



Special Circumstance Reviews as Diagnostic  
for Systemic Failure in

# **WEST VIRGINIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS**



# INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, the West Virginia Board of Education has launched a series of Special Circumstance Reviews, culminating in nine county-level interventions and state takeovers. These actions, grounded in West Virginia Code §18-2E-5 and WVBE Policy 2322, reveal a pattern of persistent financial mismanagement, administrative dysfunction, failure to provide safe and supportive learning environments, and violations of state and federal law across West Virginia's public schools. The following is an analysis of findings from each review, establishing that these cases represent more than isolated failures—they are a signal of systemic noncompliance without consequence, demanding urgent policy reform.

The nine Special Circumstance Reviews conducted in West Virginia between 2023 and 2025 reveal a troubling pattern of systemic failure that threaten students' educational rights, the integrity of public funds, and the stability of the state's public education system. Collectively, these cases underscore the need for strengthened state-level oversight mechanisms, clear statutory safeguards, and enhanced transparency to prevent future governance breakdowns.



# 01

## WHAT IS A SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCE REVIEW?

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The West Virginia Department of Education's Special Circumstance Review represents an accountability framework designed to address significant failures of county-level school systems through a structured, multi-phase investigation and intervention process. Triggered by written requests from stakeholders, which may include the community or parents, or formal assessments addressing issues ranging from criminal allegations and academic failures to board dysfunction and safety concerns, these reviews begin with formal notification to district leadership and proceed to intensive on-site evaluations.

WVDE teams, at the behest of the Board of Education, examine financial practices, governance effectiveness, special education compliance, administrative leadership, and related operational controls. Following issuance of the final findings, districts receive formal reports outlining deficiencies and are traditionally granted six months to implement corrective action, though the West Virginia Board of Education retains authority to declare a state of emergency.

Doing so allows the Board to assume direct control of the county's operations, including appointing new superintendents, stripping the local board of decision-making power, and directly managing administrative functions if progress towards correction proves unsatisfactory or immediate intervention is warranted. Recent applications of this process in counties including Boone, Pocahontas, and Mingo demonstrate its scope, with state control persisting for, at times, years, until the board determines that all identified extraordinary circumstances have been adequately resolved.

These Special Circumstance Reviews therefore serve as one of the most consequential accountability mechanisms in West Virginia's educational governance structure.

# 02

## THE NINE COUNTIES UNDER REVIEW

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### 2.1

#### Upshur County Schools (2023-2024)<sup>i</sup>

In Upshur County, a Special Circumstance Review revealed one of the most sweeping examples of fiscal mismanagement and ethical violations. Investigators<sup>1</sup> uncovered widespread misuse<sup>ii</sup> of federal ESSER funds<sup>2</sup>, including unallowable expenditures on staff retreats, meals, and employee stipends that went far beyond legal allowances. For instance, the district spent over \$34,000 of allocated Title II funds<sup>3</sup> on registration and travel for a teaching conference in Chicago; costs included individuals not employed by the district and others whose roles did not justify attendance. Federal nutrition funds, strictly designated for meal programs, were improperly spent purchasing iPads and MacBooks, while gas cards were issued in direct violation of federal funding restrictions.

Compounding the financial crisis was employment of the superintendent's immediate family member, who lacked a bachelor's degree or teacher certification — requirements for employment — raising serious concern about nepotism and, consequently, student safety. Upshur County Schools also paid out unauthorized summer wages to teachers, bonuses and stipends to the superintendent, not Board approved, and misrepresented the superintendent's total compensation in official financial disclosures. Furthermore, the district treasurer, a critical position for financial oversight, was unlicensed and never applied for the required WVBE credential. Taken together, these violations paint a picture not only of financial recklessness but of structural collapse in local accountability systems.

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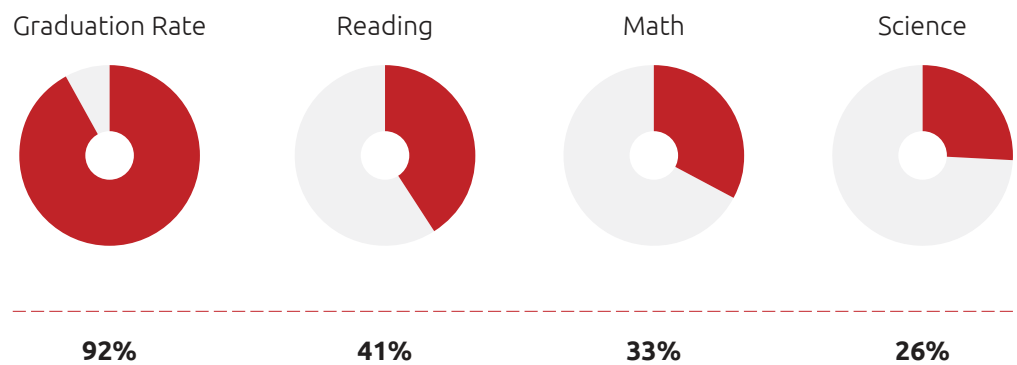
1. Special Circumstance Reviews are conducted by personnel of the West Virginia Department of Education as part of the state's internal oversight and compliance process. The findings are documented by the West Virginia Office of the Legislative Auditor, Performance Evaluation and Research Division. These reviews are not conducted by an independent external auditor.

2. The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, or "ESSER," is the largest one-time federal investment in K-12 education in history, totaling nearly \$200 billion across three COVID-19 relief packages. Authorized through the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act, and the American Rescue Plan, ESSER funding was distributed in three rounds: ESSER I, ESSER II, and ESSER III. The U.S. Department of Education awarded these funds to state educational agencies (SEAs), which then allocated them to local educational agencies (LEAs) to address pandemic-related disruptions, including learning loss and continuity of instruction. (<https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/formula-grants/response-formula-grants/covid-19-emergency-relief-grants/elementary-and-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund>)

3. Title II, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is part of a federal grant program which provides funding for states and districts to provide professional development, recruitment, retention, and quality support for teachers and principals. (<https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/formula-grants/school-improvement-grants/supporting-effective-instruction-state-grants-title-ii-part-a>)



### Upshur County – Percentage of Proficient Students by Subject Area



Several areas of noncompliance occurred related to the 2021 Model Schools Conference charged to Title II. A purchase order (PO) was created in the amount of \$34,000, but the district continued to modify the purchase and add individuals to the registration after the PO was approved.

The actual cost totaled \$38,000. The registration list included an individual that does not appear to be an Upshur County Schools employee. Additionally, the registration list included individuals who, based upon their job titles, should not have attended a Model Schools conference being paid for with Title II funds. A charter bus appears to have been reserved for travel to the Model Schools Conference but was later canceled. As a result, the district paid a \$250 cancellation fee, which is a violation of *WVBE Policy 8200*.

**Source: WV DOE**



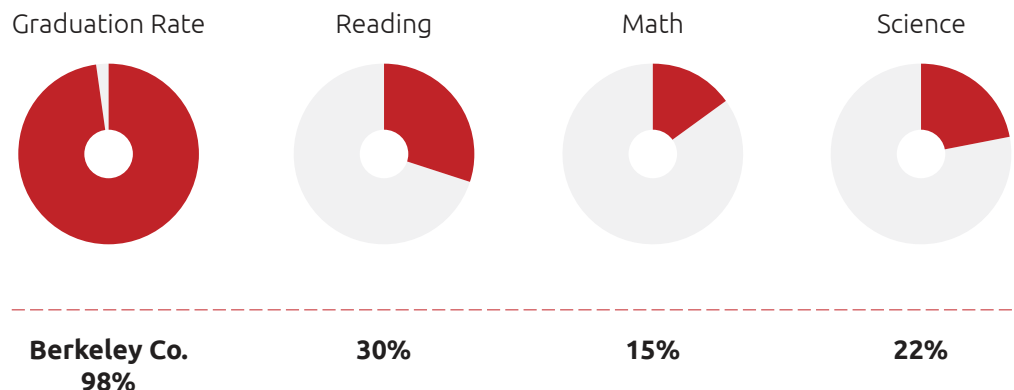
## 2.2

### Martinsburg North Middle School (June 2024)<sup>iii</sup>

In June 2024, Martinsburg North Middle School was placed under a state of emergency by the West Virginia Board of Education due to an alarming combination of unsafe school conditions, academic stagnation, and leadership disintegration. Through a Special Circumstance Review, it was reported that both students and staff were subject to unsafe or unhealthy environments, including inconsistent behavior management, weak administrative oversight, and inadequate supervision throughout the building. Student misbehavior was frequent and disruptive, and the absence of clearly communicated expectations left teachers and administrators without the tools to restore order. The review also documented a failure to implement a comprehensive discipline plan, leaving students at risk and staff unsupported.

