



**ALIGNED**  
*Every. Student. Prepared.*

**2024**  
**ANNUAL REPORT**

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## Letter from the President

### Aligned Members:

When we founded Aligned over a decade ago, we searched to pinpoint where on the cradle-to-career spectrum we could affect policy change that would have the greatest impact on shaping the trajectory of a student's life. Rigorous research and countless conversations led us to the decision to focus on early childhood policy - an area that offered tremendous potential for transformative change. Since that time, we have planted seeds and nurtured growth through thousands of hours of educating stakeholders, influencing policies, and building coalitions.

We are proud to report that in 2024, we reached a significant milestone in our decade-long effort to expand access to high-quality early childhood education. With the passage of Senate Bill 727, Missouri lawmakers allocated up to \$117 million annually to expand state-funded pre-kindergarten access for children from low-income families, representing the largest investment in our earliest learners in state history.

Realizing this achievement did not happen overnight. Each year, we strived for incremental progress, beginning with the first-ever legislation that included early childhood funding in the state foundation formula in 2014, to language that removed the ban on early learning quality benchmarking systems in 2016, to passing contracting a law that led to innovative pre-K cooperatives between community providers and public schools in 2019, to advising the executive branch on early childhood governance structures in 2021, to the creation of \$82 million in early childhood grant programs, and finally to this year's doubling of the state investment in pre-Kindergarten.

With roots firmly planted in early childhood education in our first years, we soon recognized the need to extend our advocacy efforts to address broader challenges in K-12 education. That led to passing an alternative teacher certificate pathway for subject matter experts in 2016 and policies to reward student achievement based on mastery rather than seat time in 2022. As an organization of members who guide us towards policies that benefit the whole of society rather than a narrow interest, our team has the latitude to explore opportunities across the Pre-K-12 education.

A strong base and agile framework allow us to respond quickly to emerging challenges and new opportunities. For example, in recent years, we learned that school leaders needed fresh ways to address persistent teacher shortages in rural and urban communities. We also discovered that outdated school finance structures have exacerbated the property wealth gap between affluent and lower-income communities, leading to inequitable funding across districts.

Therefore, in Missouri, we crafted a policy passed in 2024 that allows teachers to receive compensation based on expertise, benefiting hard-to-staff schools and hard-to-fill subject areas and allowing leaders more tools to recruit and retain talented teachers. This year, we also formed a working group to study ways to update a decades-old funding formula that will benefit all public-school districts. And in Kansas, we proposed a state longitudinal data system that will transform how the state strengthens the education-to-work pipeline.

We are thrilled to report that we recently added three new full-time staffers, giving us a greater capacity and a more substantial presence to achieve our goals in both states. As we look to 2025, we will focus on strengthening early childhood systems, expanding equitable student choice options, and updating school finance models to ensure that children are the real winners in public policy.

I want to thank our board members, supporters, and partners, who embody our core values and enable us to deliver wins each year for all learners. Together, we will continue to deepen our roots and reach new heights, working towards a vision where every student in Kansas and Missouri can thrive.

All the best,



Torree Pederson  
President, Aligned



## Mission statement

Deep Roots, Expanding Branches: From Strong Foundations to Boundless Opportunities

### *Tall trees grow from deep roots.*

Roots grow incrementally by slowly pushing into the soil to firmly anchor a tree and provide access to water and nutrients. Fast-growing trees have shallow roots and are likelier to topple in high winds or succumb to disease during drought or flood.

Building deep roots in an organization requires intentionally investing in values, building trusted relationships, and honing skills. Time allows leaders to add one block at a time, learning, adapting, and growing stronger at each stage.

### *Patience ensures depth.*

At Aligned, we have focused on incremental growth since the outset. Our small but mighty staff looked to make a difference rather than noise. We quietly layered win upon win, eyeing opportunities to build upon the previous year's success.

In 2024, we reached a significant milestone that signaled a new chapter in our growth. Our work in the state capitol resulted in the doubling of access to high-quality preschool programs and the passage of a tangible solution to address teacher recruitment and retention challenges. These achievements helped us realize our roots will support new branches and bolder goals.

We must make childcare affordable for families, modernize school finance models, and rebuild the education-to-workforce pipeline. That will take increased resources to build relationships, investments in high-quality research, and broader communication channels.

