

SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS' ASSOCIATION
2026 ADVOCACY PLATFORM

The Small School Districts' Association represents nearly half of California's school districts, many of them rural, geographically isolated, deeply community-rooted, and operating with thin staffing and thinner margins.

SSDA's Advocacy platform focuses on practical solutions that promote equity for rural students, stability for district budgets, flexibility for local leaders, and relief from policies that were never designed with small districts in mind.

Below are areas of advocacy for SSDA in 2026 organized by broad issue area.

State Budget & School Finance

Prioritize stability and adequacy for small and rural districts operating at the margins.

- Protect Proposition 98 funding from manipulation and ensure transparency around deferrals, settle-up obligations, and one-time windfalls.
- Substantially increase LCFF Base Funding, recognizing that California remains behind top-tier states in per-pupil funding and that base grants are structurally insufficient for small LEAs.
- Transition state education funding from attendance-based to enrollment-based so long as it ensures funding formulas are adjusted to account for the additional student counts.
- Explore new ways to facilitate poverty counts and in the meantime establish a hold-harmless for LCFF Supplemental & Concentration funding as statewide poverty counts and census estimates continue to underrepresent poverty counts, leaving many rural districts financially exposed.
- Establish appropriate minimum grants for all state funding sent to small LEAs.
- Fix ELOP Tier 2 by ensuring funding reflects the actual cost of serving low-income rural communities with limited expanded learning infrastructure.
- Provide sustainable funding for Necessary Small Schools and rural staffing models.
- Oppose unfunded mandates, particularly those affecting special education, transportation, and accountability, unless paired with full state reimbursement.
- At the federal level, press Congress and ED to fully fund IDEA at 40 percent, reauthorize and extend Secure Rural Schools (SRS), and ensure rural districts have equitable access to competitive grants that currently favor large LEAs.
- Provide relief for Special Education and related costs, which are the fastest growing part of school budgets.
- Find ways to reduce the uncertainty faced by school agencies as it pertains to stability of funding.
- Any one-time funds should be fully flexible.
- Support the extension of the existing Prop 30/55 tax rates to ensure stable school funding.

Governance & Operations

Restore local control and reduce burdens that uniquely harm small LEAs.

- Fix the Administrator-to-Teacher ratio formula so small districts are not penalized for having the minimum administrative capacity necessary to operate a school system.

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- Reform the Public Records Act (PRA) workflow by creating tiered timelines, cost-recovery options for complex requests, and excluding requests for sensitive cybersecurity information.
- Streamline or eliminate duplicative state-mandated plans, audits, and reports to cut red tape that drains instructional time and local capacity.
- Protect and expand local decision-making authority, especially around staffing, instructional calendars, student placement, and operations.
- Ensure that any new state or federal mandates come with full-cost reimbursement and predictable implementation timelines.

Assessment & Accountability

Build an accountability system that measures what matters and does not crush district capacity.

- Overhaul disproportionality calculations so they do not punish small districts whose numbers fluctuate dramatically based on one or two student cases.
- Streamline state and federal plans, consolidating reporting requirements and eliminating duplicative submissions across LCAP, ESSA, special education, SARC, Title programs, and safety plans.
- Create an accountability model for Alternative Education and Continuation Schools that reflects growth, re-engagement, and student mobility.
- Require the state to study and validate threshold data used for accountability (attendance, poverty metrics, demographic counts) before penalizing LEAs.
- Consider new metrics that more accurately measure outcomes for student populations in small school districts.
- Support a more coherent state dashboard that prioritizes student progress, early warning indicators, and post-secondary readiness instead of compliance checklists.
- Build awareness and ensure recognition of the volatility for small districts relative to state and local indicators. Any change in student population or demographics can radically impact an LEA's dashboard status.

Curriculum & Instruction

Ensure that rural students receive academically rigorous, developmentally appropriate, and locally relevant instruction.

- Support expansion of early childhood education, including geographic-specific flexibility for UTK instructional hours, credentialing, staffing, and facilities that reflect rural realities.
- Instructional materials adoptions should consider the inevitable integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in classrooms.
- Strengthen special education funding and reform formulas to support regional programs, county partnerships, and low-incidence services.
- Maintain freedom for districts to select curricula aligned with local needs (also meeting state standards), while ensuring access to state-funded professional development for small LEA teachers.
- Ensure access to Career Technical Education (CTE) pathways, including agriculture, health, construction trades, and IT, in communities where regional access is limited or nonexistent.

