

2023 | WEST VIRGINIA LEGISLATORS RETREAT

ISSUE BRIEF

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EARLY BRAIN DEVELOPMENT, THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP, AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF AMERICA'S FAILURE TO INVEST EARLY

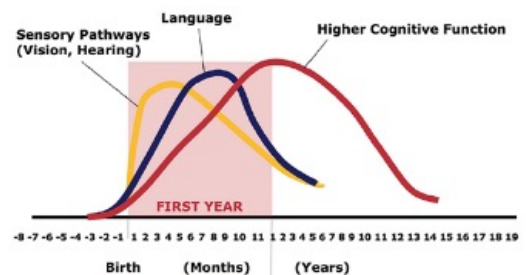
Decades of research on the [developing brain](#) demonstrates the importance of early childhood investments – which support children's healthy development, the formation of strong attachments, and set the foundation for academic and life success. A working knowledge of this research is especially critical for policymakers, who have the power to dramatically influence their states' environments for young children and their families.

The Developing Brain

Infants are [born learning](#). The earliest years of life – particularly the period from prenatal to age three – represent a unique developmental window during which the fundamental architecture of the brain is wired. With [one million new neural connections](#) created each second there is no other period across the lifespan during which the brain develops so rapidly. Connections formed during the early years provide either a strong or weak foundation for lifelong learning.

Human Brain Development

Neural Connections for Different Functions Develop Sequentially



[Source](#)

Though many states identify kindergarten as the start of formal schooling, achievement gaps often manifest long before children reach the schoolhouse doors. A [2009 study](#) identified disparities in the cognitive development, general health, and social-emotional development of low-income children as early as nine months of age – with these gaps growing larger by 24 months. There is little question that both children and taxpayers are well served by preventing these gaps through the delivery of high-quality early care and education.

Interactions are at the Core of Brain Development and Early Learning

Interactions children experience during the early years of development help shape the architecture of their brains. When an infant or young child babbles, gestures, or even cries, and an adult responds appropriately, neural connections are built and strengthened. When parents and other caregivers are nurturing and responsive to a child's signals and needs, they provide an environment rich in the opportunity for children to learn and thrive. The need for responsive early interactions holds significant implications for early childhood settings. With roughly two-thirds of American children requiring education and care outside the home due to parental employment, brain science suggests the need for a stable, nurturing and well-trained early childhood workforce equipped to serve not only as caretakers, but "brain builders" during these critical, formative years.

The Impact of Adverse Early Experiences

Just as the developing brain is receptive to nurturing environments, it is also susceptible to circumstances that threaten its healthy development. Extensive research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) and toxic stress show that healthy child development can be derailed by excessive or prolonged activation of the stress response systems in the body and brain. Children exposed to frequent or prolonged stress – caused by physical or emotional abuse, or neglect – may experience developmentally toxic effects. Prolonged activation of the body's stress response systems – labeled toxic stress – can disrupt development of the brain's architecture and increase the risk of stress-related disease and cognitive impairment well into adulthood.

A child exposed to toxic stress is more likely to experience disruptions in the development of their executive function skills (i.e., inhibitory control, mental

flexibility, and short-term memory), vocabulary, and language processing skills, often resulting in an increase in challenging behavior, increased need for special education services, and the need for remedial supports.

Protecting Children from the Effects of Toxic Stress

Although toxic stress can play a significant role in children's development, it is not the only factor that influences future success. During the early years of development, secure relationships and positive early interactions can mitigate the negative effects of adverse childhood experiences and support healthy brain development, executive function, and the development of social and emotional skills.

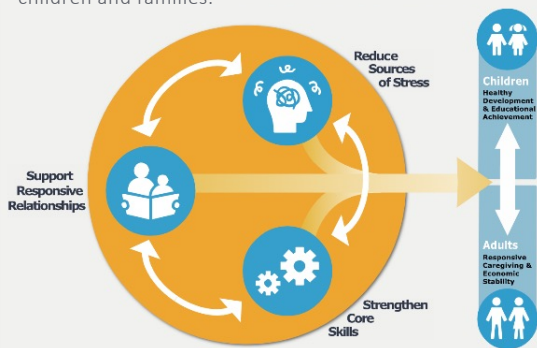


Family engagement and high-quality early care and education are particularly important for children and families who face multiple challenges such as poverty, homelessness, and language barriers. Supportive caregivers, even in the face of toxic stress, can help children learn coping skills and develop the resiliency necessary to overcome potential threats to development. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University suggests [three science-based principles](#) to better protect children from the effects of toxic stress:

Science to Policy and Practice

Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families

These principles, grounded in science, can guide policymakers and program developers as they design and adapt policies and programs to improve outcomes for children and families.



[Click to View Full-size](#)

- Support responsive relationships for children and adults to help buffer children from excessive stress and strengthen the building blocks of resilience.
- Reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families to lessen the toll of adversity and make it easier for adults to provide protective relationships for young children.
- Strengthen core skills for planning, adapting, and achieving goals, to support children's development of resiliency and build skills that will help them succeed in school.

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD INVESTMENT

Investing early in young children has been shown to produce substantial returns on investment for society, families, and children, making the case for policymakers to expand early childhood supports and funding opportunities. Nobel Prize-winning economist, Dr. James Heckman, has been studying the economic impact of quality early childhood programs in the Perry Preschool Project. [As detailed below, conclusions](#) have been drawn about the multifaceted positive impact of quality early childhood programs.

