



THE HUNT INSTITUTE'S
VIRGINIA EDUCATION SUMMIT

ISSUE BRIEF
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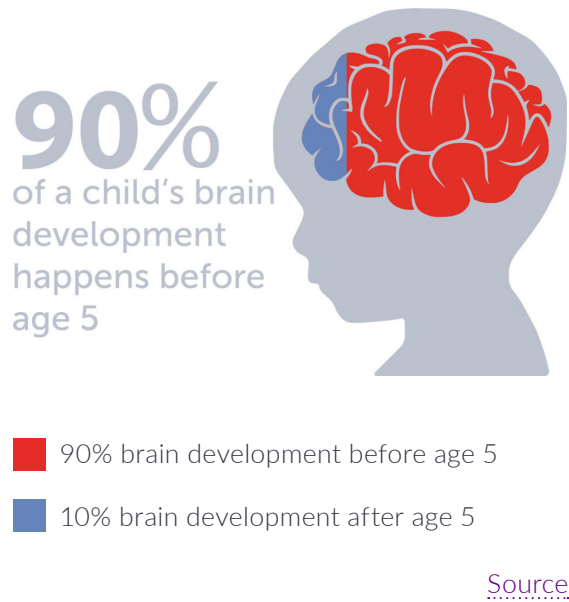
EMBEDDING QUALITY INTO EARLY LEARNING

Optimal brain development during a child’s earliest years of life has a [long-term](#) impact on emotional and physical health, social skills, and cognitive and linguistic capacities. This development happens iteratively through interactions with family members and well-prepared, highly qualified early educators. With consistent exposure to nurturing, language-rich environments with adults at home, and early educators in child care and preschool settings, young children develop robust networks of neural connectivity that undergird their academic and life [success](#) for decades to come. An [intergenerational](#) analysis of the outcomes stemming from High-Scope’s Perry Preschool Project, a high-quality preschool intervention, found that it improved participants’ employment, health, cognitive and social-emotional skills, and reduced criminal activity. The positive effects continued to benefit the academic and social development of participants’ children.

There are [593,287](#) children under five years of age in the Commonwealth of Virginia. With [66](#) percent of the state’s parents in the workforce, there is a great need for high-quality and affordable child care and preschool access. Unfortunately, the demand for high-quality care far exceeds the supply. The child care gap in Virginia is [10 percent](#), implying that almost 60,000 children of working parents potentially do not have access to care.

Early educators are termed the “workforce [behind](#) the workforce,” and serve a critical role of providing developmentally appropriate social, emotional, and

Figure 1: The Developing Brain



academic instruction. While early educators support both the youngest learners and their families, the average hourly wage for an early educator in Virginia is only [\\$14.18](#), while the hourly living wage for an individual in the commonwealth is [\\$18.94](#). Low wages and the demanding nature of caring for young children cause concerning attrition in this critical workforce, which is calculated at [12-15](#) percent nationally. Attrition causes children to experience lapses in care and shrinks available capacity at child care providers. Virginia loses an estimated [\\$3.1 billion](#) in income annually due to the child care gap.

Figure 2: The Workforce Behind the Workforce



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Fostering Quality Child Care in Virginia

Ensuring that child care is high quality requires that both early educators and child care settings meet established standards aligned to developmentally appropriate early education. The Unified Virginia Quality Birth to Five System, [VQB5](#), aims to measure and boost quality through improved curriculum and regular assessment. Participation in VQB5 is required for all licensed child care providers who receive public funds.

Preparing a High-Quality Early Educator Workforce

Currently, Virginia’s minimum criteria for early educators require that all three classifications of early educators, directors, teachers, and assistant teachers, have training and experience to work in licensed child care settings, and complete annual mandated hours of professional development.

Table 1: Qualifications for Virginia Early Educators in Licensed Settings

Role	Age (Min.)	Qualifications	Annual training hours
Director	21	Meet one of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Graduate degree in a child-related field and six months program experience ■ An endorsement or bachelor’s degree in a child-related field ■ College credits: 48 semester or 72 quarter hours of which 12 semester or 18 quarter hours in a child-related subject and 1 year program experience ■ Two years of experience with one year in a supervisory capacity and additional education background* ■ Directors without management experience can meet qualifications through educational requirements* 	16
Teacher	18	High School Diploma or Equivalent and one of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ One of the Director qualifications ■ An endorsement or bachelor’s degree in a child-related field ■ Have three months of programmatic experience and some educational background* ■ Have six months of supervised programmatic experience 	16
Assistant Teacher/Aide	16	Orientation	16

* [Source: For Specific Educational Background Requirements](#)

Retaining a High-Quality Early Educator Workforce

A national task force on quality in early education promotes a [multi-pronged](#) approach to improve pay and benefits for early educators, and provide access to apprenticeships, credentialing and career growth opportunities for nurturing and sustaining the early educator workforce. Virginia launched the [Teacher Recognition Program](#) pilot in 2019 that offered \$1,500 stipends per year for teachers who stayed in the profession for more than eight months of that year. Funded through the federal Preschool Developmental Block Grant (PDGB-5) funds, the program recognized that “The adults who care for and teach young children play a foundational role, influencing not only children’s early learning but their development through life. These high levels of employment turnover [of early educators] have negative implications for young children, who benefit from warm, engaging interactions and stable, sustained relationships with caregivers.” The results of the pilot showed that investments in early educators can improve employment stability. Virginia’s [RecognizeB5](#) program will scale the Teacher Recognition pilot to 16,000 teachers by 2025.

Best Practices in Supporting Quality Child Care

Virginia’s neighbor, the District of Columbia (D.C.), has adopted several research-based practices for strengthening the early education workforce. In 2022, the District of Columbia Council approved a modest tax increase on its highest income residents to fund the [Pay Equity Fund \(PEF\)](#), financing a pay increase for its early childhood educators. The initial payments helped increase the early childhood educator workforce by about [100](#) educators, a three percent increase, and [nearly two in three](#) early educators indicated that the payments incentivized them to stay in their jobs. In 2023, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) received a \$2.4 million grant to implement the Child Development Association Training and

Preparation Program and the D.C. Leading Educators towards Advanced Degrees (D.C. LEAD) program to support credentialing at no cost. In addition to wage supplements and credentialing, D.C. also implemented [HealthCare4ChildCare](#), a program that provides free or reduced health insurance to early educators working in licensed programs.

