



THE HUNT INSTITUTE'S
VIRGINIA EDUCATION SUMMIT

ISSUE BRIEF
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ADVANCING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN VIRGINIA

Virginia is home to almost [600,000 children](#) aged five and under. Access to reliable child care is critical to Virginia's children, families, and employers, as 66 percent of children aged five and under have all parents in the workforce. Virginia consolidated early childhood governance in 2020, joining a handful of states that are in the process of unifying early childhood governance. The state has also increased funding for early care and education initiatives, including through the Governor's [Building Blocks for Virginia Families](#) and [Virginia Quality Birth to Five \(VQB5\)](#). Virginia experiences a child care deficit of [13.4 percent](#), with deficits in some rural counties reaching 80 percent. The annual economic impact of the child care gap in Virginia is estimated at about [\\$3 billion dollars](#).

Early Childhood Initiatives in Virginia

- [The Virginia Preschool Initiative \(VPI\)](#) was established in 1995 to serve children who were at risk of not being ready for school due to social and economic factors. By 2023, VPI [expanded](#) to 96 percent of eligible school divisions with 95 percent of enrolled children attending full-day programs throughout the school year.
- The [Mixed Delivery program](#), was launched in 2016 and is supported by a public-private partnership overseen by the [Virginia Early Childhood Foundation \(VECF\)](#). It supports child care and preschool options in licensed, non-school-based and non-faith-based settings. Children who have been identified as at-risk for entering kindergarten without the necessary social and academic skills are eligible for this program.
- The [Preschool Development Grant B-5 \(2019\)](#) and renewal grants (2020 and 2024) provided Virginia with \$71.4 million for early childhood initiatives.
- [Recognize B5](#), a financial award for outstanding early educators was established in 2019 and concluded in 2025 due to funding limitations.
- The [School Readiness Act](#) of 2020 paved the way for the consolidation of “out-of-home” care within the Virginia Department of Education.
- The [Division of Early Childhood Care and Education \(DECCE\)](#) was established in 2021 to further the goals of the Act by consolidating early childhood education programs within the Department of Education.
- [Ready Regions](#), also administered by VECF, was established in 2022 to broaden and streamline access to quality child care and early education across the nine regions of the state.
- [Virginia Early Educator Fast Track Initiative](#) initiated in 2022, provides paid, full-time, on-the-job training with a mentor and includes bonuses to support new educators.
- [Building Blocks for Virginia](#), launched in 2023 [invested](#) \$1.2 billion to address child care deserts, expand parental choice, build the early educator pipeline, and expand and improve the child care payment system.
- [Virginia Quality Birth to Five \(VBQ5\)](#) was launched in 2024 to improve school readiness. VBQ5 helps child care and preschool programs develop standards-based practices, collect data supporting continuous improvement, and helps parents choose quality programming.

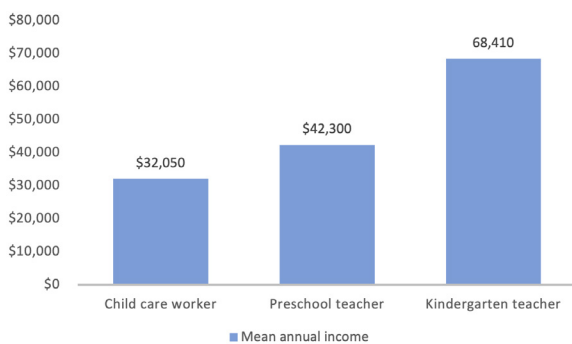


Current Challenges in Early Care and Education

Despite [expanding](#) public preschool access through VPI and [halving](#) the number of child care sites that needed improvement through VQB5, Virginia continues to face the following challenges in providing reliable and affordable early care:

- Affordability:** Like in much of the country, the price of child care is unaffordable for families, with [the average annual price](#) of center-based infant care at almost \$17,000 and toddler care at almost \$16,000. Center-based infant care is estimated to account for 11 percent of the median income for a married couple and 39 percent of the median income for a single parent. The price of care also [exceeds](#) rent and college tuition and ranks among the biggest monthly expenses incurred by families.
- The Child Care and Development Block Grant serves [10 percent](#) of eligible children and Head Start Preschool reaches [26 percent](#) of the same, leaving the majority of eligible children without these valuable services.
- Despite workforce compensation programs like [Recognize B5](#), on average child care workers earn less than preschool and kindergarten teachers in the state (Graph I). supporting continuous improvement, and helps parents choose quality programming.

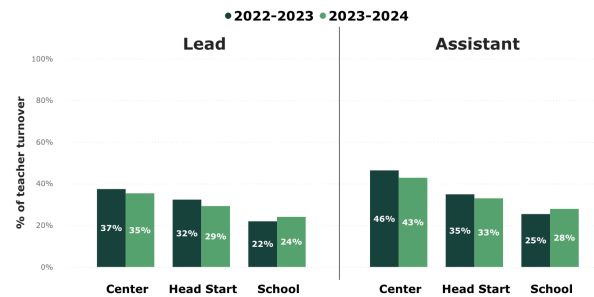
Figure 1: Early Educator Income Comparisons



Source

- Workforce attrition continues to be a concern for the early care and education sector. Results from a [study](#) of early education settings in Virginia show that teacher turnover, despite slight decreases for center-based and Head Start programs, remained high across settings from 2022 to 2024 (Graph II).

