

The **West Virginia Advisory Council for the Education of Exceptional** Children (WVACEEC) is a state level committee mandated by state and federal law. Members are interested in the quality of education received by exceptional children and youth. The WVACEEC includes parents and individuals with exceptionalities, educational service providers, administrators and representatives from a variety of related agencies. Participation is statewide and representative of diverse exceptionalities. The Council schedules and conducts regional meetings across the state to seek input and gain information about programs and services for exceptional students. The West Virginia Board of Education (WVBE) appreciates the efforts to collect information regarding the unmet needs of children with exceptionalities within the state. The WVDE Office of Special Education (OSE) is pleased to respond to the recommendations.

Teacher Shortages

The West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) recognizes that teacher shortages in critical areas, such as special education, have a direct impact on educational opportunities for our most vulnerable learners. Research shows that educator shortages disproportionately impact students with disabilities, students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and students from rural communities. Thus, to address teacher shortages in our most needed areas, the WVDE has intently prioritized supporting and providing pathways to teacher certification and financial incentives.

Pathways to Teaching. The WVDE in collaboration with school districts, West Virginia Institutions of Higher Education (WVIHE), and the West Virginia Legislature, continues to support and create evidence-based pathways to teaching. Candidates following these pathways are encouraged to pursue special education certification even if they are pursuing certification in one of the other critical areas. Details about various pathways are on the WVDE Educator Development and Support and TeachWV websites. Summaries of those pathways are below.

- 1. Grow Your Own** – The Grow Your Own (GYO) teaching pathway is a fast-track designed for WV high school students who want to become classroom teachers. During high school, students earn 24-30 dual credit hours positioning them to complete their bachelor's degree at a WVIHE in

three years. In the third year of their bachelor's program, students are placed in a paid yearlong residency as the teacher of record with support from the university and the school district.

2. **County-Based Alternative Certification** – School districts may partner with WVIHE when an area of critical need and shortage exists to allow individuals to teach while they are completing a state-approved teacher program.
3. **State-Approved Teacher Preparation Coursework** - Individuals who participate in a state-approved alternative certification program pay a minimal cost to complete course work in special education and other high need subject areas. with a school district that has an approved program and receives an offer of employment for a vacancy in an identified area of critical need and shortage.
4. **WVDE Alternative Certification Programs** – There are four WVIHE (West Virginia University, Bluefield, Glenville, Wheeling, and West Liberty) that provide alternative certification programs.
5. **Scholarships and Grants** - In addition to financial support and incentives built into the pathways, there are additional funding sources to supplement paying for the courses needed to complete teaching certification and paraprofessional programs. (For example, the West Virginia Promise Scholarship, the Underwood-Smith Teacher Scholarship Program, West Virginia Invests, HEAPS Grants, and university and private scholarships.)

West Virginia school districts report that their highest need pertaining to the teacher shortage is in special education. As substitutes and new teachers are hired to fill special education teaching positions, the WEST VIRGINIADE and school districts continue to provide virtual and face-to face training needed to develop effective instruction and to meet IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) guidelines. In addition, school districts, such as McDowell County, have chosen to address teacher shortages by contracting with a Tennessee-based company to stream certified teachers who instruct students live via web conferencing technology.

Financial Incentives. Despite aggressive measures to increase teacher certification pathways, the challenge remains to recruit and retain special education professionals in West Virginia. There are 18 educator preparation programs in the state. Of those 18 preparation programs, nine of those programs graduated less than 20 teachers last 2022.

In addition to the work demand placed upon educators, teacher salaries continue to be one of the main reasons for teacher shortages according to current research. According to the National Education

Association, “the average national teacher salary is lower today than ten years ago, contributing to national educator shortage” (NEA, Press Release 4/2022). In other words, teachers make on average \$2,150 less than they did ten years ago, adjusted for inflation. The U.S. Department of Education indicates that more than half of the nation’s public schools surveyed in its *School Pulse Panel* started the 2022-2023 school year understaffed. Nationwide approximately 360,000 fewer people are working in public education than before the pandemic, according to August 2022 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor.

West Virginia remains the lowest paying state compared to its five bordering states.

