

Community colleges are helping with housing, gas and food to keep students in class

Free tuition programs might entice students to enroll in community college, but they don't cover gas or child care, or put food on the table. Here's what two schools in rural Southwest Virginia are doing to meet students' needs.

by **Lisa Rowan**
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Peja Reed lives in Bristol, about 10 miles from Virginia Highlands Community College. But it usually takes her an hour to get to class in the morning.

Four days a week, she wakes up at 6 a.m. to be ready for the school's #CollegeExpress bus. Driver Jeb Turner said Reed is always waiting in front of her house when the bus rolls off nearby Interstate 81 and collects her from her street on the north edge of the city around 6:45 a.m. Then Turner picks up a few more students closer to downtown Bristol before heading to campus in Abingdon, about a dozen miles back up I-81.

Reed then has almost two hours on campus before her 9:30 a.m. biology class. "I'll do my school work," she said. "But that's what I was trying to do this morning, and I fell asleep."

Transportation challenges are common for students at Virginia Highlands, which has an enrollment of about 2,000 students — and a service area of more than 1,000 square miles. Many students live far from the bus stops that serve the region’s commercial core, and even those bus lines have gaps that can make it difficult to get to campus.

That transportation challenge could be the breaking point for some people who are thinking about enrolling in an academic or job-training program at the community college.

Help paying for tuition is plentiful: Beyond federal and state student aid, Virginia also offers free tuition for a variety of job-training programs in an effort to place more workers in growing industries. And high school graduates going directly to community college can often get free tuition thanks to local “last-dollar” programs that pay for what’s left over after federal and state aid are applied.

But free tuition doesn’t mean much if a student can’t get to campus.

The #CollegeExpress is one example of how community colleges are trying to meet the evolving needs of their students in Southwest Virginia, a largely rural corner of the state facing widespread challenges driven by systemic changes in the region’s economy.

And as the population of fresh-out-of-high-school students levels off, community colleges must also figure out how to better serve adult learners who are seeking new skills that can lead to better-paying jobs, and who are dealing with their own financial, transportation or child care barriers.

From handing out grocery gift cards to offering laptops on loan, some campuses are finding ways of providing “wraparound” services to help students not just enroll but also complete their programs, earning degrees or certificates that can boost their earning potential.

Reed would like to study international business economics at East Tennessee State University, an hour over the state line from Bristol, or at Mary Baldwin University in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley. For now, she’s a first-semester student in the general studies program at Virginia Highlands. If she didn’t have the #CollegeExpress, she’d need to ask her father to fit pickups and dropoffs around his shifts at a gas station.

She doesn’t have her driver’s license yet, but she’s been putting away money from her part-time fast-food job to buy a car in time for the fall 2024 semester. So far, she has \$300 saved.

The Virginia Community College System has implemented a systemwide platform to match students with resources to provide for some of their most basic needs. But system leaders acknowledge continued struggles to serve the diverse student body.

One of the few things that unites every community college in the state system is “the significant need for wraparound services for the students they serve,” said Jennifer Gentry, vice president of institutional advancement for the state community college system.

Community colleges as essential education hubs

Virginia’s community college system has come under increased pressure to bolster the state’s economy in recent years, in part to fill

jobs left vacant by population declines in the southern and western parts of the state.

In rural parts of Southwest and Southside Virginia, students come from expansive geographic areas that have been transformed by the decline of the coal, tobacco and textile industries. Rural areas have increasingly aging populations, and four-year college students are more likely to leave Virginia than stick around after graduation.

Community colleges in these places must serve a wide array of students with a range of education and career goals. Reasonable costs and open access are part of the draw, whether students plan to transfer to a four-year university or take their credentials earned over a matter of weeks or months into the workforce. The cost per credit hour to attend a community college in Virginia is \$155; it costs almost three times that to attend a public four-year college in the state.

Virginia ranks seventh in the nation for educational attainment beyond a high school diploma, according to analysis by the Lumina Foundation. But the affluent Northern Virginia region around Washington, D.C., plays a significant role in that ranking. As you move into rural Southwest and Southside Virginia, the attainment level declines considerably. In Lee County, at the very southwestern tip of the state, only 18% of adults 25 and older have at least an associate degree.

In the 2023 spring semester, Virginia's community colleges enrolled about 133,000 students in academic and workforce training programs, 70% of them part-time. Fields of study range from commercial truck driving to dental hygiene to music theory.

