

West Virginia's Public School Buildings Are, On Average, Half-Empty

~55%

**AVERAGE SCHOOL BUILDING
UTILIZATION RATE**

~185,000

EMPTY SEATS

22 of 55

**COUNTIES OPERATING SCHOOL
BUILDINGS BELOW 50%
CAPACITY**

Americans for Prosperity West Virginia obtained county-level school building capacity data through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request and compared it against the West Virginia Department of Education's actual 2025-26 enrollment figures.¹ We discovered that the state's average school building utilization rate is roughly 55%.

West Virginia schools have the capacity to seat 416,004 students but enroll only 230,714. The state has around 185,000 empty seats.² By comparison, that is enough seats to accommodate the entire public-school population of North Dakota.

Twenty-two of West Virginia's 55 counties are operating their school buildings below 50% capacity.³

This is not only a rural county problem. Kanawha County has 17,947 empty seats—more than the entire student enrollment of all but a handful of counties in the state—despite being one of the state's most populous counties.⁴ Statewide, the ten counties with the most

¹ AFP West Virginia FOIA request, building capacity data, compared with WV Dep't of Education, "Enrollment by County & Grade"

² AFP FOIA-derived building capacity data

³ Id., county-level utilization figures: Barbour, Boone, Braxton, Brooke, Doddridge, Logan, Marion, Marshall, McDowell, Ohio, Pocahontas, Preston, Ritchie, Roane, Summers, Tucker, Tyler, Wayne, Webster, Wetzel, Wirt, Wyoming

⁴ Id., Kanawha County (17,947 empty seats; 55.2% utilization)

empty seats account for 44% of all unused capacity.⁵ Six counties are operating buildings that are, on average, a little over a third full:⁶

County	County-Wide Utilization
Braxton	35%
Webster	36%
Pocahontas	36%
Ohio	36%
Wetzel	37%
Summers	39%

Comparing each county’s actual 2025-26 enrollment to its 2020 facility planning projections, 51 of West Virginia’s 55 counties came in below what they had projected in terms of overall enrollment, missing by a combined 30,359 students.⁷ Only Jefferson, Tyler, Clay, and Doddridge grew past their projections. Statewide, West Virginia now operates 1.8 seats for every student actually enrolled.

Taxpayers Fund Schools at an All-Time High

We spend more on public schools, and for fewer students, than ever before. Public school enrollment has fallen by nearly 60,000 students since 2000, but the state continues to operate nearly the same physical footprint of school buildings. With birth rates and public school enrollment declining nationwide, school systems across the country are grappling with fewer students.

West Virginia is not under-investing in its public schools. Total public school funding from all sources—state, local, and federal combined—rose from \$4.149 billion in FY2023 to \$4.730 billion in FY2024 to \$4.812 billion in FY2025: a \$663 million increase, +16%, in just two years.⁸ That is the highest level of school funding in state history, even as the number of students being funded continues to shrink.

⁵ Id., statewide ranking by empty-seat count

⁶ Id., county-level utilization figures

⁷ AFP West Virginia FOIA request, building capacity data, compared with WV Dep’t of Education, “Enrollment by County & Grade,” statewide total (261,073 projected vs. 230,714 actual, a shortfall of 30,359)

⁸ EdChoice/Cardinal Institute, “Fiscal Analysis of the West Virginia Hope Scholarship Program — Year 3 Results” (Sept. 2026), Table 1 (WVDE school finance data)

Per-pupil, West Virginia spends more than the typical state. Accounting for regional differences in wages, RAND found West Virginia’s total per-pupil spending (state, local, and federal combined) was \$20,858 in 2022-23, 3% above the national average.⁹ RAND’s analysis also found that West Virginia’s real, inflation-adjusted state and local per-pupil spending rose by nearly 14% in a single year (2023-24 over 2022-23) driven by educator pay raises and additional service-personnel funding.¹⁰ On a dollar-for-dollar basis, West Virginia already outspends most of the country.

