

20 | **WEST VIRGINIA**
24 | **LEGISLATORS**
RETREAT

EARLY CARE AND LEARNING AS AN ECONOMIC DRIVER

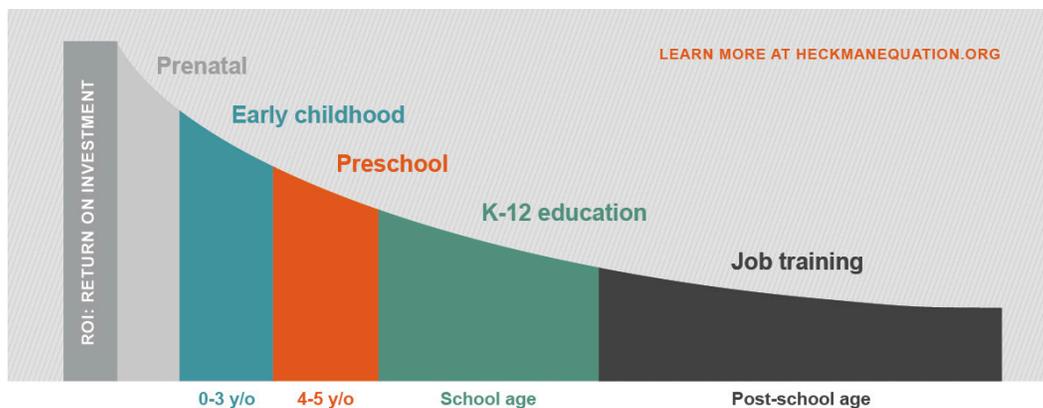
West Virginia is gearing up to attract business [investment](#), and must address child care barriers that pose [threats](#) to investment and workforce productivity. The state is [home](#) to nearly 112,000 children younger than five years of age, with around [18,000](#) babies born in the state every year. For children, the earliest years of life are a critical window of development with long-lasting implications for their success in school and life, and quality care and early learning opportunities are needed to support this development. For West Virginia parents and employers, the lack of access to affordable, high-quality child care poses an increasing threat to workforce participation. With [56 percent](#) of West Virginia's parents in the workforce, strengthening early childhood support is critical to children's care and learning, as well as the state's workforce and economic growth.

The first five years are of life-changing consequence during which the architecture of the brain is [wired](#) in response to relationships and interactions with family members and early educators. With consistent exposure to language-rich environments and nurturing adults, young children develop robust networks of neural connectivity that undergird their academic and life [success](#) for decades to come.

A cited [intergenerational](#) analysis of the outcomes stemming from HighScope's Perry Preschool Project, a high-quality preschool intervention, found that the program improved participants' employment, health, and cognitive and social-emotional skills, and reduced criminal activity. Positive effects continued to influence the academic and social development of participants' children. The absence of stimulating early experiences has adverse results. Studies show that [disparities](#) in cognitive, health, and social-emotional development of young children are evident at nine months and increase by 24 months.

The Heckman Curve model indicates that for every dollar spent on high-quality birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children, taxpayers can expect a 13 percent per annum [return](#) on investment, with the greatest returns associated with programs at the earliest stages of life (Figure 1). These savings are reflected across education and social service systems in the form of reductions in grade retention, special education, welfare supports, and incarceration as well as increases in employment and taxpaying ability. Increasing funding in early care and learning will result in improved access, affordability, and quality of care, and enable consistent [workforce](#) participation and productivity in the present and the [future](#).

Figure 1: 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.

Addressing West Virginia’s Child Care Gap

There are almost 63,000 young children under five who need care, but there is an inadequate supply of child care. Table one shows the extent of the [gap](#) between the number of children who need care and the number of slots available in West Virginia.

Table 1: The Child Care Gap in West Virginia

| Children under five needing care | Licensed capacity (child care spaces) |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 62,786 | 39,405 |
| Estimated child care gap | Estimated child care gap (percent) |
| 25,914 | 41 percent |

Early educators are dubbed the “workforce [behind](#) the workforce,” as they enable parents to stay employed. However, early educators are paid about [\\$10.95](#) per hour on average in West Virginia. The average living wage for an individual in West Virginia is [\\$18.94](#). Attracting quality early educators to the field and helping them [stay](#) engaged requires supplementing wages and providing benefits, to address widespread burnout and [attrition](#) in the sector.

Table 2: Child Care and State Median Income: A Comparison

| Cost of care for West Virginia families | Annual cost of care | Care as a percentage of median income | DHHS recommendation |
|---|---------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Cost of care (Infants) | \$7,680 | 15% | 7% |
| Cost of care (Toddlers) | \$7,200 | 14% | |
| Cost of care (Four-year-olds) | \$6,720 | 13% | |

Making Child Care Affordable in West Virginia

According to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), child care is [affordable](#) if it costs no more than seven percent of a family’s income. In West Virginia, infant care can cost up to 15 percent of the state’s median family income. This expense leads many parents, especially [mothers](#), to leave the workforce or reduce their work hours to care for children, with a negative economic impact on the state of approximately [\\$464](#) million annually. Table two shows the cost of care to families for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, relative to the state’s median income of [\\$51,248](#).

Policy Considerations

- ❓ Does West Virginia’s current model of early care funding support access for all children?
- ❓ To capitalize on business investment and maximize workforce productivity, how can the state incentivize existing child care providers to expand their services and attract new providers into the sector to expand the supply of reliable care?
- ❓ How can the state engage business leaders in developing on-site and near-site child care options for working parents?