Beyond concerns about safety, the review pointed to serious instructional deficits. The middle school lacked high-quality, standards-based instruction, and classroom observation revealed inconsistent teaching practices coupled with weak engagement strategies. In addition, the school lacked an effective professional development system to support teacher efficacy. The report concluded that the leadership team failed to provide the vision, training, and oversight necessary to improve student learning or ensure staff accountability. As student performance declined and staff lacked the resources to intervene, conditions at Martinsburg North warranted corrective action.

#### Martinsburg North Middle School - Percentage of Proficient Students by Subject Area



## 2.3

### Philippi Middle School (January 2024)<sup>iv</sup>

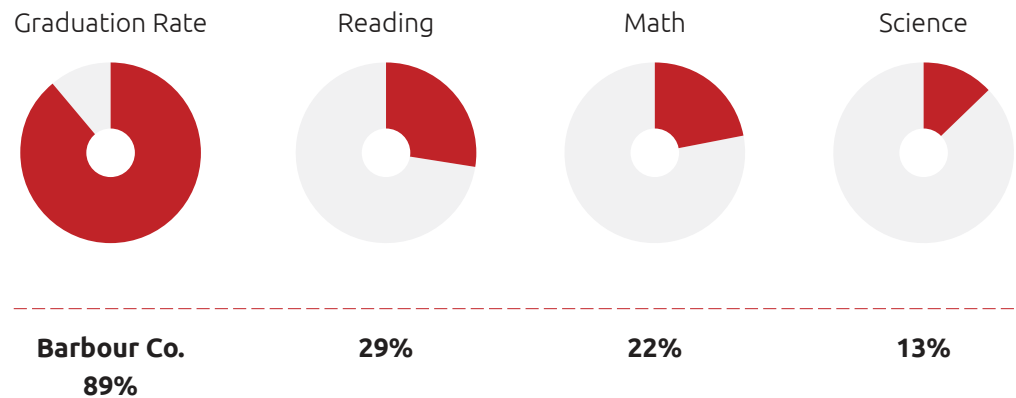
A January 2024 Special Circumstance Review of Philippi Middle School, located in Barbour County, revealed a school in deep crisis, academically and behaviorally. Responsible for 41% of all disciplinary referrals across the county, the staggering statistic underscores its failure to maintain order and provide a safe learning environment. Students report that fights, yelling, and disruptions were common, with one classroom described as entirely unsupervised and “chaotic” by investigators. Educators often responded to misbehavior by meeting a hostile climate, yelling back, rather than meeting the needs of a supportive one. In response to “three reported incidents occurring in the bathroom”, school leadership implemented a controversial policy of locking up seventh-grade bathrooms. This measure proved counterproductive, as students experienced accidents and bullying due to restricted access. Despite the prevalence of serious disciplinary incidents, including Level 4 offenses<sup>4</sup>, the school failed to issue expulsions as required under WVBE policy.

Academically, the school exhibited comparable instability. Many students performed well below grade level, and the instructional environment lacked consistency. Chronic teacher absenteeism necessitated reliance on long-term substitutes, undermining the delivery of grade-level instruction. Leadership was characterized as fragmented and ineffective, with neither the principal nor the assistant principal able to articulate or implement clear procedures for behavior management or instructional oversight. Together, these findings indicate a school requiring not incremental improvement but urgent structural intervention.



4. Definition of Level 4 offenses: Level 4 behaviors are the most serious offenses under the Safe Schools Act, as defined in W. Va. Code §§ 18A-5-1 and 18A-f-1a. These behaviors include battery on a school employee, commission of a felony, illegal substance-related offenses, and possession or use of a dangerous weapon. Level 4 offenses require the principal to impose a mandatory out-of-school suspension. In specified cases, including possession of a deadly weapon, battery on a school employee, or sale of a narcotic drug, the county board of education must impose a mandatory expulsion of not less than twelve consecutive months. See W. Va. Code § 18A-5-1a.

## Philippi Middle School County - Percentage of Proficient Students by Subject Area



Upon arrival to a classroom for the first observation of the school day, a team member discovered a class of students left unsupervised. One student called the office and reported the teacher was not present in the classroom. The school secretary told the student the teacher was in the office meeting with the principal. The students continued to be left unsupervised until the teacher arrived several minutes later. *WVBE Policy 4373: Expected Behavior in Safe and Supportive Schools.*

Source: WV DOE

At the time of the review, interview comments indicated a student had exhibited behavior defined as Level 4 in WVBE Policy 4373: Expected Behavior in Safe and Supportive Schools and had not been suspended from school according to appropriate disciplinary procedures. Level 4 behaviors are Safe Schools Act behaviors defined in W. Va. Code TBA-5-1 and 184-f-1a, including battery on a school employee, felony, illegal substance related behaviors, and possession and/or use of a dangerous weapon and require mandatory out-of-school suspension by the principal and mandatory expulsion for a period of not less than twelve (12) consecutive months by the county board of education for possession of a deadly weapon, battery on a school employee, or sale of a narcotic drug, *W. Va. Code 584-5-10*

Source: WV DOE



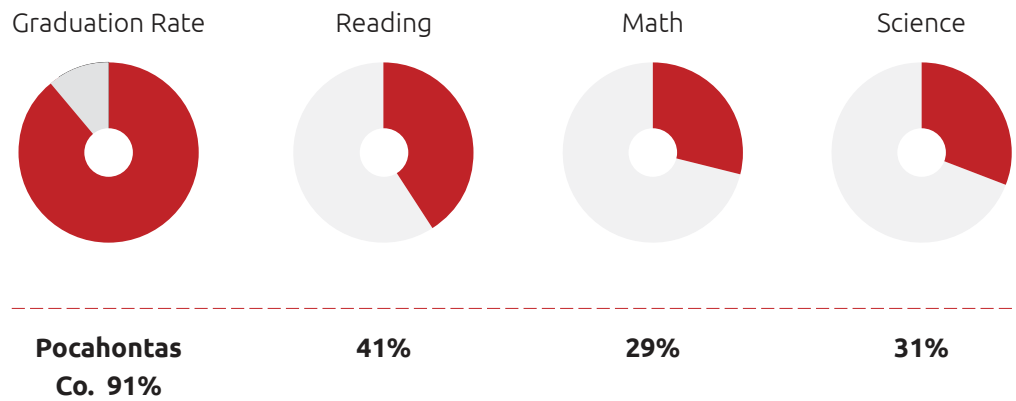
## 2.4

### Pocahontas County High School (January 2025)<sup>v</sup>

The review of Pocahontas County High School in January 2025 revealed institutional failures that compromised academic integrity, student safety, and administrative oversight. Among the most alarming findings were instances of grade falsification and transcript manipulation, including pressure from administrators to change student grades, particularly during credit recovery. The high school credit recovery system was described “insufficient” and, at times, “abused,” with minimal accountability in how credits were earned or awarded. Grades were also altered when met with parental pressure, raising concerns of fairness, record accuracy, and ethics.

A disturbing lack of data security was uncovered as well, including unsecured access to student information and special education documentation. Apart from academics, discipline protocols were misunderstood and inconsistently applied. Administrators misinterpreted WVBE Policy 4373, operating with the understanding that interventions were required before a student could be referred for disciplinary action—contrary to what WVBE policy mandates. These issues were furthered due to reports of a clear absence of instructional and professional support.

