

Schools Issue Brief

VOICE believes that our children should be lifted up, not locked down. School safety will not be achieved simply by putting more police officers in our schools or installing metal detectors. Rather, we must invest in our children -- including their health and emotional wellbeing -- to promote community and security. This includes increasing mental health services, promoting quality after-school and summer programming, hiring and retaining top flight and diverse educators, and investing in pre-K.

Mental Health and Counseling

- According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, **1 in 5 children and adolescents experience a mental health problem during their school years.** The National Association of School Psychologists also notes that **nationally up to 60% of students do not receive the treatment they need and of those who do get help, nearly two thirds do so only in school.**¹
- **Youth with access to mental health service providers in their school are 10 times more likely to seek care than youth without access.** Unfortunately, many school districts lack the resources to provide students with the in-school treatment they need.² Additionally, in some cases, such as rural areas, schools may provide the only mental health service in the community.³
- The American School Counselor Association **recommends that schools strive to maintain a 250:1 student-to-counselor ratio.** In a recent analysis, only three states (New Hampshire, Vermont, and Wyoming) maintain a ratio lower than 250:1.⁴
- Furthermore, the **school environment has a major effect on students' psychological wellbeing over time.** As demonstrated by a study of Maryland's Safe Supportive Schools Project and the Adolescent Depression Awareness Program, positive school climate is associated with greater student understanding of depression and symptoms, as well as fewer stigmatizing attitudes toward classmates with mental health concerns.⁵

¹ <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/2018/08/29/schools-fall-short-in-meeting-student-need-for-mental-health-services/>, <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/mental-health/school-psychology-and-mental-health/school-based-mental-health-services>

² <https://www.ktvz.com/news/merkley-proposes-mental-health-counselors-in-all-public-schools/794586806>

³ <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/mental-health/school-psychology-and-mental-health/school-based-mental-health-services>

⁴ <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/Publications/ratioreport.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5520658/>

- In Northern Virginia, the student-to-counselor ratios vary greatly depending on the school district as well as whether it is an elementary, middle, or high school. Moreover, whether a counselor's time is focused on mental health rather than academic achievement and college readiness is often left to the discretion of the school administration. VOICE urges schools to ensure that the counselors' primary role is mental health counseling.

After-school and Summer Programming

- A 2008 Harvard Family Research Project summarized a decade worth of research on after-school programs, confirming that youth who participate in these programs reap many positive benefits, including academic, social/emotional, prevention of risky behaviors, and health and wellness.⁶
- However, program quality is key. The following factors are critical: access to and sustained participation in the program; quality programming and staff; and strong partnership among the program and other places of learning, such as schools, homes, and other community institutions.⁷
- Fairfax County data indicates that after-school programs have a positive effect on a child's grades and relationship with fellow students and teachers. It may also help a child be more connected to the school, develop leadership skills, and reduce high-risk behavior.⁸ Additionally, the 2016-2017 Fairfax County Youth Survey found that participating in extracurricular activities and community service was associated with a lower percentage of risky behavior.⁹

Hire and Retain Top Flight and Diverse Educators

- Virginia has made recent strides to address Virginia's growing teacher shortage. Last year, former Gov. McAuliffe signed Executive Directive 14 which issued emergency regulations giving colleges and universities the option to offer undergraduate teaching majors. During the 2018 legislative session, Gov. Northam signed HB 1125/SB 349. This bill streamlined licensing requirements; codified the undergraduate teaching major option for colleges and universities; and provided pathways for alternative licensure for the top two critical shortage areas. The Virginia Department of Education reported that the

⁶ http://www.sedl.org/pubs/sedl-letter/v20n02/afterschool_findings.html, <https://www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds/article/improving-quality-and-impact-afterschool-and-summer-programs-lessons-learned>

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ <https://www.northernvirginiamag.com/family/education/2018/03/30/the-benefits-of-after-school-programs/>

⁹ https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/health-humanservices/sites/health-humanservices/files/assets/documents/youth%20survey/sy2016_2017_fairfax_county_youth_survey_report_online.pdf

number of unfilled positions dropped to 935 in the 2017-2018 school year.¹⁰

- Despite these strides, Virginia still faces a teacher shortage and a shrinking pool of candidates that is increasingly less diverse. Students of color make up nearly 49% of Virginia's student population, but only about 21% of the state's teachers are people of color.¹¹ The state's student body is becoming more diverse each year, widening this disparity over time.
- In Fairfax County, students of color make up more than 60% of the school district's enrollment, but teachers of color make up only 18% of the school system's teaching staff.¹²
- Research has found that black students from low-income families are more likely to graduate if they have at least one black teacher¹³ and that black teachers are more likely to identify gifted students of color.¹⁴
- According to a report by the National Education Association, **Virginia's teachers rank 32nd in the country for pay, falling close to \$8,000 under the national average.** In 2017, the average teacher salary in Virginia was \$51,049, compared with the national average of \$58,950.¹⁵ Since 1969-70, the state has ranked in the top 20 in teacher pay just once.¹⁶ Additionally, when considering the extraordinarily high cost of living in Northern Virginia, the average salary does not go as far as in other parts of the state.