Financial aid, including federal and state grants, is critical at these 23 schools spanning 40 campuses. Nationwide, about 1 in 3 community college students receive federal Pell grants, reserved for students with the greatest financial need, according to the Institute for College Access and Success. In Virginia, that number jumps to almost half. At some rural community colleges in the state, it's closer to 60% of students receiving Pell grants.

But while traditional financial aid might cover some or all of tuition and fees, it may not stretch to cover the cost of books, required software or uniforms such as nursing scrubs. Nor does it pay for living expenses such as housing, fuel, food or child care.

The state community college system knows that many of its students are struggling. The system, too, is trying to do more with less.

Funding for community colleges in Virginia pales in comparison to what the state Legislature sends to four-year schools. For fiscal year 2022, [Virginia ranked ninth from the bottom](#) for state appropriations per full-time-equivalent student at two-year schools.

“We educate the learners that are the most challenged and therefore need more help accessing these resources. And yet we are funded 57 cents on the dollar for every dollar that goes to a four-year university,” said David Doré, chancellor of the Virginia Community College System. “An investment in our learners is an investment to get people into high-wage jobs that will stimulate the economy.”

The current state funding structure provides limited financial support for wraparound services, leaving it up to individual schools to obtain grants or contributions to cover the costs of such programs.

The majority of community college graduates remain in the commonwealth, Doré said, so “Why would we not be investing more in that?”

Laura Pennington, vice president of institutional advancement at Virginia Highlands, said some schools can better address basic student needs than others.

“It takes money,” she said. “And you’re very often not going to be able to use state money or federal money to address those” basic needs. Foundations and community-based organizations are crucial for continued success of low-income students, she said.

Each school’s philanthropic foundation has an emergency fund for students that’s supplemented by a statewide foundation, the Virginia Foundation for Community College Education.

The state foundation has distributed nearly \$13 million to local community college foundations over the last five years to help students with costs related to attending school.

“The niche is to fund where the state doesn’t fund,” said Gentry, vice chancellor of the community college system who also serves as executive director of the foundation. “We try to fill in where students have the greatest needs, and we count on the colleges to identify what those needs are in their local communities.”

The foundation’s major initiatives include financial support for former foster youth attending community college, workforce development in rural areas and services for student parents, along with covering unexpected expenses that can derail a student’s progress.

Virginia Highlands has used money from the state-level foundation and its own philanthropic arm to build its transportation and food assistance programs.

The #CollegeExpress bus started as a carpool matchmaking effort by college staff to help bridge the transportation gap for students who live outside its base in Abingdon. The school's service area covers two counties and the city of Bristol, for a total population of just under 100,000.

In Virginia, about a third of community college campuses lack a public transit stop within walking distance, according to analysis by the Civic Mapping Initiative of the Seldin/Haring-Smith Foundation, which promotes access to public services.

When Virginia Highlands' carpool matching became too unwieldy, the school secured a \$25,000 grant from the Virginia Foundation for Community College Education and contracted with the local transit agency to provide service for its students.

The #CollegeExpress launched in 2019 with one route to Bristol and just a handful of regular riders; it now has three routes, and 37 students are signed up to ride.

The bus service, which picks up most students within a block or two of their homes, evolves with student needs. Karen Cheers, who runs a program at the college that supports low-income, first-generation college students, said a student recently called her on a Tuesday because she found out she didn't have a way to get to class the next day.

Cheers coordinated for the bus to add her to a route on Wednesday.

Responding to critical needs

Leigh Ann Adams couldn't figure out why all the milk was gone.

Adams coordinates the PHIL Station at Virginia Highlands, a food pantry posthumously named after a beloved faculty member. Tucked away in a building that has low foot traffic for privacy, the modest windowless room offers an array of nonperishable options and quick-prep meals.

If anything, Adams said, students are shy about using the food pantry, concerned that it will take away from another who needs it more. But one day during this fall, she said, all two dozen of the small containers of milk she had purchased just a few days earlier vanished from the minifridge. Concerned about possible theft, she asked campus security to check the camera mounted in the corner of the room, to find out if one person had taken the milk, or many.

“That many people had come in,” she said, and had taken all of the milk.

Last spring, Adams restocked the pantry every three weeks. This semester, she says, “I could probably go to the store twice a week, if I had the time and we had the funds to do that.” She said the pantry easily goes through \$325 worth of food weekly.