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- Expand digital instructional materials and broadband access to support remote and blended learning options for rural communities.
- Encourage better higher education and postsecondary training for students in rural and or isolated areas. Equity for one should be equity for all.
- New policies related to curriculum should consider the outsized impacts of requirements on small school districts
- The state should explore flexibilities around the Independent Study student-teacher ratio.

Facilities

Guarantee that rural districts can build and modernize schools without being disadvantaged.

- Implement Proposition 2 equitably so rural districts receive the facilities dollars intended for small and aging campuses.
- Fix state facilities program rules that rely on match requirements many rural communities cannot meet.
- Increase state funding for potable water, broadband infrastructure, energy efficiency, and modernization of aging school buildings disproportionately located in rural areas.
- Oppose the use of Prop 98 funds for statewide facilities programs.
- Create rural carve-outs for modernization approvals and environmental review processes to shorten timelines and reduce planning costs.
- Address overly burdensome requirements that hinder small school districts' abilities to undertake critical modernization projects.

Charter Schools*

Support high-quality charter schools while ensuring appropriate authorizer oversight.

- Support clear and consistent requirements for charter authorization, oversight, and renewal.
- Ensure authorizers have funding, training, and legal tools to perform required oversight duties.
- Protect the right of small school districts to be charter school authorizers.

[Subject to additional conversations with group of charter school and charter authorizer members.]*

Human Resources

Address the staffing crisis with flexibility, fairness, and rural-focused recruitment strategies.

- Fix the 30-day substitute limit so rural districts can maintain instructional continuity when permanent staff are unavailable.
- Expand rural pathways for teachers, counselors, nurses, psychologists, IT staff, and administrators to include residency/apprenticeship programs, tuition waivers, and grow-your-own models.
- Streamline recent changes to background checks for certificated and classified applicants to ensure small districts can efficiently and effectively meet the requirements of the law.

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- Streamline and incentivize recruiting staff to rural areas, including credentialing, recognition of out-of-state certificates, and CTE teacher onboarding.
- Address employee retention issues unique to small school districts.
- Assist school agencies with the increasing costs related to AB 218.
- Increase access to insurance that is not cost prohibitive.
- Prioritize the sustainability and integrity of the CalSTRS and CalPERS pension funds over destabilizing policy shifts that are inconsistent with the pension systems' efforts to maximize risk-adjusted investment returns and control employer and employee contribution rates.
- Increase state investment in staff housing solutions in high-cost and geographically isolated communities.
- Oppose changes to laws necessary to appropriately staff small and very small school districts.

School Safety

Develop and sustain safe, and supportive environments for students and staff.

- Fund sustainable on-campus mental health and behavioral support staffing (school psychologists, counselors, social workers).
- Seek state assistance in addressing severe delays in addressing potable water issues in schools.
- Improve state support for crisis response, threat assessment training, and emergency communications in rural regions with limited public safety infrastructure.
- Expand funding for campus safety improvements, including secure perimeters, controlled access points, and communications systems that work in remote areas.

Student Services

Provide equitable access to full wraparound services regardless of ZIP code.

- Expand supervised tele-mental-health access and Medi-Cal billing flexibilities for schools.
- Strengthen regional partnerships to support foster youth, homeless students, and migrant communities, including transportation, counseling, and credit recovery.
- Reform attendance-driven funding models for alternative and court schools to better reflect mobile and highly vulnerable student populations.
- Provide sustainable funding for community schools in rural areas—recognizing that “integrated services” require actual service providers.
- Ensure that small districts have access to staff and technical assistance and guidance on Medi-Cal billing to increase opportunities for reimbursement and capacity building.

Technology

Deliver 21st-century tools to districts that are often treated as an afterthought in statewide initiatives.

- Guarantee sustained funding for rural broadband, fiber backbones, and campus-to-student connectivity.

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- Establish a statewide cybersecurity fund or structure for small LEAs to obtain protection, insurance, and incident response services.
- Ensure state digital platforms, compliance systems, and reporting portals work for districts with extremely limited staffing.
- Provide resources to SSDA, and potentially other statewide groups with expertise in the appropriate implementation of AI in schools, to provide training to school staff on the effective and appropriate use of AI in schools.

Transportation

Fund transportation in a way that recognizes the realities of rural, mountainous, and remote communities.

- Increase state reimbursement rates to reflect the massive geographic distances rural districts cover daily.
- Modernize the transportation formula to reflect terrain, weather, sparsity, and regional labor markets.
- Delay electric bus mandates until the technology and electric grid infrastructure catches up to Legislative intent.
- Allow broader use of transportation funds for bus driver recruitment and retention, including training stipends and housing allowances.