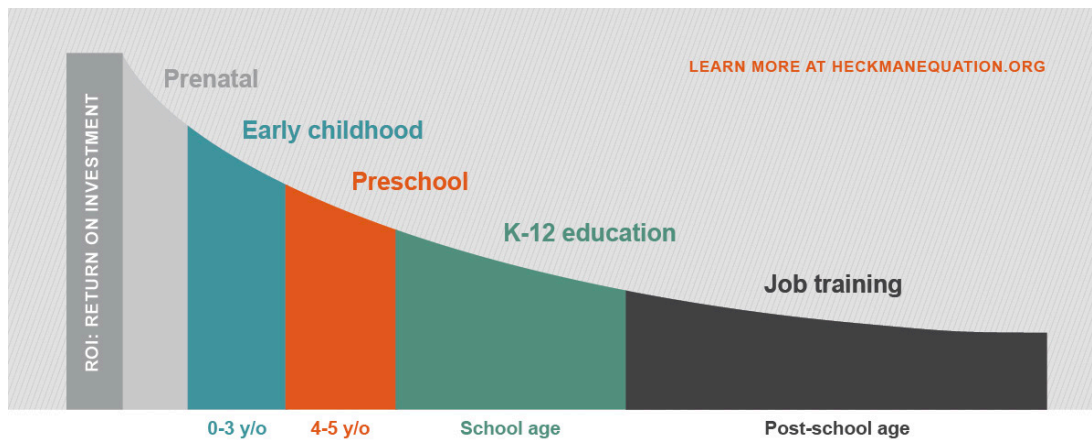
For every dollar spent in quality early childhood education programs for children that are disadvantaged, taxpayers can expect a return on investment of at least 13 percent.

Contemporary understanding of a return on investment includes **nurturing productive citizens** (reduction in incarceration, and increased employment and tax-paying ability), **improved health outcomes** (improved healthy behaviors and increased health expenditure due to higher income), and **reduced need for social services** (reduction in retention, special education, and welfare supports).

Return on investment also includes [intergenerational benefits](#), as children of the Perry Preschool Project participants, on average,

- reported higher graduation rates,
- lower school suspension rates,
- reduced criminal activity,
- higher full-time employment;
- had higher earnings as a result of improved home environments.

Rate of Return on Investment in Human Capital



The “[Heckman Curve](#)” shows that investments have higher rates of return the earlier they are made in a person’s life.

Clearly, investing in the learning and growth of young children is vital for economic development. Quality early childhood education has been proven to contribute to many [short- and long-term benefits](#) for children, including preparing them to be a successful future workforce.

foundational skills necessary for the workforce, such as problem-solving, decision-making, and collaboration, are developed during early childhood. Early childhood not only yields better outcomes for young children but can also save taxpayers money and ensure future generations are prepared to enter the workforce.

“

When we give children what they need to learn, develop, and thrive, they give back through a lifetime of productive citizenship.

[Shonkoff, 2017](#)

Business leaders depend on a [skilled workforce](#) to support today’s economy. Gains from quality early education extend far beyond childhood and

Impact on the Business Sector

The child care industry is vital to states’ economic success. In 2019, the U.S. [child care industry](#) produced a total revenue of \$47.5 billion and generated an additional \$52.1 billion in “spillover” (output) in other industries for a **total economic impact of \$99.3 billion**. Child care revenue is comparable to other important industries such as medical and diagnostic labs (\$47.2 billion), spectator sports (\$46 billion), pipeline transportation (\$44.5 billion), and water transportation (\$43.3 billion).

According to [new research from Ready Nation](#), the lack of adequate infant-toddler care alone has an annual economic impact of \$122 billion (\$464 million annually in West Virginia), with parents absorbing \$78 billion of this impact in the form of lost or foregone wages and employers and taxpayers shouldering the remainder of this burden as a result of lost productivity/profitability

and diminished tax revenues. Furthermore, when child care and schools closed during the pandemic, roughly [\\$700 billion was lost in revenue and productivity](#), equivalent to about 3.5 percent of the national gross domestic product (GDP).

The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted how closely tied the child care industry is to the economic success of the country. More than [50 CEOs of major corporations](#) have called on Congress to make greater investments in child care. A letter from the [ReadyNation CEO Task Force on Early Childhood](#) called on Congress to address the lack of child care quality and affordability, noting it as “**one of the biggest barriers to economic recovery and growth.**” Additionally, [over 90 economists](#) wrote an open letter to encourage child care relief, supporting an investment of “at least [\\$50 billion](#) to stabilize the child care industry, save child care businesses from permanent closure, and prevent an even greater shortage of child care going forward.”

Parent Participation in the Workforce

In the United States, over [1.5 million children under age six have working parents that need weekly child care](#). Child care is critical not only in providing families the option to return to/enter the workforce, but also contributes to family members maintaining their jobs and work-life balance. Research has shown

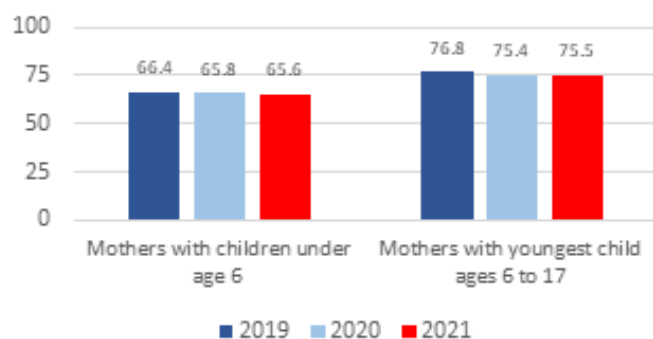


that inadequate child care negatively impacts family income, business profitability and productivity, state revenue and the overall economy.

