



# Education as the Backbone in Rural Virginia



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## Overview

Education, a key driver of lifelong health and well-being, extends beyond the walls of classrooms. The education system in rural Virginia serves as the foundation for establishing healthy learning that continues throughout life.

Lifelong learning begins with early holistic education including Head Start programs, and continues into pipeline career programs, retraining the workforce at community colleges, and adult continuing education. Every child deserves the opportunity to lead the healthiest life possible and communities committed to providing access to education and encouraging higher educational attainment help to ensure that they do.

An investment in the early years of life is one of the most impactful decisions communities can make. Quality early learning experiences are an essential element in preparing children to succeed in kindergarten and beyond. This return is lifelong: children who experience effective early childhood programs are more likely to finish college, get high-paying jobs, and be healthier and happier later in life. Yet access does not equal quality and quality does not happen by chance. If the quality of early childhood education experiences is not high there will be little or no return on investment.

While there is an emphasis on early-childhood education, it is important to acknowledge the anchoring role higher education plays as agents of economic redevelopment in rural communities. Rural community colleges and technical career institutions have served a critical role in local economic development by offering workforce training and encouraging degree and credential attainment. In 2014, the Virginia Foundation for Community College Education founded the Virginia Rural Horseshoe Initiative (VRHI). The initiative is named for

the 14 community college campuses that are located in Virginia's "rural horseshoe," a crescent arc of countryside that stretches from the Shenandoah Valley to the corners of Southwest Virginia, up towards the eastern shore of the commonwealth. The Virginia Rural Horseshoe Initiative is a collaboration between rural community colleges and philanthropists working to double the number of rural students who earn a post-secondary degree or certification (1). While college enrollment is critical, one of the goals of the VRHI is to increase the number of students completing a degree or credential. A community college credential can increase a student's income between 20% and 40%, and with such a pay increase, can move students off of public assistance. Opportunities such as the Virginia Rural Horseshoe Initiative establish a solid foundation from which students can grow a career, and potentially provide the economic means to support a family. (1)

### Education Metrics (Median School District)



Rural

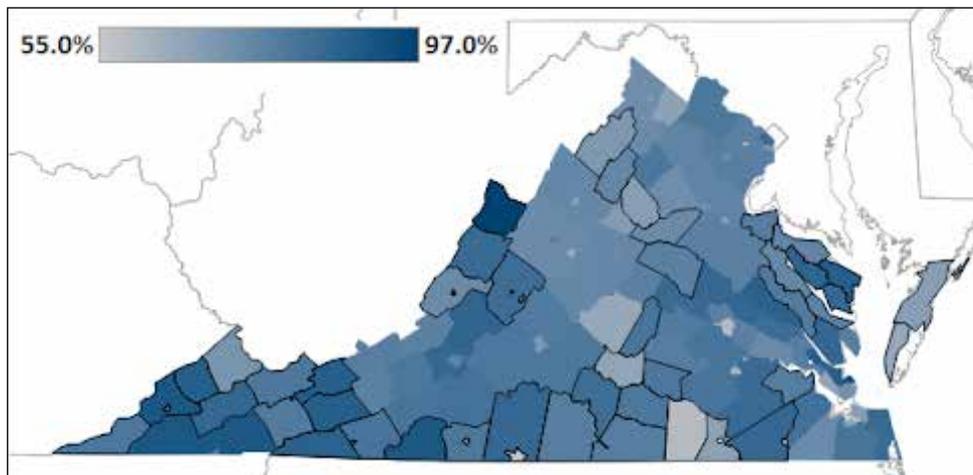


non-Rural

	Rural	non-Rural
On-time Graduation	92.0%	92.7%
Third grade Standards of Learning Reading Assessment Pass Rate	71.5%	70.0%

The Virginia Department of Education (DOE) provides families with information and resources including *A Guide to Child Development Milestones*, quality child care, and preschool programs. To ensure that children are prepared to enter kindergarten, additional programs exist to address the educational and developmental needs of children with disabilities and developmental delays.

## Third Grade SOL Reading Assessment Pass Rate



Source: Virginia Department of Education, 2019

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### Educational Attainment of Adults Metrics



Rural



non-Rural

	Rural	non-Rural
Adults (18+) without a High School or College Degree	16.4%	9.6%
Adults (18+) with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher	17.3%	38.1%

### Leading Practices and Approaches

Whenever possible, examples of leading practices and approaches were taken from rural Virginia communities. Otherwise, examples were gathered from localities with comparable demographic characteristics.