#### Pocahontas High School - Percentage of Proficient Students by Subject Area



## 2.5

### Tyler County Schools (May 2025)<sup>vi</sup>

In May 2025, a Special Circumstance Review of Tyler County Schools identified significant violations of governance norms and ethical standards by the county Board of Education. Most notably, the Board conducted executive sessions on 53 occasions over a four-year period. Executive sessions are a narrowly defined exception to open-meetings requirements and are intended to be used sparingly for limited purposes, such as specific personnel matters or consultations with legal counsel. State law requires that the purpose of an executive session be publicly announced and justified during an open meeting before the public is excluded.

While executive sessions are permitted under defined circumstances, they occur entirely outside of public view and are not recorded or documented through detailed minutes. As a result, the public has no ability to verify what was said or decided. The frequency and duration of closed-door meetings in Tyler County far exceeded what would reasonably be expected and raised serious concerns about transparency, accountability, and board governance.

Compounding these concerns, board members admit disclosing confidential student and parent information in public forums, including names related to disciplinary actions and transfer requests. These disclosures created clear risks of noncompliance with FERPA<sup>5</sup> and further undermine public trust in the Board's stewardship.

Beyond the identified legal and privacy violations, the report documented a pervasive climate of fear and retaliation among school staff, many of whom reported being unable to publicly support the superintendent without facing adverse consequences. Interviews with board members demonstrated minimal focus on student outcomes or instructional improvement, with only one member identifying student needs as a primary motivation for service. Governance practices were further weakened by outdated policy manuals, contract approvals lacking cost transparency, and board actions that routinely undermined administrative processes. These findings reflect not isolated dysfunction, but a governance culture fundamentally misaligned with its responsibilities to students and the public.

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5. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, or "FERPA," governs the privacy of education records. Education records are records that are directly related to a student and maintained by a school or education agency. Examples include grades, transcripts, health records maintained by the school, disciplinary records, and other student-specific files. (<https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/ferpa>)

**Tyler County - Percentage of Proficient Students by  
Subject Area**

Graduation Rate



94%

Reading



47%

Math



45%

Science



36%



## 2.6

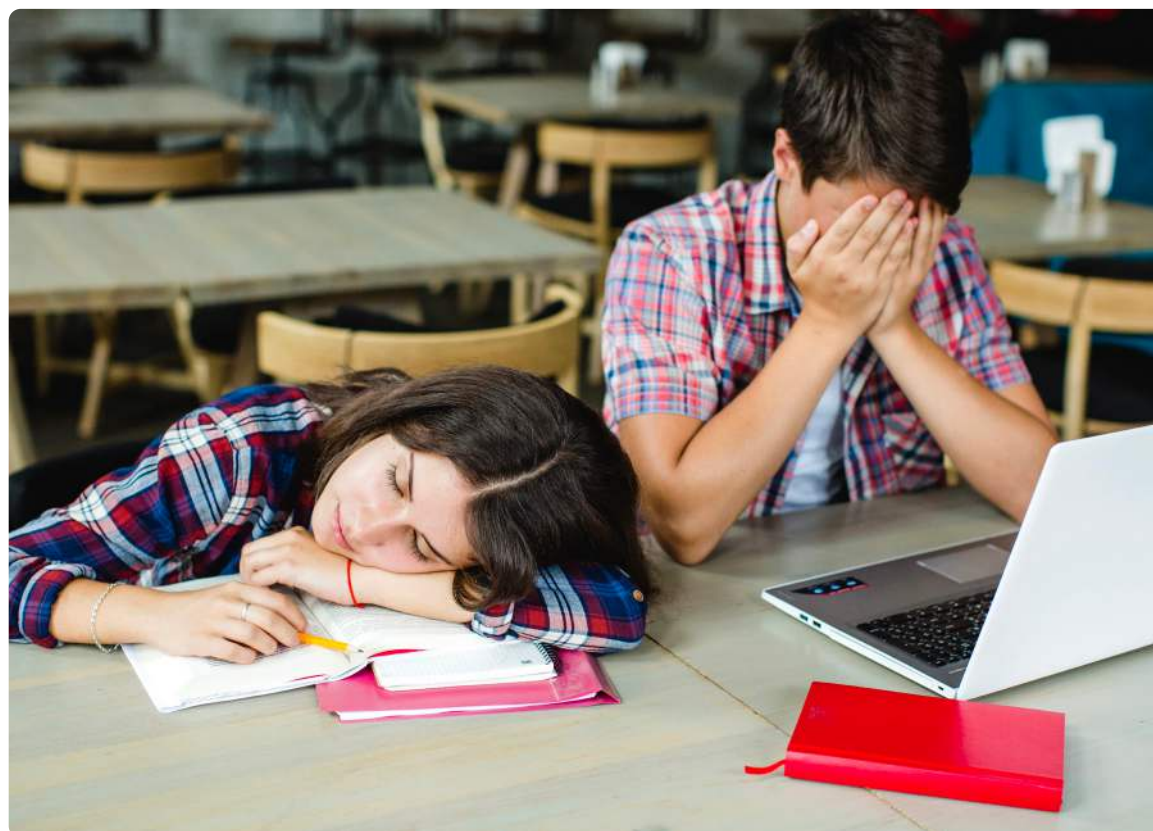
### Mingo County Schools (May 2025)<sup>vii</sup>

In the Special Circumstance Review of Mingo County Schools, longstanding governance failures culminated in immediate state intervention. Chronic dysfunction among board members, including repeated violations of open meeting laws and decisions made outside of public view, such as the non-renewal of the superintendent's contract without appropriate public discussion. Board meetings were subsequently characterized by accusations, conflict, and poor communication, contributing to breakdown in confidence between district leadership and staff.

One board member was quoted saying he would “never vote to close [the elementary school] because it was a campaign promise,” even though the building was operating at only 22% capacity. This comment highlights how personal and political motivations overrode fiscal responsibility and long-term planning.

The district was also found to be in noncompliance with criminal background check procedures, using an unapproved private vendor instead of the state police as well as employing uncertified staff, lacking board approval.

Citing the cumulative risks to students and staff, the WVBE concluded that immediate intervention was necessary.



### Mingo County - Percentage of Proficient Students by Subject Area

Graduation Rate



96%

Reading



45%

Math



33%

Science



25%

Certain board members' comments and interview responses revealed their intention to make financial decisions that would result in long-term financial instability. In response to the presentation on the building utilization and cost-per-pupil data for Dingess Elementary School, one board member stated he would never vote to close Dingess Elementary because it was a campaign promise. Dingess Elementary is currently operating with a building utilization rate of 22%, and central office staff and leadership have presented the per-pupil expenditure and utilization data to the board multiple times. Numerous interview responses indicated the need to close schools to maintain long-term financial solvency. *Mingo County Board of Education Policy po0123: Code of Ethics; Mingo County Board of Education Policy po1210: Board-Superintendent Relationship; W. Va. Code 18-5-13 (c) (1)*

Source: WV DOE



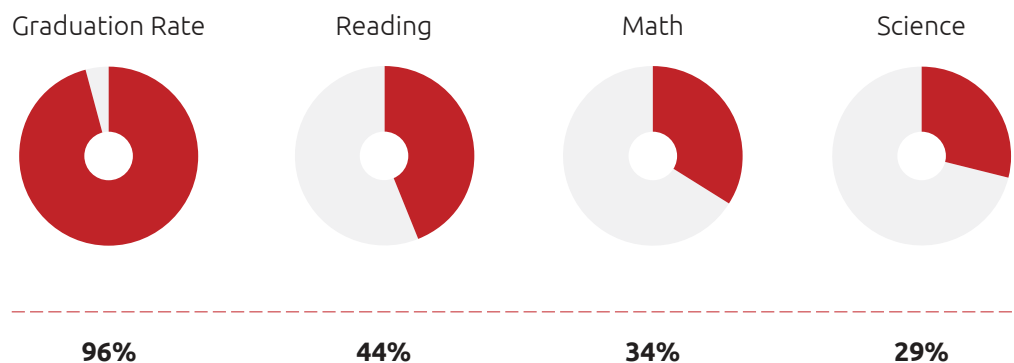
## 2.7

### Nicholas County Schools (May 2025)<sup>viii</sup>

The Nicholas County School review identified deeply concerning personnel practices that compromised student safety, violated state policy, and undermined public trust. Central to the findings was the employment of a close relative of the superintendent who was a registered sex offender, a fact disclosed on the individual's job application. The individual began working prior to the completion of the required background check, and the superintendent later acknowledged deliberately avoiding review of the results, stating he "knew something would come back and didn't want to know what it was." This admission reflected a willful disregard for student safety and established vetting requirements.