Mothers are a substantial part of the workforce

and [caregiving responsibilities](#) at home and work threaten women’s ability to remain and progress in the workplace. Specifically, mothers’ [workforce participation rates](#) peak at 75.5 percent for mothers with school-aged children (ages 6 to 17) and decreases while children are younger. Just over **65 percent** of mothers with children under age six and **62.3 percent of mothers with children under the age of three** participate in the workforce. Although half of mothers with infants (58.5 percent) participate in the workforce, they are the least likely group to do so.

Labor Force Participation Rate Of Mothers By Age Of Youngest Child, 2019-21 Annual Averages



During the COVID-19 pandemic, child care disruptions threatened families’ ability to participate in the workforce. Specifically, more than **one in three women** caregivers, according to the [RAPID-EC survey](#), were

forced to leave the workforce or reduce their work hours, even though most could not afford to do so. Reported in early 2021, the total number of [women who left the workforce](#) since the start of the pandemic reached **over 2.3 million**.

Business leaders and policymakers can capitalize on the economic benefits of early care and education by investing in measures that support working families, in particular mothers, and their young children. Investing in quality early childhood programs produces positive outcomes for children, business and for society overall.

WEST VIRGINIA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD LANDSCAPE

West Virginia is home to over [108,000](#) children under the age of six. [Over half](#) of the state's young children live in households in which all available parents participate in the workforce – reinforcing the importance of quality child care for West Virginia's families.

[Twenty-six percent](#) of young West Virginia children live in households earning less than the federal poverty definition – \$27,479 for a family of four. Growing up in poverty is often a [threat](#) to healthy development.

Financial stress can impede children's cognitive development and ability to learn. It can also contribute to behavioral, social and emotional problems, and poor health.

To support the healthy development of all children, states and local communities must provide comprehensive, coordinated, and adequately resourced systems designed to foster long-term success.

Early Childhood Governance

According to the [Education Commission of the States](#), there are three approaches of early care and education oversight:

- 01. Coordination:** Places authority and accountability for early learning programs and services across multiple public agencies. This can be achieved in two ways: Peer agency coordination and coordination through a Governor's Office of Children's Cabinet.
- 02. Consolidation:** Places authority and accountability for the early childhood system within an existing executive branch agency.
- 03. Creation:** Creation of a new executive branch agency with authority and accountability for the early learning system.

26%

Live in Poverty Age 0-5, 2021

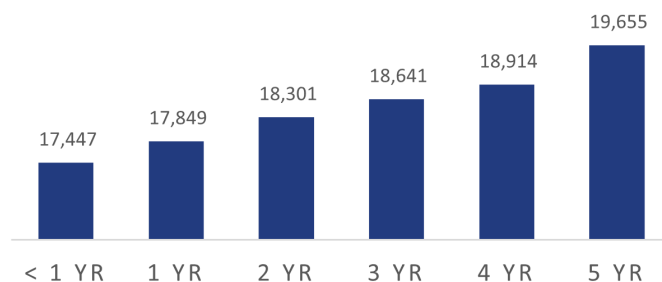
[Source](#)

59%

Have All Parents Working, 2021

[Source](#)

Number of Children Under Age 6 | 2020



[Source](#)



CREATION
of a dedicated early
childhood agency.

Source



CONSOLIDATION
of existing programs and
divisions into one state agency.



COLLABORATION
and **COORDINATION**
across different agencies.

NEW MEXICO

In 2019, New Mexico enacted legislation creating a consolidated cabinet agency – the [Early Childhood Education and Care Department](#) – under which all the state’s early childhood programs would be housed and administered. In the leadup to the Department’s launch in July of 2020, The Hunt Institute convened a transition advisory committee charged with the development of an [18-month action plan](#) to guide the Department’s early work.

West Virginia’s Early Childhood System

West Virginia’s early childhood programs are currently [coordinated](#) across multiple agencies, leading the Bipartisan Policy Center to in a 2023 analysis of system efficiency and coordination. The Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Resources provide an array of services for children prenatal through age eight. The [Early Childhood Advisory Council of West Virginia](#) was established to provide opportunities for stakeholders to engage in the process of creating a statewide comprehensive early childhood system.

MISSOURI

In January 2021, Governor Parson [announced](#) the consolidation of Missouri’s key interagency early childhood programs into a single [Office of Childhood](#). This consolidation integrates early learning, afterschool, home visiting, and child care into one office, housed in the state’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The Hunt Institute, along with other partners, came together to develop [recommendations](#) for ongoing engagement with the Office of Childhood in an effort to ensure that the needs of the state’s early and after care and education stakeholders are incorporated meaningfully within its decision-making processes.

WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN RESOURCES



■ Bureau for Family Assistance, Division of Early Care and Education

- Child Care Development Fund
- WV Head Start and Early Head Start Programs
- Preschool Development Grant

■ Bureau for Public Health, Office of Maternal, Child and Family Health

- Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part C

**WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION**

Office of Early & Elementary Learning

- State Funded Prekindergarten
- Kindergarten – Third Grade

Child Care Affordability and Access

Finding [affordable quality child care](#) in West Virginia can be a barrier for many families. Less than 11 percent of families are able to access affordable infant care (defined as [seven percent](#) of family income) with the cost of infant care currently averaging [17.1 percent](#) of median family income at a cost of approximately [\\$728](#) per month.

Child care subsidies are one way to alleviate this cost burden for eligible families. Administered by the Division of Early Care & Education under the Bureau for Family Assistance within DHHR, approximately [9,700 West Virginia children](#) received child care subsidies monthly in 2020 – only about [40 percent](#) of those eligible. To [qualify](#), parents must be working or attending school with incomes at or below 150 percent of the poverty level. Families also provide a co-payment based on their gross income and is based on a sliding fee scale.