Policy Considerations

- ❓ What opportunities exist to implement credentialing and career lattice programs to further develop the quality and capacity of the early education workforce?
- ❓ How can the Commonwealth develop partnerships with public, philanthropic, and/or business entities to develop braided funding to scale and sustain wage increases through RecognizeB5 and provide benefits for early educators?
- ❓ How can the Commonwealth promote standards-based staff-to-child ratios and class sizes as part of the quality improvement system, to ensure safety, nurture, and age-appropriate interaction and education?

ALIGNING FUNDING MODELS TO STUDENT NEEDS

Public K-12 schools are funded by a combination of local, state, and national dollars that are allocated through a funding formula established by the state. Generally, state funding formulas fall into one of four types each designed to allocate resources based on a variety of factors:

- **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.

- Staffing-Based:** Expenses are calculated using staffing ratios multiplied by student enrollment categories.
- 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.
- Program-Based:** Calculates the cost of delivering education based on the cost of specific programs and initiatives.

Funding Quality Education in Virginia

Virginia spends over \$20 billion on education each year, with [39 percent](#) of K-12 public school funding coming from the commonwealth, 52 percent from local sources, and nine percent federal funding.

The Commonwealth currently utilizes a hybrid, staffing-based funding formula, which incorporates various elements of resource- and student-based funding models. Under the Virginia Constitution, school divisions are required to meet a [Standard of Quality](#) for public education. The General Assembly uses the Standards of Quality, or SOQ formula, to determine appropriate funding levels to ensure these standards are met. Figure 4 below outlines the three-step process Virginia uses to create the SOQ formula.

Improving Funding Quality

A 2023 [report](#) from the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) identified [several gaps](#) within the current SOQ formula, including a lack of consideration for regional labor costs and variations in school division size, resulting in inadequate funding for students with increased learning needs. In fact, under the current funding formula, Virginia schools receive [14 percent](#) less funding per pupil than the national average, including fewer dollars than nearby Kentucky, Maryland, and West Virginia.

Figure 3: Funding Models Across The Country

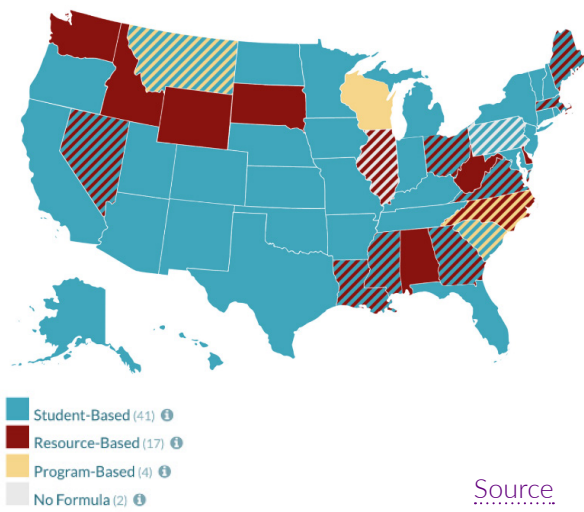
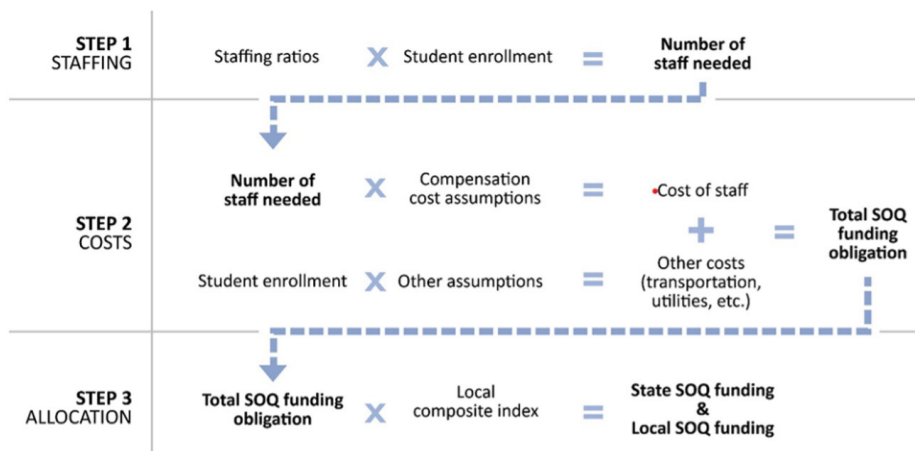


Figure 4: Model of Virginia's Funding Formula Process



The report also provided several [recommendations](#) for adjustments to strengthen Virginia's funding model in the near- and long-term, as well as five policy recommendations for the General Assembly to consider:

- Develop and implement a plan to increase compensation supplements as needed to adjust teacher salaries to be at or above the national average.
- Adjust the Appropriation Act language to equally weight student enrollment and general population demographics when calculating the local composite index for a division.
- Replace the local composite index with a revenue capacity index.
- Replace the staffing-based formula with a student-based formula using the average school division expenditures.
- Replace current SOQ calculations regarding target student groups with student-based funding calculations based on actual average school division expenditures.

The General Assembly tasked the Elementary and Secondary Education Funding Subcommittee to complete a study to make recommendations for the improvement of the Standards of Quality funding costs and policies. This report is expected on November 1, 2024.