FUNDING HIGH QUALITY EARLY CARE AND LEARNING

Recent news on child care closures spotlight the challenges providers face in balancing their passion for the care and learning of young children with business realities. The pandemic revealed the [fragility](#) of this sector, which has historically had limited public funding. West Virginia may see around 600 child care centers [close](#) this year as Federal dollars provided during the pandemic are fully spent-down.

Recent strides in brain science research emphasize how critical the first [1000](#) days of a child’s life are in their lifelong learning and development, and economic analyses showing the high [return](#) on investment on early learning make a strong case for increased public investment in this sector. In West Virginia, public funding for early care and learning programs reaches only a [fraction](#) of eligible children (Table 3).

Market Rate Surveys

Apart from limited public support, business fragility is exacerbated by [weaknesses](#) in methods of calculating the cost of care. The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), administered by the federal Office of Child Care, allocates the Block Grant to states for providing subsidized care for income-eligible families. CCDF requires that states use market rate surveys to calculate the cost of child care for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. The Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) defines a [market rate](#) survey as “a study of the prices or fees child care programs typically charge, and families typically pay for a given type of child care setting, care by age group, and per unit of care.”

Every three years, as part of their CCDF grant renewal process, states use statistically valid surveys to collect price data from providers to calculate rates of reimbursement through the [Child Care Subsidy](#). Subsidies usually reimburse providers for child care to eligible families at the 75th percentile of market rates. The [BPC](#) states that “subsidy reimbursement rates based on distorted market rates increase the gap between what it costs to provide child care and what a state pays child care programs.” According to the Center for American Progress, for the “FY 2022-2024 CCDF plan period, [all](#) states except New Mexico and the District of Columbia set their reimbursement rates based on a market rate survey.”

There are [disadvantages](#) to market rate surveys:

- They narrow pricing to tuition and fees for private-pay families, without accounting for administrative costs such as meeting state health and safety requirements, providing staff with a living wage, and allocations for staff benefits and professional learning opportunities.
- Costs of delivering infant and toddler care, which are higher than care for older children, experience the biggest cost-revenue gaps, as do smaller care providers.
- Current market rates, which skew low because providers fear losing paying families to their competitors, are used as the baseline for setting subsidy reimbursement rates. The subsidy rate is at the 75th percentile of an already low market rate and is not financially viable for providers.
- Market rates are set every three years, and do not reflect real-time changes in the state’s wage structure and inflation in rents, materials, and other costs in the interim period.

Table 3: Public Funding for Early Care and Learning in West Virginia

| Publicly Funded Programs | Child Care and Development Block Grant | Early Head Start | Head Start | Preschool |
|--|--|------------------|------------|-----------|
| Percent of income-eligible children served | 19% | 13% | 45% | 35% |

Cost Models

CCDF allows two other methods of calculating costs: 1) the cost estimation model; and 2) the cost study or survey, widely known as cost models, which promise fairer subsidy pricing at the program level to keep child care providers in business, and powerful data at the systems level to help states make strategic investments in the sector.

Several states have found cost models useful in addressing lingering challenges in the early care and learning sector. Texas is piloting a funding stream to help programs boost staff salaries. Illinois analyzed child care supply by community to strategically invest in pandemic recovery in the worst affected

regions. Massachusetts is building a cost model to assess the adequacy of subsidy levels statewide. Policymakers can apply data from cost models to develop new programs/funding streams such as:

- Salary supplementation
- Incentive programs to attract child care providers to underserved areas
- Universal preschool expansion through mixed-delivery programs
- Quality guidelines for programs, and support to meet these guidelines
- Shared services through networks/partnerships to reduce overhead costs of centers

Table 4: Program Level Cost Modeling

| COSTS | REVENUE STREAMS |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Space (rent) ■ Safety and health requirements ■ Educational materials ■ Salaries ■ Benefits ■ Professional learning opportunities ■ Administrative costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Tuition and fees by age group for enrolled children (size of business) ■ Subsidies ■ Other public funding (e.g., food program) ■ Business partnerships ■ Donations ■ Grants |

Table 5: Systems Level Cost Modeling

| COSTS | REVENUE STREAMS |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Aggregated costs across the system ■ Variations in costs within the state <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > By rural and urban > By size of business > By age of child ■ Analysis of staffing costs ■ Analysis of facility costs ■ Analysis of types of administrative costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Tuition data disaggregated by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Age of child > Size of business ■ Child Care Subsidy ■ Other public funding ■ Mixed funding streams ■ Business partnerships ■ Grants |

Policy Considerations

- ❓ Is West Virginia’s current model of cost modeling meeting the needs of providers, children, and families?
- ❓ How can the state use cost modeling data at the program level to establish the true cost of providing early care?
- ❓ At the system level, how can the state use cost modeling to strategically invest in strengthening access to quality, affordable care for working families?

ACCOUNTABILITY AND SCHOOL FUNDING

Public school funding constitutes a critical component of the nation’s education system, shaping the quality and accessibility of educational opportunities for millions of students. Funding includes resources allocated by federal, state, and local governments to support the maintenance and operation of public schools. The state has a fundamental, constitutional duty to ensure that all students have access to a high-quality education, through proper funding and resource allocation that supports instructional materials, infrastructure, personnel compensation, and extracurricular activities. Increased [spending levels](#) in education leads to higher graduation rates and earnings in adulthood. Research [suggests](#) that when a district increases per-pupil spending by 10 percent for students aged five or younger, students complete more years of schooling and, as adults, experience higher incomes and reduced poverty rates.