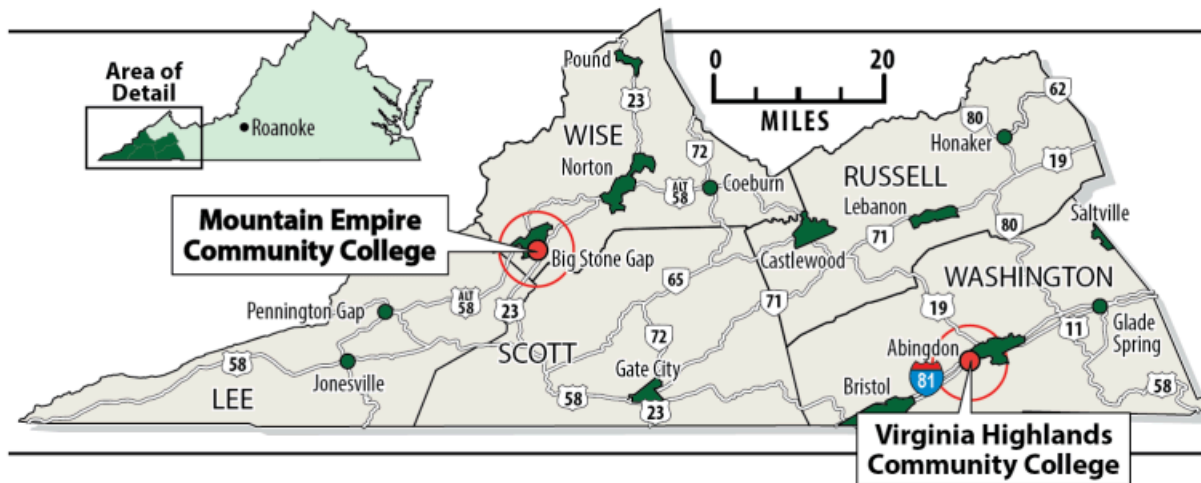
Initial funding for the pantry came from a grant from the Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation, which has supported community college food pantries across the state. Now, the college relies on local

donations to keep it going. This year, Virginia Highlands raised more than \$6,000 on Giving Tuesday to keep the PHIL Station stocked, thanks to a combination of individual contributions and a matching program from the VFCCE and Aetna Better Health of Virginia.

Every community college in Virginia has some sort of food assistance program, though they're all different in size and scope depending on the college's resources and partnerships with community organizations. In a survey of more than 10,000 Virginia community college students in fall 2020, 32% said they had faced food insecurity in the previous month.

The PHIL Station was open for only three months before the pandemic forced students off campus. Gift cards to the regional Food City chain of grocery stores were crucial in keeping students fed while the physical pantry was closed, Adams said. She still routinely sends gift cards to students who ask for them, in amounts ranging from \$25 to \$100.

Inside each envelope, Adams adds a handwritten note wishing the student well in their program, which she looks up and mentions by name. "[I'm] just trying to make them feel like somebody knows them as a person, not just as the kid who needs," she said.



Map by Robert Lunsford.

Sixty miles away from Virginia Highlands in the town of Big Stone Gap, Mountain Empire Community College also has about 2,000 students enrolled each semester. It's more rural than Virginia Highlands, serving a mountainous three-county area that stretches more than 90 miles from its most northern point to the southwestern-most tip of Virginia.

The food pantry at Mountain Empire has been open since 2013, driven by a rise in student requests for emergency aid to pay for groceries. The college's philanthropic foundation helps fill the shelves with nonperishable and toiletry items that line three sides of a wide room. Two refrigerators are packed with frozen items and microwaveable meals.

Dean of Students Lelia Bradshaw recalls being able to fill the pantry at the beginning of a semester and having the supplies last almost until final exams. But now the food pantry needs a monthly restock. Some students will fill a bag with groceries to take home, while others pop in to microwave a hot lunch.

The school's laptop loan program was also prompted by a critical need.

Campus staff noticed that many students starting at the college had Chromebook laptops that they'd used in high school. But many fields of study require a computer that's more powerful to run specialized software. The college ordered a few laptops in 2019 and started lending them out. "And then COVID hit, and everybody needed a computer" to complete classes online, said Bradshaw. "So we ordered a big round [of them]."

Mountain Empire began the fall 2023 semester with about 80 loaner laptops but ran out within the first few days. So the school ordered 50 more. Anyone who's enrolled and taking at least six credits a semester (or an equivalent for shorter career and technical programs) can borrow a laptop, charger and carrying case, thanks to a combination of funding over the years that has included COVID federal relief money, Virginia Department of Social Services funds, and other similar sources totaling about \$60,000.

Mountain Empire also has graphing calculators available for loan for students who can't afford to buy the devices, which cost about \$150.