Not only is child care affordability a barrier to accessing care in West Virginia, but child care deserts also limit accessibility. [Sixty-four percent](#) of West Virginians live in a child care desert – an area where licensed child care is extremely limited or unavailable.

NORTH DAKOTA

Governor Doug Burgum and Lt. Governor Brent Sanford [announced](#) a framework for legislation to address the availability, affordability, and quality of child care services in North Dakota to support working families. The proposal comes after 14 months of work with child care providers, business leaders, the Workforce Development Council, legislators, and other key stakeholders.

15,142

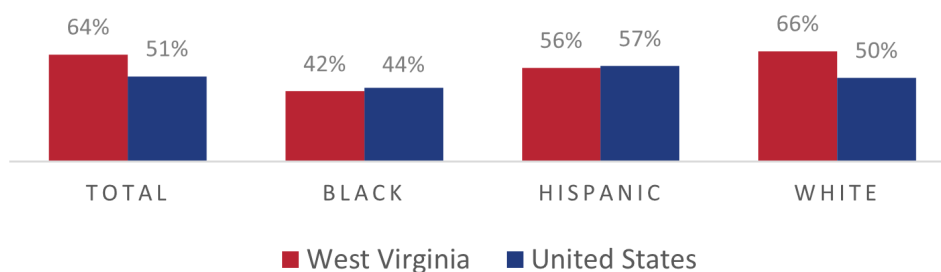
Children Enrolled in State Funded Pre-K, 2020

[Source](#)

11,981

Children Enrolled in State Funded Pre-K, 2021

[Source](#)

Percent Of People Living In Child Care Deserts | 2018


[Source](#)

Accessible child care relies on a healthy early childhood ecosystem. Thus, addressing child care affordability, workforce shortages, and supporting the child care industry are critical components to increasing access for West Virginia's families with young children.

West Virginia Universal Pre-K

The West Virginia [Universal Pre-K Program](#) was established in 2002 to provide early learning opportunities to all four-year-old children as well as to three-year-old children with special needs. The program is considered to be high quality, meeting [nine of the ten](#) NIEER quality standards benchmarks. In the 2020-21 school year, the program enrolled 11,981 children, or roughly 56 percent of four-year-old children and five percent of three-year-old children. According to NIEER, this places West Virginia 6th in the country for four-year-old access to preschool.

From the beginning, West Virginia prioritized mixed delivery systems, writing into law that 50 percent of early childhood classrooms had to be in community programs, including Head Start and licensed child care centers. Additionally, school districts are required to enter contracts with community providers to create collaborative classrooms. During the 2018-19 school year, [82 percent](#) of all pre-K classrooms were collaborative, with 67 percent of students in Head Start classrooms, 15 percent in licensed child care, and 18 percent in school districts. Funding for the pre-K program is provided by multiple sources, including the State School Aid Funding Formula, federal Head Start, and federal child care funding. Through the funding formula, the state contributed \$90,636,501 in 2020, which roughly equates to \$6,394 per enrolled child. This places West Virginia 16th in the

nation for state spending.

West Virginia's Universal Pre-K program has shown [significant impacts](#) on children who were in the program. Children who participated in the programs showed gains in vocabulary that were 30 percent higher than the gains of children who did not go through the program. The Pre-K program also increased children's gains in math skills by 80 percent compared to those not in the program.

PRESCHOOL DEVELOPMENT GRANT

The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR), Bureau for Family Assistance (BFA), Division of Early Care and Education was awarded [\\$2.6 million](#) by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Funding from the Preschool Development Grant will help support the development of additional professional development of additional professional development opportunities; target efforts to promote successful partnerships among early learning providers, community agencies, and school districts for successful transition from early learning programs to kindergarten; and improve the alignment and coordination of services and programs that serve migrant children (ages 6 weeks to 5 years) who participate in preschool.

West Virginia

% ENROLLED FOUR-YEAR-OLDS	\$ PER CHILD	NIEER RATING	SETTING	FUNDING	STRUCTURE
56%	\$9,096	9/10	Public school, requires 50% of programs to partner with private or Head Start programs	School funding formula augmented with federal funds	Minimum 25 hours per week; 4 days per week

CHALLENGES FACING THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

Early Childhood Workforce

Despite the critical role child care plays in a state's economic and social success, the nearly five million individuals who form the child care workforce (majority of whom are [women](#)) have not been given the support needed for success. The educator pipeline is broken, with often convoluted pathways for the child care workforce to enter or advance in the field. This has led to a [range of qualifications](#) among child care providers, with each program defining its own credentialing, high-quality standards, and even minimum professional qualifications. Furthermore, the guidelines, accountability systems, and supports

for early childhood professionals in the field are generally siloed, inequitable, and driven by a mix of state and federal regulations. Together, this creates a burdensome system for the early childhood workforce.

Additionally, many in the early childhood workforce do not receive a compensation in line with their state's minimum living wage; as of June 2022, the median wage of child care workers is just [\\$13.22 per hour](#). Many in the early childhood workforce also lack access to critical benefits such as paid sick leave and health insurance. The lack of compensation and benefits causes many child care providers to report difficulty with food security, housing, or paying for utilities, causing many to hold an additional job to meet their basic needs. In fact, the early education workforce experiences a poverty rate [7.7 times higher](#) than teachers in the K-8 system.