Figure 2: Teacher Turnover in Early Education Settings



Source

State Examples

Texas | The Community Action Corporation of South Texas, in partnership with the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) and local Workforce Solutions boards, [helps home-based child care providers](#) in 16 rural counties become licensed and improve the quality of their care to meet state standards.

Michigan | [Tri-Share](#), a cost-sharing program developed in Michigan, facilitates a three-way split in child care expenses between the employer, eligible employees, and the state. Michigan's Tri-Share program has achieved a 65% average reduction in child care costs for participating families, improved employee retention for businesses, and inspired other states to adopt similar models.

District of Columbia | [The Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund](#) was created in 2021 to provide wage supplements to early educators. Administered by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education and implemented by the Early Childhood Educator Equitable Compensation Task Force, the fund provides quarterly award payments to ECE programs to supplement staff wages. Once received, ECE programs must pay eligible staff wages that meet or exceed \$24.52 per hour.

Policy Considerations

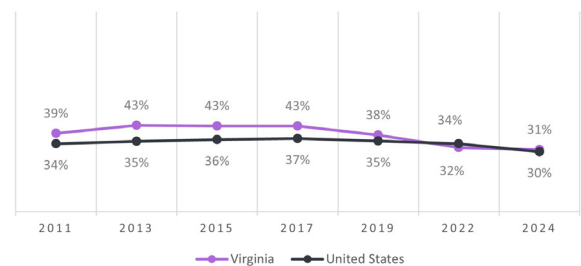
- ❓ Virginia is building a strong early childhood system with the potential to improve access to quality care for families. Could policymakers consider shared-cost and tuition scholarship programs to alleviate the cost of care for low- and middle-income families?
- ❓ Many rural areas of Virginia currently experience large child care deficits. Could policymakers consider initiatives to expand and strengthen home-based care in these regions to help close the gap?
- ❓ To address pay inequities and attrition, could policymakers consider expanding credentialing and compensation programs with the potential to strengthen and expand the early educator workforce?



RETHINKING LITERACY REFORM IMPLEMENTATION: RESULTS, PRESSURES, AND INNOVATIONS

Of the [1.26 million students](#) enrolled in Virginia’s kindergarten through twelfth-grade public school system, [43.5 percent](#) are economically disadvantaged, [14.1 percent](#) qualify for special education services, and [14.3 percent](#) are English Learners. Since the 2020-21 school year, Virginia has experienced a decline in reading scores across all student groups in its National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) and Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) assessments. Additionally, the 2024 Virginia Readiness Program data revealed that [74 percent](#) of English learners are below the overall readiness benchmark, and elementary grades SOL data show English learners have a significantly lower pass rate than their peers. To ensure the instructional materials approved by the Virginia Board of Education (VBOE) positively impact literacy instruction and student reading proficiency, specifically for English learners, it is important for leadership and classroom-based personnel to understand—and be trained—to implement high-quality instruction to teach children how to read.

Figure 3: United States v. Virginia 4th Grade Reading NAEP Scores Over Time | 2011 - 2024



Source

THE VIRGINIA LITERACY ACT

The [Virginia Literacy Act](#) (VLA) requires a multi-pronged approach to ensuring students and school divisions have the tools, resources, technical assistance, and financial support to improve student literacy outcomes. The VLA requires:

- VDOE to recommend kindergarten through fifth-grade core, kindergarten through eighth-grade supplemental, and intervention instructional materials to the VBOE for approval;
- divisions to develop literacy plans for the provision of professional development, reading specialist availability, and implementation of high-quality instructional materials;
- intervention for sixth- through eighth-grade students who do not meet literacy benchmarks based on a student reading plan; and
- access to online literacy development resources for families with students who do not meet assessment benchmarks.

The VDOE provides monthly updates on the implementation of the Virginia Literacy Act. According to the update at the beginning of the 2025-2026 school year, the department shared several successes including the fulfillment of teacher training on the science of reading, a new literacy screener for K-3 students, new literacy programs for core, supplemental, and intervention instruction. The next phase will focus on literacy practices for students in 4th through 8th Grade.



INNOVATIVE PRACTICE IN LITERACY

In February 2025, the VDOE announced the expansion of literacy efforts for student groups with the most need through the federal Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grant. The CLSD grant will provide over [\\$29 million](#) in funding over the next five years. The [grant aims](#) to increase student access to high-quality instructional materials, enhance educator capacity and training, support alignment across pre-K and elementary, improve student outcomes, and increase growth on literacy assessments. For the 2025-2026 school year, Virginia will support family engagement with literacy resources for young students and host the Literacy Improvement Network to strengthen instructional practices through training, observation, and feedback cycles, and assistance to leadership teams.

