



WV Business & Industry Council Education Reform Platform

What hope West Virginia has for future economic opportunity, economic diversification and reversal of the trend of outward migration of our people is conditioned on our capacity to more fully develop our human resources – an educated and trained workforce for the jobs of today as well as the jobs of tomorrow. The transportable and flexible nature of the global economy requires us to compete not only with neighboring states, but nations across the globe for job opportunities for our people. Current and future generations of West Virginians must be prepared to take their place as part of a workforce prepared to compete for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

As state government leaders and stakeholders continue the ongoing debate about education reform, the West Virginia Business & Industry Council wants this conversation to include the perspective of employers. Our members represent some 26 different industries that employ nearly 400,000 people. We know better than anyone what capacity and skills are required of those making careers in our industries.

Make no mistake, West Virginia's economic health starts in the classroom, and many of the state's students leave the classroom underprepared to succeed in life or in the workforce. This is a crisis, and it has been developing for decades. These are facts that cannot be overlooked in favor of sustaining the roles of those vested in the current system or who desire a politically themed plan of reform. While today's leaders cannot be blamed for this crisis, they are challenged with solving it in a meaningful way based on academic, intellectual and practical ways that meet the demands of the contemporary world.

If we are to achieve better results, West Virginia must embrace new ideas and forge a new path for delivering a thorough and efficient system of public education, as our Constitution demands. We must acknowledge the system that may have educated our population adequately generations ago has devolved into a system with little accountability, mediocre overall performance and low achievement levels. For those students who excel, this state has not offered enough opportunities for them to make their adult lives in West Virginia, so many have left the state to find employment elsewhere.

When we look squarely at West Virginia's ability to educate students, our best is not nearly good enough. For example, the best public high school in West Virginia today ranks 585th in the nation, according to the 2019 U.S. News and World Report. The next-highest West Virginia public high school ranks 1,050th in the country.

Results from National Assessment of Education Program (NAEP) testing make it clear that West Virginia students not only fail to compete, they are losing proficiency in math and reading instead of gaining. It is widely known that far too many West Virginia students require remedial math and reading when they move on to higher education or move into the workforce from college. High graduation rates have little value if students leave our education system unprepared for a successful life.

It is unacceptable that our teachers are not paid competitive salaries and that such a situation has been allowed to occur for decades. It is equally unacceptable that West Virginia's education community remains steadfastly resistant to restructuring education spending, increasing accountability measures and using 21st century education delivery models that have well-documented success.

The time for change is now – not later, not after the next election and not after multiple more studies and town hall meetings that only perpetuate a system we know to be flawed. We must embrace innovation and creativity. In business, those who fail to innovate and compete do not remain viable. That simple maxim must be applied to public education. To that end, BIC has identified six topics that our members implore policymakers and the education community to consider as they embark on the special session to reform West Virginia's education system:

1. **Successful businesses and industries are built on innovation, competition, evaluation and evolution. Strong education systems demonstrate these same qualities.**

BIC believes we need bold change. We need to embark on an ongoing review of an evolving education system. As consumers of our public education system, we see firsthand the deficiencies of the current system as we struggle with the state's workforce pipeline. Consider the following statistics reported by the U.S. Census Bureau:

- **Population 25 and Over with a High School Diploma or Equivalent:** West Virginia ranks 43rd nationally with 85% of its population having attained a high school diploma or equivalency. The national average is 87%.
- **Population 25 and Over with a Bachelors' Degree or Higher:** West Virginia ranks last (51st) nationally with 19.6% of its population having attained a Bachelors' Degree or higher. The national average is 30.3%.

2. **West Virginians deserve a return on their educational investment.**

Despite an underperforming public education system, West Virginia funds education at some of the highest levels in the country. Even so, members of the business community support appropriate funding of our classrooms with like accountabilities for increased student achievement. We cannot continue to throw money at the same system and expect it to produce better results:

- West Virginia is one of the top funders of public education on a per pupil basis in the country. According to data from the National Education Association (NEA) and the West Virginia Department of Education, West Virginia ranks 16th in the nation with a per pupil expenditure of \$12,250.

- Additionally, nearly 44% of West Virginia's General Revenue Budget is dedicated to public K-12 education, far outpacing any other functions of government.
 - In 2012, West Virginia had 282,309 students. Today, there are about 265,755 -- that's a loss of 16,554 students, yet education spending continues to rise.
 - The average salary for a West Virginia teacher is \$45,555, ranking us 49th in the country for teacher pay. We support a raise for deserving educators but believe there should be more accountability for performance. Aggressive but achievable performance standards should be developed for all classroom teachers with appropriate rewards for success and consequences for failure to meet those standards.