Mean Hourly Wages, by Occupation, May 2021



[Source](#)

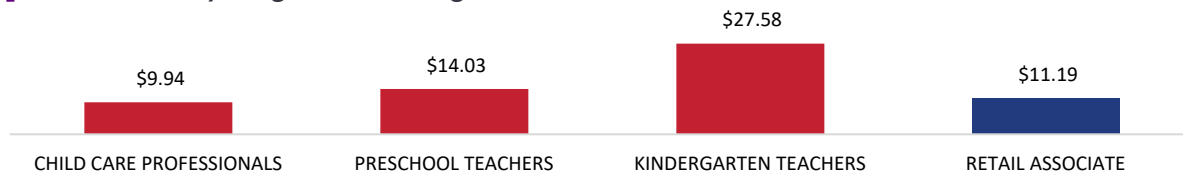
*K-12 hourly salaries calculated based on a total of 2,080 hours worked.

7.7x

Early Education
workforce
experiences poverty
7.7 times higher
than teachers in the
K-8 system

[Source](#)

Median Hourly Wage in West Virginia



[Source](#)

95%

Of ECE Workforce are Women

20%

Of ECE Workforce are Latina

19%

*Of ECE Workforce are Black*Source

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the landscape of the nation's workforce, including that of the early learning system, resulting in an unprecedented closure of child care programs. Already operating on the narrowest of margins, child care programs experienced financial turmoil, fluctuating and unpredictable demand, as well as costly new health and safety regulations. As these effects continue, many child care providers struggled to find qualified staff and stay in business. In 2021, a survey by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) found that 80 percent of child care providers reported experiencing staffing shortages. In 2022, the workforce shortage has not fully recovered as there are still only 90.4 percent of child care jobs than compared to February 2020. Retainment issues not only cause skilled, knowledgeable, and devoted educators to leave the field but also negatively impacts children's social and academic progress.

To sustain the early childhood care and education system, three rounds of Federal COVID-19 Relief Funds were awarded to states to help alleviate the financial burden centers and providers faced. These different

forms of funding have helped with increased cost of operations, addressing workforce compensation, increasing reimbursement rates, and more. These supports are temporary; all relief funds must be expended by September 30, 2024 and Stabilization grant funds must be liquidated even sooner – by September 30, 2023. Thus, creating concern for many providers as they work to sustain their businesses. The use of relief funds should be designed in such a way that it becomes a foundation for public policies and investments to address the underlying systemic deficiencies that have made this sector and its workforce especially vulnerable.

RECRUITING AND RETAINING EFFECTIVE LEADERS

School leaders are estimated to account for one-fourth of school-based effects on student achievement, making them second only to teachers in impact on student outcomes. Recent research finds that effective principals shape a vision of academic success for all students, create a climate hospitable to education, cultivate leadership in others, improve classroom instruction, and manage people, data, and processes with the goal of school improvement.

Effective school principals are critical to improving student learning, particularly in low-performing schools. In fact, there is no documented instance of a successful school turnaround that did not include strong, effective leadership. Principals effectively improve instruction through their role in setting high expectations for all students and adults in the school; hiring, evaluating, and developing effective teachers; and holding everyone in the building accountable for the success of all students. A growing body of research indicates that the time, energy, and resources allocated to improving teacher effectiveness will fail to reach their full potential if states do not also focus on strengthening principals' expertise.

Principal leadership also plays a significant role in teacher turnover. The quality of administrative support is an important factor in teacher's decisions to leave a school; in fact, many teachers deem this factor to

be more important than salary. Additionally, teachers point to the importance of school culture and collegial relationships, time for collaboration, and decision-making input, all areas in which principals play a crucial role. Additionally, the presence of school leaders of color is a significant factor in recruiting teachers of color. In 2019, the [Annenberg Institute at Brown University](#) found that Black principals increase the likelihood that a Black teacher is hired by 5-7 percentage points. [Research](#) from the University of North Carolina also explores this relationship, finding that by establishing cooperative and supportive relationships with teachers of color, principals of color may reduce workplace stress, improve communication channels, and motivate teachers to remain engaged in the work. This can also include an exploration of leadership pipelines within schools for teachers to become administrators.

School Leadership in West Virginia

Pathways to Leadership

To become a principal in West Virginia, an individual must hold a master's degree, complete an administrator preparation program from an accredited college or university, and achieve a passing score on the PRAXIS 5412 Educational Administration and Supervision test.

Once hired, applicants must complete the Evaluation Leadership Institute from the West Virginia Department of Education.

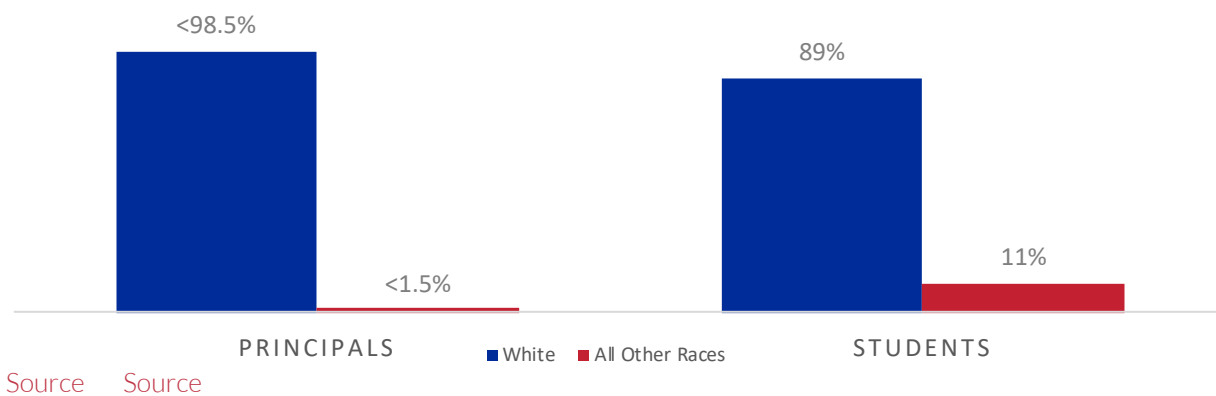
School Leadership Landscape

While the overwhelming majority of West Virginia's student body is white, there is still a significant gap in diversity between school leadership and students.

