

2024 LEGISLATIVE TALKING POINTS

Our voice is our power. Because many battles are won or lost before they are fought, now is the time to discuss the vital issues we're facing in our schools with legislators. Let them know what the issues are and what needs to be accomplished to improve public education in West Virginia.

Educators have the knowledge, and we must make sure our voices are heard by the legislature before they rush into making decisions impacting you and your students. What we can accomplish locally with your senators and delegates will impact what happens statewide. If they won't listen and act, we must elect others who will! Among the many topics, discuss the following with your legislators and colleagues to bring these issues to the forefront of conversation and make them a priority for lawmakers.

Academic Freedom

- ▶ West Virginia educators teach the West Virginia College and Career Readiness Standards developed by West Virginia educators for West Virginia students in each academic area.
- ▶ Our educators teach students to become critical thinkers. A student must be presented with all sides of an issue to be a critical thinker. These issues, again, are set forth in the West Virginia College and Career Readiness Standards.
- ▶ Our educators are professional experts in their classrooms and know their students best. They should have more decision-making into the policies of their worksite.
- ▶ Politics and political buzz words have no place in West Virginia classrooms.

Public Schools Funding and Support

- ▶ 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 com-

mitted 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 critical for Public Education in WV

- ▶ With skyrocketing vacancies in our schools, significant salary increases are imperative to ensuring a high-quality education to our students. Token raises that don't keep up with inflation, or that are recycled just to pay for PEIA premiums, will not fix our long-term crisis of vacancies.
- ▶ Adequate compensation not only recognizes the dedication of educators but also attracts and retains the high-quality employees our state desperately needs and is losing to neighboring states who all pay substantially more than WV.
- ▶ At a time when education employees are reporting an all-time low in job satisfaction, improved salaries can enhance morale, reduce turnover, and ultimately benefit students by ensuring a stable and motivated education environment. These problems will only continue to increase the longer salaries are

not made the highest priority by the legislature.

PEIA

- ▶ The compensation package is a huge factor in employment decisions. Without stable/affordable health care, an 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.
- ▶ Attempting to offset PEIA premium increases with salary increases is simply a shell game. We need to reduce the hard line on the 80/20 premium split and change it to...the state shall pay no less than 80% and employees no more than 20%. This will allow the state to add money to the plan without employees being required to contribute each time.

Retirees

- ▶ Retirees are living longer but never see 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 20 years of service.
- ▶ Provide adequate funding for projected PEIA increases for retirees. Control PEIA prescription drug and health care costs.

Income Tax

- ▶ West Virginia voters spoke loudly 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.
- ▶ Expensive tax cuts enacted by the legislature will hurt the state over time, costing nearly \$818 million per year with triggers that seek to eventually eliminate the personal income tax entirely, at an annual cost of over \$2 billion, or about 40 percent of the state's general revenue budget. The personal income tax is the state's single largest source of general revenue. This revenue must be replaced, or programs and services will be severely cut.
- ▶ The volatility of energy prices makes revenue from the energy sector highly unpredictable. Nearly half of the state's surplus is from severance tax collections, which are the result of high energy prices due to factors outside of West Virginia's control and are expected to decline in the coming years as energy prices continue to decline, leading to lower severance tax revenues.
- ▶ 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, resulting in cuts to public services, lost jobs, and decreased funding for public schools.

Safe Schools

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, unstable situations at home and are acting out more and more in schools. We must find better ways to handle these situations. In order to keep our students and staff safe, we must:

- ▶ Continue to strengthen the language on suspensions and expulsions and increase the list of offenses for mandatory expulsions or suspensions. Expand new mandatory removal language to include Pre-K through 5th grade.
- ▶ 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 with Pre-K.