3. West Virginia must explore consolidating our 55 separate county school boards and returning control of our education system to the voters.

Many believe we have a critical need to reduce the number of county school systems in West Virginia to erase duplicative management, costs and oversight while providing more control and funds to our classrooms. Yet West Virginia is challenged by constitutional protections to the state Board of Education that makes it almost entirely immune to input from West Virginia's citizens.

- While local control is important for the human resource aspects of school operation, West Virginia's population and budget no longer can nor should sustain 55 individual county boards of education. Regionalization of West Virginia's public-school system is long overdue. Although this is not a new idea, it is one whose time has come to be embraced, explored and implemented.
- The West Virginia Constitution mandates that we provide for a "thorough and efficient system of free schools," and that promise by our founders should trump constitutional protections for the State Board of Education. It is long past time that voters are offered a constitutional amendment that would alter education governance in West Virginia.

4. We cannot ignore the life challenges West Virginia children are facing every day, and the business community should be part of addressing these problems.

Any systemic education reform must interface with ongoing efforts in other areas of government to address the needs of West Virginia children who lack the necessary economic, familial or technological infrastructure that contributes to successful educational attainment.

- Where possible, new education programs intended to help resolve remedial education needs should be offered to parents/guardians as well.
- Each West Virginia school should have a full-time, dedicated guidance counselor who is required to provide not just emotional support but also substance abuse education and career guidance that includes trades, community/technical education and other higher education. Career planning guidance counselors should interact with the state's business community so they are well-versed not only on the career paths available in West Virginia but the curricular rigors students must be exposed to so they can be successful after graduation.

- Every West Virginia public school must have at least one partner within the local business community (either individual businesses or the local chamber of commerce) that can provide additional professional resources to students. Proactive partnerships with businesses from the perspective of exposing students to careers with West Virginia businesses need to be formalized and implemented.

5. School choice must become part of West Virginia's education future.

West Virginia must entertain 21st Century education delivery models which produce results commensurate with the taxpayer dollars spent on public education in the state. Consumer choice and market forces create competition and positive energy for businesses to provide a better product. West Virginia's public education system should embrace such a concept as well. The education market is demanding change and choice because our current education options are not providing optimum results. Opposition to school choice is an attack on our students. Consider the following:

- The top five high schools nationwide (and eight of the top 10) are charter or magnet schools (2019 US News and World Report)
- West Virginia is one of only seven states that does not allow for charter schools. We should learn from the experiences in other states to avoid common pitfalls and seize opportunities for improving student achievement, both emotionally and intellectually.
- Increasing school choice options in West Virginia will allow parents to find the right educational environment for their children so they are not condemned to failure in a school that does not suit their educational and emotional needs.

6. Keep our schools open.

Schools should remain open during unlawful work stoppages by requiring every school principal to file an "alternative instructional plan" with the county superintendent for approval. The alternative instructional plan is intended to be implemented in the event of an unauthorized work stoppage or strike.

The consequences of schools closing unexpectedly are well known. Community and parent schedules are disrupted, last minute childcare and babysitting needs arise, businesses experience higher and unexpected absenteeism from parents and most importantly students on "free lunch" programs may go without. Communities, parents and students should not be made to suffer during teacher strikes.

Alternative instructional plans should include a general assembly to commence with the principal and school volunteers and parents who agree in advance to participate and sponsor lunch. Select educational videos and internet coverage of local and world events could be presented. Local businesses and industry organizations could offer lectures and special presentations. Perhaps, a full-fledged career day could be planned. Local fire, police, and security personnel could demonstrate their services and school emergency procedures and emergency drills could be practiced. Anti-smoking, drug and

alcohol programs could be presented. In other words, with a little advance planning, make it a productive day, but importantly, keep the school open for all the right reasons.

The West Virginia Business & Industry Council intends for this platform to help guide the debates in Charleston and communities across the Mountain State. We are prepared to be an active partner in policy debates and implementation of what must become an ongoing evolution in our public education system. West Virginia students deserve nothing less than our highest and best efforts. We must give them the educational tools and environment that are critical to success so they can become the highly qualified employees, entrepreneurs and leaders our business community needs today and for generations to come.

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