Policy Considerations

- When seeking to improve school leadership development, West Virginia's policymakers and education leaders should consider the following:
- How can we support principal preparation programs in lowering barriers to entry for candidates, as well as playing a key role in intentionally matching principals to schools that are a good fit to the leaders' strengths and style?
- How can we encourage and support educators to pursue school leadership?

■ The Principal Diversity gap in West Virginia | 2017-2018



CONNECTING THE CONTINUUM: ENSURING COLLEGE AND CAREER SUCCESS POST- GRADUATION

State education systems are often viewed as “pipelines” for our future workforce. Once a leader in educational attainment, however, the U.S. is beginning to fall behind its global competitors. For the last decade, states have implemented numerous education reforms designed to reverse this trend and ensure students are “college and career ready.” While much has been accomplished within K-12 education to improve student outcomes, the U.S. is still not where it needs to be.

College and Career Readiness in West Virginia

West Virginia’s Common Core standards for college and career readiness were repealed in late 2015. In an effort to create more accessible and clear standards, The West Virginia Board of Education [brought together](#) educators, parents, higher education,

and business/community stakeholders to craft and implement the West Virginia College and Career Readiness Standards for English-Language Arts and Mathematics in July 2016. The states [current content standards](#) can be found here.

Academic Metrics of College and Career Readiness

Career and Technical Education (CTE)

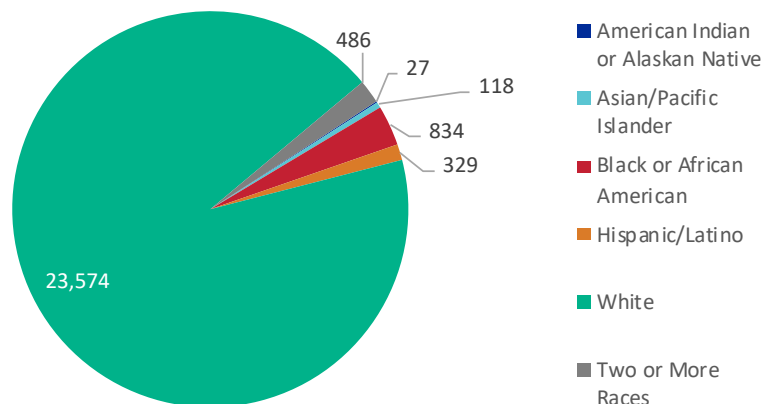
Career and technical education (CTE) courses focus on workplace competencies and hands-on experiences that provide students with the skills, knowledge, and training to succeed in future careers. CTE programs vary across states and districts, from job shadowing opportunities to specialized technical training and apprenticeships, all aiming to equip students with the academic and technical skills, knowledge, and training necessary for success in their careers.

COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMS

There are two major college entrance exams: the ACT and the SAT. Both exams demonstrate college readiness, though they differ in several key ways,

CTE Concentrators | 2019 - 2020

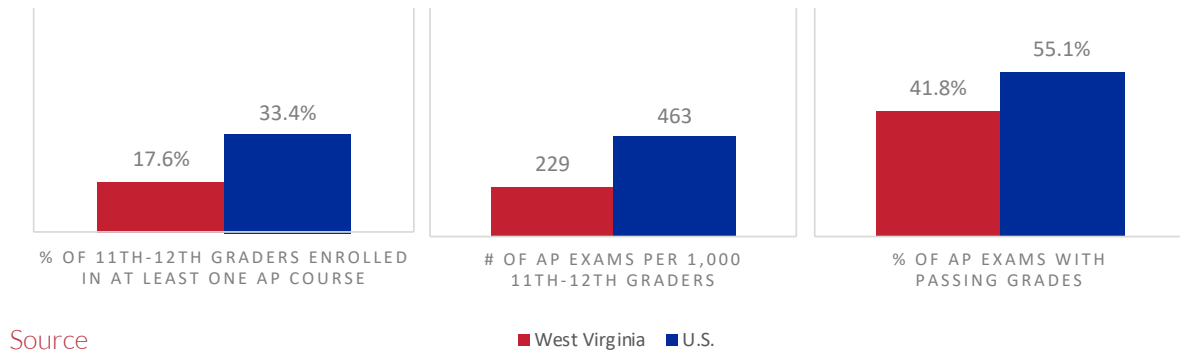
At the high school level, a student is considered to be a CTE concentrator if they have completed at least two courses in a single CTE program or program of study.



Source

Advanced Placement Courses

Advanced Placement (AP) courses offer high school students the opportunity to take rigorous coursework. Students can also earn college credit if they perform well on their AP exams, saving the student time in college as they skip introductory courses.



including structure and length. As national exams, they provide a mechanism through which to compare student performance across states.

