How to navigate and improve Virginia's education options



Virginia Institute for Public Policy

HOW TO NAVIGATE AND IMPROVE VIRGINIA'S EDUCATION OPTIONS

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Foreword

Every child is a universe of potential—unique, vibrant, and brimming with possibilities. We hold the sacred responsibility of nurturing that potential, helping each young mind find the path where they can truly shine. But what happens when the system meant to support them feels more like a barrier than a bridge? For too many families in Virginia, this is the reality: a one-sizefits-all education model that doesn't always fit the needs of every learner, leaving parents searching for options that align with their child's dreams and their family's values.

This booklet is a call to action—a celebration of the power of choice in education and a roadmap for building a future where every child can thrive. Imagine a shy student finding confidence in a smaller, nurturing classroom, or a hands-on learner discovering their passion through a curriculum tailored just for them. Picture a family whose faith guides their lives, finding a school that reflects their beliefs, or a parent in an underserved community gaining access to options that unlock their child's potential. These aren't just dreams—they're possibilities we can make real, together.

Every student learns differently, and public schools can struggle to cater to every style. The typical setup relies on lectures, group work, and standardized tests, which suits students who excel in structured or social settings. But what about the hands-on learner who needs experiments to grasp concepts? Or the advanced student who feels unchallenged because the curriculum moves too slowly? Today's public schools are tied to state standards and budgets, which can restrict their ability to offer specialized programs. Budget cuts might trim offerings like art, music, or advanced STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) courses—subjects that could ignite a spark in a student who doesn't cope well with with traditional academics.

At the Virginia Institute for Public Policy, we believe that education should be as diverse as the children it serves. With only 54% of Virginia parents feeling they have a choice in their child's education (50CAN), and our state ranking 42nd nationally for parental choice, the need for change is clear. And the momentum is on our side: 75% of Virginians support open enrollment, and 76% back education savings accounts (EdChoice, 50CAN/ Sygnal). These numbers aren't just statistics—they're a chorus of voices calling for a system that puts families first.

In these pages, you'll find the stories, facts, and solutions that can help us reimagine education in Virginia. From exploring the challenges of public schools to highlighting the promise of microschools, charter schools, and private options, this booklet is a guide for anyone who believes in the transformative power of choice. It's for the parent who wants more for their child, the educator who dreams of innovative ways to teach, and the advocate who knows that change starts with us.

Let's dare to envision an education system where every child's potential is not just recognized, but celebrated—where no student is left without a future because of a system that wasn't built for them. Together, we can create a Virginia where every family has the freedom to choose the education that's right for their child, and every child has the chance to soar. The journey starts here, with you.

-Jafar

Lynn Taylor

President, Virginia Institute for Public Policy

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SECTION 1

THE PROBLEM WE'RE TRYING TO SOLVE

66 On education all our lives depend / And few to that, too few, with care attend.

- Benjamin Franklin, Poor Richard's Almanack, 1747, as cited in The Quotable Founding Fathers, edited by Buckner F. Melton Jr. (Potomac Books, 2004).

Some public schools do an amazing job...

We're not here to denigrate the role of public schools within Virginia's society. The public school system has a track record with experience dating back to the 19th century. They are absolutely the right place for many children. They're often the heart of a community, providing resources like free meals, sports, and clubs that other options might not match. Because of their size, there may well be a huge range of extra-curricular activities and groups available to join. There are far more options available when choosing subjects to study, and classes in traditional subjects such as math may be grouped according to ability.

The stereotypical high sschool football player can gain something from a public school which cannot be replicated anywhere else: specialized training, team-mates of a similar competitive standard, and the opportunity to face challenges of an appropriate level to spur on their development. A microschool might, for example, find innovative ways to provide training in a variety of sports settings for its students. It might work as part of a collective, or bring in external trainers. It cannot, however, replicate the football (or other sports) programs of a large public High School. The same principle applies to many other group activities which simply cannot be catered for in a smaller-scale environment.

Although this booklet is based upon the premise that a one-sizefits-all system isn't right for everyone, we shouldn't throw the baby out with the bathwater: it would be unfair to suggest that it isn't right for *anyone*.

