



# 2025



## ANNUAL REPORT



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## LETTER FROM **THE PRESIDENT**

Torree Pederson:

As I reflect on 2025, the adage that time flies when you are having fun feels especially true. This year moved quickly—but not because it was easy. It moved quickly because it was full: full of people, learning, hard conversations, progress, and purpose.

We kicked off the year with a full team—Linda and me as the long-timers, alongside three new, eager staff members ready to jump in. At the same time, we began preparing for Linda's retirement. It quickly became clear just how much institutional knowledge she carried after a decade of service. As we worked to thoughtfully "download" that knowledge, our team was also deeply engaged in legislative sessions in two states. It was a true balancing act—honoring transition while operating at full speed.

Those whirlwind first five months found our team in statehouses more than ever before, educating lawmakers, agency staff, business leaders, and partners on the facts and education issues we care most deeply about. We built new relationships, strengthened existing ones, learned constantly, and weathered plenty of ups and downs. It was demanding and energizing all at once—and it set the tone for the rest of the year.

May concluded with a well-deserved send-off for Linda. For 10 years, she was the steady pulse of this organization—ensuring our followers stayed informed, grounded, and engaged on education issues across both states. Her dedication to early learning and her unwavering commitment to putting students first shaped our work in lasting ways. While she is deeply missed, her legacy continues to guide us as we move forward. With her retirement, it was time for our new team to step fully into leadership—picking up the ball and forging ahead with new ideas and bigger goals.

And move forward we did.

2025 brought new programming, broader reach across both states, and more research than ever before. Our small but mighty team prioritized building and deepening relationships with business leaders, lawmakers, and education leaders through newly revamped advisory boards across both states. These boards became critical spaces for honest dialogue, shared learning, and momentum-building around student-centered policy and practice.

One of the year's highlights was hosting more than 150 leaders in Kansas City for a two-day Georgetown Edunomics Lab certificate course in June. What began as professional learning quickly evolved into something deeper—shared language, trust, and long-term partnerships committed to understanding education finance and making smarter decisions for students. The ripple effects of that experience will be felt for years to come.

Throughout 2025, our work remained centered on a simple but powerful belief: when adults understand systems better, students benefit. Whether through research, convenings, advisory boards, or legislative engagement, we stayed focused on translating complexity into clarity and grounding every conversation in what's best for learners.

I am incredibly proud of this team and deeply grateful to our partners, funders, advisors, and supporters who make this work possible. Change is rarely linear, and progress often happens quietly—but together, we are building capacity, relationships, and understanding that will serve students well beyond this year.

Thank you for being part of this journey. I look forward to what we will accomplish together in the year ahead.

All the best,

*Torree Pederson*

Torree Pederson  
President, Aligned



# BUILDING FORWARD, TOGETHER



2025 was a year defined by transition, momentum, and collective growth. As we navigated leadership change, new team dynamics, and increasingly complex education challenges across two states, one truth remained constant: meaningful progress happens when people come together with shared purpose and clarity.

This year marked an important turning point for our organization. We honored a decade of dedication and institutional knowledge while intentionally building the next chapter. With new staff stepping into leadership and fresh ideas taking shape, we balanced learning and continuity with urgency and action. That combination—experience paired with innovation—allowed us not only to sustain our work, but to expand it.

Across both states, our presence deepened. We engaged more lawmakers, business leaders, and education stakeholders than ever before, grounding conversations in research, trust, and a shared commitment to students. Through advisory boards, legislative engagement, and convenings, we created spaces where complex systems became understandable and where collaboration replaced silos. Our focus remained clear: translate complexity into clarity so that better decisions lead to better outcomes for learners.

A defining moment of 2025 was bringing more than 150 leaders together for the Georgetown Edunomics Lab certificate course in Kansas City. What began as professional learning became a catalyst—aligning leaders around common language, data, and responsibility for student-centered solutions. It represented the power of investing in people as a strategy for long-term change.

This annual report captures a year of building—relationships, knowledge, and capacity. It reflects a small but mighty team leaning into transition, expanding reach, and staying anchored in what matters most. As we look ahead, our work continues to be guided by partnership, learning, and an unwavering commitment to putting students first. Together, we are building forward.