Emergency funds meet unexpected needs

Beyond everyday basic needs, emergency expenses can trip up students and prevent them from completing their classes. Nationwide, about [70% of all colleges and universities offer some type of emergency fund](#) to help students stay enrolled despite unexpected costs.

At Virginia Highlands and Mountain Empire, students can request help with financial emergencies, with funding coming from each school's philanthropic foundation.

There's often a gap left after federal and state funding are applied to a student account, said Pennington at Virginia Highlands. "Even though I think students are grateful for what they get for tuition [aid], there's never enough for books and access codes" for online tools and software, she said.

Pennington has purchased quarts of oil for a student's car to hold them over until they could get repairs done. She used the emergency fund to pay for hotel nights to help a student get out of an unsafe housing situation.

In October, she helped two students in a practical nursing program who each needed to buy \$790 worth of books and software for the year. She was able to give \$500 to each.

For many students, she said, one modest financial crisis can wreak major havoc on their lives.

"And many of them don't have families who have a long history of college attendance, and a lot of them don't have a real deep bench in terms of support at home," Pennington said.

At Mountain Empire, students fill out an online form to request emergency aid; the help is capped at \$700 per semester and \$1,400 during their tenure at the school. The MECC Foundation provides about \$20,000 annually to fill student requests. Bradshaw said money

for vehicle repairs and gasoline is often requested, as many students drive more than 30 minutes to attend class.

A challenge: Measuring return on investment

Community colleges often measure the success of these emergency funds and basic needs initiatives in terms of program completion: the rate of students who go on to graduate or earn a credential.

Measuring workforce success is more difficult, as there's a delay in the data for the employment rate of community college graduates. The most recent year of Virginia data, from 2020, found that almost 80% of career and technical students were employed 18 months after graduating from community college. The rate is comparable to the outcome for the classes of 2018 and 2019, but it will be several years before the true picture of pandemic and post-pandemic outcomes crystalizes.

Having multiple strategies working in tandem to help students can amplify their impact.

A [2023 study](#) looked at four Arkansas community colleges that converted their food assistance efforts from simple pantries into holistic hubs for basic student needs, providing connections to public assistance programs, financial and career advising and life skills training. Students who used the hubs were up to 8 percentage points more likely to reenroll the following semester and the following academic year, and to ultimately earn their credential.

The education journey for community college students can be far from linear, with completion sometimes taking far longer than the typical standards for measuring student success.

Bradshaw of Mountain Empire said that “life issues” can easily take students away from campus. Sometimes they’ll attend for a semester, take the next one off to focus on work or family obligations, then return in the summer. The ultimate win, in many cases, is when students remain enrolled despite a financial hardship — when they come back semester after semester for however long it takes to finish their degree or credential.

“It’s like a revolving door,” she said. “We have a lot of students who live in a multigenerational household. So you’ve got parents and grandparents and nieces. ... We see a lot of that, and ... [sometimes] school just falls by the wayside.”

Change in degrees and certificates completed

Percent change in degrees and certificates completed from the 2017-18 academic year to the 2021-22 academic year.



Chart: Kate Selig • Source: Virginia Community College System • Created with Datawrapper

While enrollment remains fairly flat across the state’s community college system after years of gradual decline, program completions and degrees have increased. The increases are notable at both Mountain Empire and Virginia Highlands. In the 2017-18 school year, Virginia Highlands awarded 548 degrees and certificates. In 2021-22,

that had risen to 705. Over the same period, Mountain Empire jumped from 650 to 975.

Bradshaw said a recent focus on short-term programs can help prospective students anticipate challenges and plan for them. An eight- or 10-week program to earn a technical certification may not be students' ultimate career goal, but they can take that certification into the workforce immediately and start to see the benefits while planning their next steps.

Students have Single Stop for help

In 2021, VCCS launched the Single Stop platform at all 23 of its community colleges. The program, operated by a national nonprofit, allows students to input basic information about their household and income and learn if they're eligible for SNAP (often referred to as food stamps), housing assistance or other social benefit programs.

Becky Kell, who manages Single Stop for Virginia Highlands, said food assistance and health insurance access are common benefits for students. But Single Stop also can connect users with tax preparation help, affordable internet service and utility assistance programs.

The platform has been especially helpful, she said, for students who may not be eligible for benefit programs but can get connected to local resources for help. Kell said most Single Stop users at Virginia Highlands are in their 20s or 30s and are often the heads of their household.