...but they aren't right for everyone

Imagine a young person who finds it tough to make friends or feel at ease in a bustling group setting. They're bright, curious, and full of potential, but the crowded hallways and noisy classrooms of a public high school can feel like a whirlwind. For them, the standardized structure of many public schools might not be the ideal fit. While public schools offer fantastic opportunities for countless students, they aren't the perfect match for everyone.

In Virginia, for instance, the average public high school has about 1,200 students, creating a lively environment where students can connect with peers from all walks of life. But for a student with autism who struggles with the scale of social interactions, the scale of a school—with some, like Alexandria City High School, having over 4,000 students—can feel daunting and overwhelming. Class sizes, often averaging up to 30 students, may limit the one-on-one attention a quieter child needs to flourish. Teachers, though dedicated, are often stretched thin, managing a room full of diverse learning needs.

Social dynamics add another layer. Public schools expose kids to diverse perspectives, preparing them for the real world, which is a big win for many. But for students who face bullying or grapple with anxiety, the social scene can be daunting. A 2023 study found that 20% of U.S. high school students reported being bullied at school, which can make the environment feel unsafe or isolating. For a shy young person, navigating cliques or speaking up in class might feel like climbing a mountain. Schools may lack the resources (with barely 1 counselor to each 400 children) to fully support students struggling socially or emotionally. Parental choice also plays a big role in why public schools might not suit every family. Parents often want an education that aligns with their values, whether that's religious beliefs, cultural priorities, or a focus on alternative learning approaches. For example, a family with strong faith-based convictions might prefer a school that integrates their spiritual values into the curriculum, something public schools, by design, can't provide due to their secular mandate. Others might seek environments that emphasize character development or specific educational philosophies, like Montessori or Waldorf, which public schools rarely offer. Parental choice should give families the opportunity to find a setting that feels right for their child's needs and their own principles.

Flexibility is another hurdle. Public schools run on fixed schedules and curricula, which don't always mesh with every student or family. Some children thrive in homeschooling or private schools, where they can learn at their own pace or dive deep into niche interests. Logistical issues, like long commutes or safety concerns in certain districts, can also make public schools less appealing. For families who value customization, the rigidity of public schools can feel limiting.

For the dyslexic student, the hands-on learner, or the family seeking an education that reflects their values, exploring alternatives might be the key to unlocking a child's potential. It's about finding the right fit, not forcing a square peg into a round hole.



Top Tip: In the internet age, with artificial intelligence becoming more powerful by the day, the future of schooling in America may look very different from the models with which we grew up. We should welcome innovative ideas for education.

What do the facts and figures say?

Virginia's education system is not meeting parental expectations, with polling data revealing strong public support for school choice reforms. According to 50CAN's State of Education Opportunity in America, only 54% of Virginia parents feel they have a choice in their child's education, placing the state 42nd nationally. Virginia ranks 45th for parents who would choose their current school again if given options, with Black and Hispanic parents particularly dissatisfied with their assigned schools. These rankings highlight a critical need for policies that expand parental options, including open enrollment, more charter and magnet schools, reduced state regulations, and financial support for private school families.

Public sentiment underscores this urgency:

- Low Satisfaction: Only 33% of Virginians believe K-12 education is on the right track, and just 43% of parents would choose a public school if given alternatives (EdChoice Public Opinion Tracker).
- **Preference for Reform:** 61% of voters favor reforming the education system over increasing funding, compared to 28% who prioritize more funds (50CAN/Sygnal).
- **Funding Concerns:** 55% of Virginians view school funding as "too low" (EdChoice), yet reform remains the preferred solution.

Key reforms supported by polling data include:

• **Open Enrollment:** 75% of Virginians support allowing families to choose public schools outside their assigned zone (50CAN/Sygnal). This policy would enable parents to select public schools that better address academic, social,

or safety concerns, such as bullying. Current transfer policies, like those in Albemarle County, are restrictive, limiting parental agency. Statewide open enrollment would foster competition and innovation within public education. There are three particular changes needed:

Open enrollment needs 1. to be available to parents statewide. not just in localities. some transparency 2 Parents need about open policies. including enrollment appeals processes. The funding formula needs to 3. be changed level playing field for families. to ensure a

Top Tip: At present, some localities charge for access to public schools outside the district which a child in Virginia is zoned for. This is because of a complex formula across local, state and federal level. This is one of the issues where we're advocating for change.