Examples of State Funding Models

Some states have chosen other primary funding models, such as weighted student funding in which the states may attribute multiple [weights](#) to correspond with certain academic supports, for example English language learners may be assigned an additional weight of .25 and therefore warrant 25 percent more funding than the average amount to a non needs student. According to the [Georgetown Economics Lab](#) for the Study of Education Finance, this student-based funding approach allows for districts or schools with higher needs and limited resources to address any [fiscal gaps](#). Below are examples of states with weighted student funding (WSF) formulas:

Hawaii

As an early adopter of WSF, Hawaii has seen [mixed results](#) - while more money is being allocated to schools, the state is struggling to meet the needs of rural and geographically isolated schools. According to the American Institutes for Research, Hawaii's schools saw an [11.3 percent](#) increase in dollars allocated to schools from 2006 to 2013. However, rural schools have struggled to produce the required per-pupil funding needed as student enrollment is one of the components of the WSF's base formula. Hawaii's [legislative](#) attempts to remedy this issue include exemptions for smaller and more remote schools as well as further funding for rural schools in the region. Hawaii's attempts to balance the broader gains from WSF with the funding struggles of smaller schools could serve as a strong frame of reference for Virginia.

North Dakota

North Dakota's rapidly [fluctuating](#) student population has presented a challenge when it comes to ensuring equitable funding. Until 2019, school district funding in North Dakota was based on enrollment from the [previous year](#); however, the budget provided could not respond to sudden spikes or large drop-offs in enrollment. North Dakota passed [Senate Bill 2265](#) in 2019, so that weighted student funding could more quickly respond to changes in student populations. The legislation includes increases in per-pupil payments and a transition to 50 percent on-time funding.

Texas

In 2019, Texas passed [House Bill 3](#) which introduced a new school funding formula that increased the base funding allocated per student. It also provided extra resources for low-income students, expanded access to full-day pre-kindergarten for eligible children, and included incentives to promote college, career, and military readiness.

Policy Considerations

- How does increasing local funding responsibility influence districts' abilities to meet the SOQ education for students?
- What opportunities exist to strengthen Virginia's funding model to reduce inequities in funding at the local level?
- How can Virginia better leverage its funding model to allocate funding for all necessary operations and address funding gaps for high need schools?

CURRENT TOPICS IN K-12 EDUCATION | CELL PHONES IN SCHOOLS

On July 9, 2024, Governor Youngkin issued [Executive Order 33](#) to promote cell-phone free learning in Virginia public schools. This executive order comes after years of research on the impact of cell phones and social media usage on youth well-being, particularly mental health. The draft guidance was released after nine public listening sessions

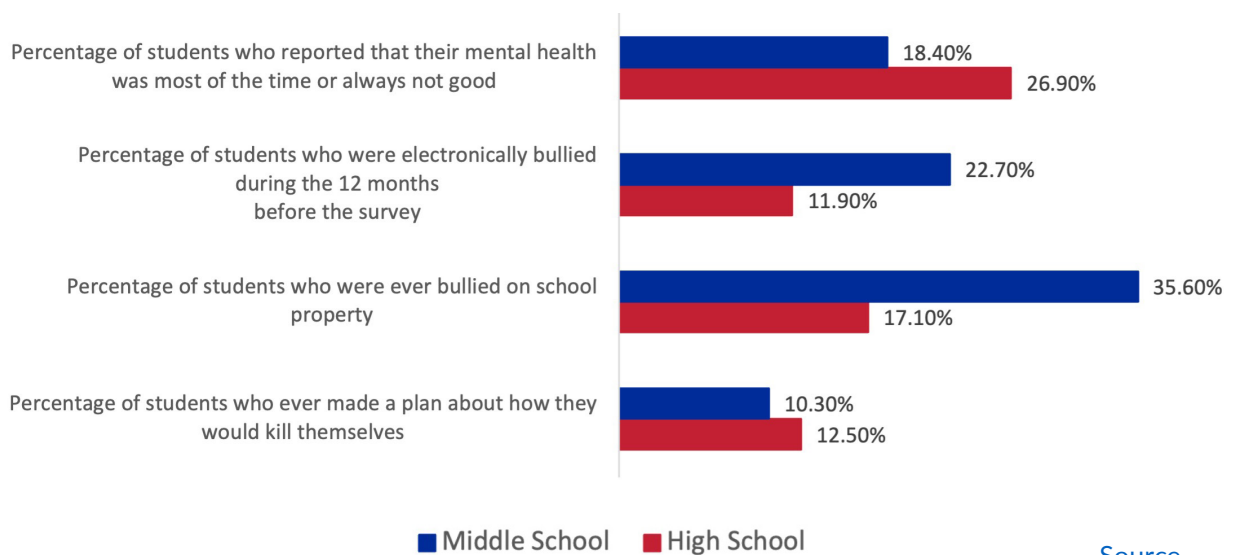
where [77 percent](#) of participants were found to be in favor of cell phone-free instructional time. The order outlines restrictions for cell phone usage or access, depending on the grade level, from "bell-to-bell", meaning from the start of school to the dismissal bell, students are not permitted to use their cell phones.

Impact of Cell Phones on Youth Mental Health

Children's social and emotional development is critical to their long-term health and well-being. Mental health significantly impacts their 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.

The use of smartphones for communication, learning, and entertainment develops a sense of dependency across all users and affects mental health of all users, but especially youth. Constant notifications can

Figure 5: Virginia Youth Behavioral Risk Survey | 2023



create a sense of urgency which leads to increased anxiety and stress, which carries over into other areas of our lives. For young people, this can also influence their self-esteem and lead to feelings of inadequacy. A [2022 study](#) found a significant correlation between eye strain, back pain, neck pain, weigh gain, depression, loneliness, and mood disorders amongst high-usage cell phone users. The study recommended more physical activities and other alternatives to minimize cell phone usage for students, specifically.

Cell Phone Restrictions Across the Country

Virginia is not the only state restricting cell phone usage for students given the impact on well-being and mental health. Several states including Indiana, Louisiana, South Carolina, Utah, Florida, and now Virginia are working to implement legislation which will limit cellphone usage during the school day.

Indiana

Indiana passed a [law](#) that mandates that school districts implement policies prohibiting students from using wireless devices during class time. The law applies to cellphones, tablets, laptops, and gaming devices. Exemptions are allowed for educational purposes with a teacher’s permission, in emergencies, or to manage health care needs. Additionally, students with disabilities or those with individualized education plans can use technology as necessary.