Since VCCS rolled out Single Stop across its system in spring 2021, more than 45,000 students have used it, accessing more than \$35

million in social service benefits across the state, said Jim Babb, communications manager at VCCS.

Single Stop helps track the number of people who receive assistance and the value of ongoing aid, but it's sometimes hard to get students to complete a profile to see what their options are — it's just one more form for them to remember to fill out. Mountain Empire has offered grocery store gift cards to students who complete a Single Stop profile. At Virginia Highlands, students are asked to fill out a profile before they can request a second grocery or gas gift card.

But Single Stop can't solve all the social infrastructure challenges facing students.

Child care still a barrier for many

One of the biggest barriers to signing up for and completing an education or training program at the state's community colleges is child care, which is an increasingly critical area of focus for school leaders.

Even if students can afford child care, it's often hard to find a reliable source. Nearly half of Virginians live in a child-care desert, according to research from the progressive think tank Center for American Progress, meaning there's a severe shortage of child care providers.

Mountain Empire President Kris Westover has been talking to United Way and Head Start in the region to discuss options for offering child care on campus. "It's probably one of the biggest barriers to our students being able to come and be successful right now, is child care," she said.

Doré, who became chancellor of the state community college system less than a year ago, said the need for child care for student parents struck him during his initial tour of the system. A handful of campuses have or are about to open child care centers, but they're usually operated separately from the community college, which typically don't have the means to do so independently.

"The most effective approach ... is if we can provide the space at one of our colleges and then partner with a community based organization to offer the childcare services," Doré said.

"We just don't have a lot of options," Bradshaw said of the area surrounding Mountain Empire.

Sometimes students bring their kids to school with them, which the faculty has supported. A few years ago, the only way the school could field a nursing aide course was to use grant money to offer child-minding, which let parents drop their children off at the campus gym before going to night classes.

The school plans to restart that program in 2024.

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Lab school projects pushed by Youngkin move forward despite funding questions

The governor has made opening alternative schools a priority, and up to two dozen lab schools could launch as soon as fall 2024. But a discrepancy between state code and the 2022 budget could mean some of the projects aren't eligible for state funding.

by **Lisa Rowan**
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If all goes according to plan, a new high school will open in Mecklenburg County in the fall of 2024.

The Southern Virginia Career Academy, to be housed inside Mecklenburg County High School in Baskerville, will offer agricultural, computer, health and industrial sciences tracks to students with grades too low to be eligible for dual enrollment at Southside Virginia Community College.

Microsoft, which operates a data center in Boydton, has written a letter of support for the academy, and the community college's proposal for the school shows that with fundraising efforts, it should be self-sustaining within five years of opening.

SVCA is one of three college partnership laboratory school concepts waiting for approval by the Virginia Department of Education.

Sixteen other projects across the state have been awarded planning grants of up to \$200,000 toward creating full proposals for lab schools, with curricula focusing on everything from [health care](#) and [information technology](#) careers to reading literacy.

Five more colleges have planning grant applications under review.

If they all get off the ground, Virginia could have 24 new K-12 schools as early as fall of 2024. They'll be run by the colleges that sponsor them, but praise will likely go to Gov. Glenn Youngkin, who entered office in 2022 promising to open at least 20 alternative schools.

But some say the lab schools being proposed look more like charter schools, which are public schools run by private entities, often with the help of the business community.

Even if they stray from the typical definition of a lab school, the initiative has bigger challenges than its branding.

It's not clear whether Virginia will offer long-term support to these lab schools, or whether the majority of the schools that have submitted applications are eligible to receive state funding for their projects. A discrepancy between Virginia law and the 2022 budget could prevent community colleges and private universities receiving grant money to establish their innovative school concepts.

Youngkin's push for lab schools

Think of a lab school like a bridge for new teachers between the college classroom and the schools they'll eventually teach in, explained Gretchen Whitman, assistant professor of education at Columbia College in South Carolina.

The concept of lab schools dates to 1896, when philosopher John Dewey opened the first one in Chicago to test learning theories. Lab schools saw a surge of popularity in the first half of the 20th century, but fell out of favor as college education programs began training teachers in partnership with public school systems.

The lab schools that still exist today are usually tied to colleges that perform education research. A notable exception to this is a state program established in North Carolina in 2016. The University of North Carolina system operates [nine lab schools](#) around the state aimed at boosting student achievement at underperforming public schools. Training teachers is the network's secondary goal.

In Virginia, the General Assembly established a state process for authorizing lab schools in 2010. The goal was to provide an opportunity for teachers to use various methods of instruction and develop models that could be replicated in other schools.