- More Charter and Magnet Schools: 63% of adults and 69% of parents support charter schools (EdChoice), yet Virginia's charter sector is underdeveloped, with few options available. Magnet schools are also limited. Expanding these schools would provide specialized programs in STEM, arts, or International Baccalaureate (IB), catering to diverse interests and potentially reducing social pressures through shared communities.
- Funding to follow the child: Families pursuing homeschooling,microschools,oronlineprogramslikeVirginia Virtual Academy face regulatory hurdles, such as mandatory homeschool assessments. A Mason-Dixon poll found that 61% of Virginia voters supported redirecting \$15,424 perstudent funding to home, virtual, or private education during

school closures, indicating public demand for flexibility. Streamlining regulations would empower parents to align education with their values, including religious beliefs. Governor Youngkin's Virginia Opportunity Scholarship enjoyed 57% support with 28% opposing (net +29), with even stronger support from Black (65%-29%, +36,) and Hispanic (76%-21%, +55) voters (50CAN/Sygnal). The level of political opposition to prevent even a small pilot project shows how difficult a task we face to change things.

Additionally, 69% of adults and 76% of parents support education savings accounts, according to research by EdChoice. These ESAs or tax credits would help families afford private schools offering smaller classes or tailored curricula (including faithbased), addressing cost barriers for low-income households.

Virginia's rankings—42nd for parental choice and 45th for school satisfaction out of all 50 states—signal a system misaligned with public expectations. Polling data demonstrates robust support for reform: 75% for open enrollment, 69% for charters, 61% for funding flexibility, and 57% for private school scholarships. These policies would create a dynamic education system where parents can choose schools that best fit their children's needs, whether public, charter, magnet, or private.

Virginia can address dissatisfaction, reduce barriers for underserved communities, and ensure every student has access to an education that fosters their potential. In order to do this, we need greater parental choice in education.

SECTION 2

WHAT ARE THE PUBLIC SECTOR OPTIONS AVAILABLE IN VIRGINIA?

The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and must be willing to bear the expenses of it.

Letter to John Jebb, September 10, 1785, in The Works of John Adams, Volume 9, edited by Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown, 1854), p. 540.

1. Traditional Public Schools

Traditional public schools are the most common option, serving the majority of Virginia's nearly 2 million K-12 students across 132 school divisions.

These schools are tuition-free, funded by local, state, and federal taxes, and follow the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL). They offer a broad curriculum, extracurricular activities like sports and clubs, and access to resources such as free or reduced-price meals.



Top Tip: A few districts offer open enrollment, allowing parents to transfer their child to a public school outside their zoned area, but this is currently dependent upon the locality and fees may apply.

Advantages:

- Convenience, always available in your local area
- High quality sports and other facilities
- Wide variety of curriculum options

Disadvantages:

- One-size-fits-all education isn't right for everyone
- Class sizes can be high, limiting individual attention
- Easy to get 'lost' or forgotten in a large-scale environment
- Teaching may not reflect parents' philosophical or religious values

2. Charter Schools and Lab Schools

Charter schools are publicly funded but operate with more autonomy than traditional public schools, allowing for innovative curricula or teaching methods. They're tuition-free and open to all students, often with enrollment via lottery. CodeRVA Regional High School, a lab school focused on computer science, is an example.

Charter schools can be a good fit for students who thrive in specialized programs, but their limited presence in Virginia restricts access. Parents valuing flexibility or unique educational approaches might appreciate charters, but the lack of widespread options and potential transportation challenges (though some offer free transport) can be barriers.

66 A lab school is a public school partnered with a higher education institution to test innovative teaching methods, curricula, or educational approaches, offering tuition-free, lottery-based admission.

Lab schools have been one of the key education policies for the Youngkin administration. They are not available in many localities, and the lottery-based admission process is intended to be fair to all families but also means that there is no guarantee of actually obtaining a place.