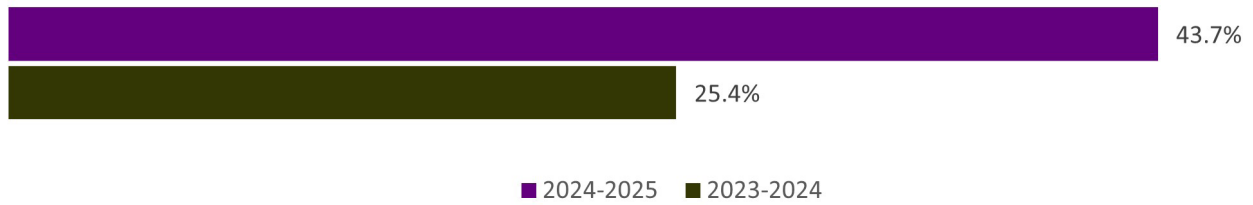
VIRGINIA LITERACY NETWORKS

In the 2024-2025 school year, the CLSD grant supported Comprehensive Literacy Network. This network engaged 33 school divisions and 90 schools across 30 divisions in three learning opportunities – the English Learner Literacy Network, and Students with Disabilities Literacy Network and Family Engagement Resources through Just Right Readers.

English Learner Literacy Network

In 2024, the [graduation dropout rate](#) for all students was 4.5 percent, while the rate for English learners was much higher at 18.6 percent. To improve literacy instruction, reading proficiency, and graduation rates for English learners, it is essential that both leadership and classroom educators understand and are trained to effectively implement the Virginia Board of Education’s approved instructional materials.

Figure 4: Average Pass Rate of Participating High School English Learners Over Time | 2023 - 2025



Source

In collaboration with [The Hunt Institute](#), the [English Learner Literacy Network](#) launched a statewide strategy to support 30 school leadership teams in developing and executing action plans designed specifically for improving English learner achievement and graduation rates. The network engaged schools through three convenings to support leaders in evidence-based reading research, high quality curriculum implementation, structured literacy methods for English learners and instructional feedback using the VDOE walkthrough tool. Additionally, the network assisted schools in developing and implementing action plans to enhance student growth, achievement, graduation rates, and instructional capacity for English learners.

After year one of the VA ELN, participating schools showed a 3.9 percent increase in passing rate for the [Virginia Standards of Learning \(SOL\)](#) reading assessment. In contrast, non-participating schools across the state showed only a 0.3% increase. Data shows the program was most impactful at the high school level. On average, participating high schools improved the passing rates for their English Learners by over 18 percentage points.

Policy Considerations

- ❓ How should education leaders and policymakers think about success for literacy reform, beyond assessment scores, to capture both student growth and instructional quality?
- ❓ What innovations or policy adjustments need to be considered to sustain and deepen impact?
- ❓ What feedback do legislators need in order to determine the successes and challenges being faced by schools in the implementation of the Virginia Literacy Act?



SPECIAL EDUCATION IN VIRGINIA: BRIDGING POLICY GAPS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are considered one of the most protected student groups in education. The [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#) requires children with disabilities to receive free and appropriate public education (FAPE), early intervention services, and grant funding to make these services possible. The FAPE standard requires that all students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment appropriate for their disability.

When states do not meet these federal requirements outlined in IDEA, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services or the Office of Special Education Programs under the U.S. Department of Education may become involved in their correction. As of 2025, only [20 states](#), including Virginia, meet the requirements of IDEA according to federal determination letters.

However, in 2019, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs determined Virginia was not meeting the IDEA requirements satisfactorily due to failure to resolve complaints filed by parents of special education students, and the state did not have the proper procedures in place to ensure these complaints were addressed promptly. The U.S.

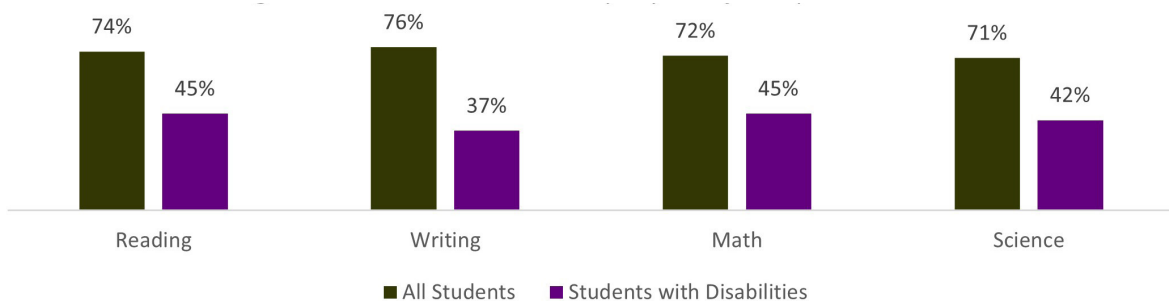
Department of Education monitored the VDOE and the Commonwealth’s special education data until December 2024, when VDOE received a [letter](#) saying the corrective actions were satisfactory and monitoring would no longer continue.