ACT		
West Virginia Graduates Participating in ACT: 28%		
Average Score	West Virginia: 20.5	United States: 19.8

SAT		
West Virginia Graduates Participating in SAT: 84%		
Average Score	West Virginia: 938	United States: 1050

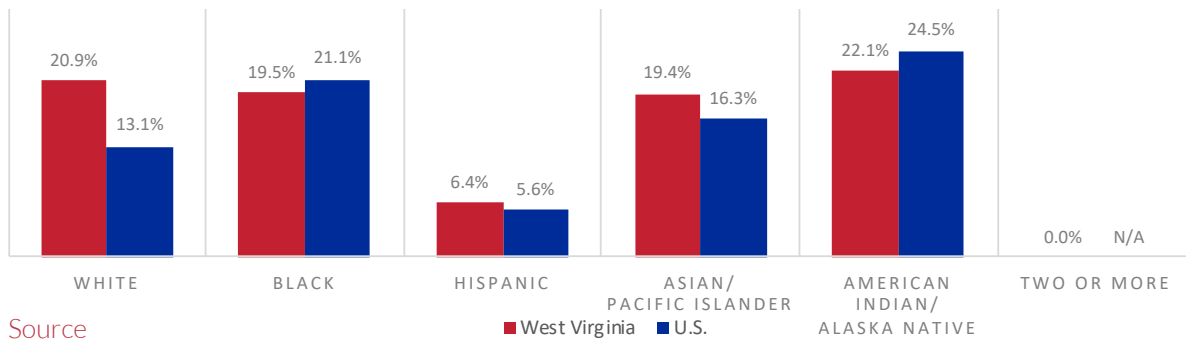
Non-Academic Metrics of College and Career Readiness

Along with academic outcomes, it is crucial to have an understanding of the other indicators that can signal whether students are on track for success. Measures of chronic absenteeism, out-of-school suspension, and graduation and dropout rates track how many students are away from school and missing opportunities for learning for a significant portion of the year. When disaggregated, this data also reveals where students from certain demographic groups are disproportionately missing time in the classroom. Monitoring these indicators can help policymakers and state education leaders determine where interventions may be needed to ensure that all students are receiving the instruction and support they need to successfully transition into postsecondary education or a career.

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

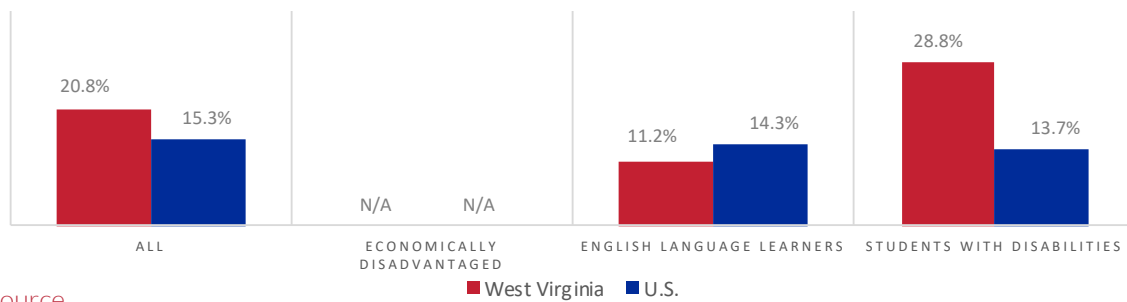
Research shows that chronic absenteeism has a [negative impact](#) at all levels of K-12 education. Students in elementary school who are chronically absent are more likely to fall behind grade level in early reading and miss a critical third-grade milestone. Meanwhile, chronically absent high school students are at increased risk of dropping out.

West Virginia Chronic Absenteeism by Race/Ethnicity | 2020 - 2021



Source

West Virginia Chronic Absenteeism by Other Subgroups | 2020 - 2021

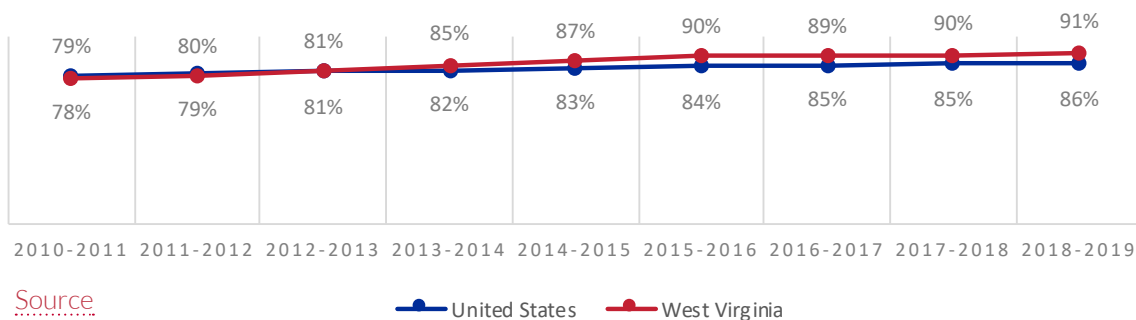


Source

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE

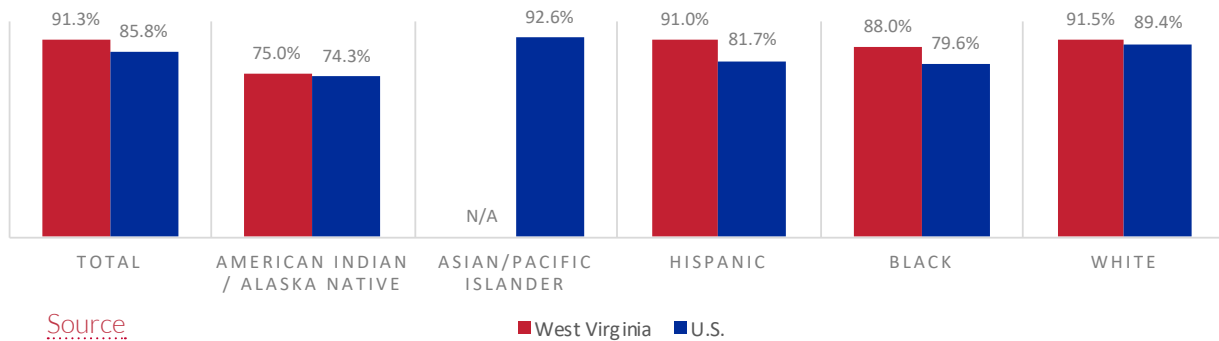
High school graduation rate is a [key indicator](#) of whether schools are successfully supporting all students through the education system.

