

Issue: K-12 Education Funding in Virginia

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The State of K-12 Education in the Commonwealth

Teacher Pay Has Been Among Lowest in Nation

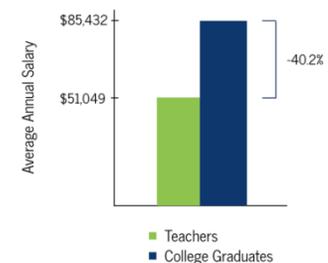
The statistics on teacher pay in Virginia are unsettling. At \$51,994 per year, Virginia came in 32nd among the states for average teacher pay in 2018. When adjusted for inflation, Virginia’s teachers that year made on average 4.5 percent *less* than they did ten years prior.¹ According to data from the National Education Association and the US Census Bureau, in 2017, Virginia had the highest pay gap in the nation at -40.2 percent, when comparing the average annual salary of a teacher (\$51,049) to the average salaries of all college graduates in the state (\$85,432). Sadly, the gap was negative for all states other than Vermont and Alaska, and many of the states had severe gaps, although none as wide as that of Virginia.²

The 2017 statistics are even worse compared to the numbers from another study conducted in 2015, where Virginia ranked 49th in wage competitiveness (referring to how much teachers make compared to similarly educated people in other jobs), making about 70 cents on the dollar that year.³ Until the five percent teacher pay raise that was passed earlier this year (discussed below), Virginia had been moving in the wrong direction on teacher pay.

Virginia Education Rankings

32nd for Teacher Pay
49th for Wage Competitiveness

Worst Teacher Pay Gap in U.S.



Rank	State	Teacher pay gap	Average salary (teachers)	Average earnings (college graduates)	Teacher salary change (1999-00 to 2016-17)
1	Virginia	-40.2%	\$51,049	\$85,432	-8.1%
2	Colorado	-37.1%	\$46,506	\$73,992	-15.0%
3	Arizona	-34.7%	\$47,403	\$72,636	-10.4%
4	Texas	-34.5%	\$52,575	\$80,261	-2.4%
5	Florida	-32.1%	\$49,407	\$72,804	-6.1%
6	Washington	-31.8%	\$54,147	\$79,418	-8.0%
7	Oklahoma	-31.1%	\$45,245	\$65,660	0.9%
8	Utah	-31.1%	\$47,244	\$68,547	-5.7%
9	Tennessee	-30.4%	\$48,456	\$69,636	-6.9%
10	North Carolina	-29.9%	\$49,837	\$71,098	-11.8%

Source(s): National Education Association, Estimates of School Statistics, 2016-17.
U.S. Census Bureau, 2016 American Community Survey

Classroom Funding Insufficient, Especially for the Underprivileged

With respect to state funds allocated to education, Virginia has much room for improvement. According to the Virginia Education Association, in 2018, Virginia ranked 42nd in the nation for per-pupil, state-allocated funding to K-12 schools.⁴

A 2015 study conducted by Rutgers University and the Education Law Center looked at education “fairness” across all 50 states and the District of Columbia.⁵ Essentially a report card for the states, the study looked at the extent to which they provide equal educational opportunity for all by allocating funding in a way that accounts for the additional needs caused by student poverty.

On funding per student, Virginia was ranked by this study to be 29th in the country, at just over \$9,000 per student. While Virginia falls into the middle of the pack on that metric, it is graded with Cs and Ds in categories measuring “fiscal effort,” which refers to the amount of funding spent on schools compared to a state’s overall wealth. The most alarming news from this study is that Virginia earns an F in state funding distribution. It is among a handful of “regressive” states, where schools that serve poorer populations receive *less* money per student than schools that serve wealthier students.⁶

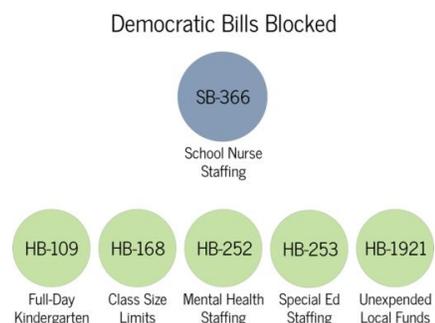
Unsurprisingly, teacher retention has been careening toward a crisis in Virginia in recent years. After spending time personally writing letters to retired teachers imploring them to return to the classroom, in 2017, former Governor Terry McAuliffe convened a working group to look at the plight of teachers in Virginia.⁷ This Advisory Committee on Teacher Shortages found that the number of unfilled teaching positions in Virginia had increased by 40 percent in ten years, and had become particularly catastrophic in areas with high levels of poverty. For example, just prior to the start of the 2017 school year, the city of Petersburg had 142 of its 400 teaching positions unfilled - over one third of the jobs. The report also noted that the number of minority teachers fell far short of the increasingly diverse student body in Virginia. At the time of the report, 79 percent of the teachers were white, compared to 51 percent of the students. This disparity is greater than that which exists in other states in the region.⁸