The State of Special Education in Virginia

Less than half of Virginia’s [181,000 identified students](#) with disabilities are achieving proficiency on standardized assessments, calling into question the support and resources available to them. To address concerns about support for students with disabilities (SWDs), during the 2024 General Assembly session, both the House and the Senate passed [bills](#) requiring a [public dashboard](#) to support the annual reporting of performance for SWDs. According to existing reports, the Commonwealth is making progress towards its state targets for SWDs.

The Commonwealth nearly reached its goal of [72 percent](#) students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) attaining high school diplomas, missing the goal by 1 percentage point. The Commonwealth is also aiming to reduce dropout of students with IEPs. In 2023-2024, [7.7 percent](#) dropped out, slightly above the goal of less than [6 percent](#). The largest area of needed improvement within the goals identified for students with disabilities is expulsion. The state target for 2023-2024 was for there to be no discrepancy between exclusionary

Figure 5: Virginia Student Proficiency by Subject | 2024 - 2025



Source

discipline between students with disabilities and non-disabled students. However, [61 percent](#) of school districts identified a discrepancy between suspension and expulsion rates for students with disabilities. By improving accessibility of performance data, education leaders across the state have better visibility into target areas for improvement.

Federal Changes Affecting Students with Disabilities

On March 20, 2025, President Donald Trump issued the [Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities](#) Executive Order. This order demands the closure of the Department of Education and the return of education authority to the states. It is important to note that primary jurisdiction over education lies with the states, as established in [San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez](#); however, the 10-13 percent of federal funding states receive is significantly limited in its allowable uses per current federal guidelines. The Trump administration has begun laying off federal employees within the Department of Education to pursue goals of increased funding flexibility for states and reduced government oversight.

These personnel changes have raised concerns about continued access to services and data monitoring across offices, but recent changes sparked significant discourse on the impact on the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. [Critics](#) of the decision are concerned about the continued oversight of IDEA and potential impacts on the [7.5 million students with disabilities](#) across the country. Supporters of downsizing or eliminating the Department of Education point to the flexibility in funding provided to states once federal oversight is reduced.

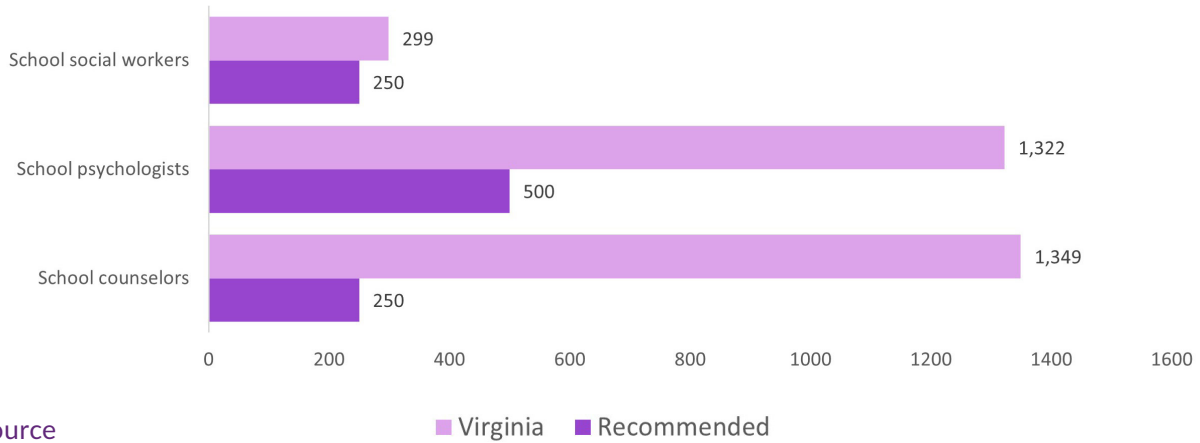
While the impacts of these changes at the federal level are still unclear, due to Virginia's recent investment in monitoring special education services and the performance of SWDs, the Commonwealth has established systems that will identify significant impacts on the most protected population in education.

Policy Considerations

- ❓ How can state policymakers work with local education leaders to make progress towards state goals for students with disabilities?
- ❓ What additional information is needed about federal changes for policymakers to effectively plan at the state level to limit the disruption of services for students?
- ❓ How can legislators maintain the current momentum in monitoring and accountability for students with disabilities to ensure sustainability of newly implemented systems?



Figure 6: Virginia Student-to-Practitioner Ratios: Recommended vs. Actual



Source

APPROACHES TO ADDRESS STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

Young children’s social and emotional development is critical to their long-term health and well-being. Mental health significantly impacts a child’s ability to learn, establish healthy connections with others, manage their emotions, and grow into capable adults. Mental health issues can begin early in life, with [10 to 16 percent of young children](#) experiencing disorders such as PTSD and anxiety. Youth suicide has 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. During the 2020-2021 academic year, over 60 percent of college students met the criteria for at least one mental health condition, which is a 50 percent increase since 2013.