Every charter school and lab school is different, so it is important to research any such schools in your local area to determine whether they happen to be the best fit for your child.

The main drawback is lack of availability of places, and although there are currently some signs of progress, there is a logjam when local school boards refuse to allow new charter schools and lab schools to open.

3. Magnet Schools

Magnet schools are public schools with specialized programs, such as STEM, performing arts, or International Baccalaureate (IB). They're tuition-free and emphasize learning through a specific lens, making them ideal for students with strong interests in particular fields. If you can find the right magnet school your child (and that is a big 'if' given the relatively low number of magnet schools in Virginia), it can allow your child to follow their interests and become more enthusiastic about attending school. For this reason, magnet schools are not the right place for many children. But if it is the right fit for your child, the benefits can be huge. They can provide a massive advantage for later pursuing a career in that field.

Magnet schools offer parental choice by allowing families to prioritize a particular academic focus over geographic zoning, but admission is very competitive, often requiring examinations or applications.

In Virginia, the main problem with all these public sector options: charter, lab, and magnet, is supply. Demand for these schools far outstrips supply, and it is unclear that this will change without advocacy support. Therefore, one of the Virginia Institute for Public Policy's priorities is to find means of removing roadblocks which currently prevent genuine choice in education within the public sector.



Top Tip: A school district that has an idea to innovate an aspect of education within their school district can apply to the state to receive authorization to implement the program for five years and be designated as a division of innovation.

4. Special Education Services

Virginia's public schools provide special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), offering tailored instruction for students with disabilities at no cost. Services range from classroom accommodations to separate settings, depending on the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). Private schools and homeschooling families can access some services, but public schools are the primary providers. The Applied Studies Diploma is available for students with significant disabilities who don't meet standard diploma requirements.

Special education addresses unique learning needs, but parents may feel limited by public school resources or bureaucratic processes. Bullying can be a particular concern for students with disabilities, who may be targeted due to differences.

SECTION 3

WHAT ARE THE PRIVATE SECTOR OPTIONS AVAILABLE IN VIRGINIA?

A primary object should be the education of our youth in the science of government. In a republic, what species of knowledge can be equally important? And what duty more pressing than communicating it to those who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the country?

- Eighth Annual Address to Congress, December 7, 1796, in The Writings of George Washington, Volume 13, edited by John C. Fitzpatrick, p. 307.

1. Private Schools

Private schools, including day and residential options, provide alternatives for families seeking tailored education. They charge tuition and are not bound by Virginia's "Standards Of Learning", allowing them flexibility in curriculum, class size, and teaching philosophy. Many incorporate religious or cultural values, appealing to parents who prioritize faith-based education (e.g., Christian or Jewish schools). Virginia has a tax-credit scholarship program to help low-income families afford private schools.

Private schools often have smaller classes, which can benefit shy students or those needing personalized attention, potentially reducing bullying through closer supervision. However, costs can be prohibitive, and not all private schools offer robust special education services.

It is important for parents to research accreditation and alignment with their values.

Parental Choice Note: Governor Youngkin's proposal for the "Virginia Opportunity Scholarship Program" aimed to fund 10,000 low-income students with \$5,000 scholarships annually. Unfortunately, this met with significant political opposition.

2. Homeschooling

Homeschooling allows parents to fully customize their child's education, aligning with religious beliefs, learning styles, or family schedules. Virginia law requires parents to notify their school district annually, and provide evidence of progress (e.g., standardized tests). Where a student does not perform well enough academically as defined in law, the division superintendent has significant power to require parents to provide evidence of their ability to provide an adequate education for their children. There also exists a possibility for religious exemption from school attendance, but this has been the subject of recent attempts to change the law in the General Assembly's 2025 Session.

The homeschooling option offers maximum parental choice but demands significant time and resources. It's ideal for students who feel overwhelmed in large schools or need specialized attention. Socialization can be a concern, though co-ops and extracurriculars help. Bullying is less likely in a home setting, but parents must proactively address social skill development.

Fortunately, there is now significant support available for parents who choose to homeschool; while it is important to be aware of the scale of the challenge to educate your child at home, it is reassuring to know that help can easily be found. Homeschool co-ops offer an opportunity to share resources and some of the direct work with other parents, though this possibility is not right for everyone and is dependent upon the options available in your local area.

