Behind Act, is the product of bipartisan efforts in the U.S. Senate and House to give states greater control of accountability and academic standards. States have been given the opportunity to apply to the U.S. Department of Education for waivers to utilize their own systems for school improvement since 2011. More than 40 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico successfully requested waivers from certain requirements of federal law by showing a commitment to rigorous state-developed plans for improving educational achievement for all students. The ESSA will provide all states with the ability to develop their own accountability systems and provide the opportunity for state-level funding decisions.

WIOA Implementation
On July 22, 2014, President Obama signed into law the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, or WIOA, to assist those looking for employment by facilitating access to education, training and support services needed to find family-sustaining jobs, and to match skilled workers with the needs of business and industry. One of the first actions states must take under WIOA is to develop and submit a plan that will explain how the states intend to implement WIOA’s core programs and how these plans will serve as a playbook for effective strategies to help workers and businesses succeed. These plans are due in March 2016 and present a major opportunity for the states. States will be free to use these plans to describe the workforce development system they truly want and to explain how they will use WIOA and other state and federal programs to achieve that vision.

Student Veterans
In 2009, there were approximately 500,000 student veterans receiving federal education benefits. In 2013, more than one million student veterans used their GI benefits to pursue advanced educational opportunities, and this number is estimated to increase by 20 percent in the next few years. These goal-oriented and experienced leaders are one of the nation’s greatest untapped human resources. However, some veterans have a difficult time obtaining the benefits and training necessary to allow them to transition to a productive civilian life. Often, the solution is not about creating or establishing new benefit programs, but in ensuring easier access to the programs and entitlements that already exist. State leaders should explore ways to ensure veterans can readily obtain the education benefits to which they are entitled and that veterans are placed in positions that capitalize on existing skills.

Increase Access to All Forms of Postsecondary Education
Statistics show that on any given day, 600,000 middle-skill manufacturing jobs remain unfilled due to a lack of qualified candidates. Studies also show that by 2020, 65 percent of all jobs in the economy will require some training beyond high school, 35 percent will require at least a bachelor’s degree, and 30 percent will require some college or an associate’s degree. States must find ways to increase access to all forms of postsecondary education, such as technical and community colleges, apprenticeship programs, or university course offerings. This will require state leaders to develop an integrated, long-term vision that connects education to unmet middle-skill workforce needs.

For more information on these topics and for additional resources on education policy, see » www.csg.org/top5in2016.

—by Jeff Stockdale
Elizabeth Whitehouse joined The Council of State Governments in December 2015 as the director of education and workforce policy.

Whitehouse most recently served in Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear’s administration, where she co-wrote Kentucky’s successful $44.3 million Race to the Top grant application. She helped shepherd through early childhood legislation and was charged with the budget and planning recommendations for the state’s $25 million tobacco settlement funds for early childhood programs.

As policy adviser to the Kentucky Education and Workforce Development Cabinet secretary, she helped revitalize the career and technical education system and worked on fully funding the Kentucky’s unemployment insurance fund.

Whitehouse is a graduate of the University of the Cumberlands.

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 multi-state 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 Rep. John DeBerry of Tennessee and Rep. Jacqueline Sly of South Dakota. In recent years, the committee has focused on several key issues, including 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 as part of the 2016 CSG National Conference, Dec. 8-11, in Colonial Williamsburg, Va.