

2023 Legislative Talking Points

Help educators' voices be heard. Historically, WVEA members have been successful in standing together and advocating for public schools. There are those in decision-making positions who would weaken our power and harm our public schools. Stand together with us and advocate for public schools. How? Become a WVEA public school advocate by developing positive relationships with your legislators. Talking to legislators isn't hard—it can be fun. You don't have to be an expert on school finance or anything else. You ARE the expert on how legislation will affect our students, our teaching practices, and our schools. As you talk to your legislators, below are a few issues to highlight.

Academic Freedom – #TeachersAreTheExperts

- West Virginia educators teach the West Virginia College and Career Readiness Standards in each academic area. These standards were developed by West Virginia educators for West Virginia students.
- Our educators teach students to become critical thinkers. To be a critical thinker, a student must be presented with all sides of an issue. These issues, again, are set forth in the West Virginia College and Career Readiness Standards.
- Our educators must be valued as the professional experts in their classroom. Our educators know their students better than anyone and will use their expertise to reach each student.
- Politics and political buzz words must be kept out of West Virginia classrooms.

Public Schools Funding and Support – #FundPublicEducation

- Our public schools provide an opportunity for all students to succeed and prepare for adulthood. Our school employees are committed to their students and go above and beyond to ensure that our children achieve their full potential.
- Without highly qualified committed employees in our school system, student achievement could be compromised. We must work to ensure the retention of our current employees and work to make sure careers in public education are desirable so we can adequately fill vacancies in our systems. We must make teaching a respected and valued profession if we are to provide highly trained employees in our schools.
- The problems of society greatly impact our students and those issues impact student achievement. We must provide our students with adequate resources to assist with mental health and trauma.
- Research has shown us what is needed to improve student achievement. Smaller class size, greater student support, wrap-around programs and parent resources have proven important in increasing achievement.
- We will continue to oppose proposals that take money away from our public schools. Programs that entice parents to remove their children from public schools also take much needed resources away from our schools and the students that remain. We must ensure that funding for public schools does not decline. Our school systems are already financially strapped to provide all that our students need. We need to increase funding to make sure all students thrive.

Salary Increases are Needed for All West Virginia Educators – #MuchNeeded

- Major employment shortages throughout our school systems are proving that we simply cannot retain or recruit highly qualified educators with the current salary schedule. As we seek to continually improve our schools and the education of our students, our educators must receive a salary that places them within the national average of pay for those in the same employment categories.
- With a salary that averages below our surrounding states, it is too easy for our educators to cross the borders to work rather than stay in West Virginia. This is not only a blow to our work force but creates problems in the education of our students.
- Our West Virginia teachers and service personnel have gone without competitive pay for long enough. As the cost of living continues to rise, educators deserve a salary that reflects these changes.

PEIA – #FullyFundPEIA

- The compensation package is a huge factor in employment decisions. Without stable/affordable health care, and individual's compensation level falls as they bear the burden of increased out-of-pocket expenses. Such expenses factor into the recruitment and retention of employees.

- A reduction in PEIA benefits by reducing or eliminating dependent/spousal coverage is a harmful path that could intensify vacancies in our public schools.
- Cutting state revenues will make it more difficult to fully fund PEIA. A long-term funding solution must be found for PEIA. To avoid program cuts or significant cost-shifting to employees.
- Promises were made to find a long-term funding solution for PEIA. Promises must be kept.

Retirees – #WVEARetired

- Retirees are living longer and never seen a cost of living increase. West Virginia must continue to follow the needed funding requirements in order to fully fund the Teachers Retirement System (TRS). By doing so, participants can see guaranteed optimum benefits, including a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) in the future.
- Increase the monthly minimum pension for retirees with more than twenty years of service to an amount above the federal poverty level.
- Provide adequate funding for projected PEIA increases. Determine PEIA premiums by a fixed percentage of the retiree's education-related retirement pension. Control PEIA prescription drug and health care costs.
- Increase the state income tax exemption for retired school employees to at least the first \$20,000 in teacher retirement benefits.

Income Tax – #CutsDon'tHeal

- West Virginia voters spoke loudly in the last election when they soundly defeated Amendment 2. Their message was that public services, including funding public schools, are more important than tax cuts. Roads, police, senior services, schools, first responders and more could once again be put at risk if the state's revenue is not adequate to support them. Personal income tax results in 43% of the state's revenue.
- Much of our current state surplus is due to the increased federal revenue sent to states during the pandemic. This is one time money that, once it is gone, cannot be replaced. Reductions in the income tax collections are ongoing and will cut into the state's future revenue collections.
- Additional surplus revenue in the budget is due to increased severance tax revenue created by high energy prices. The volatility of energy prices makes revenue from the energy sector highly unpredictable and an unstable revenue source. Cutting taxes and counting on the energy sector to fill the gap is risky.
- The income tax is the largest source of revenue in our state budget, bringing in over \$2 billion dollars annually. That number represents 43% of the state's budget. Even in a flat budget, this revenue must be replaced, or programs and services will be cut.
- Income tax cuts typically benefit wealthy individuals. An income tax reduction would continue to shift the tax burden from the highest earners to working West Virginians.
- Other states have gone down the path of reducing income tax and it has proven disastrous for their state's economy. Income tax cuts lead to growing budget deficits. Those resulted in cuts to public services, lost jobs, and decreased funding for public schools. One of the most recent examples of problems created by income tax cuts occurred in Kansas. Lost revenue could not be replaced, and budget deficits forced the state to try to find additional revenue sources. Eventually, income taxes had to be reinstated.

Safe Schools – #SchoolSafety

The Safe Schools Act was passed over 20 years ago to ensure a safe learning environment for our students and a safe work environment for our educators. Increasingly, students are affected by trauma, poverty, and unstable situations at home and are acting out more and more in schools and we must find better ways to handle these situations. In order to keep our students and staff safe, we must:

- Strengthen the language on suspensions and expulsions and increase the list of offenses for mandatory expulsions or suspensions.
- Create a discipline review committee at each school to annually review the school's discipline plan and give them the power to make changes when that plan is not working.
- Require a "consequence" section for each behavior plan that would outline progressive discipline for students who have IEPs.
- Increase access to more alternative education settings beginning in elementary grades.