## WHAT WE DO

### **Invests in Values and Relationships:**

Aligned builds strong organizational foundations by prioritizing values, relationships, and skills, ensuring growth is rooted in a solid, ethical framework.

### **Advocates 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.

### **Tackles 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.

### **Fosters 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



## Legislative

- Hosted virtual legislative calls for Kansas and Missouri stakeholders in January and May, providing policy updates and session context.
- Convened a Kansas legislative lunch-and-learn in February to support deeper discussion on priority policy topics.



## Educational

- Engaged in Edunomics training to strengthen internal expertise in education finance and data analysis.
- Participated in PIE and ExcelinEd convenings to learn from national policy leaders and best practices.
- Hosted and participated in webinars to share research and elevate education and workforce policy discussions.



## Outreach

- Conducted a Kansas Listening Tour, engaging stakeholders across the state to inform 2026 policy priorities.
- Hosted a Springfield Roundtable in Missouri, convening education, business, and community leaders for structured policy discussion.

# REVIEW OF PRIORITIES



## State Longitudinal Data System

Aligned advanced efforts in 2025 to establish a State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) in Kansas as a critical tool for strengthening the education-to-workforce pipeline. An SLDS securely connects data across early childhood, K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems, allowing policymakers, educators, and employers to better understand outcomes and evaluate investments.

**House Bill 2303** received an **informational hearing** in the House Commerce Committee on January 27, 2025. Aligned also hosted a legislative lunch and learn to share best practices from other states and address governance and privacy considerations. The bill was later introduced in the House K-12 Budget Committee on February 5, 2025.

Aligned continues to support the development of an SLDS as a foundational step toward data-informed decision-making and more effective policy design in Kansas.