Virginia

A 2024 nationwide study ranked Virginia 17th out of 50 states for overall youth mental health, using measures such as youth with substance use disorder in the past year and youth with serious thoughts of suicide. This national study mirrors results from a 2022 [study](#) commissioned by the state’s Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC), which found that among students attending public high schools in Virginia, 40 percent reported feeling sad or hopeless for two weeks or more, and 13 percent seriously considered attempting suicide. Mental health concerns were also broadly heightened among high schoolers when compared to their middle school peers. The report also found that Virginia schools lack sufficient staff to address student mental health needs adequately. Over half of the Commonwealth’s division superintendents were [not confident](#) in their ability to find a suitable mental health workforce, which includes school counselors, social workers, and psychologists. Virginia employs far fewer mental health staff than those recommended by national organizations like the American School Counselor Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the School Social Work Association of America. Figure 4 shows the recommended number of students to be assigned per practitioner compared to the actual number of students served.

Mechanisms for Supporting Student Mental Health

VIRGINIA PARTNERSHIP FOR SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH

Established in 2020, the [Virginia Partnership for School Mental Health](#) (VPSMH) is a statewide collaboration among the VDOE, universities, and school districts aimed at increasing the number of qualified mental health providers in public schools. The initiative creates a pipeline from graduate programs in social work, nursing, psychology, and counseling to high-need school divisions across the state. VPSMH offers high-quality training for trainees, pairing them with experienced supervisors in nearby schools, while also providing professional development opportunities for current practitioners.

State Examples

Massachusetts | In 2021, Massachusetts launched a [pilot program](#) to increase mental health and substance use services through tele-behavioral healthcare in schools. The Brookline Center for Community Mental Health has facilitated the implementation of the program in 20 school districts by expanding access to youth mental health services, evaluating the program's impact, and demonstrating feasibility for statewide replication. To date, the program has supported over 940 students and provided more than 11,000 behavioral health sessions.

New Jersey | Although the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration recommends it as a best practice, fewer than [15 percent](#) of schools have implemented a universal screening process for behavioral health. Notably, New Jersey [enacted legislation](#) in 2021 to establish the Mental Health Screening in Schools Grant Program that provides funding and resources to school districts to implement mental health screening programs for students in grades 7-12.

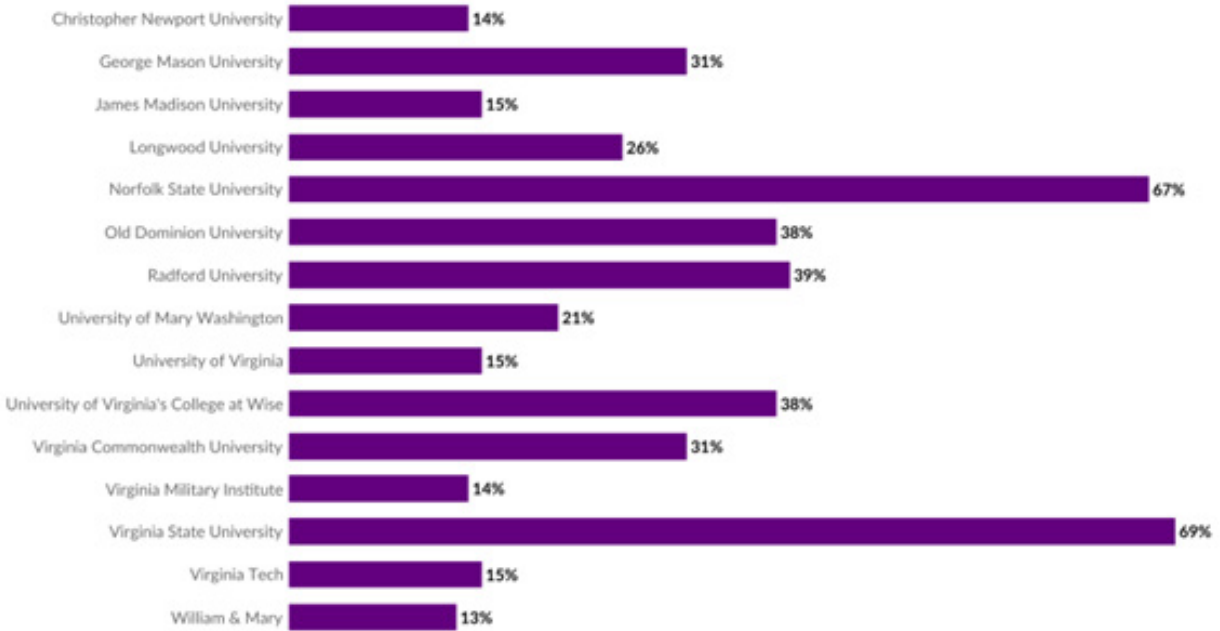
North Carolina | North Carolina established the [Superintendent's Working Group on Student Health and Well-Being](#) to develop recommendations in support of student mental health. These recommendations were codified through legislation such as [SB 476](#), which requires the Department of Public Instruction to establish a statewide school mental health policy. The law also requires individual schools to implement policies aligned with the working group's recommendations.

Policy Considerations

- ❓ What steps can lawmakers take to ensure that Virginia's public schools have adequate resources to address the mental health needs of students, particularly in underserved communities?
- ❓ What additional information is needed to develop a statewide plan that ensures that schools are equipped with both prevention and intervention strategies to address mental health challenges among students?
- ❓ How can Virginia leverage existing partnerships with local and regional agencies to better integrate behavioral health assistance and support to students?