Utah

In January 2024, Governor Spencer Cox sent letters to school districts and charter school leaders discussing the harmful effects of social media on students and requested to ban cell phones during class time. This comes after a statewide push to limit phone access, including a public awareness campaign which provided access to a [website](#) describing the impacts of social media on children. Two bills were proposed during the 2023 General Session to [set restrictions](#) on youth social media accounts and to [protect youth data](#) from social media companies.

Policy Considerations

- ❓ What steps can be taken to address the diverse needs of students, including those who rely on cell phones for health, communication, or accessibility, to ensure the policy is equitable?
- ❓ How can parents and the broader community be involved in the process of implementing cell phone restrictions?
- ❓ What guidelines should be established to address parental concerns about communication during the school day?



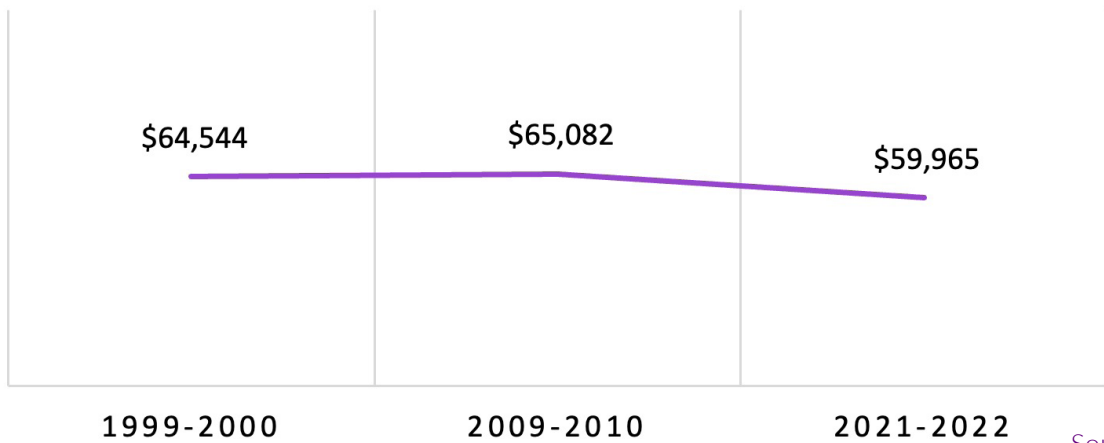
INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO TEACHER RETENTION

Recent [national data suggests](#) that K-12 teachers report the highest burnout rate of all U.S. professions, with more than four out of every 10 teachers feeling [burned out](#) at work, and both burnout and stress being the most common drivers for teachers exiting the workforce. Many factors can lead to increased stress, [such as](#) lack of agency, lack of resources, and limited pay; additionally, Black teachers are [more likely](#) to experience burnout or stress if they do not feel welcome or have a

low proportion of colleagues of the same race or ethnicity in the schools they work at. Virginia's educator workforce is also predominantly white with [80 percent](#) of teachers identifying as white compared to only [45 percent](#) of the student body as seen as in Figure 6

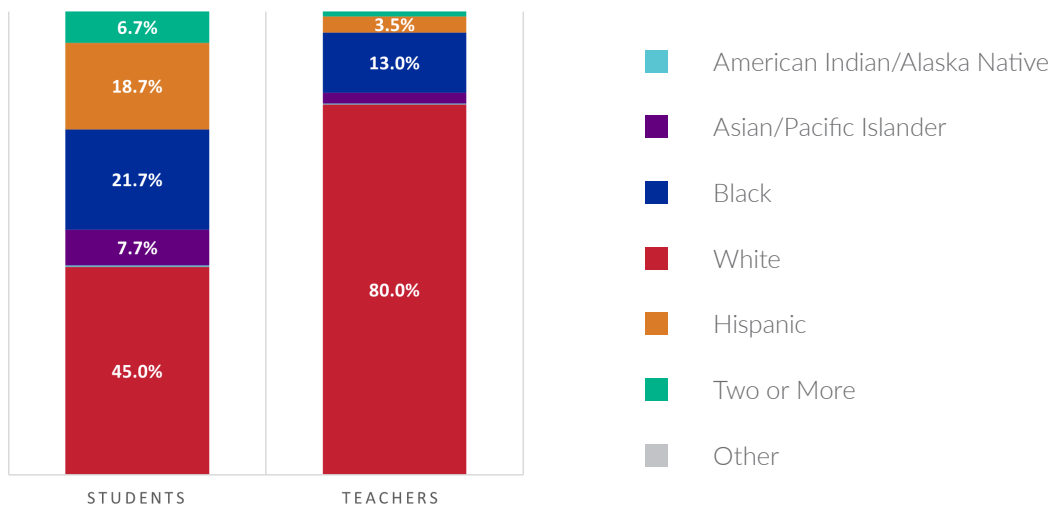
Exits from the workplace often cause districts to increase expenditures around recruiting, training, and filling full-time vacancies. This is particularly concerning with nearly [360,000 teachers](#) leaving the workforce nationally since 2020, indicating that pre-pandemic employment numbers among teachers

Figure 6: Change in Teacher Salary in Virginia Over Time



[Source](#)

Figure 7: Student Diversity VS. Teacher Diversity in Virginia | 2022-2023



[Source](#)

may not return to normal until August 2032. This decrease has exacerbated existing shortages across public schools in the [United States](#) during the 2022-23 school year.

Virginia, like other states, is experiencing an educator [retention crisis](#). In the 2021-2022 school year, [43 percent](#) of schools had hard-to-fill or unfilled positions. Virginia has a [low attractiveness rating](#) for educators due to low wage competitiveness and high rates of dissatisfaction. This is seen in [declining enrollment](#) in Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs). Furthermore, the average teacher salary has decreased by [eight percent](#) over the past 20 years.