There are various models that states use as a formula to fund K-12 public schools. Generally, state funding falls into one of the three main formulas or is a hybrid of the formulas:

- **Resource-Based:** Determines the cost of education expenses by factoring the cost of resources needed, such as staff salaries or curriculum materials. States may adjust additional costs to

districts for specific student categories with flat, per-student dollar amounts. West Virginia currently utilizes this funding model.

- **Student-Based:** Identifies a base allotment for an average student and multiplies this cost by district enrollment figures. States may adjust for additional costs of educating specific categories of students based on need. This is the [most common](#) formula design, as 40 states use this type or this type in combination with another approach.
- **Guaranteed tax-base:** Funding levels are determined by a formula that equalizes the taxes paid on the base amount of property within the district. The state provides higher levels of funding to lower property-wealthy districts than higher property-wealthy districts.
- **Hybrid Model:** Hybrid models often combine aspects of student-based foundation models, resource-based allocation models, and various cost factors.

In West Virginia, families can choose to attend traditional public schools, public charter schools, private schools, online learning, homeschooling, and micro schooling. Most West Virginia families choose traditional public schools, with roughly 90.6 percent of K-12 students opting into this model. Recently, West Virginia implemented public charter school options, with two statewide virtual schools and two brick-and-mortar schools, with more being planned and developed. Following the passage of [West Virginia’s Public Charter School Pilot Program](#) recently updated in 2021, the program allows for the approval of 10 public charter schools every year and a limit of two statewide virtual charter schools.

When discussing the state-specific funding model, West Virginia primarily utilizes a [resource-based formula](#) to fund public schools. The cost of delivering education in a district is based on the cost of resources including staff compensation and actual transportation costs. The funding model does consider categories to include English language learners, students with disabilities, and small district.

The source of these dollars is only based in local revenue from property taxes, with no increased funding dedicated to low-income students or impoverished districts.

Expansion of Choice

Launched in 2022, West Virginia's [Hope Scholarship Program](#) is an education savings account (ESA) allowing eligible parents to receive average per-pupil state funding for their children's education in an electronic, parent-controlled fund for educational expenses. These expenses may include private school tuition, tutoring, credentialing, therapies, transportation, and a few other accommodating products or services that supplement their children's education. The Hope Scholarship program [does not use](#) any funds meant for West Virginia's public schools. Instead, funding provided to this program is generated by separate, annual appropriations by the Legislature for the sole purpose of funding the program. With its recent implementation, the West Virginia Legislature requires [a compressive report](#) to the Legislative Oversight Commission on education accountability at the end of 2026 to ensure dollars are being utilized and appropriated correctly.

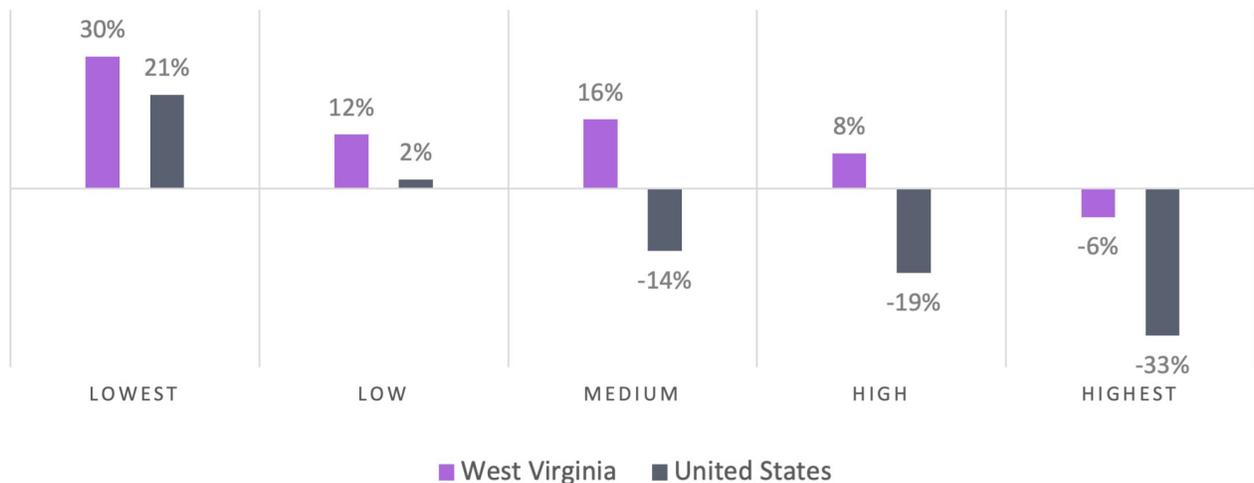
The funding breakdown of the Hope Scholarship is equal to 100 percent of the prior year's statewide average net state aid allotted per pupil. It is based on net enrollment adjusted for state aid purposes (roughly \$4,300 in 2022-2023), which is about a third of the total value of current public school per-student spending in the state. ESAs have been a growing practice nationwide as states expand and fund strategies to expand school choice programs.

District Funding

Equal educational opportunity is achieved when all districts in a state are on par, and no districts are substantially further above or below adequate spending levels.