The state’s “State Aid to Schools” general-revenue appropriation, the core state funding line for K-12, has held at roughly \$2.0 billion for four straight fiscal years even as the state’s total General Revenue Fund has contracted. As a result, State Aid to Schools has grown from 32.3% of total general revenue in FY2024 to 37.0% in FY2025 and 37.3% in FY2026, the largest single category in the entire state budget.¹¹ Far from being squeezed, public education has absorbed a rising share of general-revenue dollars the state collects.

Fiscal Year¹²	State Aid to Schools (Fund 0317)	Total General Revenue Fund	Share
FY2024 (actual)	\$1,945,104,275	\$6,027,553,373	32.3%
FY2025 (actual)	\$2,024,409,809	\$5,475,462,273	37.0%
FY2026 (appropriated)	\$2,018,915,542	\$5,409,300,178	37.3%
FY2027 (enacted)	\$2,010,884,589	~\$5,493,367,000*	~36.6%

Principles for Reforming the School Funding Formula

Despite funding public education at historic levels, West Virginia taxpayers are being asked to pay more for fewer students and half-empty buildings. Perpetually increasing K-12 spending will not fix the structural issues inherent in our school funding formula or help kids succeed. Every dollar spent maintaining a half-empty building is a dollar not spent on the roughly 230,700 children sitting in West Virginia classrooms today. It’s time for

⁹ RAND Corporation, RR-A4161-I, “Analysis of West Virginia’s State School Aid Funding Formula,” Table 2 / p.7 (U.S. Census Bureau Annual Survey of School System Finances; NCES Comparable Wage Index, 2022-23)

¹⁰ RAND RR-A4161-I, p.3

¹¹ WV State Budget Office, “Executive Budget, Volume I – Budget Report,” FY2026 and FY2027 editions, General Revenue Fund Overview by Functional Category, “State Aid to Schools” (Fund 0317) line

¹² Id.; FY2027 enacted figure from CS for HB 4027 (2026 Regular Session, enrolled), §51

policymakers to take bold action that directly funds students, not systems, and allows that funding to be directed by parents.

1. Fund Students, Not Systems

West Virginia's school funding formula relies on rigid, arbitrary ratios tied to overall enrollment that incentivize county policymakers to prioritize resources and infrastructure over what students need.

The solution is a student-centered funding formula that puts the focus back on students and individualized learning.

By creating a fully per-pupil funding formula based on actual student enrollment, adjusted for legitimate cost differences like disability status, funds follow the student wherever they go. When paired with reforms that let parents direct those dollars to the public school of their choice, schools succeed on merit by responding to the needs of local communities, creating incentives that reward results and parental satisfaction instead of arbitrarily preserving infrastructure.

2. Cut Red Tape So Teachers Can Teach

Every child deserves access to the right education for their unique needs. But too much needless red tape stands in the way of public school teachers' ability to individualize education around each child and respond to the needs of students and their local community.

Because West Virginia has adopted robust school choice options and no longer forces families to attend the public school they were residentially assigned to, the education marketplace is more competitive than ever. Instead of attacking school choice options and trapping families where they do not want to be, state lawmakers should quickly remove the red tape holding public schools back from adapting and innovating, giving much-needed flexibility to teachers, students, and parents to create educational pathways guided by local communities instead of Charleston.

From curriculum and assessment to the length of the school day and teacher compensation, public schools in good standing must be positioned to partner with parents to create the right learning environment for their community. For public schools to succeed based on merit, it means government must get out of the way, parents must be empowered to direct their education funding to the public school of their choosing, and each child's education funding follows them directly.

3. Restore Fiscal Discipline

West Virginia is spending more than ever on public education. Meanwhile, taxpayers are being asked to pay even more for overstaffed, half-empty buildings because inflexible ratios in our outdated funding formula incentivize infrastructure calculations over what students actually need.