All states use a salary schedule to determine teacher pay with some states or districts offering bonuses tied to performance for teaching in hard-to-staff schools or hard-to-staff-subjects. Virginia gives [local districts](#) the authority to set pay scales. The commonwealth offers an Alternative Teacher Compensation Grant opportunity for school districts to explore alternative teacher compensation approaches that “move away from tenure-based step increases toward compensation systems based on teacher performance and student progress.”

In addition to the Alternative Teacher Compensation Grant, Virginia’s Middle School Teacher Corps provides [incentive payments](#) of \$5,000 per year for experienced math teachers to teach in middle schools where math is an area identified for improvement. The commonwealth has also [established](#) the Virginia Teaching Scholarship Loan Program to provide financial support to those interested in pursuing a teaching career in one of the top five critical shortage teaching areas.

State Efforts to Retaining Educators

When compared to Virginia, neighboring states demonstrate varying regional approaches to teacher pay and retention with some offering [supplemental compensation](#), [targeted incentive programs](#), and/or [policy reforms](#) aimed at bolstering salaries to attract and retain quality educators.

Georgia

Attrition is particularly [persistent](#) in subjects like math and science, where graduates often find more lucrative opportunities outside the teaching profession. This discrepancy has contributed to challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers in these specialized areas. Georgia instituted a bonus system for math and science teachers, [and data found](#) that following implementation of the bonus, teacher attrition was reduced by 18 to 28 percent.

Missouri

The Missouri’s Blue Ribbon Commission [report](#) outlined steps for strengthening teacher recruitment and retention across the state. Missouri’s next step was to conduct an online survey, [presenting the findings](#) to their board. The recommendations were presented to the State Board with a focus on strengthening the teaching profession through improved school culture and climate. As part of the recommendations outlined by the commission Missouri raised starting teacher pay to at least \$40,000 per year up from \$25,000.

North Carolina

[Opportunity Culture](#) is a Public Impact initiative that reimagines the one teacher one classroom teaching model. Currently, more than [20 school districts](#) in North Carolina implement the Opportunity Culture model, which makes use of Multi-Classroom Leaders who coach or provide support to teachers across classrooms within a coaching team, not necessarily a grade level team. This team may be broken up according to teacher needs, curriculum, or student cohorts. Schools implementing this model provide more time for teacher planning, coaching, and collaboration.

Tennessee

Teacher residencies, a form of Grow Your Own (GYO) programs, offer teaching candidates the chance to work alongside a mentor teacher for at least one year before becoming the teacher of record. In January 2022, Tennessee pioneered the [Teacher Occupation Apprenticeship](#), becoming the first state to establish a teacher apprenticeship

program approved by the U.S. Department of Labor. Recognition as a Registered Apprenticeship Program enables the Teacher Occupation Apprenticeship to access federal funding, allowing the program to combine state and federal resources to establish a sustainable funding model.

Policy Considerations

- ➊ What reforms or updates are needed in teacher certification and licensing requirements to attract and retain educators, especially those with non-traditional backgrounds or expertise in high-demand subjects?
- ➋ How can policies create pathways for teachers to take on leadership roles within their schools, fostering a culture of collaboration and shared decision-making?
- ➌ Are there enough reforms in the implementation of differentiated pay, based on teaching in subject shortage areas or high-needs schools, alongside a sufficient base salary to fill high-needs positions?

DEVELOPING K-12 ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

[Accountability systems](#) enable states to measure and hold districts, schools, and educators accountable for raising student achievement and providing education stakeholders with data on where additional support and improvements may be necessary. From 2002 until late 2015, states were held accountable to standards laid out under the federal [No Child Left Behind](#) (NCLB) Act, which emphasized student assessment scores and tied results to educator and school evaluation and measures of quality, leading to a culture of “high stakes” testing. The [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (ESSA), which replaced NCLB, removed many accountability requirements tying student performance to teacher evaluation, leaving the decision on whether to do so largely up to the states.

Accountability systems are used to measure student outcomes and identify areas of growth for districts and schools. States design and implement their own accountability systems. For example, many states include measures for target student areas such as students with disabilities, multi-lingual learners, or students with low socioeconomic status. Once education leaders use this data to identify areas of



improvement, stakeholders can make responsive financial decisions to address student needs. Leaders may consider providing additional funding for students in these areas or hiring additional staff to support target student groups. The most common [student success indicators](#) include chronic absenteeism, college and career readiness, and school climate or safety.

Virginia’s Accountability Reform Efforts

At a special meeting in August 2023, the Virginia Board of Education [approved](#) a Notice of Intended Regulatory Action (NOIRA) to repeal 8VAC20-131 and introduce a new chapter which would separate accreditation from school performance and revise the school performance framework to enhance transparency. Under the new [School Performance and Support Framework](#), schools will be categorized into [four performance categories](#) based on their scores in Mastery in reading and math, Growth in reading and math, and Readiness scored based on chronic absenteeism rate:

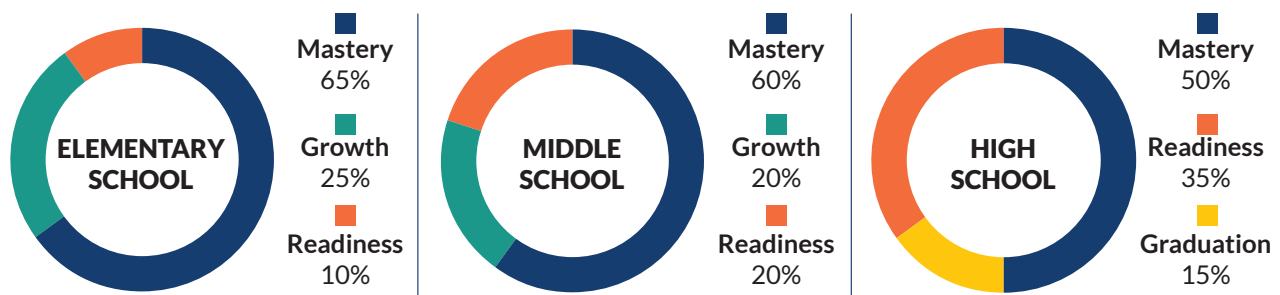
- [Distinguished \(90 points and above\)](#), where schools exceed state expectations for growth, achievement, and readiness, serving as models of best practices;
- [On Track \(80 to 89 points\)](#), where schools meet state expectations and have access to general state supports, along with additional resources for specific student groups;

- [Off Track \(65 to 79 points\)](#), where schools do not meet state expectations and will receive additional support from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE); and
- [Needs Intensive Support \(below 65 points\)](#), where schools significantly fail to meet expectations and will receive intensive Tier 3 support from VDOE starting in Fall 2025.