Equitable opportunity for students is calculated by comparing adequate funding gaps between higher- and lower-poverty districts in each state (essentially the "gap between the gaps"). The difference in adequacy gaps between higher- and lower-poverty groups, in percentage points, is known as the "opportunity gap." These gaps are relevant because when higher-poverty districts are less adequately funded than more affluent districts in each state, the latter districts are essentially funded to achieve

Figure 2: Funding Adequacy Gap Percentage By District Poverty Level | 2020-2021



Source

higher outcomes than the districts in highest poverty. West Virginia’s current public education funding strategy has reduced opportunity gaps by prioritizing equitable access to quality education in low wealth districts. However, there is still work to be done to address the gaps that exist in the most impoverished districts in the state.

Policy Considerations

- ❓ Does West Virginia have the data necessary to measure how student funding impacts student outcomes?
- ❓ How might West Virginia better support low wealth school districts to reduce adequacy gaps?
- ❓ What strategies can West Virginia implement to ensure school choice options result in strong student outcomes?

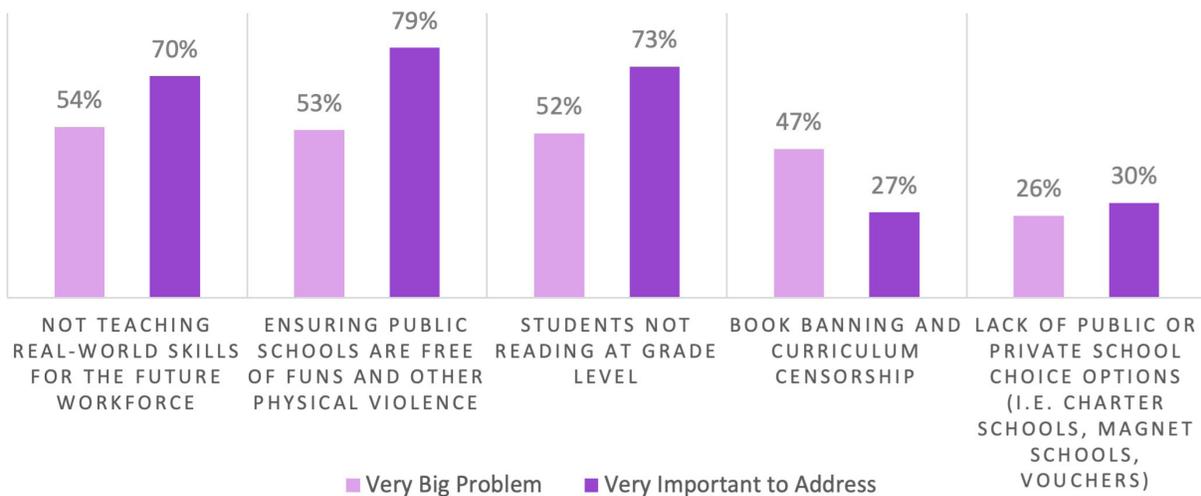
PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ON EDUCATION | LOOKING AHEAD TO THE 2024 ELECTION

According to The Hunt Institute’s 2023 [Across the Aisle survey](#), the “hot-button” issues which dominate election news headlines, such as curriculum censorship, parental oversight, and school choice, do not reflect voters’ education priorities. Rather, parents and voters demonstrate [significant agreement](#) on a set of “core values” for education.

Education Priorities

In the summer of 2023, The Hunt Institute partnered with Lake Research Partners to survey potential voters across the country. The survey showed voters and parents have a clear vision of their priorities for education and public schools, nationally and within their communities. Unsurprisingly, parents want their children to be safe, read on grade level, and leave school with skills that will enable them to be successful in the workplace.

Figure 3: Voter Identified Education Priorities | 2023



Source

Student Safety

Student safety is a basic requirement for a learning environment, and it also has major implications for student learning and engagement. Students who feel unsafe are [less likely](#) to be focused in the classroom, engage in school activities, or be present for class. Concerns over school safety coincide with the reality that gun violence in schools [doubled](#) between the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. According to the survey, [83 percent](#) of voters are likely to support a leader who believes that our schools cannot be a safe place for our children when we do not address gun violence and other physical violence. The West Virginia Department of Education is partnering with the Federal Bureau of Investigation to host [Regional Safety Conferences](#), with a focus on educating students protecting themselves online.