### *The deeper the roots, the greater the reach*

As we look ahead, our deep roots will continue to anchor us as we stretch toward new opportunities. The branches we have grown thus far will support the bold and transformative actions necessary to shape the future of education.

We want to thank our partners and supporters for their ongoing support. Together, we will continue to grow, adapt, and strengthen, working towards a vision where all students can thrive.



## What we do

- » **Invest in Values and Relationships:** Aligned builds strong organizational foundations by prioritizing values, relationships, and skills, ensuring growth is rooted in a solid, ethical framework.
- » **Advocate for Policy Change:** Aligned works at the community level to learn what families and businesses need from an education system and then takes that knowledge to state leaders to drive action and change.
- » **Tackle Systemic Education Issues:** Aligned focuses on key challenges, like the lack of affordable childcare or the broken education-to-workforce pipeline, to identify and champion realistic and politically feasible solutions.
- » **Foster Incremental Growth:** Aligned takes a patient approach to growth, achieving wins step by step, building upon past successes, and staying strong to tackle future challenges.

## Summary of activities in 2025

- » **We secured** a \$117 annual investment in state-funded pre-kindergarten programs.
- » **We hired** three new full-time staff members to expand our footprint in Kansas and Missouri.
- » **We monitored** more than 300 bills and published 20 legislative reports.
- » **We convened** policy experts and served on advisory groups across both states to address ideas across the cradle-to-career spectrum.



## Early Care and Education

This past year, we worked to have an additional \$82 million included in Missouri's budget for FY24. This allocation included \$55.8 million for pre-K grants to districts and charter schools for 4-year-olds and \$26 million for pre-K grants to childcare facilities—both grant programs prioritize students from low-income families. Aligned also partnered with other child advocacy organizations to suggest regulatory reforms to allow more education pathways for lead teachers receiving state grant funds for pre-kindergarten programs.

2024 marked a historic year for early childhood funding in the Show-Me State, doubling the appropriation for pre-kindergarten in the foundation formula and preserving the funding for the Missouri Quality Pre-K grants. Together, these two programs provide up to \$117 million annually for early learning and increase access for another several thousand students.

Aligned also continues to serve on a statewide advisory group with other child advocacy organizations across Missouri to inform on policies and regulations that will address shortcomings in the state's childcare system.



## Teacher Recruitment and Retention

In 2024, Aligned achieved a significant milestone in the effort to strengthen Missouri’s teacher workforce. Our team drafted model legislation enabling school districts to adopt differentiated pay structures to tackle staffing shortages. Lawmakers included this critical provision in Senate Bill 727, passed by the Missouri General Assembly and signed into law by Governor Parson.

Through extensive research and collaboration with stakeholders, we identified a key barrier to recruitment and retention: the traditional “step and lane” salary schedule. While this approach remains the most common method for determining teacher compensation, it does not account for the unique demands of hard-to-staff subject areas, challenging school environments, or professional expertise gained outside the classroom. Unlike other professions—such as medicine, law, and engineering—public education rarely adjusts compensation to reflect specialization or market demand, which leaves district leaders with limited flexibility to attract and retain top talent.

The passage of SB 727 offers school districts a new tool to address these challenges. Differentiated pay structures give districts a way to meet staffing needs and recognize teachers for their unique skills. As this policy is adopted, Aligned will follow its progress to ensure it helps with teacher recruitment and retention.





## School Finance Reform

In 2024, Aligned took the first step toward addressing Missouri's outdated school funding formula by convening a group of stakeholders to explore improvements. Building on suggestions outlined in our 2022 op-ed, we brought together education leaders, lawmakers, and policy experts to assess how best to modernize the formula to meet the needs of all districts. The group focused on key areas of concern, including refining how the formula accounts for poverty, special education needs, and local tax revenue.

We will continue to explore options to modify the formula and propose policies that benefit all public districts and charter schools and identify legislative champions to support the needed changes.

## State Longitudinal Data System

This year, Aligned worked with Kansas lawmakers to propose legislation to create a Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) that will provide a secure resource to transform how Kansas strengthens its education-to-workforce pipeline. These systems empower employers to anticipate workforce trends, help leaders evaluate program investments, and identify strengths and weaknesses in the pipeline.

By tracking college and career readiness, monitoring outcomes, and enabling high-quality research, an SLDS can improve decision-making and program effectiveness. Students and parents benefit from clearer pathways to success, while educators gain insights to better prepare learners for life beyond graduation.

