

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 is left to each locality despite inequalities in local fiscal capacity.

Our study confirmed the League’s long commitment to a high-quality education as a foundation of our democracy, essential to providing students the intellectual skills for becoming active citizens. It also concluded that the 1971 Virginia Constitution fails K-12 pupils because it states that the General Assembly “shall seek to ensure” rather than “shall provide” a high-quality public education.

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.

Spurred by a \$25 billion statewide crisis in aging school buildings, the legislature also approved \$800 million for one-time construction grants and increased Literary Fund monies for construction loans as well as grants. The state still faces a significant backlog of school construction needs. Leaking roofs and aging buildings in every part of the state have become a visible representation of inequality in school funding. Unlike most states, including poorer neighbors such as West Virginia and Kentucky, Virginia has left almost all infrastructure costs on the locality.

The Commonwealth Institute described the 2022-23 budget as sending “mixed messages.”

Despite this year’s burst of 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,” wrote TCI.

Leadership in both parties failed to enact long-term policies that address chronic needs and inequities. Even this year’s budget increases failed to fully fund the Virginia Department of Education Standards of Quality, which barely meet the criteria for a “high-quality” education.

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 exists 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.

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 increase 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.

The full report can be found on the website, www.lwv-va.org under the Publications/Studies tab.