

HOW VIRGINIA FUNDS ITS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“The greatest obstacle to achieving equitable and adequate school funding continues to be the lack of political will...” --Education Law Center, 2021

The League of Women Voters of Virginia at its 2021 Convention approved a study of education equity in Virginia. The Virginia Constitution states that the General Assembly “shall seek to ensure that an educational program of high quality is established and continually maintained.”

The Education Equity Study Committee’s members from across the state:

- Defined the importance of a high-quality education.
- Researched the wide disparity in financial capacity and funding between wealthy and poorer school divisions; whether state funding addressed these funding gaps; and how costs should be shared between the state and localities to assure education equity for all students.
- Compared Virginia’s funding for K-12 education to that of other states. Of special interest was how states fund school construction and modernization, which in Virginia was left to each locality despite inequalities in local fiscal capacity.

Our study confirms the League’s long commitment to a high-quality public education as a foundation of our democracy. Public schools are open to all children. A public education with the exchange of ideas is essential to provide students the intellectual skills for becoming active citizens.

We found that the 1971 Virginia Constitution fails K-12 pupils because it states that the General Assembly “**shall seek to ensure**” a high-quality education rather than legally mandating it. In 1969 when the General Assembly was drafting a new state constitution, four Republican and two Democratic legislators championed language to “ensure” a high-quality education. A legislative committee, however, weakened the language to “shall seek” in our current Constitution. “And that is why today there are such disparities between schools in Virginia, because the legislature is not mandated to guarantee high quality in every school system,” as a 2019 Roanoke Times editorial stated.

Leadership in both parties has failed to enact long-term policies that address chronic needs and inequities. Virginia, one of the 10 wealthiest states, ranks 41st in state per-pupil funding, joining states such as Mississippi and Missouri.

A root cause of inequity is the fact that most of the cost for K-12 funding falls on localities despite Virginia’s stated commitment to public education. Dramatic inequalities in school funding exist within the state depending on a student’s zip code. In Arlington, per pupil funding was \$19,744 annually compared to \$9,707 per pupil in Norton – a difference of \$200,000 for a class of 20. The state’s funding formulas fail to balance income disparities between school systems.

Virginia's funding formula does distribute more dollars to poorer school districts. Research has shown it costs more to provide a quality education to low-income students "but it just doesn't distribute enough," said education expert Dr. Richard Salmon. "The state has the capacity to do a lot better." Rural school districts suffered larger cuts than more affluent districts from the 2008-2009 recession budget reductions that still linger.

Buoyed this year by a budget surplus, the General Assembly increased K-12 funding by almost \$3 billion, including teacher raises, funding for at-risk students, and restored funding for school support personnel. Even this year's budget increases, however, failed to fully fund the State Board of Education's Standards of Quality, which barely meet the criteria for a "high-quality" education.

Leaking roofs and aging buildings in every part of the state have become a visible representation of inequality in school funding. The state's Standards of Quality ignore whether a child is sitting next to a trash can catching rainwater or in a classroom ill equipped for today's technology. Unlike most states, including poorer neighbors such as West Virginia and Kentucky, Virginia has left almost all infrastructure costs on the locality. Spurred by the state's \$25 billion crisis in aging school buildings, the legislature approved \$1.25 billion in construction grants and loans, including \$800 million for one-time construction grants and increased Literary Fund monies for both loans and grants in the 2022-23 budget. The state still faces a significant backlog of school construction needs.

The 2022-23 budget "sent mixed messages," according to The Commonwealth Institute. Despite this year's budget generosity, school funding in future years could be hurt by a decline in state tax revenues due to passage of an 80 percent increase in the standard deduction for state income taxes. "...several choices in the budget will cut state revenue, hurting Virginia's ability to make much-needed investments in our schools, state health care programs, transportation system and much more" (TCI, *Virginia's New Budget Sends Mixed Messages about Our Values*).

Virginia has also fallen behind in teacher pay. Teacher salaries lag the national average by nearly \$10,000. When teacher salaries are compared to salaries of other adults with similar degrees, Virginia ranks 50th out of 50 states, perhaps explaining the widespread teacher shortage in school districts this year.

To conclude our study, we are recommending significant strategies for addressing Virginia's education inequalities, including amendment of the Virginia Constitution to "guarantee" a high-quality education; full funding of the Standards of Quality; a permanent commitment to funding school construction and renovation; increasing per-pupil funding and teacher salaries, and more as laid out in this report.

One strategy is totally within the League's own power: LWV-VA should continue its efforts to educate the public about the benefits of high-quality public education and continue to develop partnerships with other state organizations that support funding public education.