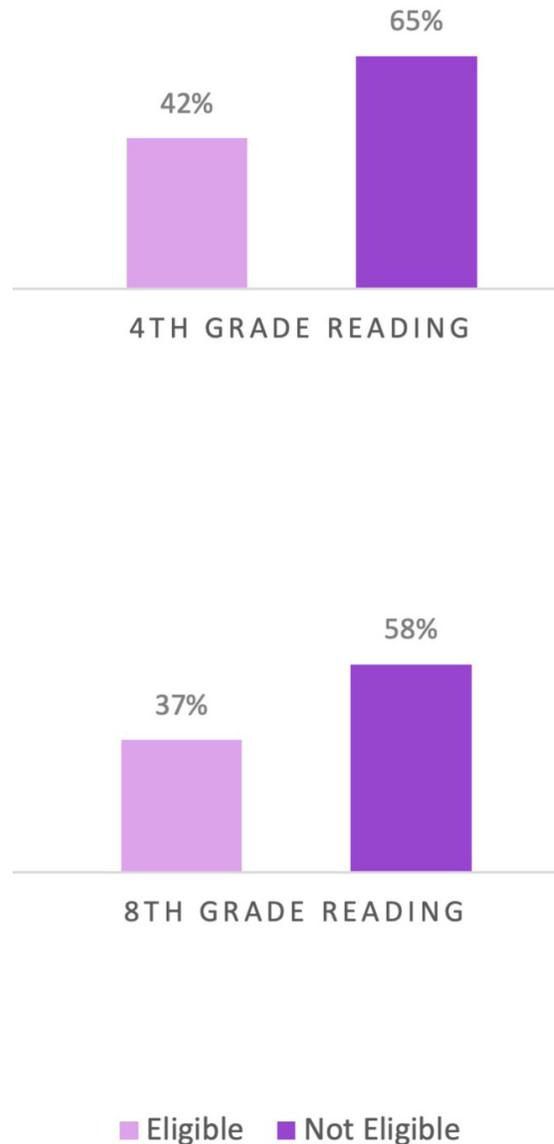
Literacy

According to the most recent [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) (NAEP) scores, fourth grade reading scores have lost the gains made over the past 20 years and reflect averages last seen in the 1990s. This is particularly concerning for upper elementary and middle school students because after third grade children [stop learning to read](#) and begin reading to learn. [Many states](#) are making efforts to align literacy instruction with the science of reading and investing in strategies to support [learning recovery](#). West Virginia students consistently perform [under national averages](#) on NAEP reading assessments. The largest gap in student reading performance in 2022 was between students who were eligible and not eligible for the National School Lunch Program.

Workforce Readiness

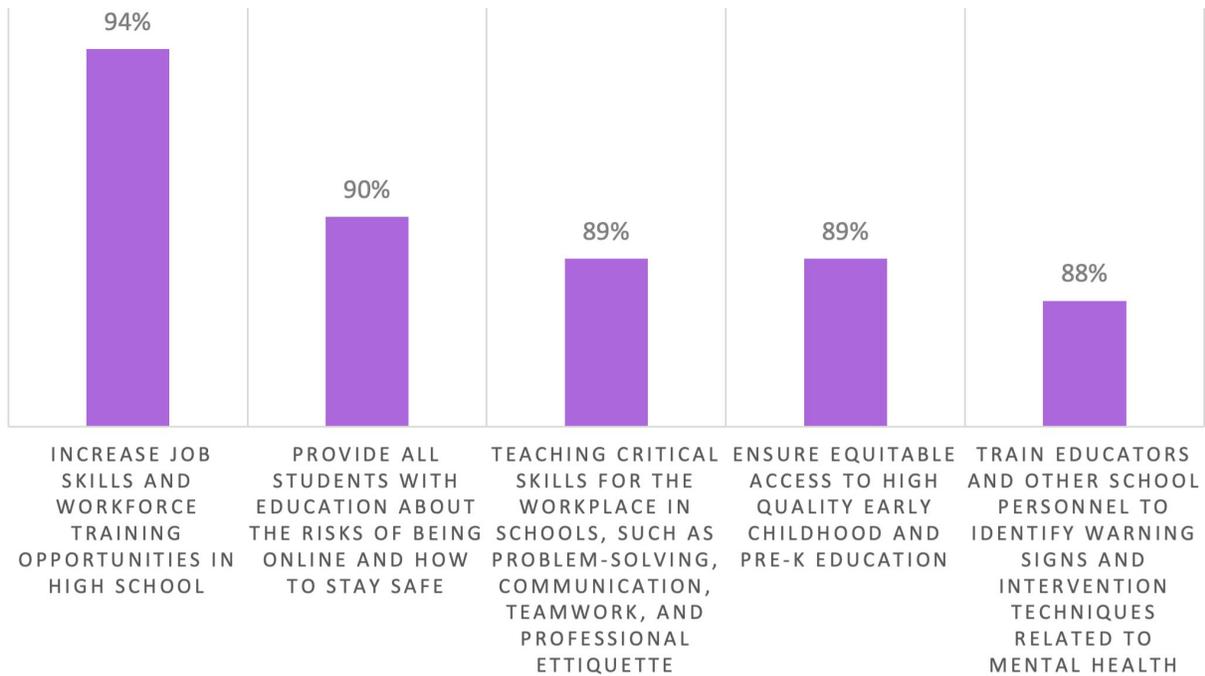
Concerns over student preparation for the workplace reflects increasing [unemployment](#) by college graduates and discourse over the [value of higher education](#). According to Across the Aisle data, [72 percent](#) of voters favor increasing job skills and workforce training opportunities in high school, like apprenticeships and internship opportunities. Parents and voters are seeking assurances students will be able to make valuable contributions to the workforce.

Figure 4: West Virginia NAEP Reading Scores by National School Lunch Program Eligibility | 2022



[Source 1](#) [Source 2](#)

Figure 5: Voter Support for Public Education Proposals | 2023



Source

Looking Forward

As 2024 general elections draw near, elected officials may consider using this election cycle to re-establish voter trust. In 2023, 58 percent of voters rated elected officials as doing a “just fair” or “poor” job when it comes to education today. To rebuild trust, candidates for election may consider aligning term priorities with identified voter core values and program proposals with significant support.