When faced with declining enrollment, county policymakers have little obligation to meet their fiduciary responsibility to rightsize staff and buildings, creating deficits and school systems structures that simply don't make sense. And counties who see increased enrollment end up financially punished.

State lawmakers should not throw more money at the current funding formula, or rewarding financial mismanagement, because these bad policies are insufficient to meet the stark challenges facing education in the Mountain State. Taxpayers cannot afford to continue subsidizing financial mismanagement.

Instead, principled policymakers should restore fiscal discipline in the public education system by creating safeguards around state funding that stop waste, fraud, and abuse. This starts with funding students, not systems and putting parents in the driver seat when it comes to directing their child's funds to the right public school for them.

County	Number of Schools	Total Building Program Capacity	2025-2026 Actual Enrollment (WVDE, All Grades PK-12)	Utilization - 2025-2026 Actual (%)
Barbour	7	4,147	1,907	46.00%
Berkeley	32	22,762	19,797	87.00%
Boone	13	7,137	2,870	40.20%
Braxton	8	4,333	1,514	34.90%
Brooke	6	4,336	2,160	49.80%
Cabell	25	18,258	10,955	60.00%
Calhoun	3	1,200	762	63.50%
Clay	5	2,253	1,338	59.40%
Doddridge	4	2,597	1,220	47.00%
Fayette	13	9,014	5,031	55.80%
Gilmer	2	1,271	712	56.00%
Grant	4	2,583	1,570	60.80%
Greenbrier	13	8,162	4,223	51.70%
Hampshire	9	5,303	2,659	50.10%
Hancock	8	6,418	3,275	51.00%
Hardy	6	3,729	2,154	57.80%
Harrison	23	14,970	8,926	59.60%
Jackson	12	7,058	3,896	55.20%
Jefferson	15	8,458	8,213	97.10%
Kanawha	68	40,079	22,132	55.20%
Lewis	6	4,059	2,148	52.90%
Lincoln	8	4,586	2,638	57.50%
Logan	17	10,650	4,347	40.80%
Marion	22	14,039	6,903	49.20%
Marshall	13	8,769	3,992	45.50%
Mason	12	5,965	3,462	58.00%
McDowell	10	4,409	2,089	47.40%
Mercer	25	14,588	7,906	54.20%
Mineral	13	7,134	3,880	54.40%
Mingo	9	5,925	3,255	54.90%
Monongalia	18	17,385	11,070	63.70%
Monroe	4	2,789	1,548	55.50%
Morgan	7	3,853	2,062	53.50%
Nicholas	14	3,439	3,006	87.40%
Ohio	13	12,623	4,580	36.30%
Pendleton	4	1,568	843	53.80%

County	Number of Schools	Total Building Program Capacity	2025-2026 Actual Enrollment (WVDE, All Grades PK-12)	Utilization – 2025-2026 Actual (%)
Pleasants	4	1,981	1,011	51.00%
Pocahontas	5	2,316	833	36.00%
Preston	10	7,341	3,549	48.30%
Putnam	23	15,146	8,357	55.20%
Raleigh	27	17,924	10,090	56.30%
Randolph	13	6,454	3,351	51.90%
Ritchie	5	2,520	1,111	44.10%
Roane	5	3,741	1,545	41.30%
Summers	5	2,679	1,053	39.30%
Taylor	5	3,921	2,013	51.30%
Tucker	3	2,102	906	43.10%
Tyler	3	2,805	1,224	43.60%
Upshur	9	5,074	3,197	63.00%
Wayne	18	12,291	5,679	46.20%
Webster	4	2,771	990	35.70%
Wetzel	9	5,322	1,979	37.20%
Wirt	3	2,026	831	41.00%
Wood	25	16,636	10,819	65.00%
Wyoming	14	7,105	3,133	44.10%
STATEWIDE TOTAL	661	416,004	230,714	55.50%