The largest predictor of whether a teacher decides to stay or leave, according to the committee’s report, seems to be the level of poverty at a particular school, which is not too surprising given that poorer schools receive less funding than wealthier ones. The lack of resources devoted to education and the poor condition of facilities cause stress and frustration for teachers in poorer districts. Compounding the problem, there have been reductions in the number of support staff in the poorer districts “which often means teachers have to fill multiple roles that used to be handled by staff such as counselors, school psychologists and nurses.”⁹ The report makes several recommendations to alleviate the teacher shortage problem, including incentive programs to attract teachers in high-needs schools.¹⁰

Obstacles to Quality Education in Virginia

Democratic Bills Quashed

Republican Delegate Steve Landes has been Chair of the House Education Committee since 2014. He and his Republican colleagues in both the House of Delegates and the Senate have let Democrat-sponsored bills die that would have improved conditions in the schools and the quality of K-12 education in Virginia. In 2018 alone, Landes’ committee killed: HB109 that would have provided for full-day Kindergarten,¹¹ HB168 that would have capped science classes at 24 students,¹² HB252 that would have added school mental health staff,¹³ and HB253 for increased special



education staffing.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the Republican-led Senate Health and Education Committee killed SB366 that would have supported adequate school nurse staffing.¹⁵

Similarly, in 2019 two additional Democrat-sponsored bills were killed that would have improved the landscape for Virginia's schools. HB1921¹⁶ and HB1969¹⁷ would have allowed school districts to keep unspent money that had been allocated to their budgets, rather than having the money revert to the local government for reallocation to other purposes.

Despite the 2017 Democratic gains in the House of Delegates, we are repeatedly reminded by these committee actions that a slim Republican majority remains in control.

“School Choice” - Charters, Vouchers, and Tax Haven Schemes

In 2017, then Governor McAuliffe (D) vetoed several bills proposed by Republican members of the General Assembly that threatened to undermine Virginia's public schools under the guise of “school choice.”

Among the bills vetoed by McAuliffe were HB2342 and SB1283, which sought to establish regional charter schools.¹⁸ Charter schools often operate outside of the same rules as regular schools, and this change would have removed any control from local school boards. However, charter schools are not as prevalent in Virginia as in many other states. With only eight charter schools currently operating in the state,¹⁹ the population in charter schools represents less than one percent of the public school population.²⁰ This is a good thing, since Virginia's laws require far less accountability for charter schools. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools ranked Virginia 39th of 43 states in 2016 in terms of the essential components of a strong charter school law.²¹

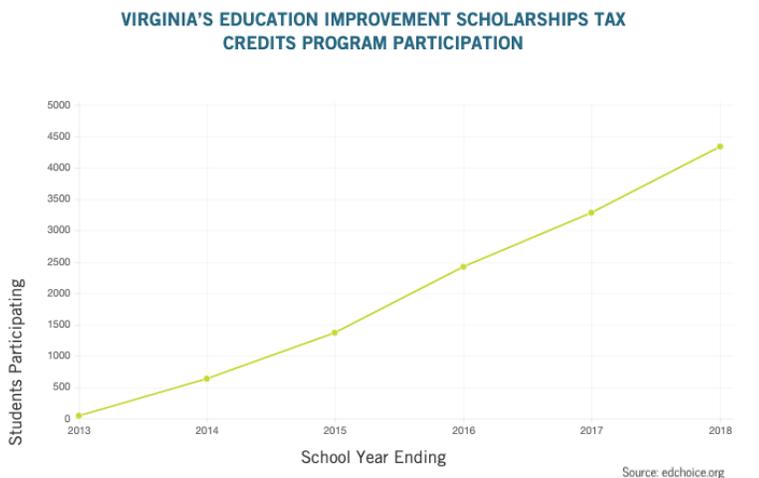
Another bill vetoed by McAuliffe (HB1605) would have established “Parental Choice Education Savings Accounts,” which is just another term for school vouchers. These accounts divert funds from public schools and redirect them for private use by allowing some parents to use taxpayer funds for private religious or non-religious schools.²² According to the School Superintendents Association, voucher programs have two common themes: (1) They seek to transfer state taxpayer dollars from public schools to private non-profit or for-profit education companies, and (2) they exist in opposition to the interests and public policy benefits of teacher unions, tenure, and certification.²³

In January 2017, the National Education Association (NEA) placed Virginia on a list of five states to watch for voucher program threats. They argue that the conservative, corporate-funded lobbyist group, American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) is behind the trend toward “school choice” in many states.²⁴ According to the NEA, in a December 2016 meeting in Washington, D.C., ALEC representatives announced that they have commitments from legislators in 11 states, including Virginia, to promote voucher legislation.²⁵ Perhaps that explains the “Parental Choice Education Savings Accounts” bill (HB1605) discussed above. This would certainly be in keeping with ALEC's overall goal to privatize as much of government as possible, even if it means funneling taxpayer dollars into private and religious schools at the expense of Virginia's public schools.