- What opportunities for continuing education exist for educators to improve skills in literacy instruction and student mental health support?
- How will the election influence the education landscape regarding voter education priorities? What can education leaders do to ensure public values are reflected in upcoming policy actions?

Policy Considerations

- What strategies can West Virginia explore to expand access to workforce readiness skills through work-based learning, career and technical education, or enrichment opportunities to support the state’s future workforce?

MEASURING AND IMPROVING STUDENT OUTCOMES

[The Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (ESSA), enacted in 2015, is the primary federal law governing K-12 education in the United States. ESSA grants states autonomy in education while emphasizing transparency for parents and communities. Under ESSA, each state is [obligated](#) to assess student

performance in reading, math, and science, with assessment methods determined by the state. Additionally, ESSA requires the creation of easily accessible online “State Report Cards,” offering information on test scores, graduation rates, disciplinary actions, attendance, teacher qualifications, and more, to ensure transparency and accountability.

The Office of Accountability oversees and enforces the West Virginia System of Support and Accountability as outlined in West Virginia Board of Education [Policy 2322](#). Services provided by the Office of Accountability aim to facilitate ongoing improvement. The office assists schools and counties, promoting a focus on outcomes, innovation, and accountability to foster learning organizations within districts.

The Balanced Scorecard [assesses](#) West Virginia schools based on the following indicators:

- **Performance in English Language Arts and Math:** This considers test scores from statewide assessments in grades three to eight and 11.
- **Academic Progress:** This measures students’ year-to-year test score improvement on statewide assessments in elementary and middle school.
- **Four- and Five-year Cohort Graduation Rates:** This looks at the percentage of students graduating within four and five years at the high school level.

- **English Language Learner Progress:** This evaluates the progress of students learning English as a second language across speaking, reading, writing, and listening domains.

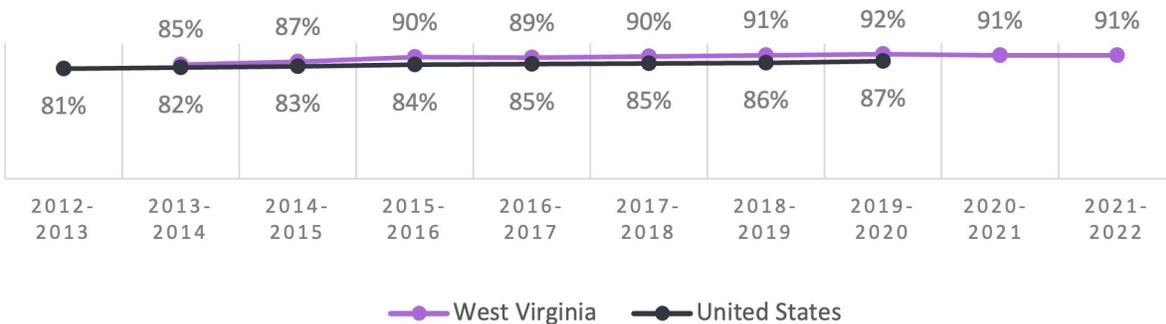
- **Student Success:** This considers factors like attendance rates and disciplinary records. For elementary and middle school, it includes students with over 90 percent attendance and no out-of-school suspensions. For high school, it includes attendance rates, credits earned by 10th graders, and completion of various academic programs and courses.

Graduation

A common [measurement](#) of student performance and success is whether a student graduates high school. While graduation rates alone do not tell the entire story of a graduate’s profile, including whether they may need remediation, among college-bound students it offers a rather even benchmark to compare across the state and country.

In the last decade, West Virginia has demonstrated some of the nation’s most [robust](#) graduation rates. This success can be attributed to various statewide initiatives, with the most impactful being the establishment of the state’s [Early Warning System](#). This system meticulously monitors 45 different indicators, with primary focus on attendance, behavior, and academic performance, to flag

Figure 6: Public High School Graduation Rate | 2012 - 2022



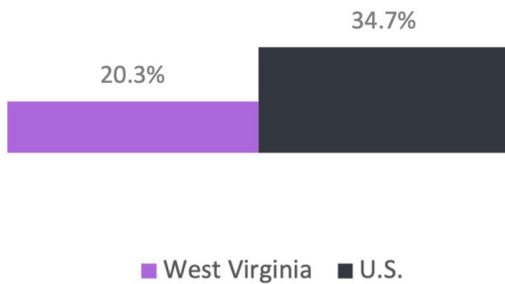
[Source](#)

students who may be at risk of dropping out. Implemented in 2011, this system equips educators at all levels with readily accessible data and evidence-based insights to pinpoint students at risk of leaving school prematurely. By identifying at-risk students earlier, educators can intervene promptly and alter their educational trajectories, leading to [improved](#) graduation rates and better overall student outcomes.

Access to Advanced Placement Courses

Access to advanced courses like Advanced Placement (AP) or dual college credit courses provide students with opportunities to deepen their learning as well as the chance to [reduce](#) future expenses associated with postsecondary education. [Research](#) highlights that high school students who enroll in AP opportunities are more likely to graduate, attend college, and complete a degree. For example, those who entered college with approximately 10 hours of AP credit had, on [average](#), \$1,000 less debt upon graduation. In [West Virginia](#), the percentage of students of the class of 2023 taking an AP exam was lower than the national average.

