The Half Sheet

The blog of The Commonwealth Institute

October 2, 2019

Voice Your Support Today for Much-Needed School Equity Fund Proposed in Virginia

On Sept. 19, the Virginia Board of Education put forward ambitious, critically important revisions to how the state funds public education in the state's Standards of Quality (SOQ). The proposals being considered offer a comprehensive vision for how school funding can look here in Virginia by addressing key shortcomings in the current staffing standards and improving the equity of state funding, helping to make sure that the schools and students who need the most support will receive it.

The full SOQ proposal can be downloaded at www.doe.virginia.gov/boe/meetings/2019/09-sep/item-h-attachment-a.docx

The Board will be voting on the SOQ proposals at their next meeting on Oct. 17. To voice your support, submit a written comment at bit.ly/TakeActionForVAStudents or sign up to speak during public comment at the Oct. 17 meeting.

Guidelines to sign up for public comment can be found at www.doe.virginia.gov/boe/meetings/2019/09-sep/agenda.shtml

The proposals include important staffing increases for English Learner teachers, counselors, social workers, nurses, and assistant principals; making the state a full partner in funding support staff positions, which the state capped funding for following the Recession; and, perhaps most important of all, establishing a new, much-needed Equity Fund. The proposals would increase overall state investment in public education by $950 million.

The Equity Fund would combine existing state funds for the At-Risk Add-on Program ($121 million) with the SOL Prevention, Intervention, and Remediation funding ($112 million) and add an additional $131 million in new funds. These dollars would be distributed to school divisions based on the share of students who receive free lunch to be used for a variety of services that include hiring additional teachers, targeted compensation adjustments to attract and retain teachers in schools with high child poverty rates, or for programs that support students who are academically at-risk. Divisions would be required to deploy resources in schools with the greatest concentration of poverty and will report to the Virginia Department of Education to ensure resources are going where need is greatest.

These revisions are needed here, because Virginia is currently one of the states spending less per student (state & local) in the highest poverty school divisions compared to those with the lowest poverty – earning a failing grade on a national report. That's backwards from what the research shows is needed to get to more equitable outcomes. It also misses where money can make the biggest impact. Studies show increased spending has much more pronounced benefits for students from low-income families in terms of improving both academic and life outcomes.

ABOUT

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More than 80% of students in Virginia's highest poverty schools are students of color. High-poverty schools face challenges in attracting and retaining experienced instructors. In Virginia, in the 2013-2014 school year, high-poverty schools had twice the rate of first- or second-year teachers as low-poverty schools did. The Equity Fund proposal will direct state resources to schools to provide compensation supplements to attract experienced teachers or add additional instructional positions.

Every student should have access to strong, well-supported schools – no matter their zip code. These proposed changes could put Virginia on a path to making that a reality. A high-quality education is a critical component for thriving communities, and every community member has a reason to support these changes.

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– *Chris Duncombe, Policy Director*

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