Figure 7: Rate of In-State Undergraduate Students receiving Pell, 2021



Source

SHARED GOVERNANCE AND FINANCIAL RESILIENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Shared Governance and Financial Resilience

Virginia's higher education relies on shared governance to balance statewide priorities with institutional flexibility. The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia ([SCHEV](#)) provides policy guidance, approves academic programs, oversees data collection and reporting, and [advises](#) the Governor and General Assembly on higher education issues. Each public four-year institution is overseen by a governor-appointed [Board of Visitors](#), responsible for setting tuition, approving program offerings, and guiding strategic planning. The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) is governed by the State Board for Community Colleges, which allocates state funds, sets tuition rates, and coordinates systemwide workforce development efforts. This structure enables

institutions to respond to regional workforce needs while ensuring statewide accountability and alignment. It also provides a coordinated framework for managing financial pressures, particularly in light of potential changes to federal funding that may affect students, institutional budgets, and academic programs.

Proposed adjustments to federal aid programs such as Pell Grants could influence both affordability and access. The [Congressional Budget Office](#) estimates that approximately 10 percent of Pell Grant recipients could lose eligibility under current proposals, while many others could receive reduced awards. Within Virginia's shared governance model, institutional boards and coordinating bodies can work together to evaluate impacts, protect student access, and support financial stability.

Financial Resilience

Workforce Pell Grants: Policy Overview and Upcoming Rulemaking

Starting July 1, 2026 the Pell Grant program will undergo significant changes. Current law stipulates that Pell Grants are to be available only to students enrolled in eligible educational programs that meet minimum duration requirements in clock or credit hours and calendar weeks. Recent bipartisan [legislative budget expansions](#) have sought to expand Pell Grant eligibility to students enrolled in short-term programs that fall below these current thresholds. These budget bill expansions [aim to support low-income](#) individuals pursuing in-demand occupations through programs that typically provide 150 to 599 clock hours of instruction over 8 to 14 weeks and lead to a recognized postsecondary credential. Expanding Pell Grants in this way could increase federal investment in workforce development while preserving the flexibility and portability inherent in the Pell Grant program.

Policy Goals

The short-term Workforce Pell programs are intended to provide lower-cost postsecondary options for students and the federal government, targeting high-skill, high-wage, and in-demand industry sectors. The Pell Grant eligibility will be expanded for short-term programs (8-15 weeks, minimum 150 hours). This expansion is [seen to strengthen](#) the pipeline of qualified workers for key occupations while maintaining broad access to financial aid for students who need it most. [Quality benchmarks](#) are being implemented, meaning programs must demonstrate a 70 percent completion rate, 70 percent job placement rate, and earnings above a certain threshold to qualify. Grant awards will be prorated by program length, which is smaller than a traditional Pell Grant. [Eligibility will include](#) low-income students, including those already holding a bachelor's degree. The Congressional Budget Office [estimates](#) about \$300 million over 10 years to be dispersed, compared to the around \$5.6 billion that states have already

invested. The [CBO](#) projects a \$2.7 billion Pell shortfall by AY 2025–26, requiring \$10.3 billion more in 2026 than in 2025 to sustain current award levels.

Next Steps & Considerations

Although the [current maximum Pell Grant](#) is \$7,395, the amount provided through [Workforce Pell](#) will be prorated based on the number of clock hours, credits, or weeks of the program. As a result, Workforce Pell Grants will be less than the full maximum amount. Rulemaking for Workforce Pell is [expected later this fall](#). As the process unfolds, institutions should consider how they might adapt program offerings to meet eligibility requirements, track outcomes, and align credentials with labor market demand. Key points to monitor include guidance on program duration, clock-hour requirements, and alignment with recognized credentials. Colleges and universities should also anticipate compliance and reporting requirements as rules are finalized.

The Congressional Budget Office [estimates](#) that under the House's proposal, about 10 percent of Pell recipients could lose eligibility, and most others would see reduced awards. 26 percent of undergraduate students attending four-year public institutions in the state of Virginia [receive a Pell Grant](#). The rate of in-state Pell Grant recipients across four-year public institutions in Virginia [ranges](#) from 13 percent to 68 percent, 68 percent of in-state undergraduate students [received Pell Grants](#) in 2021 from both Norfolk State University and Virginia State University.

While the upcoming changes to Workforce Pell Grants could ultimately lead to the decrease of Pell grant recipients, the policy shifts are in alignment with the current [Blueprint Virginia 2030 plan](#), created by the [Virginia Chamber of Commerce](#) and supported by Governor Glenn Youngkin. [Blueprint 2035](#) was recently released. This plan [emphasizes the need](#) for attracting, retaining, and expanding high-need credentials and degree programs that

can be linked to the needs of businesses and can be crucial to economic growth, while emphasizing STEM and high-demand fields. As the state's plans coincide with the upcoming federal changes, lawmakers and institutions could collaborate together to consider how they can adapt to changes, financially and programmatically.