Figure 7: Percentage of the Class of 2023 taking an AP Exam during High School



[Source](#)

CTE Participation

Career and technical education (CTE) curricula focus on workplace competencies and hands-on experiences that provide students with the skills, knowledge, and training to succeed in future careers. While CTE programs vary across states and districts, they are [most commonly offered](#) as work-based learning opportunities that develop workplace skills through job shadowing, mentoring, entrepreneurship, service learning, internships, job site tours, and youth apprenticeship or pre-apprenticeship programs. In West Virginia, workforce preparation is designed around [16 career clusters](#) which capture careers in a wide range of fields such as, arts, agriculture, finance, and health science. Numerous students in West Virginia are currently engaged in CTE programs, where they acquire technical, academic, and employability skills while participating in work-based experiences alongside industry partners. In the 2020-21 academic year, the [state](#) had 38,082 secondary CTE participants and 13,067 postsecondary CTE participants.

Policy Considerations

- ❓ What strategies can policymakers implement to enhance accountability systems within high schools to track student progress towards postsecondary readiness and intervene when necessary?
- ❓ How can the Legislature promote innovation and flexibility in high school curricula to adapt to emerging industries and technological advancements, ensuring that students are prepared for the jobs of the future?
- ❓ What role can state funding mechanisms play in supporting schools and districts in implementing effective career readiness programs and ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities for all students?

SUPPORTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND WELLNESS

Young children's social and emotional development is critical to their long-term health and well-being. Mental health significantly impacts young children's ability to learn, establish healthy connections with others, manage their emotions, and grow into capable adults. Mental health issues have the ability to begin early in life, with [10-16 percent of young children](#) experiencing mental health conditions including PTSD and anxiety. Youth suicide has also been on the rise for the past decade and is the [second leading cause of death](#) among children ages 10-14, and the [third leading cause of death](#) among individuals ages 15-24. In the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the [proportion](#) of children between the ages of five and 11 visiting an emergency department because of a mental health crisis was 24 percent higher than the same period

in 2019; among 12- to 17-year-olds, that number increased by 31 percent. Ultimately, [37 percent](#) of high school students reported experiencing poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among college students, in the 2020-2021 academic year, over [60 percent](#) of students met the criteria for at least one mental health problem, a 50 percent increase from 2013.

West Virginia is working diligently to address the growing concerns and challenges regarding student mental health. Through the [West Virginia Expanded School Mental Health Initiative](#) (ESMH), the state strives to ensure every student can benefit from a school environment that supports social emotional wellbeing to achieve their full potential. The ESMH is categorized into a three-tiered model aiming to outline the different supports provided to varying demographics of students:

| | Student Group | Intervention | Characteristics |
|--------|--|----------------------------------|--|
| Tier 1 | All Students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 85%-90% of students will be successful when Tier 1 services are fully in place and aligned with best practice standards: without the need for Tier 2 and 3 services. | Universal Promotion & Prevention | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provided in the everyday learning environment in the classroom or large group settings. Includes: Social and Emotional development, drug and alcohol education, suicide prevention, student transition support, conflict resolution, parent involvement, youth development programs, use of data systems to identify needs. |
| | At-Risk Students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5-15% of students need Tier 2 services when Tier 1 prevention programs are systematically implemented. | Target Interventions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complementary to Tier 1: Successful Tier 2 services will reduce the need for Tier 3 services. |
| | High-Risk Students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5% or fewer students will require Tier 3 services when Tier 1 and 2 services are systemically implemented. | Intensive Interventions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools must ensure Tier 1 and 2 services are provided to students prior to moving into the Tier 3 category. Includes: Formal assessments, mental health diagnosis, school-based therapy, referral for short-term hospitalization, IEP accommodations, collaboration and record sharing with consenting parties. |

IMPACT OF THE ESMH FRAMEWORK

Improved:

- Access to care
- Social function
- Emotional well-being
- Attendance
- Behavior
- Academic performance
- Early Identification and Intervention

Reduced:

- Barriers to learning
- Discipline referrals
- Stigma
- Class interruptions

[Source](#)

Policy Considerations

- ② How might West Virginia adapt their ESMH framework as the landscape of mental health continues to evolve?
- ② How can West Virginia best collect data on student mental health trends to better provide direct support to students?
- ② How can educators be supported and trained in recognizing and reacting to student mental health challenges?

ALIGNING HIGHER EDUCATION TO WORKFORCE NEEDS

In today’s rapidly evolving job market, the alignment of credentials to workforce needs is paramount for both West Virginians and West Virginia businesses. Credentials, ranging from degrees and certifications to badges and micro-credentials serve as indicators

of an individual’s skills and competencies. The true value of a credential lies in personal development and their relevance to the labor market’s demands. There are several important aspects of aligning credentials to workforce needs including understanding the skills gap, engaging higher education institutions and industry employers, and recognizing the needs of diverse learners.