Based on data from the 2022-23 school year, VDOE [estimates](#) that 60.5 percent of schools are either off track or in need of significant support under the new accountability system. These schools are categorized as “significantly below” or “not meeting the state’s expectations for growth, achievement, and readiness.” In contrast, under the existing system, only 11.5 percent of schools were not fully accredited and operated under specific conditions.

Through 2023 and 2024, Virginia Superintendent of Public Instruction Lisa Coons [convened listening](#) sessions across the commonwealth to offer a comprehensive understanding of Virginia’s existing accreditation system and discuss plans for the new accountability model. These listening sessions served as a platform for the Virginia Board of Education (VBOE) and Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to actively engage education stakeholders, learn about their priorities and gather input on the forthcoming plans for accreditation and accountability. The final regulations were reviewed in multiple stages, with adjustments made based on stakeholder feedback. The framework introduces new performance categories and readiness

Figure 8: School Performance and Support Framework Weighting



School Performance and Support Framework
Last Updated August 2024

Virginia Department of Education | doe.virginia.gov

[Source](#)

components, with the goal of enhancing the state’s accountability system under ESSA. The new system sets high expectations for all students, prioritizes transparency, and emphasizes both academic proficiency and growth.

Policy Considerations

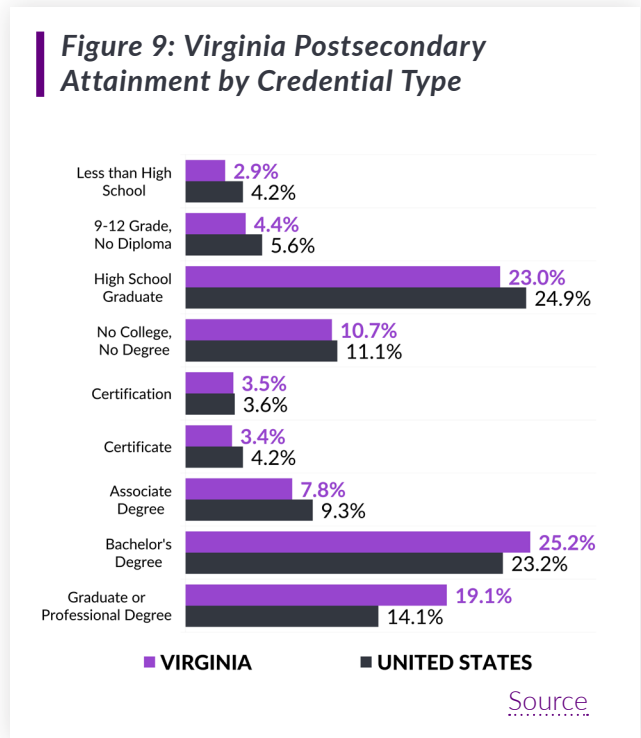
- ❓ Does Virginia’s accountability system present data in a way that is accessible and understandable to all stakeholders, particularly parents and families?
- ❓ Does Virginia’s accountability system account for multiple measures of success, and is it transparent around where equity gaps exist?
- ❓ Does Virginia’s accountability system balance support for student growth and proficiency to ensure all students are learning in a high-quality environment?

WORKFORCE READINESS AND THE ROLE OF INTERNSHIPS

High-quality career coaching and career readiness education allows all K-12 students to meaningfully navigate to their postsecondary plans through exploration and engagement, and experience activities inside and outside the classroom. Career coaching and career readiness education should empower students to directly enter skilled positions in the workforce, pursue a postsecondary pathway, or enlist in the military after graduation. At the postsecondary level, career-related experiences and coaching create [a bridge](#) between the classroom and the workforce, while providing opportunities for adult learners to re-skill, up-skill, or attain a postsecondary degree or credential.

As employers struggle to fill [open positions](#), career readiness education plays a critical role in addressing the disparity between jobs available and the skillsets of job seekers—also known as the [skills gap](#)—and helps prepare job seekers for open positions. Middle-skill jobs—jobs that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree—make-up [roughly 52 percent](#) of the labor market. However,

only [43 percent](#) of the workforce have access to the skills training needed to fill those jobs. In 2020, about [68 percent](#) of jobs in Virginia required a postsecondary degree of some kind and about [43 percent](#) of the working age population in Virginia does not have a postsecondary degree.



As the demographics of higher education and workforce needs continue to change, there is a growing recognition of the value different types of credentials provide for students. Postsecondary pathways are the varying opportunities students may pursue to become college and career ready. The full scope of postsecondary pathways include:

- [Workforce Training Programs](#): Programs that offer students new and/or improved skills often aligned to a specific industry.
- [Industry Credentials](#): Vocational certifications, licenses, or badges that are recognized by local, state, or national business and industry partners.
- [Certificates](#): Awards that usually require less than one or two years to complete and prepare individuals for middle-skill jobs (such as nurses and welders).

■ **Postsecondary degrees:** Include associate, bachelor's, and graduate degrees that provide students with the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills that can be used toward employment or further study.

Highlights from Virginia

Funded through the Commonwealth Innovative Internship Fund and Program, the [Virginia Talent + Opportunity Partnership](#) (VTOP) is a partnership between the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, the Virginia Business Higher Education Council, and the Virginia Chamber Foundation that aims to streamline connections between higher education, employers, and students to meet workforce needs and to ensure student success. VTOP also provides toolkits and guidance to these stakeholders on how to best enhance students' opportunities for work-based learning. By connecting students with employers and employment opportunities, VTOP also seeks to keep talented students working in Virginia.