The review further identified a pattern of nepotism and credential mismanagement. The superintendent hired multiple relatives, including individuals who were not qualified candidates, and placed at least one individual in a teaching position without ever holding a valid teaching certificate. Required criminal background checks were not conducted for parent volunteers or for teachers transferring from other counties, and expulsion hearings were described as disorganized and inconsistently applied, reflecting administrators limited understanding of governing policy. Although the superintendent characterized these findings as "personal and political attacks" related to prior disputes over school consolidation, the documentary record instead demonstrated significant structural failures in leadership, compliance, and internal controls.

#### Nicholas County - Percentage of Proficient Students by Subject Area



On the employment application, the applicant disclosed being charged and convicted of “Prohibiting Child Erotica” in August of 2017. Criminal records indicated the conviction was the result of a plea agreement. While the offense is a misdemeanor, the applicant is required to register as a sex offender and has been on the West Virginia State Police Sex Offender Registry since 2017.

**Source: WV DOE**

The assistant superintendent, who serves as the personnel director, stated that a background check was completed at the time of his employment and recalled a conversation in which the superintendent said to her, “Something is going to come back on that background check. I don’t want to know what it is.” The assistant superintendent stated the background check indicated charges had been dismissed.

**Source: WV DOE**

Records review indicated parent volunteer background checks are conducted by a retired law enforcement officer who is now a private investigator. A review of board minutes found examples of parent volunteers with criminal backgrounds approved during the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years.

**Source: WV DOE**

The review of personnel records indicated that background checks are not conducted on teachers who transfer from other counties. On at least one occasion, a teacher from another county was hired despite having disclosed that serious disciplinary action had occurred in the previous county.

**Source: WV DOE**

An individual who has never held a teaching certificate has been employed in a teaching position since 2023. Multiple additional examples of incorrectly or inadequately certified personnel were identified during the review.

**Source: WV DOE**

## 2.8

### Randolph County Schools (May 2025)<sup>ix</sup>

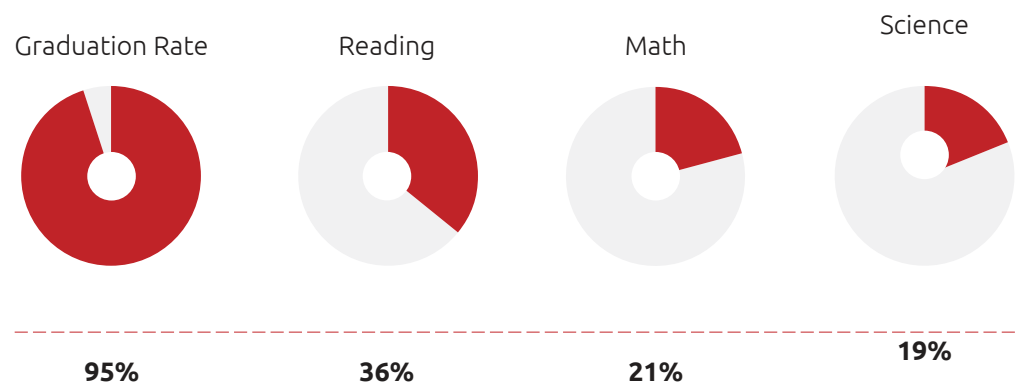
The May 2025 Special Circumstance Review of Randolph County Schools found the district on the brink of fiscal collapse, driven largely by weak governance and an unwillingness to make difficult, but necessary, corrective decisions. Despite a projected \$2.8 million budget deficit, the county board declined to approve a school consolidation plan that would have addressed chronically under-enrolled facilities and generated substantial operational savings. The Board also reversed previously approved personnel reductions intended to control spending, reflecting a failure to exercise basic budgetary discipline.

The review further cited poor collaboration between the board and superintendent, with communication described as inconsistent and, at times, retaliatory. Board members frequently could not articulate the rationale for their votes and appeared to operate without a coherent fiscal strategy. The review team also observed that student discipline and safety protocols were largely absent, suggesting a lack of focus on core instructional and operational responsibilities. In response, the West Virginia Board of Education declared a State of Emergency and required the district to submit a comprehensive recovery plan, including mandatory board training, school consolidation proposals, and a balanced budget, by the end of 2025.





### Randolph County - Percentage of Proficient Students by Subject Area



On May 15, 2025, the Chief School Business Officer presented a projected budget shortfall of \$2.8 million for fiscal year 2025. At the same meeting, the board voted to rescind some of the earlier personnel actions based on the advice of legal counsel, thus eliminating approximately \$1.6 million in potential savings generated by those staffing cuts.

Source: WV DOE



## 2.9

### Boone County Schools (June 2025)<sup>x</sup>

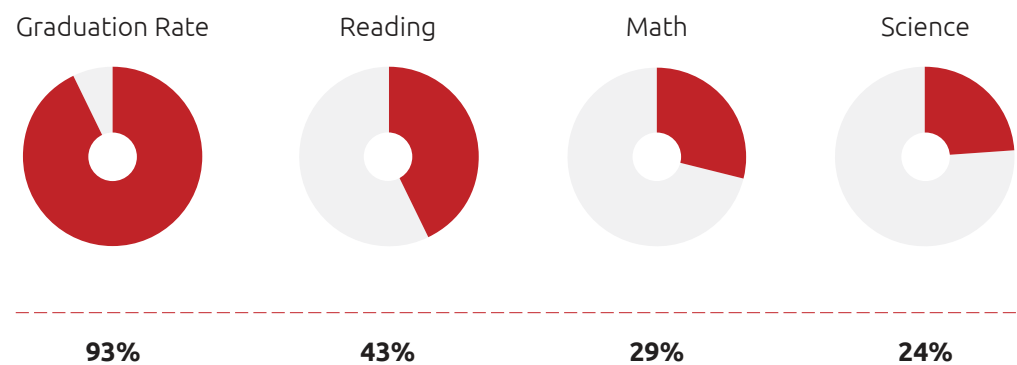
The June 2025 Special Circumstance Review of Boone County Schools uncovered egregious misuse of federal funds and serious failures in ethical governance. Most notably, a former maintenance director was indicted for orchestrating a \$3.4 million kickback scheme that defrauded the district through manipulated federal contracts. The review also found that a sitting board member operated a private catering business from a school kitchen, storing food and supplies in county facilities without board authorization, constituting a clear conflict of interest. More broadly, county policies on procurement, Procurement-cards, and the use of public resources were either nonexistent or routinely ignored, leaving the district highly vulnerable to abuse.





The review further documented significant breakdowns in school climate and student safety. Although 27 Level 4 behavioral incidents, the most serious classification of student misconduct, were recorded during the 2024-2025 school year, the district reported fewer than five expulsions, suggesting either an unwillingness or inability to enforce the state’s student discipline policy (WVBE Policy 4373). The report called for a comprehensive review of the district’s disciplinary practices, citing concerns that students who engaged in violent or dangerous conduct were not being removed from instructional settings. Taken together, these findings depicted a school system in disarray, with financial, ethical, and behavioral accountability compromised across multiple domains.