The full legal situation as regards homeschooling can be found at:

https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title22.1/chapter14/ section22.1-254.1/

3. Microschools

A microschool is a small, often communitybased educational setting that blends elements of homeschooling and private schooling, emphasizing personalized learning. Microschools offer flexible curricula tailored to individual needs, interests, or family values, such as religious beliefs.

Microschools are small, community-based learning environments, often blending homeschooling and private school elements. They emphasize personalized learning and can reflect specific values or interests. Mix-and-match learning allows families to combine options, like part-time homeschooling with online courses or public school electives. These are less common but growing in Virginia, offering flexibility for unique needs.

Microschools can minimize bullying due to their small size and close-knit nature, and they appeal to parents seeking religious or alternative educational models. However, they may lack the resources of larger schools, and costs vary.

The Virginia Institute for Public Policy has recently launched the Virginia Microschools Network, an organization which aims to provide support for microschools.

The distinction between private schools and microschools, or between microschools and homeschooling co-ops, can often be blurred. In some ways, the choice of label does not matter: the question is, whether the setup provides the kind of education which your family believes will be best suited to your own children.

SECTION 4

PRACTICAL SUPPORT

66 It is an object of vast magnitude that systems of education should be adopted and pursued which may not only diffuse a knowledge of the sciences but may implant in the minds of the American youth the principles of virtue and of liberty and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government and with an inviolable attachment to their own country.

- Noah Webster, On the Education of Youth in America, 1788, published in A Collection of Essays and Fugitive Writings (Boston, 1790).

What is the Virginia Microschools Network?

The Virginia Microschools Network is a new initiative providing support, resources, and networking opportunities to microschools across the Commonwealth of Virginia. Launched to address the growing demand for personalized education, the network aims to assist parents, educators, and communities by fostering the development of microschools—small, flexible learning environments. These schools offer tailored curricula, often aligning with family values, and provide close-knit settings that can help children to thrive in a safe, caring environment.

The network plans to connect microschool leaders through workshops and virtual forums, promoting best practices and collaboration. Advocacy is a key focus, with the network pushing for policies like education savings accounts (supported by 76% of parents, per EdChoice) and streamlined regulations, building on the 61% voter support for funding flexibility (Mason-Dixon).

By addressing the needs of a complete variety of families, especially Black and Hispanic parents dissatisfied with current options (50CAN), the network enhances equitable access to innovative education. Parents can contact the network via its website <u>www.virginiamicroschools.org</u> for local connections, ensuring microschools thrive as viable alternatives in Virginia's evolving educational landscape.

What support is available for homeschoolers?

The Home Educators Association of Virginia (HEAV): A nonprofit based in Richmond, which serves all homeschoolers since 1983. It offers:

- Free "How-to-Begin" series, seminars, and a magazine
- Legislative advocacy, protecting homeschool freedoms
- Discounts on testing and HSLDA memberships
- Networking with over 220 support groups

https://www.heav.org/

Virtual Virginia (VVA): Offers tuition-free courses for homeschoolers, including AP and dual-enrollment options, with Virginia-licensed teachers. Parents can enroll directly or through local schools, ensuring compliance with Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) regulations.

https://virtualvirginia.org/

K12-Powered Schools: Tuition-free online public schools provide structured curricula, teacher support, and social activities, blending homeschool flexibility with public school oversight.

Accredited Programs: Miacademy, MiaPrep, and Power Homeschool offer curricula aligned with state standards, easing testing requirements.

Free Platforms: Discovery K12 provides free K-12 curricula, customizable for the 180-day, 990-hour requirement applicable to public schools in Virginia.

The Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) offers:

- Curriculum Grants for supplies, co-op classes, or special needs therapies
- Group Grants for homeschool organizations
- Disaster Relief Grants for families impacted by natural disasters

In addition to these options, it is worth spending time researching the range of homeschooling co-ops available in your area. These may be found through your local community in various ways: through churches, Facebook groups, or simple word of mouth.



Top Tip: Do not be afraid to ask for support and advice from other homeschoolers you know; most people will only be too happy to help point you in the right direction.

