

WEST VIRGINIA

Overall Market Rating: Limited Growth Possible

Nearly every student in West Virginia is eligible for the state’s education savings account, which is called the Hope Scholarship. However, the maximum value of \$4,489 is low, and new private schools would need substantial and reliable tuition revenue and/or philanthropic funding to sustain themselves financially. With fewer than 150 private schools operating in the state, the ecosystem for new school development is at a nascent stage.

Market Overview

School choice is in its infancy in West Virginia. The state’s first public charter school opened in fall 2022, which was also the first full year for the Hope Scholarship ESA after it survived a court challenge. With the ESA, West Virginia was one of the first states to embrace near-universal eligibility for a state-funded private school scholarship. Parents can also use the ESA to fund tutoring, special therapies, transportation and other school-related costs. Nearly 6,000 students signed up for the ESA in 2023-24, which is promising given that the program is new and fewer than 15,000 students attend private schools.

The Hope Scholarship program is a well-crafted policy overall. However, the per-pupil scholarship amount falls short of the amounts available in neighboring Drexel target states such as Tennessee and Ohio. As in a number of other states, the value of the ESA is pegged to the average state per-pupil contribution to the cost of public K-12 education (less administrative expenses). In West Virginia that works out to about \$4,500, which is well below most schools’ per-pupil cost to educate.

In light of the ESA’s relatively low value and the state’s small private-school sector, entrepreneurial activity is likely to materialize slowly. Thus far, a handful of microscooling initiatives have sprung up, in part inspired by the implementation of the Hope Scholarship.

Enrollment

WEST VIRGINIA 2023-24			
Total PK-12	Public District	Public Charter	Private
261,827	245,047 (93.6%)	2,270 (0.8%)	14,510 (5.6%)

Choice Programs

Program	Eligibility	Participants (2023-24)	Amount
Hope Scholarship	There are no geographic or income-based restrictions, but students must have attended public school for the full prior year or 45 days within the current school year to be eligible*	5,791** students	\$4,489 in 2023-24 (will rise as state spending on public schools goes up)

*The prior public-school requirement will go away in 2026 if the number of Hope Scholarships awarded in 2024 represents less than 5% of the state's total K-12 student population.

**Includes an unidentified number of students attending public school or homeschooling, using the ESA for tutoring, therapies or other qualified expenses.

Funding

Assessment: There is no cap on the number of Hope Scholarships that can be awarded, but the value of a single scholarship covers only about one third of the typical per-pupil education cost.

Assets:

- Students can carry over unused funds from year to year.

Policy & Regulatory Environment

Assessment: The policy framework protects schools' independence.

Assets:

- The Hope program is governed by an appointed regulatory board that is separate from the K-12 governance structure in the state to ensure independent management and family voice in decision-making.
- There are minimal requirements for schools, including background checks for teachers and annual financial audits; there is not a teacher certification requirement.

Considerations:

- Schools must administer a nationally normed assessment to students who receive the scholarship.

Human Capital

Assessment: Under-developed

Considerations:

- Teach for America has an Appalachia region that includes West Virginia, but it only places about 20 teachers per year across the multistate territory.

Local Champions & Climate

Assessment: Adequate

A combination of local and national advocates supported the passage of the Hope Scholarship act and is working to attract the interest of private-school operators and entrepreneurs in opening new schools.

Considerations:

- Proof that family demand for the scholarships will rise is likely a prerequisite to legislative consideration of a substantially higher scholarship value.

Facilities

Assessment: Under-developed

Properties in West Virginia are affordable, but little exists in policy or systems to support private-school facility development.