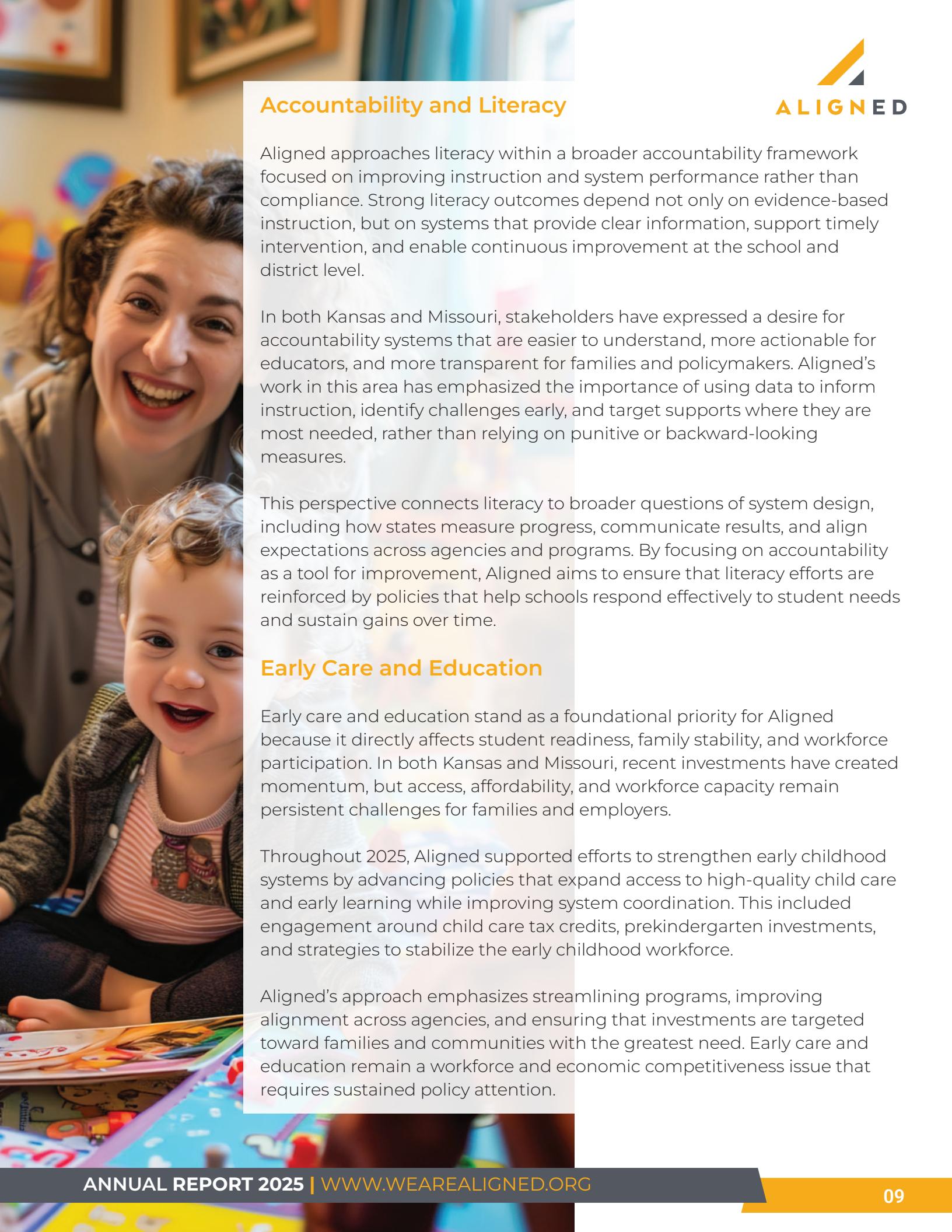
## School Finance Reform

Aligned continues to prioritize school finance reform as a lever for improving transparency, equity, and student outcomes. In Kansas, Aligned met regularly throughout 2025 with members of the Kansas school finance task force, including the chair and vice chair, to support discussions around formula design, tradeoffs, and the relationship between funding and outcomes.

In Missouri, Aligned contracted with Bellwether to develop a school finance formula simulator and accompanying report, which were shared with the governor-appointed task force. Aligned continues to participate in task force meetings and subcommittees to inform the development of a more modern, student-centered funding model.

Across both states, Aligned's work emphasizes aligning dollars with student needs, improving transparency, and ensuring that funding systems are predictable, understandable, and tied to meaningful measures of success.

## Accountability and Literacy



Aligned approaches literacy within a broader accountability framework focused on improving instruction and system performance rather than compliance. Strong literacy outcomes depend not only on evidence-based instruction, but on systems that provide clear information, support timely intervention, and enable continuous improvement at the school and district level.

In both Kansas and Missouri, stakeholders have expressed a desire for accountability systems that are easier to understand, more actionable for educators, and more transparent for families and policymakers. Aligned's work in this area has emphasized the importance of using data to inform instruction, identify challenges early, and target supports where they are most needed, rather than relying on punitive or backward-looking measures.

This perspective connects literacy to broader questions of system design, including how states measure progress, communicate results, and align expectations across agencies and programs. By focusing on accountability as a tool for improvement, Aligned aims to ensure that literacy efforts are reinforced by policies that help schools respond effectively to student needs and sustain gains over time.

## Early Care and Education

Early care and education stand as a foundational priority for Aligned because it directly affects student readiness, family stability, and workforce participation. In both Kansas and Missouri, recent investments have created momentum, but access, affordability, and workforce capacity remain persistent challenges for families and employers.

Throughout 2025, Aligned supported efforts to strengthen early childhood systems by advancing policies that expand access to high-quality child care and early learning while improving system coordination. This included engagement around child care tax credits, prekindergarten investments, and strategies to stabilize the early childhood workforce.

Aligned's approach emphasizes streamlining programs, improving alignment across agencies, and ensuring that investments are targeted toward families and communities with the greatest need. Early care and education remain a workforce and economic competitiveness issue that requires sustained policy attention.



# CASE STUDY

## – PRE-K

### Investing Early: Missouri School Districts Putting Pre-K Policy into Practice

At Aligned, we've spent the past decade working alongside policymakers to build a better early childhood system in Missouri—one that's rooted in quality, equity, and access. These case studies highlight what happens when that work meets the real world: classrooms that give young learners a strong start, districts that rise to the challenge of expanding access, and communities that benefit from smart public investment.

We advocated for placing Pre-K students into the foundation formula—first through a carefully constructed policy trigger tied to full funding, then by making that trigger attainable. When we saw that hold-harmless districts couldn't benefit from that funding stream, we championed the Missouri Quality Pre-K (MOQPK) grant to fill the gap. When Missouri's ban on measuring early childhood quality blocked our eligibility for federal support, we worked to overturn it and helped launch the Quality Assurance Report (QAR) system. And when it was time to expand access again, we led efforts to double the allowable ADA percentage from 4% to 8%.