WV and Border States Average Teacher Salaries*

STATE	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021 Rank
WEST VIRGINIA	\$45,642	\$47,681	\$50,238	\$50,261	49
VIRGINIA	\$53,091	\$54,986	\$57,665	\$59,267	25
MARYLAND	\$69,627	\$70,463	\$73,444	\$74,514	9
PENNSYLVANIA	\$67,535	\$68,930	\$70,339	\$71,281	11
OHIO	\$58,266	\$59,713	\$61,406	\$61,687	18
KENTUCKY	\$52,952	\$53,434	\$53,907	\$54,384	36
UNITED STATES	\$60,768	\$62,355	\$64,133	\$65,090	

*Source: U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics

WV and Border States Starting Teacher Salaries*		
STATE	2019-21	2021 Rank
WEST VIRGINIA	\$37,987	40
VIRGINIA	\$42,251	18
MARYLAND	\$48,510	7
PENNSYLVANIA	\$46,991	11
OHIO	\$38,231	37
KENTUCKY	\$37,373	44
UNITED STATES	\$41,770	

*Source: U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics

While starting salaries remain low, experienced West Virginia educators find themselves short-changed as well. Deficient pay for experienced teachers is seen in West Virginia ranking 40th in the nation in starting teacher salary but falls to 49th in average teacher salary. The disparity between West Virginia starting pay and average salaries may be due to salary structures that inadequately compensate teachers based on additional training and experience. The disparity has been pointed to as a reason some West Virginia teachers are leaving the profession sooner than they had originally anticipated.

Though teacher salary inadequacies persist, the West Virginia State Legislature has made efforts to address teacher shortages through salary incentives. Legislators have passed bills allowing districts to offer signing bonuses for special education personnel and given special education teachers three additional years of experience for salary schedule purposes (WVC §18A-4-2(d)). As well, the Legislature allows for a salary gap of \$600 as a supplement for classroom teachers with at least 20 years of teaching experience (WVC §18A-4-2), a \$3,500 supplement for those with national certification from the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) (WVC §18A-4-2a), a \$2,500 supplement for speech-language pathologists, audiologists, counselors, school psychologists, and school nurses with national certification (WVC §18A-4-4b), and a \$2,000 supplement for classroom teachers with NBPTS certification who are employed at a school designated as persistently low performing and who serve in a mentoring capacity for other teachers at the school (WVC §18A-4-2c). Professional personnel employed as speech-language pathologists, audiologists, counselors, school psychologists or school nurses are eligible for reimbursement for national certification and salary supplements (WVC §18A-4-2b).

The WVDE, the WVBE, the West Virginia State Legislature, West Virginia teacher organizations, and local education agencies (LEAs) continue to collaborate to address teacher shortages in special education, including supporting teacher compensation, providing professional support needed for teachers and their students to succeed, and supporting teacher preparation programs attuned to teachers' real-life needs.

It takes more than the WVDE and the districts to address teacher shortages and low salaries. West Virginia educators, parents, students, and the business community have played a part in addressing teacher shortages. In addition to recognizing educators who work with students with disabilities as highly specialized essential professionals, West Virginians have advocated for greater funding and for adjusting the federal funding formula for the distribution of IDEA grants. The statute authorizing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) includes a provision known as "full funding" that states

the maximum amount a state may receive under the IDEA Part B state grants is 40 percent of the average national per-pupil expenditure per special education student. According to the Council for Exceptional Children, as of 2021 the federal government covered 14.6% of the additional cost to states. Members of Congress also bear the burden of fully funding IDEA at the 40% level promised at the adoption of IDEA. Also, the state and federal government could use tax codes to create a permanent refundable federal Teacher Tax Credit, which would serve to increase salaries.

The problem of underfunding of IDEA creates an undue burden on districts and states. Underfunding trickles down to the LEAs, where our local education agencies must use other funding sources, mostly out of their local general funds, for the purposes of special education. This comes at a detriment to other programs. As districts are forced to put more funds into IDEA, they are unable to use those funds to increase teacher salary, decrease class size, or update classroom resources. Though there have been slight increases in federal funding, the state funding allocated to the WVDE for special education has remained about the same.