But few proposals were submitted by public four-year universities with teacher education programs, or by private colleges when the law was amended in 2012 to include them.

The General Assembly also set up a fund to support lab school development but didn't allocate money to it.

Jump ahead 12 years. Youngkin promises during his campaign for governor that he'll open 20 "innovative" charter schools in Virginia to

provide additional choices to prepare students for college or the workforce.

Charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately managed, are permitted in most states. Virginia has seven.

Supporters of charters, including many Republicans, see them as alternatives to underperforming public schools. School choice fits neatly inside the push for parental rights by Youngkin and others in the GOP who see parents as a child's first and primary educator.

Opponents of charters see them as a way to leech money from public school systems.

But in Virginia's case, the state can't authorize new charter schools — only local school boards can.

When he took office in January 2022, Youngkin's "day one" legislative game plan included changing the procedure for authorizing charter schools so that the state could also approve them. The plan also included allowing community colleges to establish lab schools alongside four-year institutions.

"Whether they're called charter schools, lab schools or schools of innovation — it doesn't really matter. I don't care what we call it, I just care that we do it," Youngkin said in his initial address to the General Assembly.

But less than two weeks into his term, it was clear there wasn't enough support in Richmond to revamp the state's charter school rules.

Youngkin started to shift his focus from opening charter schools to opening lab schools. More than a dozen college leaders attended an event hosted by Youngkin to sign an agreement in support of expanding lab schools so that any college or university could open one, and to pledge their intent to submit applications of their own.

The General Assembly approved \$100 million in funding for initial lab school proposals and approved projects. A proposal can get a planning grant of up to \$200,000 to put toward creating a full plan for a school; approved projects can get up to a million dollars toward startup costs. Any money left over after June 2024 can be distributed among the approved schools to help cover per-pupil costs.

Each lab school must have a unique curriculum focus and must be led by a higher education institution, which employs the lab school's faculty and staff. The schools must be free and admit interested students via lottery. They're separate from local school divisions.

But state law and state budget documents are at odds, creating confusion about who is eligible to get the grant money.

Two issues that could hinder lab school development

The Department of Education's lab school committee started reviewing applications for planning grants in fall 2022, despite confusion about which colleges could actually make plans to establish them.

The state law for establishing lab schools, updated during the 2022 session, says any higher education institution can start a lab school.

But the 2022 budget allows state funding for new lab schools to go only to public four-year colleges.

Sen. Janet Howell, D-Fairfax, chair of the Senate Finance Committee, asked the Division of Legislative Services to review the discrepancy. The division's report concluded that community colleges and private schools could apply to open lab schools, but they couldn't get money from the \$100 million state fund to do so.

A debate ensued among lawmakers. House Appropriations Committee Chair Barry Knight, R-Virginia Beach, wrote in an August 2022 letter to Youngkin that when the General Assembly crafted the budget, the intent was to include two-year and private schools for lab school funding. At a September hearing of the Senate Finance Committee, Secretary of Education Aimee Rogstad Guidera said the attorney general's office had provided guidance on following the intent of the law, but didn't have documentation to share.

The VDOE lab school committee's current FAQ [page](#) says that eligibility is open to public and private schools. When the first 13 planning grants were announced in March 2023, the list included three private schools and three community colleges.

Of the 19 lab school concepts already approved for some funding as of July 2023, 10 are private colleges or community colleges. Only a handful of proposals highlight goals of fostering teacher preparation and training, in line with the original concept for lab schools and closer to Virginia's initial definition of them from 2010. Instead, the plans center largely on STEM education and career training.

Whitman, of Columbia College, said that when a lab school concept is tied to a technical school or a program to meet a community need such

as workforce development, “the issue is that’s not really a lab school. It’s starting to look more like a charter school,” she said. If a lab school receives investment from local businesses, it’s more in line with the charter school public-private partnership model.

The waters can get muddy, she said, between educating a child to be a well-rounded, critical thinker, and training a child for the workforce.

It’s a concern the Virginia Education Association has raised.

The teacher’s union isn’t against lab schools, said Chad Stewart, a policy analyst for the VEA. But Stewart called the initiative “a \$100 million experiment to fulfill a campaign promise,” when that money could have gone toward Virginia’s existing public schools to boost teacher pay, improve infrastructure or further fund the at-risk supplement for divisions with high concentrations of poverty.

The teachers union has asked the state auditor to investigate whether funds were misappropriated because of the confusion about whether two-year and private colleges can access the lab school grants. The VEA says the money provided to lab school applicants so far could, in theory, be clawed back if misappropriation is discovered.