These aren't just wins in a policy ledger. They're why more children enter kindergarten ready to learn. Why more parents have access to high-quality care. Why Missouri secured new federal investments in early learning. And why our state's early childhood landscape looks so different today than it did ten years ago.

These stories show what's possible—and what's at risk if we don't protect that progress.

## Branson R-IV - Southwest Missouri



### Meeting Families Where They Are

Branson R-IV blends state funding with local partnerships to serve hundreds of children, including many experiencing homelessness. With full enrollment and strong community ties, the district uses Missouri Quality Pre-K (MOQPK) and ADA funding to expand access while protecting K-12 resources. A commitment to quality and outreach ensures students arrive at kindergarten ready to succeed—academically, socially, and emotionally.

We're giving kids those foundations—through books, conversation, play, and even trips to the zoo.

”

## Marquand-Zion R-VI - Southeast Missouri



### Creating Opportunity in a Child Care Desert

In this tiny, rural district, families face steep barriers: long commutes, low wages, and no access to local care. Marquand-Zion built a strong preschool program with flexible staffing, creative funding, and support from the MOQPK grant and QAR initiative. With just one preschool classroom, the district proves that small systems can deliver big impact.

It's not just the academic part. It's the whole child—social, emotional, behavioral.

”



## Stanberry R-II - Northwest Missouri



### Family Connections and Early Learning That Lasts

With fewer than 400 students, Stanberry R-II is proof that high-performing rural districts can lead in early childhood. By combining MOQPK resources with a unique staffing model that strengthens family engagement, the district builds relationships early and ensures children start school confident and ready. One teacher, one paraprofessional—and a seamless, joyful environment for learning.

It's not just about seats in a classroom—it's about joy, connection, and readiness.

”

## Advancing early literacy

Literacy remains a core priority for Aligned because it is foundational to nearly every education and workforce outcome the organization seeks to influence. Students who struggle to read in the early grades face compounding academic challenges that are difficult to reverse later. In Kansas and Missouri, the challenge is not a lack of research on how children learn to read, but uneven alignment between instruction, policy, and implementation.



Over the past year, Aligned approached literacy through a deliberate, multi-method communications strategy. Rather than relying on a single report or audience, we released a sequence of blogs, hosted a public webinar, and ultimately published a policy brief to translate evidence, contextualize state policy, and support more informed decision-making among policymakers, business leaders, and education stakeholders.

The blog series began with **How We Teach Literacy**, which focused on classroom instruction and the science of reading. The piece explained why reading is not a natural skill and why most students require explicit, systematic instruction to become proficient readers. Drawing from established research, the blog emphasized that instructional approaches are not neutral preferences. They have direct and measurable consequences for student outcomes, particularly for students who struggle early. The goal was to provide an accessible, evidence-based context for readers who may not regularly engage with literacy research.

The second blog, [A Brief History of Literacy Instruction in America](#), stepped back to examine how reading instruction has evolved over time. By tracing the rise and persistence of instructional approaches that are not aligned with reading science, the blog helped explain how current practices and policy debates came to be. This historical lens was important for understanding why literacy reform has proven difficult and why implementation challenges persist even as evidence has become clearer. The piece was intended to frame the present moment, not relitigate past debates.

The series then turned explicitly to state policy in [A Closer Look at Early Literacy in Kansas and Missouri](#). This analysis examined how both states have approached early literacy through teacher preparation requirements, curriculum alignment, screening and intervention policies, and related supports. While acknowledging meaningful progress in both states, the blog also highlighted gaps between policy design and implementation. Instead of advocating for a single reform, it underscored the importance of coherence across policy levers.

Aligned also hosted a [public webinar](#) on the topic. The webinar was widely shared with local stakeholders across Kansas and Missouri and generated strong public engagement, including interest from state lawmakers. The discussion reinforced themes raised in the blogs, particularly the importance of early identification, consistent implementation, and thoughtful use of data to support instruction. The webinar served as a convening moment that helped establish shared language and elevate literacy as a system-level policy issue.