For Kansas, adopting and leveraging a robust SLDS presents a significant opportunity to ensure that schools prepare students for success in a rapidly evolving workforce.



## Visiting Scholars Case Study

Visiting Scholars Teacher Certificate Brings Invaluable Professional Expertise to High School Instruction

In this case study, we showcase the success of the Visiting Scholars Certification Pathway. In 2018, Aligned worked with the Missouri General Assembly to pass legislation establishing and expanding the Visiting Scholar Certificate. This certificate is available to individuals with an academic degree or related occupational experience in a secondary content area. Qualified individuals must be employed by a Missouri public school district as part of a business-education partnership initiative designed to build career pathways systems for students or employed as part of an initiative designed to fill vacant positions in hard-to-staff public schools or hard-to-fill subject areas for students in a grade or grades not lower than the ninth grade.

In Cape Girardeau, high school students can learn basic flight skills from a U.S. Air Force veteran and receive healthcare instruction from a nurse practitioner with a master's degree.

"They are both excellent, excellent teachers who bring ... a wealth of knowledge to the table," said Libby Guilliams, former director of the Cape Girardeau Career & Technical Center (CGCTC). "But I don't think we would have gotten them if they had to go through the regular, traditional (teacher certification)."



The same goes for the marketing teacher skilled enough to have students take over the center's social media accounts from an outside paid contractor, said Guilliams, who remains involved with the center as a student advisor for Mineral Area College.

All the instructors came to the center as Visiting Scholars. The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) program allows school districts to hire industry experts for up to three years on one-year renewable contracts at the high school level. The program differs from other teacher-certification routes that require participants to pass assessments after completing college-level education courses.

The CGCTC has been one of the primary users of Visiting Scholars, which former state Rep. Kathy Swan, a Cape Girardeau Republican, championed during her time in the General Assembly. She served in the Missouri House from 2012 to 2020.

Swan sponsored the 2018 legislation establishing the program and pushed for amended language two years later allowing Visiting Scholars to be used in hard-to-staff schools and for hard-to-staff subjects. The original legislation limited participation to teachers hired through business partnerships geared toward career pathway programs.

Swan recalled the idea for the program came from a visit to the Northland Center for Advanced Professional Studies (Northland CAPS) in the Kansas City area. Through Northland CAPS, high school juniors and seniors attend classes housed in businesses in Clay and Platte counties.

She said Northland CAPS was a ***"little pocket of excellence"*** that she wanted to replicate throughout the state by having ***"people who are actively involved in those careers, in those fields, to come in and share their knowledge and information with students."***



Mike Stradinger shared Swan's passion for career education as CEO of Holland 1916, a manufacturing company based in North Kansas City, Missouri. Holland 1916 is a business partner with Northland CAPS and Stradinger is a longtime board member of Aligned.

As a business-led organization dedicated to improving K-12 education and post-secondary outcomes in Missouri and Kansas, Aligned joined Swan in her push to establish Visiting Scholars. She credited Aligned for being a "critical resource" in getting Visiting Scholar legislation through the General Assembly.

Like Swan, Aligned considered Visiting Scholars as an innovative approach to career education and a way to address the shortage of qualified teachers that remains an issue today.

A commission established by the Missouri Board of Education reported last year that about 8% of its full-time teaching positions in the state were either vacant or filled by teachers not fully qualified.

There are about three dozen Visiting Scholars around the state, according to DESE, and the number of classes they teach has steadily increased to about 200 this year.

Guilliams said one of the biggest benefits of Visiting Scholars is that it allows business professionals to see if they like teaching before spending the time and money on the college courses required to get certified through DESE. That was the case with the Air Force veteran and nurse.

***"We have been able to bring in some people who were later on in their career and with***



***even more experience, where if we hadn't had the Visiting Scholars, I'm not sure we would have gotten those people in,"*** Guilliams said.

Visiting Scholars has also provided an avenue into teaching for people at other stages of their careers.

Examples include a 23-year-old with an undergraduate degree in business administration and a 43-year-old with experience in healthcare and banking. The former served as a Visiting Scholar in Booneville while the latter did so in the Fox school district in Arnold.

Both men shared their experiences in conversations with Aligned.