### **Boone County - Percentage of Proficient Students by Subject Area**



Based on multiple interview comments, the team concluded that a comprehensive review of discipline practices is necessary to determine whether student disciplinary protocols, especially those involving student expulsion, are followed in accordance with the requirements of WVBE Policy 4373.

An initial review of WVEIS disciplinary data showed that 27 incidents during the 2024-2025 school year have been coded as “Level 4” behaviors, with fewer than five expulsions.

**Source: WV DOE**

## 2.10

### Roane County Schools (July 2025)<sup>xi</sup>

Roane County Schools review revealed a district in serious fiscal distress, driven by irresponsible staffing and facility decisions that ignored enrollment realities and budgetary limits. Despite operating at 45% of its building capacity, the district proceeded with plans to construct a new elementary school, posing questions about long-term planning and financial stewardship. Meanwhile, Roane County was found to be employing staff well above the state's funding formula, compounding a growing financial shortfall. The district projected a \$2.9 million deficit for the 2026 school year, prompting an urgent need for corrective planning.

In addition to general budget overspending, the district reported \$600,000 in excess of special education expenditures, suggesting mismanagement and a lack of alignment between services provided and reimbursable costs. The fusion of overbuilding, overstaffing, and underutilization signaled a district unwilling, or unable, to adjust to demographic and fiscal realities. The Special Circumstance Review highlighted the need for a comprehensive right-sizing plan, stronger oversight by the board, and a full evaluation of staffing, facilities, and program delivery to stabilize the system before further financial strain.



## Roane County - Percentage of Proficient Students by Subject Area

Graduation Rate



**97%**

Reading



**42%**

Math



**30%**

Science



**25%**

Roane County Schools had an average building utilization rate of 45% for the 2024-2025 school year, which is among the lowest in the state.

October 1, 2024, certified data showed Roane County Schools employed 7.54 professional and 9.2 service positions over the funding formula. The cost of these positions must be covered entirely by local funds.

The West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) Office of School Finance discovered there were significant financial issues when it was revealed that Roane County Schools had overspent \$600,000 on special education in Fiscal Year 2025 due to improper budgeting. A root cause of this improper budgeting was found to be inaccuracies in data certified by Roane County Schools and submitted to the WVDE.

During the subsequent review of this overspending, the Office of School Finance further found that going over budget on the construction of the new Spencer Middle School critically impacted the financial position of the school system. Furniture purchases for the school were initially encumbered against multiple federal programs, which were unaccounted for in the budgets for those programs. Additionally, Roane County Schools was obligated to provide \$2,550,010 in matching funds for the project, which did not include the cost of furnishing the school. Some purchases for the construction of the school appear to have been made without county board approval, as required by WVBE Policy 8200.

The WVDE Office of School Finance's review of Roane County Schools' finances revealed a potential deficit of as much as \$2.5 million for Fiscal Year 2025 and a potential deficit of as much as \$2.9 million for Fiscal Year 2026.

**Source: WV DOE**

# 03

## **A QUESTION OF CREDIBILITY: CAN WVDE INVESTIGATE ITSELF?**

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The West Virginia Department of Education's dual role as both the overseer of district reviews and the provider of technical assistance to those same districts presents an inherent conflict of interest that weakens the credibility of its oversight function. When WVDE evaluates districts it has actively supported, the department is effectively assessing the outcomes of its own guidance and assistance, compromising the objectivity of the review process. This structural flaw is further exacerbated by a demonstrated reluctance to acknowledge oversight failures or deficiencies in technical assistance, allowing accountability gaps to persist without rigorous examination.

To restore public confidence and ensure meaningful accountability, audits and evaluations should be conducted by, or subject to independent verification from nationally recognized organizations with no affiliation to the state's education bureaucracy. West Virginians are entitled to impartial assessments grounded in professional rigor rather than institutional proximity, particularly when the effectiveness of our public school's governance and the educational outcomes of students are at stake.



# 04

## PATTERNS ACROSS DISTRICT

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### 4.1

#### Finance: Spending Without Strategy

##### Problem Statement:

Districts placed under state takeover frequently attribute their collapse to inadequate funding. The available evidence, however, tells a different story. Overall public education funding in West Virginia has increased in each of the past five years, yet academic outcomes have remained flat or declined. The central problem is not insufficient revenue but weak financial discipline, poor strategic forecasting, and spending decisions that are disconnected from student outcomes.

##### Systemic Pattern:

Across all takeover districts statewide, the same financial pathologies recur:

- Persistent overspending despite declining enrollment and building underutilization.
- Staffing growth, especially in administrative and non-instructional roles, even as student numbers shrink.
- Short-term budgeting that fails to anticipate predictable enrollment declines driven by both school choice and birth rate collapse.<sup>xiii</sup>
- Opaque decision-making that leaves taxpayers and, at times, board members unclear and unaware about how funds are allocated.
- Irresponsible financial commitments made during periods of fiscal distress, often locking the district into multi-year obligations they cannot sustain.
- Minimal linkage between spending decisions and academic performance data, with outcomes rarely used to guide financial priorities.

These patterns reflect structural mismanagement rather than a lack of resources.



## **Funding Realities in West Virginia Public Schools**

Claims that West Virginia's public school system is underfunded do not withstand scrutiny. While advocates and headlines routinely assert funding shortfalls, the data show sustained growth in education spending even as enrollment declines.

### **Spending More for Fewer Students**

A recent WVDE audit<sup>xiii</sup> indicates that total K–12 spending increased from \$3.45 billion in FY2017 to \$4.39 billion in FY2024, an increase of nearly \$1 billion over seven years. During the same period, public school enrollment declined by more than 30,000 students. In practical terms, the state is spending substantially more to educate significantly fewer students.

This is not a funding crisis. It is a prioritization and management failure, and the growing disconnect between financial inputs and educational outcomes demands urgent attention.

### **ESSER Masked the Problem, But Only Temporarily**

The infusion of approximately \$1.2 billion in federal COVID relief funds (ESSER)<sup>xiv</sup> between 2020 and 2024 temporarily obscured long-standing inefficiencies. Districts were explicitly cautioned against using ESSER funds for recurring expenses such as permanent staff salaries. Many nevertheless did so, expanding payrolls with obligations that extended beyond the life of the funding.

This wasn't just mission creep; it was mission abandonment. While schools expanded into roles better suited for clinics and social service agencies, they simultaneously failed to fulfill their primary duty: educating students.

As ESSER funding sunsets, districts now face steep budget cliffs, not because funding was inadequate, but because temporary dollars were used to support permanent cost structures.

### **Declining Enrollment Is a Structural Reality**

These trends are not confined to the pandemic era. National data show that 29 states enrolled fewer students in Fall 2023 than in 2014. West Virginia is projected to experience the steepest proportional decline in the country, an estimated 18 percent reduction by 2030, equivalent to approximately 45,000 students.<sup>xvi</sup>

Despite these projections, many districts have failed to adjust their operational footprint, continuing to operate under-enrolled facilities while expanding central office functions. The longer right-sizing is deferred, the more severe and disruptive future corrections will become.

## More Spending Does Not Guarantee Better Outcomes

If increased spending alone produced results, West Virginia's academic performance would be markedly stronger. Instead, outcomes remain among the lowest nationally, particularly for students with disabilities. By contrast, states such as Mississippi,<sup>xvii</sup> which spend significantly less per pupil, have demonstrated substantial gains in early literacy, especially among historically underserved students.

West Virginia's challenge is not the amount it spends but the return on that spending. At present, the outcomes do not justify the investment, and without structural reform, additional funding is unlikely to change that trajectory.



## Policy Recommendations:



### Fiscal Analysis and Transparency

1. Require all districts under takeover to undergo an independent financial analysis conducted by a nationally recognized forensic auditing firm, not a local or in-network consultant.
2. Require that the audit be initiated by the state within 30 days of takeover, completed within 90 days, and publicly released in full on a state-maintained website, including an executive summary for community stakeholders.
3. Require that the audit include clear, actionable turnaround recommendations adjusted for staffing, facilities, and spending practices, and require the state to formally adopt, notify, or reject each recommendation with written justification.