This body of work culminated in the release of [K-3 Literacy Policy in Kansas and Missouri](#), Aligned's policy brief on early literacy. The brief synthesizes research, state policy trends, and lessons from other states into a practical framework tailored to Kansas and Missouri. It outlines key components of effective literacy systems, including aligned teacher preparation, high-quality instructional materials, universal screening, targeted intervention, and sustained implementation support. Importantly, the brief avoids promising quick fixes and instead emphasizes the need for coordination, durability, and long-term commitment.

Taken together, these products reflect Aligned's broader approach to policy influence. By communicating through multiple formats and levels of depth, we reached diverse audiences while maintaining a consistent, evidence-based message. Literacy remains a priority for Aligned because it is foundational, well-researched, and closely tied to long-term outcomes for students and the states we serve.

# BOARD MEMBERS



Aligned team and board members are celebrating Linda Rallo's retirement. Center from left: Kate Ferrell Banks, Andrea Falk Sellers, Claudia Fury-Aguirre, Linda Rallo, Torree Pederson, Garrett Webb, back from left: Jim Malle, Brian Brush, Kelly Dreyer, Eric Syverson, Mike Stradinger.



## Board of Directors

✓ **J. Michael Stradinger**  
Holland 1916

✓ **Kate Ferrell Banks**  
Ferrell Capital

✓ **H. Tyler Nottberg**  
U.S. Engineering

✓ **David Oliver**  
Berkowitz Oliver

✓ **Andrea Sellers**  
GKCCF

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✓ **Don Guenther**  
Technology Partners Inc

✓ **Michael Knecht**  
Consultant

✓ **Brian Brush**  
Focus Partners Wealth

✓ **Kelly Dreyer**  
MultiStudio



## In memoriam

2025 was met with heartbreak after losing our beloved cofounder and board member, David Oliver. David was a visionary leader, a dedicated volunteer, and a true Kansas City icon. He brought extraordinary wisdom, generosity, and expertise to everything he touched. David was passionate about his law profession, committed to strengthening our communities, and deeply invested in building a brighter future for all.

He was instrumental in the creation of our organization – helping to shape our vision, define our mission, and champion our belief that every student deserves to be prepared for success. His influence will be felt for generations to come.

We are profoundly grateful for David's leadership, his unwavering belief in our work, and the kindness he shared so freely. We share this sentiment with everyone who had the privilege of knowing him.

## 2025 Annual Report Facts

- ↗ Grew **LinkedIn followers** by **197%**, increasing from **254** to **755** followers.
- ↗ Increased Facebook followers by **9%** year over year.
- ↗ Generated **20,000 website views** across aligned research, policy, and outreach content.
- ↗ Published **28 policy blogs**, advancing research-driven education and workforce priorities.
- ↗ Conducted a statewide **Kansas Listening Tour**, engaging **100+ education, business, and community leaders** across multiple regions.
- ↗ Collected **150+ ideas, challenges, and policy solutions** to inform 2026 legislative priorities.
- ↗ Hosted **4 virtual webinars**, connecting stakeholders to timely education and workforce policy discussions.
- ↗ Published **2 Legislative Updates** during the 2025 session.
- ↗ Produced **3 Legislative Outlooks** to prepare partners and stakeholders for the 2026 legislative cycle.

# ANNUAL REPORT 2025

## FUNDING PARTNERS

- ▲ Walton Personal Philanthropy Group
- ▲ Community Foundation of the Ozarks
- ▲ Sherman Family Foundation
- ▲ Kauffman Family Foundation
- ▲ U.S. Engineering Company, Inc.
- ▲ Kate & David Banks (Ferrell Capital)
- ▲ J. Michael & Jennifer Stradinger (Holland 1916)
- ▲ Lathrop GPM
- ▲ MultiStudio
- ▲ Advent Health
- ▲ Hallmark
- ▲ Andrea Sellers

In June 2025, Aligned hosted over 150 at Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation's Conference Center for school finance training through Georgetown's Edunomics Lab, led by Dr. Margarite Roza.





Aligned is a nonprofit, nonpartisan coalition of business leaders committed to improving education in Kansas and

**Torree Pederson**

📞 913-484-4202

✉️ Torree@wearealigned.org

📍 22052 W. 66th Street, Suite 200  
Shawnee, KS 66226

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Join us in ensuring every student is prepared for the workforce of tomorrow. Donate today!

[wearealigned.org](http://wearealigned.org)