But the state auditor’s office can’t review lab school spending until it conducts its next annual audit of the education department, which likely won’t be completed until the fall.

There’s also the question of whether the General Assembly will continue its support for lab schools past this initial funding.

Legislators this year considered establishing a new lab school fund to support college partnership lab schools along with lab schools started within school divisions, but it got tabled in the Senate once it passed in the House.

Then budget talks fell apart ahead of the June 30 deadline for passing any additional funding, making it likely that paying for lab schools won't get discussed in the statehouse until January.

Sen. Louise Lucas, D-Portsmouth, chair of the Senate Education and Health Committee, [has said](#) she would vote for pulling all money from lab schools to focus instead on the state's public schools.

Lab schools will be eligible for some per-pupil funding from the state, but without further allocation in the budget, running the schools long term would be up to the colleges that operate them.

Whitman said funding is often the most difficult part of ensuring longevity for a lab school. Partnering with a university can be helpful, if it's one with a substantial endowment that's willing to invest in a lab school.

Meanwhile, preparations continue for the lab schools that have been proposed in Mecklenburg and elsewhere across the state. Chad Patton, dean of career and technical education at Southside Virginia Community College, said the project will press forward although grant eligibility for community colleges is up in the air.

Southside and Mecklenburg County Public Schools have been partners for decades to offer dual enrollment to high school students, and Patton said the lab school project creates another avenue for that

partnership. “Through the success of this project, the outcomes propose increased enrollment, providing additional resources to sustain the infrastructure of the project after the lab school funding is exhausted,” he said by email.

In Salem, private Roanoke College’s proposal to start a lab school for at-risk Salem High School students has been awarded a \$193,000 planning grant.

The Lab School at Roanoke College plans to offer tracks for education, STEM and communication for students who don’t see college in their future. Students who complete certain requirements at the lab school can be considered for a scholarship to attend Roanoke College.

Salem City Schools approached the college with the idea, and the college is also working with Virginia Western Community College to ensure that the lab school complements dual enrollment options there, rather than duplicating them.

Kathy Wolfe, vice president of academic affairs and dean at Roanoke College, said planning for the lab school will move forward with the understanding that the college meets eligibility requirements.

“If the goal is to broaden access to innovative pedagogies and affordability of college to more at-risk students in Virginia, then having a lab school to partner with public school districts in the most populous area west of Richmond seems like a good idea,” she said by email. “We can’t control the political conversation about the budget; we just need to do our best work on behalf of students in our region.”

Employers hungry for new talent look to youth apprenticeship program

The Youth Registered Apprenticeship Program, which is offered at more than 30 school divisions across the state, offers students training in fields ranging from machining and construction to dental assisting and culinary arts.

by **Lisa Rowan**

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Anthony Garcia is a second-year apprentice technician at Lawrence Companies in Botetourt County, just outside Roanoke, where he customizes vehicles for corporate and government clients. He has two welding certifications. When he finishes his apprenticeship in summer 2025, he'll receive a nationally recognized journeyworker card to prove his skills.

Garcia is just 19.

He launched his career in the Youth Registered Apprenticeship Program offered at more than 30 school divisions across the state. The

program connects high school students in career and technical education, or CTE, programs with employers willing to take on young workers to train them in fields ranging from machining and construction to dental assisting and culinary arts.

Apprentices learn skills on the job site while they earn an hourly wage, making the experience attractive for young people eyeing the CTE route instead of a traditional college experience.

But the program benefits employers, too. Their willingness to bring on young workers can help attract employees when job opportunities are still plentiful.

And in an environment where apprenticeships as an alternative to traditional higher education have widespread support, the state program is all but destined to grow — feeding the [jobs pipeline](#) that Gov. Glenn Youngkin claims is essential to Virginia's economy.

How youth registered apprenticeships work

The idea for Virginia's youth apprenticeship program dates back to 2015, when Kathleen Eddington, who had just started her role as assistant director of the Division of Registered Apprenticeship for Virginia, noticed a gap between students and the workforce. There were opportunities for young adults to start apprenticeships, but students attending high school CTE programs were struggling to find work to satisfy their education requirements.

“We had a completely untapped workforce. We weren't connecting to employers,” she said.

The apprenticeship office launched a pilot program in 2017 with five school divisions. Four continued past the first year. Now, 34 divisions participate across the state.