How to find the best private schooling option

Finding the right private school in Virginia requires a strategic approach to align with your child's needs, family values, and budget. Virginia offers over 1,034 private schools, with 47% religiously affiliated (most commonly Christian, Baptist, or Catholic), serving diverse educational and spiritual goals.

Step 1: Define Your Priorities

Before searching, clarify what matters most to your family:

- Academic Focus: Do you want a rigorous college-prep curriculum? Check for AP/IB offerings or college acceptance rates.
- Religious Affiliation: Virginia has 159 Christian schools (average tuition \$9,391), 87 Catholic schools (\$9,733), and smaller numbers of Jewish, Islamic, or other faith-based options. Identify if you seek a specific denomination or interfaith environment.
- Environment: Consider class size, student-teacher ratios, and whether you prefer single-sex or co-ed settings.
- Budget: Average private school tuition is \$13,793 for elementary and \$18,288 for high schools, though religious schools are often lower. Explore whether scholarships are available.
- Location: Decide if you prefer day schools or boarding options.

Action: Create a checklist of must-haves (e.g., faith-based, small classes) and deal-breakers (e.g., high tuition, long commute). Prioritizing helps narrow options.

Step 2. Research Private School Options

Use reliable platforms to identify schools:

- The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE): The VDOE lists private schools accredited by the Virginia Council for Private Education (VCPE). Visit <u>www.doe.virginia.gov</u> for directories and accreditation details.
- Private School Review (www.privateschoolreview.com): Offers data on over 1,000 Virginia private schools, both religious and secular. You can filter by religion, tuition, or rankings.
- Niche (<u>www.niche.com</u>): Provides parent reviews, test scores, and rankings for schools.
- GreatSchools (<u>www.greatschools.org</u>): Includes ratings for 6,459 Virginia schools, with private school reviews emphasizing academic rigor and faith integration.
- Local Organizations: Contact the Home Educators Association of Virginia (HEAV) or The Organization of Virginia Homeschoolers for referrals to religious schools, as they often connect with faith-based communities.

Action: Build a shortlist of 5-10 schools using these platforms. Check each school's website for mission statements, curriculum details, and religious affiliation.

Step 3: Evaluate Financial Aid and Scholarships

 Virginia's Education Improvement Scholarships Tax Credits Program: Offers scholarships for low-income families if income below 300% of federal poverty level, ~\$90,000 for a family of four (or 400% where the child has an IEP). Contact schools or VCPE for application details.

- School-Specific Aid: Many schools offer need-based aid or merit scholarships. Inquire directly about deadlines and criteria.
- HSLDAGrants: The Home School Legal Defense Association provides curriculum or special needs grants, applicable to private school families transitioning from homeschooling.

Action: Request financial aid packets from shortlisted schools. Apply for scholarships early, as deadlines vary (often spring).

Step 4: Visit and Assess Schools

Direct engagement reveals a school's fit:

• Schedule Tours: Attend open houses or private tours to observe facilities. Meet teachers and administrators to assess their alignment with your values.

Ask key questions:

- What are the class sizes and teacher qualifications? (47% of private school faculty have advanced degrees
- How does the school address bullying or social challenges?
- What extracurriculars (sports, arts) or college prep resources are available?
- If applicable, ask about religious beliefs.
- Talk to parents and students: request contacts for current families to discuss community, academics, and faith-based experiences.

Action: Create a comparison chart for each visited school, scoring them on academics, faith integration, community, and affordability. Ideally, you should attend at least 2-3 open houses to compare different schools.

Step 5: Understand Enrollment and Deadlines

Private schools have varying admissions processes:

- Applications: Most require transcripts, teacher recommendations, and parent statements. Religious schools may ask you about faith practices (for example, a Christian commitment or to sign a statement of faith).
- Testing: Some require SSAT/ISEE scores. Prepare via practice tests or tutoring (HSLDA offers resources).
- Deadlines: Typically December-March for fall enrollment. Confirm with each school, as top-tier schools (83% acceptance rate average) can be competitive.
- Special Needs: For students with disabilities, verify accommodations. Schools like Accotink Academy (Springfield) specialize in special education, licensed by VDOE.