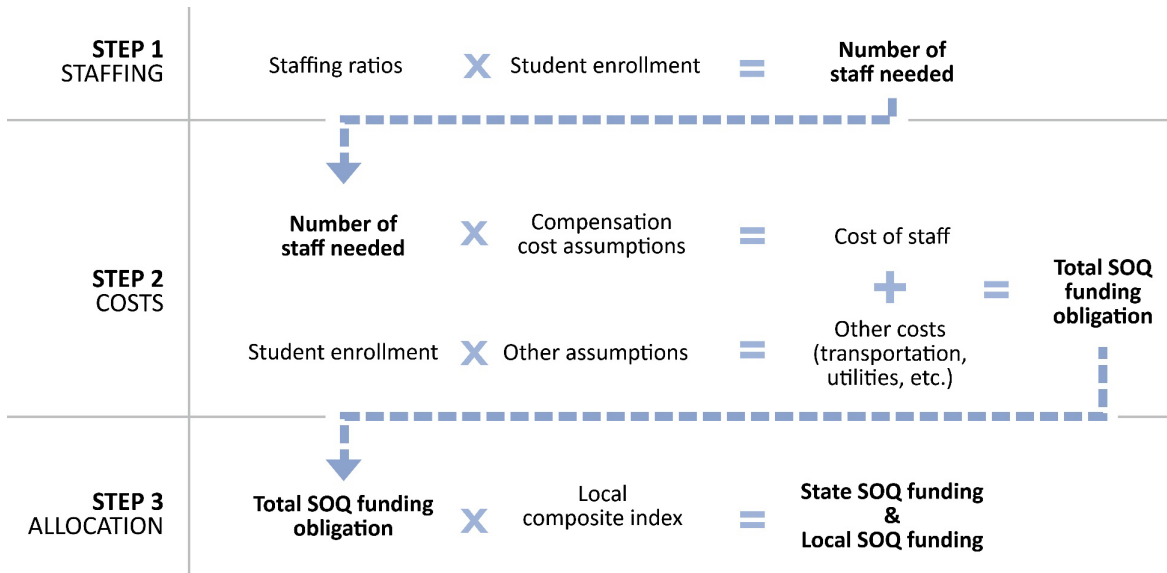
[Virginia's Community Colleges \(VCCS\)](#) and regional workforce boards could coordinate closely through the Virginia Office of Education Economics and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia ([SCHEV](#)) to identify qualifying programs and ensure alignment with the state's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act ([WIOA](#)) plans. SCHEV and VCCS may also play a key role in tracking completion, earnings, and credential data to meet new federal reporting thresholds.

Policy Considerations

- ❓ How can legislators ensure that the community college perspective is represented in federal Workforce Pell rulemaking? Should members of the House Education Committee, Senate Education and Health Committee, and the Governor's Office of Education and Workforce Development engage directly with community college leaders to better understand institutional capacity, workforce alignment, and student needs?
- ❓ How might proposed eligibility requirements impact access for nontraditional learners? Could part-time students, working parents, and rural learners—especially in Southwest and Southside Virginia—be disproportionately affected if program rules are too restrictive? What policy adjustments could promote equitable access across all regions?
- ❓ What mechanisms can legislators use to monitor federal rulemaking developments and maintain communication with Virginia's colleges and universities? How can the General Assembly help institutions prepare for compliance and implementation once rules are finalized?
- ❓ How can legislators leverage state data systems to inform decision-making? Can SCHEV's credential and workforce dashboards be used to provide evidence-based recommendations and align Virginia's workforce initiatives with



Figure 8: TITLE GOES HERE



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upcoming federal Workforce Pell guidelines?

BUILDING VIRGINIA'S WORKFORCE: EDUCATION, INNOVATION, AND AI

Education & Industry Alignment

[Blueprint Virginia 2030](#) is a statewide initiative designed to strengthen Virginia's economic competitiveness and maintain its position as one of the top states for business. Working with strategic partners and leaders in public policy, several recommendations will be implemented on issues of business climate, health care, housing, and more.

As it pertains to higher education and the workforce, the state hopes to continue developing a well-trained, qualified workforce with strong educational foundations. Blueprint Virginia sets several innovative goals, with a few relevant recommendations.

[One](#) recommendation involves investing in the educational system to improve outcomes. The

plan is to implement systemwide, public-private coordination among Virginia's employer community to centralize talent recruitment and development efforts. Using improved data systems to inform decision making, this process will include identifying industry clusters in various regions and conducting a skills gap analysis to determine where to focus resources. Benchmark metrics will also be used to track progress towards policy goals.

Another recommendation pertains to post-secondary education goals, including expanding student opportunities. This calls for leveraging students to earn early college credit by improving the state's dual-enrollment system and improving



the community college to four-year institution transfer process.

The state will also support on initiatives including:

- The Virginia Talent and Opportunity Partnership ([Virginia TOP](#)), expanding work-based learning opportunities.
- [Growth4VA](#), supporting their higher education initiatives to improve the state's talent supply, the affordability of higher education, the innovation ecosystem, and educational opportunity for all Virginians.
- Strategic initiatives at educational institutions, such as the Virginia Community College system's [Opportunity 2027](#) plan and [SCHEV's Pathways to Opportunity plan](#).