Implementing Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

One of the most important responsibilities of WVDE under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is to ensure that each school district provides students with disabilities a free appropriate public education (FAPE) that responds to their unique needs and supports them to be successful in future educational, employment, and/or independent living pursuits (34 C.F.R. § 300). WVDE provides technical assistance through compliance monitoring to ensure all districts' implementation of IDEA and FAPE requirements. Compliance monitoring is informed by the seventeen compliance and results IDEA Part B Indicators that WVDE reports to the federal government each year.

In addition to meeting compliance requirements, the West Virginia Balanced Scorecard efficiency indicators are required by the West Virginia's Consolidated State Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* Plan. The WVDE employs school improvement structures that assist schools that do not meet the indicators. The WVDE school improvement process identified 50 schools as needing targeted support based on not meeting special education proficiency requirements, an efficiency indicator, in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math. These schools are referred to as Comprehensive Support and Improvement - Additional Targeted Support Schools or CSI-ATS schools. Focus areas of support for CSI-ATS schools include assisting districts and schools with strategic planning and selecting evidence-based strategies, providing guidance for the targeted use of federal funds, promoting educator growth and

best practices in shared leadership, increasing the quality of specially designed instruction, delivering IEP services with fidelity, as well as decreasing chronic absenteeism statewide.

Technical assistance for CSI-ATS schools also includes individualized targeted improvement efforts that set-forth recommendations and assistance for implementing effective practices. Practices that may be suggested are Professional Learning Communities, revisiting the school's master schedule, staff configuration, the science of reading knowledge, family engagement strategies, standards and instructional alignment, specialized teacher and paraprofessional training, data-based decision making, and other evidence-based interventions and classroom strategies. PLCs and other practices are recommended based on specific needs that schools demonstrate. Additionally, at the request of LEAs, training may be available through the WVDE. The WVDE trains LEA leaders to support and monitor the effectiveness of school improvement strategies and encourages LEAs to design PLCs that focus on learning, collaboration, and results as an integral part of school improvement as a mechanism to improve the academic performance of students with disabilities.

PLCs are effective in the mentor process for new and certification seeking teachers as they collaborate with veteran teachers regarding teaching standards, data, classroom management, and specialized instruction. Veteran teachers also benefit from PLCs by learning from early-career teachers who may be more knowledgeable on topics related to recent research, especially regarding technology.

West Virginia Outreach Center for the Deaf and the Blind (WVOCDB) *(formerly known as the Technical Assistance Center (TAC) for Accessibility & Transitions)*

The West Virginia Outreach Center for the Deaf and the Blind (WVOCDB) *(formerly known as the TAC for Accessibility & Transitions)*, located in Romney, West Virginia, on the campus of the West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and the Blind, offers high-quality local, regional, and statewide services. The facility also offers one-stop access to partner agencies that support the broader needs of families and individuals. It includes an Assistive Technology Lending Library with Accessible Educational Materials (AEM) and Vision Technology. AEM and Vision Technology work together to provide educational materials in an accessible format at the same time as everyone else. The WVOCDB provides training on several types of options to make access easier and more efficient for eligible students. WVOCDB guidance and information resources are being created and updated to circulate to all stakeholders. A parent guide, an educator's guide, and an addition to the Hand-in-Hand document being developed.

Other services provided by the WVOADB include presentations to LEA special education directors on a regular basis at state-level special education conferences, participation on the monthly universal support calls for special education directors and through the dissemination of information on the special education director listserv maintained and operated by the WVDE Office of Federal Programs (OFPS), Special Education Services Office.

**The "Every Student Succeeds Act" (ESSA) is the federal K-12 education law of the United States. ESSA was signed into law in 2015 and replaced the previous education law called "No Child Left Behind." ESSA extended more flexibility to States in education and laid out expectations of transparency for parents and for communities. ESSA requires every state to measure performance in reading, math, and science. Each state determines the way students are assessed. Every school in each state must inform parents about their standards and their results. ESSA requires every state to develop a concise and easily understandable "State Report Card" that is accessible online and provides parents important information on test performance in reading, math, and science. The report cards must also provide data on graduation rates, suspensions, absenteeism, teacher qualifications, and many other areas.*