While Virginia's charters are few and the proposed voucher program was vetoed, one Virginia program that has been in place since 2013 and is widely utilized is the Education Improvement Scholarships Tax Credit. It is similar to a voucher program in that it funnels money to private school tuition. However, it also operates as a tax haven for the wealthy. Virginia taxpayers can get a tax credit of 65% or more on state taxes for their donations to scholarship funds that cover private school tuition for low income students.²⁶ Therefore, although the money isn't coming directly from the

state’s coffers (as is the case for many voucher programs), the state is still losing money it would otherwise have received from taxpayers, and diverting these funds to private schools.

Virginia’s tax credit program, which has grown steadily since its inception in 2013 and now claims almost 4,500 students, is one of 18 similar state programs across the nation.²⁷ This idea of providing a tax haven to the wealthy in exchange for diverting children to private schools is embraced on a national level by the Trump administration. Earlier this year, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos worked with two Republican lawmakers to propose a nationwide tax credit scholarship program. The idea is controversial because some worry that facilitating a large degree of choice will lead to more competition for private schools, and could cause increased racial and economic segregation.²⁸ On the other hand, think tank Cato Institute applauds these types of programs for their decreased “risk of regulation” as compared to voucher programs, which can face more scrutiny due to the direct funneling of government funds to private schools.²⁹ But is regulation really something that we should avoid when it comes to educating our children?



Recent Changes for the Better

2019 Teacher Pay Raise

Over the past two years, due to the efforts of Democrats, progress has been made toward alleviating the teacher pay issue in Virginia.

Recent Legislative Actions



House raised teacher salary to at or above the national average



5% teacher pay raise
\$87 million increase in K-12 funding

In 2016, Democrats in the House of Delegates worked to pass HB2332, which seeks to ensure that Virginia teachers’ pay is at or above the national average. The new law requires a review of salaries compared to other states and other occupations on a biannual basis.³⁰

In the 2019 budget process, Governor Northam succeeded in pushing the General Assembly to pass a state budget that included a five percent pay raise for teachers starting in July 2019. A three percent raise

had previously been approved, but his budget plan included an additional two percent. Although Northam did not get every dollar he requested, the General Assembly passed an \$87 million increase in funding for K-12 schools in addition to the teacher pay raise. The new money will go toward items such as school facilities and school counselors.³¹

The teacher pay raise is long overdue and will help individual teachers as well as a public school system that faces many obstacles, including those caused by the Republicans in Virginia’s

government. However, a five percent raise will not bring Virginia's teachers' salaries to the national average, which is \$56,000-\$59,000 per year,³² and probably won't be enough to entirely reverse the severe teacher shortage issue. But it is a move in the right direction and creates momentum that could be built upon by a future Democratic-controlled state government.

¹ <https://patch.com/virginia/fallschurch/here-s-how-virginia-washington-dc-rank-teacher-pay>

² <https://www.creditsesame.com/blog/education/states-largest-teacher-pay-gap/>

³ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BTajZuqOs8pEGWW6oUBotb6omVwlhUJI/view>

⁴ <https://www.virginiamercury.com/2018/12/11/with-a-positive-economic-outlook-northam-proposes-teacher-pay-raise-more-money-for-school-construction/>

⁵ See note 3

⁶ Ibid

⁷ <https://www.virginiamercury.com/2019/03/31/that-really-wears-on-you-pay-challenges-of-poor-districts-pushing-virginia-teachers-out-of-the-classroom/>

⁸ <https://www.education.virginia.gov/media/governorviriniagov/secretary-of-education/pdf/final-acts-report.pdf>

⁹ See note 7

¹⁰ See note 8

¹¹ <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?181+sum+HB109>

¹² <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?181+sum+HB168>

¹³ <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?181+sum+HB252>

¹⁴ <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?181+sum+HB253>

¹⁵ <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?181+sum+SB366>

¹⁶ <http://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?191+sum+HB1921>

¹⁷ <http://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?191+sum+HB1969>

¹⁸ https://www.insidenova.com/headlines/governor-vetoes-educational-choice-legislation/article_cff14ed2-1038-11e7-8171-2f8f89eefb5f.html

¹⁹ http://www.pen.k12.va.us/instruction/charter_schools/index.shtml

²⁰ https://ballotpedia.org/Charter_schools_in_Virginia

²¹ Ibid

²² See note 18

²³ <https://www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/JSPWinter2018.FINAL.pdf>

²⁴ <https://educationvotes.nea.org/2017/01/27/5-states-watch-regarding-private-school-voucher-threats/>

²⁵ <https://educationvotes.nea.org/2016/12/16/alec-politicians-cut-backroom-deals-float-voucher-legislation-several-states/>

²⁶ <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/virginia-education-improvement-scholarships-tax-credits-program/>

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/four-things-know-about-tax-credit-scholarships-school-choice>

²⁹ <https://www.cato.org/education-wiki/scholarship-tax-credits-vouchers>

³⁰ <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?171+ful+HB2332ER>

³¹ <https://wtvr.com/2019/02/24/general-assembly-2019-session-ends-state-budget-passed/>

³² <https://www.virginiamercury.com/2018/12/11/with-a-positive-economic-outlook-northam-proposes-teacher-pay-raise-more-money-for-school-construction/>