Action: Contact admissions offices by November to confirm deadlines and requirements. Schedule any required tests by January to meet spring deadlines.

Virginia's private schools offer diverse options for families seeking faith-based or specialized education. Start your search early, use online tools like Niche and Private School Review, and engage directly with schools to ensure alignment with your child's needs and your family's values. For further assistance, visit <u>www.myschoolchoice.com</u> for school choice resources.

SECTION 5

ADVOCACY AND NEXT STEPS

C An investment in knowledge pays the best interest.

- The Way to Wealth, 1758, in The Works of Benjamin Franklin, Volume 2, edited by Jared Sparks (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, 1840), p. 94.

What should we be working towards/campaigning for?

1. Open Enrollment in public schools

Right now, families are often locked into their zoned public school, regardless of whether it suits their child's needs. Open enrollment would let parents choose any public school in their district—or even across districts—without unnecessary boundaries.

Virginia's current transfer policies are too restrictive. We should push for statewide open enrollment, giving families flexibility while maintaining public school funding. This free-market approach fosters competition, encouraging schools to innovate and better serve students. Specifically, this will mean:

- Adjustments to funding formulas to ensure that parents are not charged when sending their children to a different public school to the one for which they are zoned
- Statewide open enrollment policies so that parents do not face a "zipcode lottery" when it comes to having the ability to choose the right school for their child
- Greater transparency about the process, including clarity about how to appeal when your child does not obtain a place at your preferred school

2. More Charter/Magnet/Lab schools in Virginia

Charter schools, which are publicly funded but operate with autonomy, and magnet schools, with specialized programs like arts or International Baccalaureate, offer tailored education. Yet Virginia has lagged behind other states, with only a handful of charter schools. Expanding these options would give parents access to innovative models without private school costs. Magnet schools show demand for focused curricula, but availability is limited. Likewise, we need commitment from legislators to continue to support lab schools. This is a new, growth area in education and it is important that Virginia's children are never left without options for the future.

More charters, magnets and lab schools mean more choices for families who want STEM, performing arts, or other niches that spark their child's creativity. These schools can also create tighter communities, potentially reducing bullying through shared interests. We should advocate for streamlined approval processes and increased funding to grow these options, letting market demand drive educational diversity.

3. Less State interference when parents choose alternative provision

Homeschooling, microschools, and online programs like Virginia Virtual Academy give families the freedom to customize education, often aligning with religious or cultural values. But Virginia's regulations—like annual notifications and mandatory assessments for homeschoolers—can feel like bureaucratic overreach. Microschools, with their small, personalized settings, face zoning or licensing hurdles that stifle growth.

We should campaign for lighter regulations, trusting parents to make informed decisions. For example, easing homeschool reporting requirements or clarifying microschool standards would remove red tape. This respects parental choice, especially for families who feel public schools don't reflect their beliefs or can't address their child's unique needs, like avoiding social pressures or tailoring learning pace.

4. Some help for parents choosing private schools

Private schools offer smaller classes, faith-based options, or specialized programs, but tuition can be a barrier. Governor Youngkin's proposed Virginia Opportunity Scholarship Program, aiming to provide \$5,000 scholarships for 10,000 low-income students, would have been a step in the right direction. We should push for expanded programs to help more families afford private schools, especially those escaping underperforming districts or in poverty. This financial aid helps some of the poorest parents in society, fosters competition, and ensures access to environments where kids might face less bullying or receive more individualized attention.

For more information on how to get involved with advocacy projects, sign up to the Virginia Education Opportunity Alliance: <u>https://veoa.org/</u>.

Next Steps

Taking action to support educational choice in Virginia doesn't have to be daunting—there are plenty of ways to make your voice heard and help create a system that works for every family. Whether you're a parent, educator, or concerned citizen, here's how you can get started.

The first step is to join the Virginia Education Opportunity Alliance (VEOA). The VEOA builds a statewide coalition to promote parental rights and education choice. Founded in 2021, it advocates for transparency in public schools, supports microschools, and pushes for Education Success Accounts (ESAs) to empower parents with flexible, personalized education options for their children. You can join at <u>www.veoa.org/join/</u>.