### Spending Tied to Outcomes

1. Mandate that budget proposals from takeover districts be tied to clearly defined academic indicators, including proficiency rates, chronic absenteeism, and graduation outcomes, with each expenditure linked to expected student-facing impact.
2. Require an annual retrospective review of prior investments as part of each budget cycle.
3. Require state-level approval for any budget line item above a designated monetary threshold or representing a new programmatic obligation that cannot demonstrate alignment with academic improvement goals.



### No New Obligations During Takeover

1. Prohibit districts in state takeover from entering multi-year contracts, including labor, services, or construction, without written approval from the state superintendent.
2. Limit all district financial commitments amid state takeover to one-year maximum terms, unless approved by the state as necessary to maintain essential operations.



### **Staffing Reform and Efficiency**

1. Require boards to review and make reductions where necessary to align staffing with enrollment.
2. Enforce exit policies that prioritize teacher effectiveness, consistent with state law, not just seniority alone.<sup>6</sup>



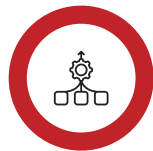
### **Forecasting and Future Planning**

1. Require takeover districts to produce and annually update a three-to-five-year financial forecast, including enrollment decline modeling, with scenario planning for birthrate-driven population changes, not just school choice impacts.
2. Require regular enrollment-to-building capacity analysis to inform building consolidation decisions and long-term resource allocation.



### **Board Oversight and Training**

1. Mandate no fewer than three public board meetings per month while in takeover status, with at least one meeting dedicated to financial reporting and corrective action plans.
2. Require financial governance and compliance training for all board members and senior administrators, delivered by an organization with demonstrated expertise in financial accountability and no prior contractual relationship with the district or the West Virginia Department of Education.



### **Consolidation Trigger**

1. If a district is found to be functionally insolvent, the state shall initiate an administrative review to determine whether absorption into a neighboring district is necessary, with full state coordination and public notice. If a district's per-pupil spending exceeds the statewide mean by 10-15% without corresponding academic improvement over a defined period, the district shall be subject to automatic review for potential consolidation.

<sup>6</sup> While West Virginia law prohibits the use of seniority as the sole factor in employment decisions under W. Va. Code § 18A-4-8g, districts should be required to implement effectiveness-based staffing models during receivership.



### **Recommitment to Fraud Detection and Enforcement**

The frequency and severity of fraud uncovered in West Virginia's takeover districts reveal a systemic weakness in oversight and enforcement. Misuse of federal relief funds, levy dollars, and other public resources has too often been addressed administratively, with limited consequences, signaling that financial misconduct carries minimal risk. This undermines public trust and diverts resources from students. To address these failures, the state should:

1. Establish a dedicated state-level education fraud unit, or formalize standing partnerships with the State Auditor, Attorney General, and appropriate federal authorities to ensure consistent investigation and enforcement of findings arising from forensic analysis and Special Circumstance Reviews.
2. Require automatic referral of any evidence of fraud uncovered during a state takeover to the appropriate investigative and prosecutorial authorities rather than permitting administrative or internal resolution.
3. Clarify that forensic analyses serve as enforcement gateways, not merely diagnostic tools, and may result in restitution and prosecution where appropriate.
4. Prohibit the use of non-disclosure agreements or quiet settlements in cases involving misuse of public education funds.
5. Publish an annual Public Education Financial Integrity Report, detailing fraud findings, investigations, enforcement actions, and outcomes across all districts.

Protecting public dollars is inseparable from improving academic outcomes and restoring public trust. Financial fraud is not victimless; every misused or concealed dollar reduces resources available for students. If the state is serious about true reform, it must pair academic intervention with rigorous financial enforcement and clear consequences.



## 4.2

### Academics: No Standards, No System

#### Problem Statement:

West Virginia's academic outcomes are not merely weak in districts under state takeover; they are alarmingly low statewide. According to the Nation's Report Card (NAEP)<sup>xviii</sup>, only 25% of fourth grade students in West Virginia are proficient in reading, and just 31% are proficient in mathematics. By eighth grade, proficiency declines further to 21% in reading and 17% in math. Students with disabilities fare even worse, ranking near the bottom or dead last nationally.

These results reflect not a localized failure but a systematic, statewide breakdown. West Virginia has failed to align academic standards, curriculum, and classroom instruction in a way that produces coherent, cumulative, knowledge-rich learning across grade levels and school systems.

#### Systemic Pattern:

The dysfunction is layered and structural. West Virginia's current content standards emphasize abstract, "skills-based" outcomes over the acquisition of specific knowledge, disregarding well-established findings from cognitive science about how students learn.<sup>7</sup> At the state level, the WVDE does not maintain a vetted list of state-approved, standards-aligned curricula, leaving each district to select instructional materials independently, with little accountability for quality and alignment.

As a result, students who transfer between schools or districts routinely miss essential content because there is no shared curricular backbone. Teachers lack a clear K-12 knowledge sequence that builds understanding year over year, subject by subject. In the absence of vetted instructional resources, many educators rely on ad hoc materials such as online marketplaces or self-created lessons, which are often misaligned with standards and best practices.

7. For example, West Virginia's social studies standards prioritize generalized civic skills such as "analyzing multiple perspectives" and "evaluating democratic principles" without specifying the historical content students must know to perform those tasks. As documented in *Reviving the American Civic Tradition in West Virginia*, the standards often omit required knowledge of foundational texts, events, and figures, leaving districts to determine content independently and resulting in inconsistent and incomplete instruction statewide. (Cardinal Institute for West Virginia Policy, *Reviving the American Civic Tradition in West Virginia* (June 2025))

At the same time, teachers are expected to design, source, and deliver daily instruction while managing extensive non-instructional responsibilities, without consistent state-led training on the use of high-quality instructional materials (HQIMs). The result is not flexibility, but fragmentation.

Together, these conditions amount to an instructional free-for-all. Without clear standards anchored in content, vetted curriculum, and coherent professional support, even well-funded classrooms cannot deliver an education that ensures all students, particularly those who are mobile or vulnerable, receive a consistent and comprehensive academic foundation.

### **Skills-Based vs. Knowledge-Based Approaches**

At the core of West Virginia's academic underperformance is a fundamental misunderstanding of how learning works. The state's current standards are largely built around a skills-based model, emphasizing generic competencies such as identifying main ideas, making inferences, or applying critical thinking, detached from specific subject matter. This approach assumes that once students master a skill, they can apply it universally.

Research and classroom experience show otherwise. Skills such as reading comprehension and critical thinking are domain-dependent.<sup>xx</sup> Students cannot analyze complex texts, historical events, or scientific concepts without first possessing the relevant background knowledge.

#### **For example:**

- A skills-based standard might say: "Students will identify the main idea and supporting details in a text."
- A knowledge-based standard would say: "Students will explain how the Stamp Act and Townshend Acts contributed to the American colonists' opposition to British rule."

Both involve reading and analysis, but only the latter ensures that students acquire concrete historical knowledge. The former can be taught using virtually any text, resulting in widely varying content exposure from classroom to classroom.

Skills-based systems encourage fragmentation, with each teacher interpreting standards independently and selecting disconnected materials. Knowledge-based systems create coherence, ensuring that students encounter shared core ideas that build systematically across grades and subjects.

### In a knowledge-based system:

- Curriculum is vertically aligned, so learning accumulates year over year.
- Standards are anchored in specific content rather than generic behaviors.
- Equity is strengthened because students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, gain access to the background knowledge that more affluent peers often acquire outside of school.

This is not a theoretical debate; it is supported by decades of research<sup>xxi</sup> in cognitive science and literacy development that support the conclusion that durable learning depends on knowledge accumulation. Until West Virginia replaces its abstract, skills-focused standards with a concrete, knowledge-rich instructional model, statewide academic outcomes are unlikely to improve.