West Virginia High School Graduation Rate | 2010 - 2019

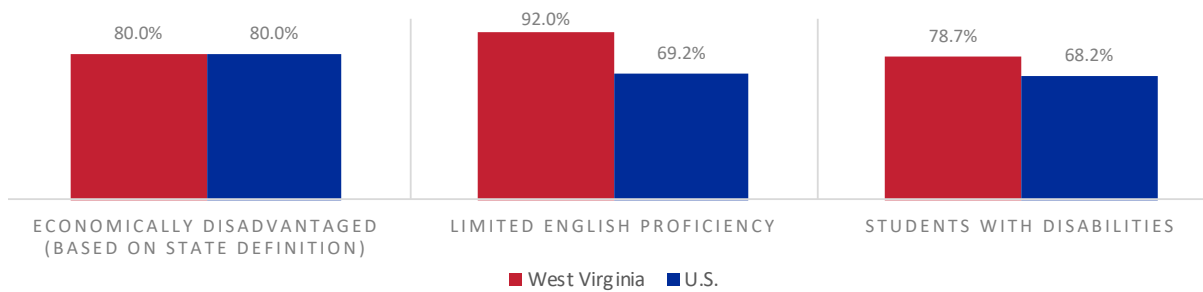


Source

West Virginia High School Graduation Rate by Race/Ethnicity | 2018 – 2019



West Virginia High School Graduation Rate by Other Subgroups | 2018 – 2019



Policy Considerations

- How can West Virginia further assess whether students are graduating high school college and career ready?
- What opportunities exist to develop stronger partnerships between early childhood, K-12 education, higher education institutions, and the workforce?
- How can West Virginia better serve the needs of historically underrepresented students to ensure that all West Virginians are prepared for success in the 21st-century workforce.





CREATING A FUTURE OF STABILITY IN THE MIDDLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION UNCERTAINTY

Higher Education Uncertainty

A recent study found that young adults who have not attended/completed college are most interested in education opportunities that guarantee a return on investment (ROI). In fact, [62 percent](#) shared that they would be willing to take on debt if guaranteed a good job after graduation.

The [following reasons were cited](#) as reasons that individuals didn't enroll in higher education:

- 38 percent worried about the cost of college and amassing debt
- 27 percent felt college would be too stressful or too much pressure
- 26 percent believed it was more important to work and earn money
- 25 percent felt uncertainty about their career trajectories and what they wanted to study

Despite student concerns about ROI, postsecondary education continues to be the most reliable way for West Virginians to increase their economic mobility.

After the 2008 economic recession, [over 95 percent](#) of the jobs created during the recovery, so far, were filled by workers who had earned a higher education degree or certificate. The need for high-quality workers is growing, with an estimate that by 2027, [over 70 percent](#) of jobs in the U.S. will require some form of postsecondary degree or credential, but as of 2019 only [38.1 percent](#) of West Virginians have a postsecondary degree or credential.

Innovative Initiatives

West Virginia offers a vast variety of degree and credential pathways, ensuring West Virginians can access a postsecondary pathway that is aligned with their career and education goals:

- [West Virginia Invests](#) is a state-funded grant program that pays toward the cost of tuition, academic program fees and mandatory fees for specific fields at a participating West Virginia public two- or four- year institution. The specific fields that are grant eligible are determined by the West Virginia Department of Commerce and are high-demand, specific to the state's workforce.
- [The Higher Education Adult Part-Time Student \(HEAPS\) Workforce Development Component](#) offers awards of up to \$2000 to West Virginia students who wish to enroll in a postsecondary certificate, industry recognized credential, or other skill development program in an area of demand in the state. Students must present financial need to be eligible for an award. Awards may go toward the cost of tuition, required testing, and required supplies.
- [The West Virginia Higher Education Grant](#) offers qualified low-income West Virginia residents a scholarship to cover the cost of tuition. The grant may be renewed until the student's course of study is completed.
- [Community and Technical Colleges](#) – West Virginia works with local businesses and industries, allowing the opportunity for partnerships with the state's Community and Technical College System. Around 150 new customer training programs have been created as a result of these partnerships.
- [Apprenticeships](#) offer West Virginians the opportunity to earn a wage while learning valuable professional skills. Apprenticeships and internships also benefit employers by providing the opportunity to develop their ideal workforce and train for specific skills they need. Currently there are more than 100 active registered apprenticeship programs located in cities throughout West Virginia.

Policy Considerations

- How can West Virginia incentivize business and industry to partner with institutions of higher education to fulfill their workforce needs?
- How can institutions of higher education more closely align programs of study with in-demand employment opportunities?
- How can West Virginia ensure students better understand the return on investment for postsecondary education?



Established in 2001, The Hunt Institute honors the legacy of James B. Hunt, Jr., the former governor of North Carolina who distinguished himself as an ardent champion of education.

The Hunt Institute brings together people and resources to inspire and inform elected officials and policymakers about key issues in education, resulting in visionary leaders who are prepared to take strategic action for greater educational outcomes and student success.

In 2016, The Hunt Institute became an independent, nonprofit entity and joined forces with Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy to pursue research, educational partnerships, and events related to improving education policy.

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