The younger Visiting Scholar decided to try teaching when he found marketing positions available during the pandemic undesirable. He loved his high school marketing teacher and was involved with DECA, and after spending time in Visiting Scholars, he has moved to the Blue Springs school district in suburban Kansas City and is pursuing a master's in education.

***"I think the best part of the Visiting Scholar Program is that, should I have not enjoyed teaching, there was no harm no foul at the end of it, and I could have just walked away into another career,"*** he said. ***"But instead, I fell in love with it."***

The older Visiting Scholar pursued the certification to pursue a passion for teaching that was rekindled when he was coaching his kids in youth sports. He received his Visiting Scholars certification in marketing on his way toward earning a master's in special education.

The ultimate success of the program depends upon how it works in the classroom, and Guilliams summed up the impact on students in Cape Girardeau: ***"It's been huge."***



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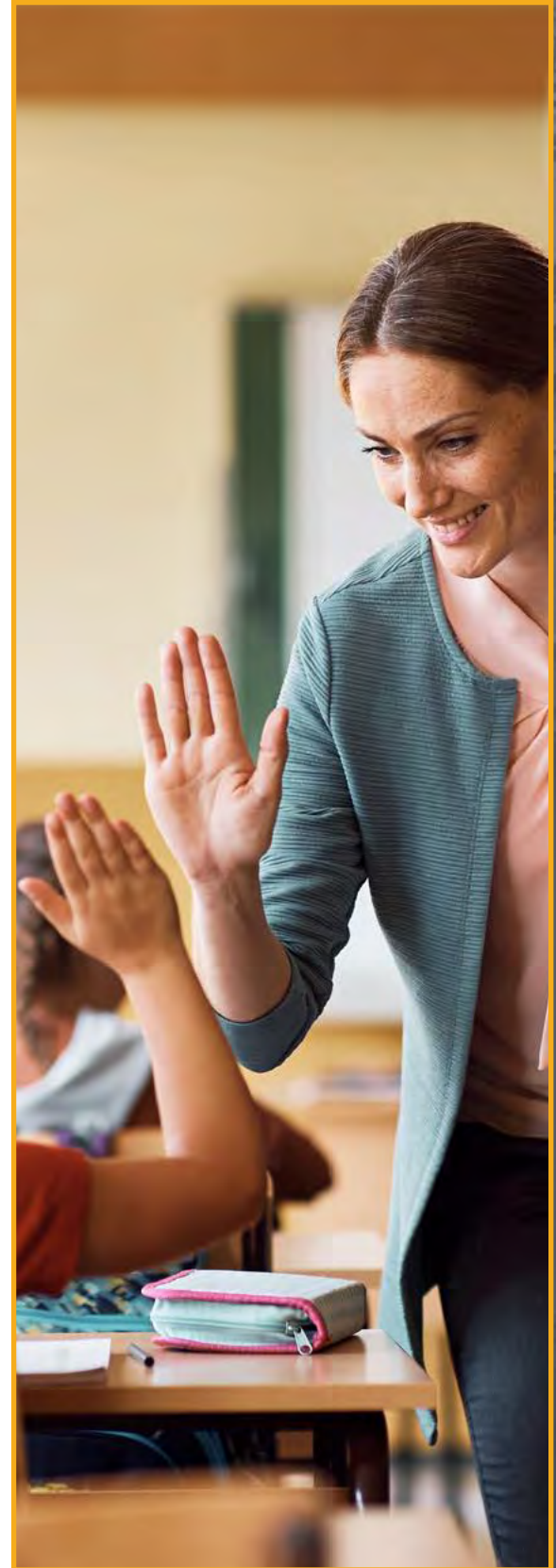
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Linda Rallo, Vice President

Jim Malle, Director of Missouri Policy

Eric Syverson, Director of Kansas Policy & Research

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## 2024 Annual Report Facts

- » Recruited 11 new Advisory Board/Board Members
- » Averaged a 51% open rate on email communications, up 9% from 2023. Participated in/presented at 27 events.
- » Received 7,000 website views, up 75% from 2023.
- » Produced 26 weekly/monthly education news updates
- » Testified on 15 policies across both states.
- » Aligned research and thought content published on 15 topics across 29 platforms.

## Annual Report 2024 Funding Partners

Walton Personal Philanthropy Group

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Yes. Every Kid.



We are a non-profit, non-partisan coalition of businesses that believe we can, and should, achieve more for our students by engaging in policy, advocacy, and outreach to advance education reform.

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