## Policy Recommendations:



### Rebuild the Foundation: Standards Reform

1. Establish an independent academic standards workgroup, with subject-matter experts, to rewrite West Virginia's content standards in core subjects (ELA, math, science, social studies).
2. Shift from "skills-based" standards to a knowledge-building model grounded in content-rich, sequenced learning, consistent with the science of reading and established principles of cognitive load theory.
3. Require that revised standards be publicly reviewed, educator-vetted, and approved by the West Virginia Legislature to prevent bureaucratic drift.



### Curriculum Transparency and Coherence

1. Require the WVDE to maintain and publish a list of state-vetted, standards-aligned curricula in all core subjects, with transparent review criteria.
2. Mandate that all districts select curriculum from this vetted list or receive a waiver only with demonstrated alignment and evidence of efficacy, such as vertical alignment expectations for approved curriculum to ensure student mastery in one year builds into the next.



### **Support Teachers with Materials, Not Mandates**

1. Prohibit districts from requiring teachers to build full curriculum from scratch as a condition of employment.
2. Invest in the statewide adoption of HQIMs, with accompanying unit guides, assessments, and pacing tools.
3. Establish statewide professional development pathways to train teachers in the effective implementation and adaptation of HQIMs, not just theoretical pedagogy.



### **Guarantee Instructional Continuity**

1. Develop a statewide scope and sequence framework for each subject and grade band to ensure instructional continuity for students who transfer between schools or districts.
2. Require instructional leaders (principals, coaches, curriculum directors) to attest annually to align classroom instruction with HQIMs and pacing maps.
3. Require schools to publish curriculum maps for each grade level and subject on their websites to ensure parent visibility and inter-district continuity.



### **Measure What Matters**

1. Tie district-level reporting not only to proficiency outcomes, but also to curriculum fidelity, participation in HQIM-aligned professional development, and implementation of vertical alignment planning.
2. Require that academic turnaround plans for districts under state oversight include explicit HQIM implementation of benchmarks and timelines.



### **Deploy Academic Turnaround Teams with Deep Expertise**

In many cases, state takeover replaces individual leaders without addressing the underlying instructional systems that produce persistently low outcomes.

1. Establish and deploy Academic Turnaround Teams for districts under state takeover or heightened oversight. Leadership teams should be temporary, state-directed units composed of subject-matter experts, curriculum specialists, special education compliance officers, and experienced instructional leaders.
2. Define the authority and scope of Turnaround Teams, including the ability to:
  - Conduct comprehensive curriculum audits and instructional materials reviews.
  - Review and align instructional materials with revised standards and state-vetted curricula.
  - Support districts and school leaders in implementing HQIMs with fidelity.
  - Evaluate districtwide professional development plans, assessment systems, instructional data use, and student data systems.
3. Authorize turnaround Teams to advise on budgetary decisions during the takeover period to ensure that staffing, contracts, and spending align with academic priorities and long-term student outcomes at the center of decision making. In other words, operating under the forward-facing question: What should students be able to do when they graduate from a West Virginia high school—and what resources are needed to get them there?
4. Require Turnaround Teams to report directly to the state superintendent with a clearly defined deployment period, deliverables, and exit criteria tied to demonstrated instructional improvement.
5. Prohibit the substitution of leadership changes alone for academic intervention and require that any leadership transition during state oversight be accompanied by a documented instructional improvement strategy led or validated by a Turnaround Team.



## 4.3

### **Discipline:**

#### The Collapse of Order in West Virginia Schools

##### **Problem Statement:**

In too many West Virginia schools, particularly those under state takeover, student behavior is no longer effectively managed. Educators are overwhelmed; principals are consumed by disciplinary crises, and state-mandated behavior policies are misunderstood, inconsistently applied, or ignored altogether. The result is a school environment in which consequences are unclear, accountability is routinely avoided, and instructional time is steadily eroded.

This is not a classroom-level failure. It is a systems-level breakdown. Evidence drawn from West Virginia's own Special Circumstance Reviews demonstrates that disciplinary failure is chronic, widespread, and directly linked to policy noncompliance, administrative disorganization, and the adoption of behavioral models that dilute rather than enforce accountability.

##### **Systemic Pattern: What the Takeovers Reveal About Discipline**

###### **1. Misunderstanding and Noncompliance with State Policy**

State law provides clear expectations for student conduct and consequences, most notably through WVBE Policy 4373, which mandates specific responses, including expulsion, for Level 4 offenses such as assault or weapons possession. Yet in multiple takeover districts, staff demonstrated only a superficial or nonexistent understanding of these requirements.

In Pocahontas County, staff incorrectly believed that repeated classroom interventions were required before certain offenses could be referred to administration. In Nicholas County, district officials displayed little familiarity with enforcement obligations altogether. These were not marginal errors but fundamental misunderstandings of binding state policy.

###### **2. Inconsistent or Absent Disciplinary Frameworks**

Many schools attempted to manage student behavior without a coherent, consistently applied system. At Philippi Middle School, students described disciplinary consequences, including lunch detention, as "fun," reflecting a complete collapse of authority. At Martinsburg North Middle School, reviewers recommended eliminating multiple competing behavior-tracking systems and replacing them with a single, fair, and transparent framework, indicating that no effective system was in place.

### **3. Failure to Enforce Consequences for Level 4 Offenses**

Some of the most serious failures involved willful non-enforcement of legally mandated consequences. In Boone County, 27 student incidents were classified as Level 4 during a single school year, yet fewer than five expulsions were issued. Philippi Middle School similarly failed to suspend or expel students whose conduct clearly met statutory thresholds.

These were not procedural oversights. They were conscious of departures from state law that exposed students and staff to ongoing risk.

### **4. Discipline Overwhelming School Leadership**

In several schools, the volume and severity of behavioral incidents have completely consumed building leadership. At Philippi, the principal's time was so dominated by discipline and parent conferences that instructional leadership functions, including classroom observations and teacher feedback, were effectively abandoned. Discipline failures thus undermined academic oversight.

### **5. Privacy and Data Mismanagement**

The absence of clear protocols extended to the handling of student data. In Tyler County, personally identifiable student discipline records were publicly posted in board meeting agendas, violating federal privacy protections and further eroding trust in district governance.

### **6. Disparities Addressed Without Structural Reform**

Discipline disparities are real and merit attention. However, responses have often been performative rather than corrective. In Upshur County, administrators were required to complete implicit bias training following disparities in suspension data for students with disabilities and lower-income backgrounds. Yet, no structural reforms were implemented to clarify behavioral expectations or ensure consistent enforcement. The result was fewer recorded consequences but no meaningful reduction in incidents.

## **Beyond Policy 4373: The Limits of SB 199 and Trauma-Centered Models**

In 2023, West Virginia enacted Senate Bill 199<sup>xxii</sup> to address elementary discipline. While well intentioned, implementation of guidance issued by the West Virginia Department of Education<sup>xxiii</sup> is complex and impractical. Teachers are expected to document extensive behavioral data over multi-week periods, attempt layered interventions, conduct trauma analyses, and implement therapeutic strategies such as emotional check-ins and individualized calming plans.

This framework assumes schools are equipped to operate as mental health clinics. They are not. Most educators are not trained clinicians, and not all misbehavior is rooted in trauma. In many cases, misconduct is willful and requires clear, timely consequences.

These intervention-heavy models often delay enforcement, exclude parents, and reinforce the perception that rules are negotiable. Discipline becomes cumbersome, uneven, and ineffective, undermining both safety and learning.

### **How the System Was Undermined**

The current breakdown did not occur in isolation. It reflects a broader shift in federal guidance and institutional practice over the past decade. In 2014, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice issued a joint Dear Colleague Letter<sup>xxiv</sup> warning districts that racial disparities in discipline outcomes, even absent discriminatory intent, could trigger civil rights violations.

The practical effect was a chilling one. Districts began retreating from clear enforcement, down-coding incidents, or avoiding discipline altogether, not because behavior improved, but because reporting it accurately became a liability. Educators observed the change directly: the same behaviors persisted, but consequences disappeared.