Best Practices in Workforce Readiness

Indiana

The Indiana Commission for Higher Education (IN-CHE) offers the [Next Level Jobs Workforce Ready grant](#) for Indiana residents who have completed their high school diploma but have not attained a postsecondary degree or credential. The grant covers the tuition and fees for students participating in eligible high-value certificate programs at select institutions of higher education. The grant is available for students for two years and covers the certificate program's course credit requirements.

Tennessee

In Tennessee, two institutions of higher education have developed partnerships with business and industry to meet workforce needs while providing students with opportunities to pay for their education. In 2017, Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) Murfreesboro and Nissan partnered to create the Smyrna Campus, a technical

training center representing a [public-private partnership between Nissan and the College System of Tennessee](#) to create educational opportunities that are closely aligned to current workforce needs in the region.

Policy Considerations

- ❓ In what ways can policymakers connect workforce development opportunities and internships to affordable postsecondary pathways? What is the role of business and industry in this connection and what incentives are currently offered to leverage their role?
- ❓ How can Virginia strengthen its workforce development opportunities and internships to ensure credit mobility for participating students?
- ❓ How can Virginia continue to strengthen its workforce development pipeline and retention of individuals who complete a postsecondary pathway?

EXPANDING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH PELL GRANTS

Postsecondary affordability speaks to a student's ability to pay for the necessary educational costs and corresponding resources while also having enough money to cover essential needs, such as food and housing once they enter postsecondary education. Affordability is different for each student, depending on their financial circumstances and their family's means, as well as the state and federal aid available to them.

The cost of attending an institution of higher education (IHE) in Virginia has never been greater. Average tuition for four-year colleges in the commonwealth rose by approximately 18 percent between 2008 and 2022 (see Figure #9 below). Over the same period, state funding for postsecondary education has decreased.

It follows that many students, especially students from low-income families, struggle to afford a postsecondary education. Since its inception in 1972, the federal Pell Grant has served as the signature financial aid program for students from low-income backgrounds. The need-based grant supports one-third of undergraduate students each year, equating to approximately seven million students annually. In Virginia, over 170,000 students are Pell Grant recipients each year, representing almost a third of the undergraduate population.

Despite the prevalence of the grant, students are still struggling to afford a postsecondary education. Students receiving Pell grants can afford fewer than 25 percent of public four-year institutions. Because of this, efforts have been made to alter the grant so that it may allow for more students to afford a postsecondary education. These efforts include:

- Pell Preservation and Expansion Act: Bicameral legislation that would nearly double the Pell Grant maximum award, index the maximum award for inflation, and make other changes to expand the award for working students and families.
- Restricting Pell dollars from being used to support other aspects of the federal budget.
- Creating a federal-state partnership: Urges Congress to invest in a federal-state partnership that would serve as an incentive for states to invest in more need-based aid.

Serving Low-Income Students in Virginia

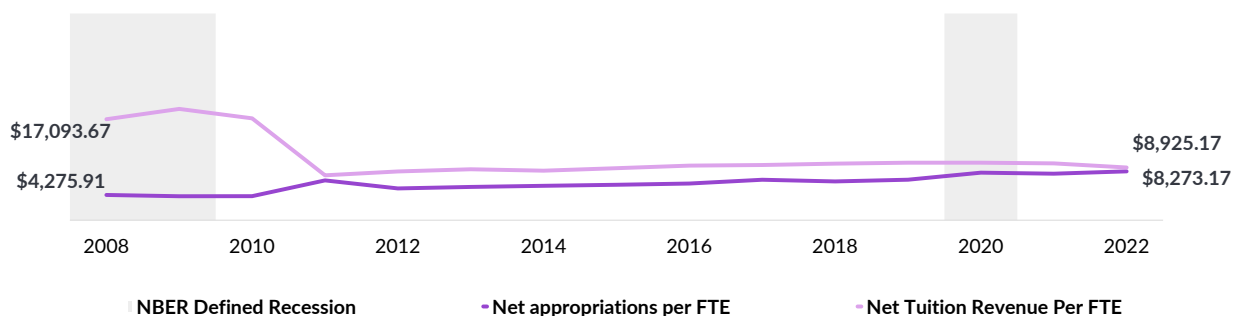
Pell grant recipients and low-income students are an often-underserved population in higher education. Because of this, Virginia appropriated \$25 million in 2023-2024 to fund proposals from state public higher education institutions to address the enrollment and retention of impacted students. State Council of Higher Education for Virginia identified initiatives at 15 public colleges and universities across the commonwealth, allocating approximately \$24.4 million for the programs over a period of 4 years.

Delays to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) have also impacted low-income Virginians. In 2024, FAFSA applications will not open until December 1st, two months later than usual. As of August 2024, only half of graduating high school seniors completed the 2024-2025 FAFSA, a 9 percent decrease from the year prior. FAFSA complications have also led to reduced student enrollment, particularly among low-income students.

Policy Considerations

- ❓ How can Virginia local education agencies (LEAs) mobilize parents, and caregivers of secondary school students in their efforts to increase FAFSA completion rates and postsecondary enrollment?

Figure 10: Net Appropriations and Tuition per Full Time Enrollment in Virginia



Source

- ② How can Virginia IHEs leverage already existing financial resources to increase the year-to-year retention of Pell Grant eligible students?
- ② How can policymakers, public university officials, and stakeholders collaborate to increase access to four-year and two-year IHEs for Pell Grant eligible students?

POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT: SUPPORTING ACCESS AND COMPLETION FOR ADULT LEARNERS

Virginia has established a statewide postsecondary attainment goal of 70 percent of all 25- to 64-year-old Virginians having a postsecondary degree or credential by 2030. While Virginia is tracking ahead of the country with a 59 percent statewide attainment compared to a national average of 51.9 percent, more work must be done to hit the 70 percent goal. One strategy to accomplish this goal is to engage students with some college, but no credential. These are often adult learners, which are defined as students ages 25 and older, who stopped their academic program. Supporting adult learners in the re-skilling and up-skilling process will further ensure Virginia has the skilled workforce needed for the state’s current and future economy.