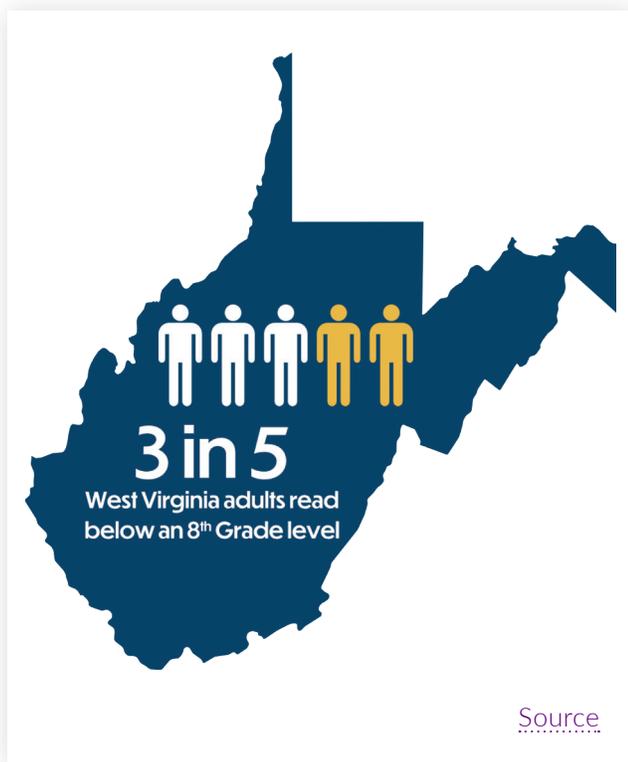
Addressing the Skills Gap

One crucial component of aligning credentials to workforce needs is understanding the skills gap, or the mismatch between the skills possessed by job seekers and those required by employers. The West Virginia labor force participation rate is close to [55 percent](#), which is below the current national average of [62 percent](#). Much of the lack of participation stems from the skills gaps that many West Virginians face when attempting to enter the workforce. Identifying these gaps requires collaboration between higher education institutions, employers, and policymakers. Several nonprofits and community colleges in West Virginia have stepped in to address the skills gap. Programs like [New Force](#) with Generation West Virginia provide access to skills training and educational support that can prepare West Virginians for the workforce.

Engaging Institutions of Higher Education

Higher education institutions play a pivotal role in aligning credentials with workforce needs. By collaborating with workforce leaders and tapping into the needs of the industry, institutions can offer programs that equip students with the skills and knowledge required by employers. This involves curriculum development that integrates industry-relevant content, hands-on experience, and opportunities for practical application of knowledge. Further, institutions should provide career guidance and support services to help students navigate their career pathways effectively.

The [West Virginia Community and Technical College System \(WVCTCS\)](#) works to align its curriculum with the needs of West Virginia's industries to ensure their graduates are appropriately prepared for the job market. The WVCTCS also offers employer partnership programs to provide training that meets individual needs. It is important to note that employers also have a responsibility to communicate their needs clearly and actively engage with educational institutions. Collaboration through initiatives such as apprenticeships, internships, and industry advisory boards can bridge the gap between academia and the workforce. Additionally, state-funded programs such as [Learn & Earn](#), which encourages employers to take on interns and provide hands on learning experiences for students, is a great collaboration between educational institutions, local business, and the state. By providing input on curriculum design and participating in skills assessments, employers can ensure that graduates possess the skills necessary for success in the workplace.



Recognizing the Needs of Adult Learners

In fall 2022, there were almost [2.9 million](#) undergraduate adult learners in college, which is [23 percent](#) of the undergraduate population. Research from the Appalachian Learning Initiative noted around [21 percent](#) (or 3 in 5) of West Virginia adults are reading below an 8th grade level. As these adult learners are earning their education and matriculating through educational institutions, they are becoming equipped to participate in the West Virginia workforce, only if they have the education and skills necessary. Supporting adult learners in West Virginia to earn credentials involves recognizing the unique challenges they may face, providing tailored resources and programs, and fostering a supportive learning environment. Several strategies to support adult learners include:

- **Flexible Learning Options:** Recognize that adult learners often have jobs, families, and other commitments. Offer flexible learning options such as evening classes, online courses, hybrid programs, and self-paced learning modules. This flexibility allows adult learners to balance their education with other responsibilities.
- **Financial Assistance and Scholarships:** Provide financial assistance options such as scholarships, grants, tuition reimbursement programs, and low-interest loans. Financial barriers can be significant obstacles for adult learners, and offering support can make education more accessible.
- **Support Services:** Offer comprehensive support services tailored to the needs of adult learners, including academic advising, career counseling, child care assistance, transportation services, and access to technology and study resources. Providing these support services can help adult learners overcome barriers and stay on track to earning their credentials.
- **Workforce Development Partnerships:** Collaborate with local employers, industry associations, and workforce development agencies to align credential programs with the needs of the labor

market. By understanding industry demands and connecting adult learners with job opportunities, these partnerships can enhance the relevance and value of credentials earned.

- **Adult Education Programs:** Offer adult education programs that provide foundational skills development in areas such as literacy, numeracy, and English language proficiency. Many adult learners may need to strengthen these fundamental skills before pursuing more advanced credential programs.
- **Recognition of Prior Learning:** Advocate for policies and practices that recognize and value the knowledge and skills acquired by adult learners outside of traditional academic settings. This includes promoting the acceptance of alternative credentials, digital badges, and micro-credentials earned through relevant work experience and training.

Policy Considerations

- ❓ How can policymakers advocate for appropriate services and resources to support adult learners as they attempt to skill up or engage in educational training to enter the workforce?
- ❓ In what ways can policymakers facilitate or incentivize educational institutions and local business to collaborate in aligning credentials to local workforce needs?
- ❓ Recognizing the skills gaps present in the West Virginia workforce, how should policymakers address literacy issues and the need for educational training for West Virginia's adult learners? Who are the community partners and state agencies that can support these efforts?





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.

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