Join the Conversation with Advocacy Groups: Connect with organizations like the Virginia Microschools Network or the Home Educators Association of Virginia (HEAV). They're already advocating for policies like open enrollment, more charter schools, and reduced state interference. You can attend their workshops, virtual forums, or annual conferences to learn more and share your perspective. Visit the Virginia Microschools Network website <u>www.virginiamicroschools.org</u> or HEAV's site at <u>www.heav.org</u> to sign up for newsletters and event updates.

Engage with Local Policymakers: Your voice matters to elected officials! Write to or call your state legislators to express support for reforms like the Virginia Opportunity Scholarship Program, which had a 57% approval rating (50CAN/Sygnal). Let them know why open enrollment, expanded charter schools, or financial aid for private school families would make a difference for your child or community. You can find your representatives'

contact info on the Virginia General Assembly website at <u>www.virginiageneralassembly.gov</u>.

Bonus tip: Share personal stories—like how a child with autism might thrive in a smaller school—to make your message hit home.

Spread Awareness in Your Community: Talk to other parents, neighbors, or friends about the need for more educational options. Host a casual coffee chat or share resources from this booklet on social media. Highlight stats that resonate, like how only 54% of Virginia parents feel they have a choice in their child's education (50CAN). Building grassroots support can create a ripple effect, encouraging more families to demand change.

Support or Start a Microschool: If you're passionate about personalized education, consider getting involved with a microschool. The Virginia Microschools Network can connect you with existing programs or help you start your own.

Whether you're an educator looking to lead a small learning community or a parent wanting to join one, this is a hands-on way to create the kind of environment your child needs. Reach out via their website for guidance.

Volunteer or Donate: Organizations like HEAV and the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) often need volunteers for events, advocacy efforts, or community outreach. If you're able, donating to these groups or scholarship programs like Virginia's Education Improvement Scholarships Tax Credits Program can directly help low-income families access private schools. Every little bit helps—whether it's your time or a small contribution.

Stay Informed and Vote: Keep up with education policy updates by following trusted sources like EdChoice or 50CAN. When election season rolls around, research candidates' stances on school choice and parental rights. Polling shows 61% of

Virginians favor reforming education over just increasing funding (50CAN/Sygnal)—make sure your vote reflects that priority.

Getting involved can be as simple as having a conversation or as impactful as advocating for statewide change. Every step forward helps build an education system where every child can thrive, no matter their needs or circumstances.

Final remarks

Virginia's education landscape offers a range of options from traditional public schools to microschools and private institutions—but it's clear the system isn't meeting every family's needs. With only 54% of parents feeling they have a choice in their child's education and the state ranking 42nd nationally for parental choice (50CAN), there's a pressing need for change. The data speaks volumes: 33% of Virginians think K-12 education is on the right track (EdChoice), and Black and Hispanic parents, in particular, are calling for alternatives that better serve their children. For the student overwhelmed by a 1,200-student high school, the hands-on learner craving more than standardized tests, or the family seeking a faith-based curriculum, the current system often falls short.

But there's hope. Polling shows strong support for reform—75% of Virginians back open enrollment, 69% support charter schools, and 76% favor education savings accounts (EdChoice, 50CAN/ Sygnal). By advocating for policies like open enrollment, more charter and magnet schools, reduced state interference, and financial aid for private school families, we can create a system that truly prioritizes parental choice. Initiatives like the Virginia Microschools Network are already paving the way, offering personalized options that cater to diverse needs and values.

It's up to all of us—parents, educators, and community members—to push for these changes. Whether you're writing to your legislator, joining an advocacy group, or simply spreading the word, your actions can help ensure that every child in Virginia has access to an education that fits their unique potential. Let's work together to build a future where no student is forced into a one-size-fits-all mold, and every family can find the right path for their child. We believe that every family deserves the genuine choice to find schooling which best fits their child's unique needs.

 What are the options available to Virginia families today?

 How can parents find the right choice for their children?

 What would make Virginia's education options better?

How can we work together to achieve that vision?

Start your journey today, and join the movement to unlock every child's potential through diverse, family-centered education.

