

Addressing Experimental Lab Schools in Virginia

With no guarantee of state funding beyond a year, universities will be taking a high-stakes risk for students and themselves to experiment with lab schools.

What to make of laboratory schools

- When it became clear that charter schools would not be expanded during the 2022 legislative session, lawmakers switched to supporting the expansion of college partnership laboratory schools which are public schools established by higher education institutions by contract between a governing board of the “lab school” and the Virginia Board of Education.
- Lab schools have been allowed in Virginia for many years and have failed to organically grow through mutual interest between school divisions and colleges and universities.
- The current state budget includes a one-time allocation of \$100 million for lab school planning and starter grants and per pupil funding for approved schools during the current biennium only.
- Higher education institutions will take a large risk establishing lab schools and should be prepared to shoulder the full cost of operating these schools into the future without any sustaining funding from the state or local level.
- Lab schools have a limited track record nationally and represent a highly experimental approach to fulfill a campaign promise and create new schools for which there has not been demand.

No strong basis to invest significant funds to serve a small number of students

- While setting aside \$100 million to establish lab schools, legislators cut more than \$100 million in At-Risk Add On funds which would have supplemented our highest poverty schools, reaching hundreds of thousands of students. The benefits of investing in At-Risk Add On far outweigh the one-time investment to establish lab schools, that realistically will only support the start-up of a handful of new schools and serve a relatively small number of select students.
- The state budget makes clear that community colleges and private universities are eligible to apply to establish a lab school but are not eligible to receive funding from the \$100 million grant fund. There is much legal ambiguity for these entities preceding to apply for any grant funds.

Let's invest in what works for students, not campaign pledges

- State education experts have researched high-return-on-investment K-12 strategies for years and made recommendations through the Virginia Board of Education to update our Standards of Quality. These include investing in critical school staff like reading specialists, vice principals, nurses, behavioral health specialists, teacher mentorships, and in high poverty schools (all evidence-based investments with strong track records). Lab schools have no such track record.
- Decades of [longitudinal research](#) has come to the [conclusive finding](#) that [money matters](#) for educational outcomes. While it might be convenient to imagine silver bullet reform efforts that serve a small number of students is enough, Virginia remains bottom tier for state per student spending, hovering between low-resource states like Mississippi and Louisiana. Moving out of the bottom tier to better serve all students will require focused and research-informed investments.