Adult learners make up [37 percent](#) of university undergraduate students across the country. Further, about [25 percent](#) of these adult learners are raising children and 58 percent are working while enrolled in college. A top priority for adult learners is to find a flexible academic program relevant to their chosen career field.

Adult learners often encounter [significant barriers](#) when returning to postsecondary education. These challenges include time constraints, financial burdens, and the need for flexible learning options. Unlike traditional students, adult learners must balance their academic pursuits with full-time employment, family responsibilities, and other

commitments. This unique set of challenges requires targeted support and innovative policy solutions. Some challenges include:

- **Time Constraints:** Many adult learners struggle to find the time to pursue education while managing work and family responsibilities. Traditional academic schedules and long-term degree programs may not align with their needs. Flexibility in course delivery, such as online classes, evening and weekend schedules, and accelerated programs, is crucial to accommodating their busy lives.
- **Financial barriers:** The cost of education is a significant obstacle for adult learners. Many are not eligible for the same financial aid opportunities as traditional students, and they may face additional financial responsibilities, such as childcare and household expenses.
- **Support Services:** Adult learners often require additional support services to succeed in their academic endeavors. These may include academic advising tailored to their unique circumstances, career counseling, and access to childcare and mental health resources. Establishing comprehensive support systems within institutions and at the state level can help adult learners navigate the complexities of returning to education and completing their programs.

Efforts to Engage Adult Learners in Virginia

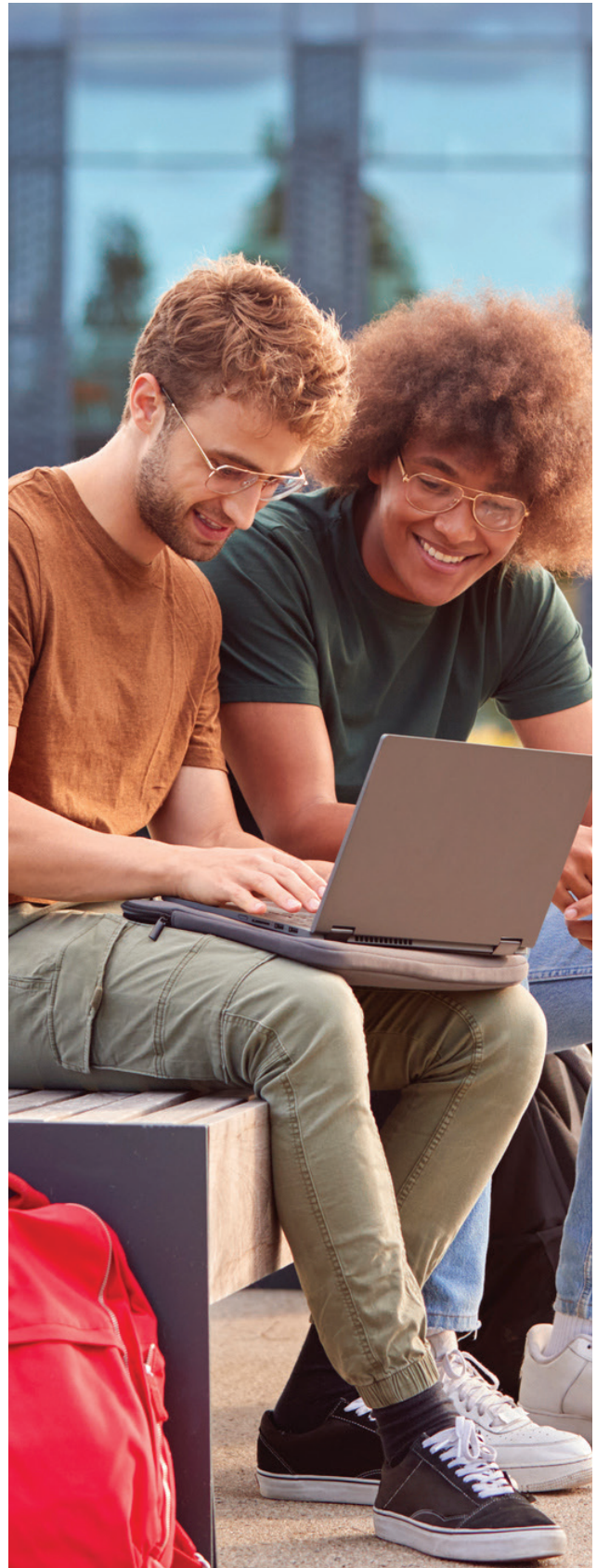
The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia provides a list of [programs](#) in Virginia designed for individuals who desire to return to college and complete their baccalaureate degree requirements but need flexibility to accommodate work schedules. The commonwealth also offers [education centers](#) that help people within their region get access to a variety of programs to secure a postsecondary credential. These centers act as regional hubs for adult learners.

Best Practices in Engaging Adults Learners

- [Tennessee Reconnect](#) is an initiative in Tennessee that targets adult learners. It provides several options for adult learners to return to get a post-secondary degree or other credential.
- [Minnesota's Adult Learner Support Network](#) provides a searchable database of post-secondary options for adult learners. What makes the program unique is that it is a collaboration across multiple organizations within the commonwealth that are all focused on addressing and closing the attainment gap in Minnesota.
- [Georgia's HOPE Career Grant](#) is a partnership between the state government and local industries to provide free tuition to students enrolling in programs that prepare them for high-demand fields. This initiative is particularly beneficial for adult learners looking to re-skill or up-skill, as it directly connects educational programs with job opportunities in the commonwealth.

Policy Considerations

- ② How does Virginia increase the state capacity to track individual outcomes across adult learners and use this data to set goals for improvement?
- ② What steps are needed to expand flexible learning options?
- ② In what ways could businesses provide support and assistance for adult learners? Are there policies that can be enacted to provide incentives for employers to support adult learners?





Established in 2001, [The Hunt Institute](http://www.hunt-institute.org) 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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