At the same time, frameworks such as “trauma-informed care,” “social-emotional learning (SEL),” and the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) gained prominence.<sup>xxv</sup> When layered atop federal pressure to avoid disparities, these approaches increasingly reframed misconduct as pathology rather than conduct. Every disciplinary infraction is now seen as a symptom of trauma, lack of therapy, or emotional dysregulation.<sup>xxvi</sup> Serious incidents triggered documentation and intervention plans rather than swift, consistent consequences.

In many districts, a child throwing a desk or threatening a teacher triggered weeks of documentation, emotional check-ins, and therapeutic intervention plans—rather than swift, consistent consequences.

By 2015, a full cultural transformation in how schools approached discipline had occurred. Over time, authority eroded. Principals lost their discretion. Parents were sidelined. Students learned that behavior was negotiable.

This context is essential to understanding why takeover districts today struggle to enforce even basic disciplinary standards. The problem is not solely local leadership failure. It is the result of a system whose architecture no longer supports clear expectations, consistent consequences, or accountability.

## Policy Recommendations:



### Restore Legal Compliance and Mandated Consequences

1. Require all districts to enforce WVBE Policy 4373 as written, including mandatory expulsion for Level 4 offenses.
2. Require quarterly discipline compliance reporting by all schools to the WVDE and published on a state-maintained website, identifying each Level 4 infraction and the disciplinary response imposed in accordance with W. Va Code § 18A-5-1.
3. Develop and mandate adoption of a statewide discipline protocol template to ensure uniform application, transparency, and legal compliance across districts.



### Simplify Discipline Interventions and Set Boundaries on Therapeutic Overreach

1. Conduct a statewide review of SB 199<sup>xxvii</sup> implementation guidance to assess instructional time loss, administrative burden, and impact to classroom order, including whether current guidance unintentionally prioritizes procedural compliance over timely classroom management and student safety.
2. Establish clear boundaries between educational discipline and mental health services, recognizing that schools are not clinical treatment settings.
3. Limit SEL and trauma-informed protocols to evidence-based<sup>8</sup> supports that do not delay disciplinary action or disrupt instructional continuity.
4. Authorize teachers and administrators to act promptly on misbehavior without requiring multi-step psychological triage processes that delay learning and impede accountability.

<sup>8</sup> "Evidence-based" refers to interventions supported by rigorous empirical research demonstrating statistically significant, positive effects on student academic or behavioral outcomes. For example, a cluster-randomized controlled trial published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* found that the SEL intervention *Passport: Skills for Life* produced no meaningful improvements in internalizing symptoms, prosocial behavior, or academic outcomes and concluded that the program "cannot be recommended" as an effective universal intervention. In *Reviving the American Civic Tradition in West Virginia*, we document how contemporary education frameworks increasingly substitute SEL-aligned emotional exploration, activism, and subjective competencies for structured instruction, content knowledge, and disciplinary clarity, despite the absence of demonstrated academic benefit. Taken together, these findings caution against treating broad SEL or trauma-informed frameworks as evidence-based absent clear, causal proof of effectiveness. (Humphrey, Neil, et al. "The Effect of a Universal, School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Intervention (*Passport: Skills for Life*) on Internalizing Symptoms and Related Outcomes During the Transition From Childhood to Adolescence: A Cluster-Randomized Controlled Trial." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 117, no. 7, 2025, pp. 1095–1114, <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000963>.)



### **Create a Rubric for Persistently Dangerous Schools**

In May 2025, the U.S. Department of Education issued guidance<sup>xxviii</sup> reaffirming that states have broad authority under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to define and identify “persistently dangerous schools.” The Department encouraged states to revisit and strengthen their criteria, citing concerns that existing definitions have resulted in very few schools being identified despite widespread incidents of school violence. The guidance emphasizes incident-based reporting, timely intervention, clear parent notification, and expanded school choice, including charter schools, in order to ensure students have access to safe learning environments.

1. Develop a multi-factor rubric to identify persistently dangerous schools, incorporating indicators such as Level 3 and 4 infractions, suspensions, expulsions, and teacher turnover.
2. Require automatic state intervention for any school identified under the rubric for more than one academic year.
3. Authorize targeted corrective actions, including possible leadership change, instructional intervention, or deployment of turnaround teams, based on the severity and persistence of safety failures.



### **Develop Alternative Learning Environments for High-Risk Students<sup>9</sup>**

1. Create alternative learning placements, including online or hybrid options, for students who commit violent acts or exhibit persistent, severe disruptions.
2. Ensure students placed in alternative settings continue to receive appropriate educational and behavioral services, without compromising the safety or learning environment of their peers.

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<sup>9</sup> Alternative learning environments should be understood not solely as disciplinary placements, but as an opportunity to redesign delivery models for students whose needs are not well served in traditional settings. With appropriate budgeting and facilities planning, districts undergoing consolidation or enrollment decline could repurpose underutilized school buildings to create open-pathway alternative education campuses offering structured academic instruction, behavioral supports, and career-aligned programming. Charter schools may also serve as a viable pathway for alternative and specialized education models, including programs designed for students with significant behavioral challenges, provided they meet state accountability, safety, and academic standards. Leveraging consolidation, charter authorization, and alternative delivery models can expand options for students while protecting instructional continuity and classroom safety in traditional schools.





### **Recenter Accountability: Families, Students, and School Leaders**

1. Require transparent notification to affected families when classroom instruction is materially disrupted, including when a classroom is cleared or a student is removed for violent, threatening, or persistently disruptive behavior, consistent with student privacy protections.
2. Affirm the right of students to an orderly and safe learning environment, and the authority of schools to remove students whose continued presence poses a safety risk, consistent with state law and due process.
3. Require districts to track and report aggregate data on serious classroom disruptions, including frequency of removals and instructional time lost, so families can assess whether schools are effectively maintaining classroom order.
4. Tie administrator evaluations, particularly in state intervention districts, to effective enforcement of discipline policy and protection of instructional time, rather than to suspension-reduction or process-compliance metrics alone.

The path forward is simple: clear rules, fair consequences, empowered educators, engaged families, and a school culture where every child can learn without fear or chaos.

# 05

## CONCLUSION TAKEOVER MUST MEAN TURNAROUND

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The recurring failures across West Virginia's state-taken school districts are not isolated or accidental. They are structural. Financial mismanagement often exposes deeper dysfunctions in academic coherence and behavioral order. Funds are spent without reference to outcomes. Instruction proceeds without a clear definition of what students are expected to know. Classrooms operate without consistent expectations, consequences, or support. Over time, the system persists until it collapses under the weight of accumulated neglect.

A state takeover should be the point at which this cycle ends.

That outcome, however, is not inevitable. It will occur only if West Virginia treats takeovers as instruments of transformation rather than administrative reshuffles. Correcting spreadsheets will not restore reading proficiency. Replacing a superintendent will not realign standards and curriculum. Retaining another consultant will not prevent tomorrow's classroom disruption.

Meaningful turnaround requires a comprehensive, transparent, nonnegotiable approach that demands financial integrity, academic coherence, and behavioral order as prerequisites for student success, not operational reforms.

This paper advances a framework designed to meet that standard: forensic financial audits that expose mismanagement rather than obscure it; academic turnaround teams charged with rebuilding standards, curriculum, and instructional coherence; clear discipline policy to protect both students and teachers; and leadership accountability that prioritize instructional outcomes over inertia.

West Virginia's students deserve schools where safety is assured, learning is expected, and public resources are used to achieve both. Every day reform is delayed represents another day lost to disorder, stagnation, and diminished opportunity.

The state does not lack resources. It lacks resolve.

West Virginia now faces a choice. Will takeovers merely contain dysfunction, or will they serve as the inflection point that restores the core mission of public education?

## DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS & STRATEGY



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Tiffany's work centers on the belief that families, not systems, are the ultimate authority over education, and that every child deserves access to an environment where they can thrive. She partners with policymakers, advocacy organizations, and thought leaders across the country to create education systems in West Virginia that support literacy, numeracy, and informed citizenship.

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