Another part of this plan is that every Virginian will be provided with affordable access to a talent pathway and/or credential program. This includes an internship or experiential learning experience with a VA employer, leading to full-time employment after graduation. Every Virginian will also have Increased access to quality higher education, with a strong return on investment due to increased financial assistance and state operating support.

These goals aim to align higher education with workforce needs, with collaborations amongst Virginian organizations and agencies equalizing access, increasing attainment, and expanding the high-quality workforce in Virginia.

Throughout the Blueprint, there is an emphasis on innovation and how technology is at a place to boost economic growth and job creation across sectors. Virginia is also home to many federal laboratories and research universities where high-level technological development and a positive entrepreneurial ecosystem are feasible.

Programs such as [GO Virginia](#) provide funding to Virginia State University to give business and entrepreneurial counseling and training to minority students. Hampton University has also developed a [Business Incubator](#), a hub for local businesses

and organizations that was funded through a U.S. Department of Education grant.

Aligning curriculum, higher education programs, and technological innovation to Virginia's workforce demands requires cross-sector collaboration and support from policymakers to ensure smooth transitions for students into their education and further transitions into a booming workforce. Recognition of the rapidly developing professional world can make way for trials of innovative practices which could expand the success of all Virginians.

AI Innovation and Governance

AI software is becoming increasingly present in classrooms. [Professors use AI](#) to save time, brainstorm lesson plans, design learning tools, and even grade student work. A 2025 report by [Tyton Partners](#) even found that in spring 2025, 40% of administrators, 30% of professors, and 42% of students claimed to use Generative AI tools daily or weekly.

Beyond the classroom, AI can be used at a higher level for internal data analysis. In the same 2025 [Tyton Partners](#) report, a potential solution to the problem of student sentiment data and demographic information being overlooked when assessing student needs is the development of data infrastructure to alert universities when students are not adequately supported, namely historically underserved populations. AI tools can also speed up instructor processes such as grading, allowing more time for faculty to develop student relationships and provide individualized support for overall student success.

Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin has already issued an [Executive Order](#) outlining AI data governance, including how to safeguard constituent information and develop standards across government agencies. In a report by the [Center for Democracy and Technology](#) released in early 2025, an analysis of states that have already issued

Executive Orders on AI's use in state government observed several trends in regulation efforts. This included a lack of a consistent definition of AI, acknowledgement of potential harms, suggested pilot programs as a starting point for agencies, and prioritizing AI governance and planning prior to implementation. When discussing potential harm, many states highlight individual privacy, security, and civil rights as concerns.

Those who are concerned about AI's increasing presence in higher education [suggest further guidance from tech companies](#) is necessary for faculty to use it efficiently. Developing an ethical framework of institutional AI usage is essential as this technology becomes increasingly present in colleges and universities.

A 2022 survey of executives estimated that [38 percent](#) of employees would need retraining or replacement within three years to address skills gaps. What type of retraining is needed, though, requires a deeper understanding of what workforce skills are not being met – and AI can help with this.

[Johnson & Johnson](#) is a company that uses AI to close skill gaps, using a process called “skills inference” where employee data is analyzed by AI to quantify employees’ proficiency in certain skills and pinpoint areas needing improvement. This process is done in three steps:

- Defining skills that the company will need in the future to be successful (i.e. robotic automation)
- Selecting proper employee data sources (i.e. HR information systems, learning management systems, etc.)
- Assess the skills (i.e. by using an AI language model)

If government agencies and business leaders in Virginia utilize these innovative processes, legislative priorities could be easily and more quantifiably identified to close skills gaps, identify educational needs, and enhance efficient economic growth.

As businesses are becoming increasingly technical-skill heavy, educational institutions have to be adaptable to workforce needs. Universities are actively adjusting programs, such as [Ohio University](#) even offering a Bachelor of Science in Artificial Intelligence starting in 2024. Furthermore, coursework is being [redesigned](#) to give students experience with emerging technologies (such as AI) and universities even partner with companies to prepare students with high-demand skills. These [partnerships](#) are in the form of contributions to course content, guest lectures, and hands-on learning.

However, as the presence of AI increases in schools, important [privacy laws](#) such as FERPA and COPPA need to be followed by AI companies. Many companies now will state their compliance, but this is on the basis that student data is not being entered into these platforms by educational institutions, which is not always the case. To prevent the exploitation of student data in the new age of AI, strategic partnerships among tech companies and educational institutions are crucial for [efficient and ethical](#) AI usage.

Policy Considerations

- ❓ How can the state leverage AI to drive innovation and ensure the collection and utilization of data necessary for the success of the above initiative?
- ❓ How can legislators ensure AI is governed ethically, protecting constituents’ privacy and preventing misuse of their personal information?
- ❓ How can emerging technologies help drive innovation, close skill gaps, and shape legislative priorities?
- ❓ How can education adapt to the evolving needs of businesses while ensuring student well-being?



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.

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