#### School-Based Health Centers

School-based health centers (SBHCs) provide much of the needed preventive and primary care service right at school, with clinical providers students know and trust. School-based health centers “reflect the convergence of public health, primary care, and mental health care in a setting that students can easily access” (2). School-based health centers are often the access point to health care that many students may not otherwise see. When children are healthy and can receive the health care they need to stay in school, they are absent less and do better in school. The benefits of SBHCs reach students, their families, school teachers and staff, and the entire community.

#### School-Based Health Center, Highland Medical Center in Monterey, Virginia (3)

**Need addressed:** The Highland Medical Center is a SBHC whose mission is to attend to unmet needs by providing mental and medical health care where the children are; to support families by keeping children healthy; and to reduce barriers to learning by keeping children in school. The center serves students at Highland High School, Middle School, and Elementary School.

**Services offered include:** ill child care, well child screenings, preventive health screenings, sports physicals, immunizations, health education, physician referrals, individual and family counseling, crisis intervention, mental health screenings, education, referrals to additional resources, and treatment for problems such as substance abuse, anger management, anxiety, depression, disruptive behavior, and attention deficit disorder

#### Ballad Health and Lee County Public Schools Partner for School-Based Telehealth Program in Lee County, Virginia (4)

**Need addressed:** Beginning in early 2020, Ballad Health and Lee County Public Schools partnered to provide telehealth services for children and faculty members. The telemedicine program serves students and staff at 108 schools in Virginia and Tennessee.



Lee County • United Way of Southwest Virginia

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**Approach:** The program embraces technology that allows individuals to connect to medical professionals within the school nurse's office for illness and injury that require greater care.

**Outcome(s):** The partnership has made healthcare more accessible to students and staff, enforcing a small per-visit fee for those without insurance.

### Career and Technical Education

Career and Technical Education (CTE) prepares students to succeed after high school by creating a link between what happens inside the classroom and what happens on the job. Examples of CTE include courses in welding and child care, and training to become an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) or Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA). Rigorous programs of study or sequences of coursework may culminate in a certificate or credential and apprenticeships that combine on-the-job training with classroom instruction. Students graduate with work-based learning experiences which provide skills needed either for immediate employment after graduation or the ability to further their post-secondary education and training.

#### Career and Technical Education, Virginia Department of Education, Project Lead the Way, Engineering Pathway (5)

**Need addressed:** Project Lead the Way (PLTW) is a not-for-profit organization that develops curriculum and training for school divisions. Participating school divisions must have a contractual agreement with the organization and send teachers to specialized training for the courses they will teach. Virginia currently participates through the engineering program and the biomedical science program and offers the pathway at more than thirty school districts around the state including Galax, Smyth, and Russell Counties in rural Virginia.

**Approach:** The Project Lead the Way Engineering pathway offers a four-year sequence of courses which, when combined in high school with college-preparatory mathematics and science courses, introduces students to engineering and engineering technology.

**Outcome(s):** Research demonstrates that PLTW students are better prepared for post-secondary studies and are more likely to consider careers as scientists, technology experts, engineers, mathematicians, healthcare providers, and researchers compared to their non-PLTW peers. Students find PLTW programs relevant, inspiring, engaging, and foundational to their future success.



VDH SORH Staff

#### School to Career Pipeline Program, United Way of Southwest Virginia's Ignite Program (6)

**Need addressed:** The United Way of Southwest Virginia (UWSWVA) Ignite Program provides middle and high school students with opportunities to learn critical workplace skills and gain exposure to many future job opportunities directly from industry professionals located in Southwest Virginia (SWVA).

**Approach:** The UWSWVA Ignite Program provides the region's high school students with a four-week summer internship designed to teach critical workplace skills and prepare students for the workplace through hands-on work experience. Internships bridge the gap between the worlds of learning and work by connecting students and schools with employees and employers.

As one component of the UWSWVA Ignite Program, the Careers Expo for Youth is an annual event for over 4,000 7th grade students from SWVA. Students move through four zones filled with hands-on activities presented by more than 100 volunteers from regional employers. At this annual event, seventh-grade students see firsthand what it is like to participate in a chemistry experiment, climb a utility pole, practice CPR, or use a 3D printer, with instruction directly from industry professionals located in SWVA.

**Outcome(s):** The Ignite Program facilitates professional youth development through annual summer internships, career expos, and school-partnered activities.