¹⁰ <http://www.vaco.org/the-intersection-of-teacher-shortage-and-equity/>

¹¹ <https://www.education.virginia.gov/media/governorvirginiagov/secretary-of-education/pdf/final-tdevp-report.pdf>, https://pilotonline.com/news/local/education/public-schools/article_1aa316ae-5307-5a8a-8273-0fa15ddd719f.html

¹² https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/diverse-virginia-school-district-makes-push-for-more-teachers-of-color/2018/01/07/d7862d6a-ebd0-11e7-9f92-10a2203f6c8d_story.html?utm_term=.971b63a78ef4

¹³ <http://releases.jhu.edu/2017/04/05/with-just-one-black-teacher-black-students-more-likely-to-graduate/>

¹⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/education/wp/2016/03/31/white-teachers-and-black-teachers-have-different-expectations-for-black-students/?utm_term=.b2b94af3780a

¹⁵ Sandra J. Pennecke, Virginia's Teacher's Pay Drops to 32nd in Country, The Hampton Roads Business Journal (May 15, 2017), available at https://pilotonline.com/inside-business/news/continuing-education-work-development/virginia-s-teachers-pay-drops-to-nd-in-country/article_cad7c6b1-2e20-535f-b95e-486cb5ce50a1.html; National Education Association, Rankings & Estimates, Rankings of the States 2016 and Estimates of School Statistics 2017 (May 2017), available at <http://www.nea.org/2017-rankings-and-estimates>.

¹⁶ https://www.richmond.com/news/virginia/government-politics/general-assembly/how-virginia-changed-the-process-to-become-a-teacher-this/article_7f01d955-e5f9-5297-88b8-9fc998706856.html

Expand Pre-K for low-income 4-year-old children.

- 1 in 3 children in Virginia is economically disadvantaged. Fairfax County has the largest number of economically disadvantaged children (200% poverty level and below) with nearly 53,000 children in poverty. Prince William is 3rd in the state with over 32,000 children living in poverty.¹⁷
- In Virginia, only 18% of 4 year olds are enrolled in state-funded pre-K programs. By comparison, 32% of all 4 year olds nationwide have access to state-funded pre-K. In Maryland, 36% have access, while DC leads the nation with 81% of 4 year olds in public preschool programs.¹⁸
- Virginia has decreased its spending per child. In 2002, it was \$4,886 per enrolled child and in 2016 it was \$3,740.¹⁹
- The Virginia Preschool Initiative* requires matching funds from local counties. **State funding for more than 7,000 slots went unspent**, largely because local government chose not to provide the required matching funds.²⁰ Nearly \$71 million was appropriated for the Virginia Preschool initiative in 2017 and any unused funds will be returned to the state budget.²¹
- Many of the unused slots are in Northern Virginia, where officials say they have been struggling to keep up in fast-growing communities and do not have the resources or the facilities to add pre-K classrooms. They say the state's contribution does little to offset the actual costs of providing a quality

¹⁷ Voices for Virginia's Children, available at <http://www.vakids.org/kids-count-data/interactive-maps/economic-well-being>.

¹⁸ Michael Alison Chandler, Virginia Lags Behind in National Push for Pre-K, Washington Post (May 28, 2017), available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/virginia-lags-behind-in-national-push-for-pre-k/2017/05/26/593e3236-4158-11e7-9869-bac8b446820a_story.html?utm_term=.8c6c1f772c73; National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, The State of Preschool 2016, available at <http://nieer.org/state-preschool-yearbooks/yearbook2016>.

¹⁹ National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, available at http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Virginia_YB16.pdf.

²⁰ Michael Alison Chandler, Virginia Lags Behind in National Push for Pre-K, Washington Post (May 28, 2017), available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/virginia-lags-behind-in-national-push-for-pre-k/2017/05/26/593e3236-4158-11e7-9869-bac8b446820a_story.html?utm_term=.8c6c1f772c73.

²¹ 2017 Virginia Appropriations Act language, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/early_childhood/preschool_initiative/appropriation_act_language.pdf.

program. As a result, Fairfax County served just under two-thirds of the 2,521 children eligible for the state preschool program.²²

- Although Prince William County only provided pre-K for 2% of children eligible in 2016,²³ the county has made vast improvements. This past year, the county posted the highest number of preschool slots in the county's history - over 800.²⁴

* The state-funded Virginia Preschool Initiative began in 1995 to provide quality preschool for at-risk 4-year-olds who were not being served by the federal Head Start program.²⁵ VPI+ is a federally-funded grant program that awarded Virginia additional slots of pre-K without a local match obligation for 4 years (2015-2019). In 2015 and 2016, VOICE helped secure 12 of those additional pre-K classrooms (or 800 students over 4 years) in Prince William County.

²² Michael Alison Chandler, Virginia Lags Behind in National Push for Pre-K, Washington Post (May 28, 2017), available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/virginia-lags-behind-in-national-push-for-pre-k/2017/05/26/593e3236-4158-11e7-9869-bac8b446820a_story.html?utm_term=.8c6c1f772c73

²³ Michael Alison Chandler, Virginia Lags Behind in National Push for Pre-K, Washington Post (May 28, 2017), available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/virginia-lags-behind-in-national-push-for-pre-k/2017/05/26/593e3236-4158-11e7-9869-bac8b446820a_story.html?utm_term=.8c6c1f772c73.

²⁴ https://www.princewilliamtimes.com/news/prince-william-schools-pre-k-enrollment-reaches-all-time-high/article_10523ecc-b6ab-11e8-8bc8-3788d7533082.html

²⁵ Virginia Department of Education, Virginia Preschool Initiative: Program Information, available at http://sfc.virginia.gov/pdf/Jt%20Sub%20Education/August%2025%202015/No5_VPI.pdf.