#### Head Start (7,8)

**Need addressed:** Low income families often face unique struggles when seeking educational programs for their small children. Because of limited income, there are fewer available options to help prepare their children for school.



Jonathan Kozowyk

Head Start is a national development program for children from birth to age 5, which provides services to promote academic, social, and emotional development for income-eligible families.

**Approach:** Head Start is a child-centered, family focused, community-based program. Head Start provides comprehensive education, health, nutrition, dental, mental health, social services, and parent involvement opportunities to low-income children and their families. Services are provided in child care settings, community centers, or the child's home, and are aimed at preparing children to enter school. The variety of settings allows foster children and families who are facing homelessness to access appropriate programs.

Not only does Head Start prepare small children academically, but also it has implemented programs to instill healthy lifestyle habits like nutritious eating, physical activity, and regular exercise. Head Start increases a family's access to healthcare, including medical, dental care and behavioral health services.

**Outcome(s):** In recent years, Virginia's Head Start program has operated with a budget of well over one hundred million dollars, provided the commonwealth with over four thousand jobs, and has encouraged hundreds of caregivers to participate in program governance. In Virginia alone, Head Start conducted over seventy thousand home visits and connected more than two thousand children with behavioral health treatment plans.

### Virginia's Preschool Initiative (9)

**Need addressed:** The Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) distributes state funds to schools and community-based organizations to provide quality preschool programs for at-risk four-year-olds unserved by the federal Head Start program. The purpose of the grant is to reduce disparities among young children upon formal school entry and to reduce or eliminate those risk factors that lead to early academic failure.

**Approach:** For four-year-olds, preschool is often the first opportunity for observation of school-readiness activities and skills. High-quality preschool programs provide a foundation for learning and prepare students for success in kindergarten and beyond. School-readiness activities in high-quality preschools focus on physical, motor, and social skills, and emotional development.

**Outcome:** Through a focus on advancing effective interaction and instruction, VPI programs help ensure all Virginia children enter school fully prepared for success. VPI programs are called to make continuous quality improvements in use of integrated, evidence-based curriculum; assessing teacher-child interactions; and providing individualized professional development.

### 4-H (10)

Cooperative Extension, a community of more than 70 public land grant universities across the nation, including Virginia State University and Virginia Tech, provides learning by doing experiences for young people through its 4-H (Head, Heart, Hands, and Health) program. For more than 100 years, 4-H has welcomed young people

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of all beliefs and backgrounds, giving them a voice to express who they are and how they make their lives and communities better. Through life-changing 4-H programs, nearly 190,000 Virginia youth have taken on critical societal issues, such as addressing community health inequities, engaging in civil discourse, and advocating for equity and inclusion for all.

### 4-H Tech Changemakers Program, Charlotte County, Virginia (11)

**Need addressed:** Rural communities have lost businesses they depended on and suffered from the loss of jobs. The workforce in many rural communities have skill sets that do not align with 21st-century job opportunities. Because of the lack of jobs with a future, many of Virginia's rural youth leave for better opportunities. This exodus hurts the rural economy by the loss of new ideas, and entrepreneurship.

**Approach:** The 4-H Tech Changemakers initiative is a teen-led program that empowers young people to change their community's future using technology and digital skills. These opportunities help them build leadership skills, take action, make presentations to local government officials, and develop a strong, positive reputation in their community.

**Outcome(s)** Teens participating in the program grow into responsible contributing citizens in an environment where they can make decisions and mistakes safely. Through the 4-H Tech Changemakers program, participants learn website development, social media marketing, and drone mapping. Participants have met with the governor, supported their local growers' association, and even helped save the loss of over two acres of a local farmer's soybeans using a drone. The program teaches youth how important digital skills can be in helping rural economies thrive and keeps young people contributing to the future of their towns.

## Opportunities for Growth

1. Promote literacy during early childhood by regularly providing books (recreational and educational) to children
2. Ensure access to broadband and invest in current technology to provide equitable access to education
3. Invest in pipeline educational programs that begin during middle school and provide students with hands-on exposure to a variety of trades and careers.
4. Develop and expand opportunities to combine college preparatory academics with technical training and workplace experience
5. Prioritize supporting students with learning differences; provide regular, up-to-date information and resources to teachers on how best to support students with learning differences; provide instruction on how to implement personalized education plans
6. Promote new and expand current after school programs and clubs like scouting, 4-H and Trail Life for students to gain exposure to a variety of experiences and learning opportunities