The Youth Registered Apprenticeship Program can give students an advantage for careers where they need to complete at least 2,000 hours of on-the-job training before getting their journeyworker certificate. They can start part-time with an employer and continue on full-time with that same company once they graduate. When they complete their requirements, they can advance at the same firm or move on.

“It helps them see the options for their careers, whether it’s in the skilled trade or in starting and running a company,” Eddington said.

The Division of Registered Apprenticeship has consultants around the state who work with school divisions as well as with employers interested in hiring students.

Roanoke County was one of the pilot sites back in 2017. Jason Suhr, director of CTE for the division, knew of companies that were in “dire straits” trying to hire for skilled roles. He also knew that the county had many students who were career-focused.

“That didn’t mean they were never going to pursue higher education of some sort,” Suhr said. “But they wanted to get out and get some experience on the job.”

The program has been so successful that Roanoke and Salem schools have joined in with Roanoke County to streamline efforts to match students with employers and manage the experience.

High school students who are already enrolled in CTE programs at their school typically get started as apprentices in their junior or senior year.

The process is similar to a typical process of applying for a job. It includes attending an employer showcase in the winter to learn about participating companies. Then, employers invite students and their parents to their facilities for a tour. Only then do students start to complete applications and attend interviews. The employers make offers and the students evaluate their offers to determine where they want to sign.

Most of the 44 new apprentices in the Roanoke regional group attended a signing day in May to officially kick off their commitments to 14 sponsor businesses.

Suhr said the three-division partnership is just around the point of having enough apprenticeships available for all the students who are interested.

Lawrence Companies, which has divisions for moving, freight, equipment and service vehicle customization, has seven YRA apprentices this year. Four of them just signed on in May. The company offers apprenticeships for diesel mechanics, auto body repair, upfitting and trailer repair, with programs ranging from two to four years.

Shortly after Morgan Byrd joined the company as a human resources generalist, her department started discussing how to attract technicians and mechanics. “They’re not exactly falling out of the sky,” she said. A quick Google search introduced her to the YRA program operating in the area.

That was January 2022. By that summer, Lawrence Companies had its first three apprentices.

Byrd has since added apprenticeship program manager to her title. She works closely with the students' schools to tailor their hours to their academic schedules. While enrolled in high school, the apprentices work between 12 and 20 hours a week, she said. In the summer, they can work full time. Of the apprentices who started this summer, three graduated in 2023 and one is a rising senior.

Byrd explained that to get started, Lawrence Companies had to submit a curriculum for what its programs would cover. But after getting those initial plans approved, running the program "is pretty cut and dry."

Apprentices shadow their mentors or complete tasks, and at the end of each day check a rubric to see how to categorize their time. If a mentor finds their apprentice is falling behind in gaining experience on a particular aspect of the job, they figure out how to adjust their time.

Byrd said the most rewarding part of the program is seeing students come in energized and ready to learn and work. At the same time, she's seen some of their experienced mentors, who may be later in their careers, "soften up" a little bit as they take pride and ownership in their apprentices' success.

Apprenticeships expose students to new career pathways

Garcia started his apprenticeship in summer 2022, shortly after graduating from Patrick Henry High School.

When Garcia started high school, he said he thought he'd end up working in construction but feared it would become boring and repetitive. He took automotive classes in high school. But it wasn't until he started at Lawrence Companies that he discovered welding and realized he could use the experience he already had with automotive tools and build upon them with welding.

He said welding is fun because the situation is always different depending on the metals involved and the scope of the project. Byrd said Garcia was naturally gifted when he started trying out welding under supervision in the shop.

Garcia enrolled in an accelerated welding certification program at Virginia Western Community College at the recommendation of a friend. For almost six months, he attended class all day three days a week, working at Lawrence Companies on Thursdays and Fridays. He came away with two welding certifications and plans to go back to earn more.

"I don't have any college debt," Garcia said. "I'm going straight to work, making money and already building my future." He lives with his parents in Vinton. They've supported his career path and offered to help him financially when he scaled back his apprenticeship hours to take classes at VWCC, but he said he ended up not having to ask them for help.

Renewed interest in apprenticeships may propel state program

The tradition of learning a skilled trade via apprenticeship is gaining renewed attention as the standard path of attending a four-year college declines in popularity.

Nationally, expanding free job training programs including registered apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs is one of the key tenets of President Joe Biden's jobs policy. In fall 2022, the Biden administration launched the Apprenticeship Ambassador Initiative, a national network to strengthen apprenticeship programs.

In July, the federal Department of Labor announced the latest funding for state grants to expand registered apprenticeships in high-demand industries. Of a total \$65 million, Virginia received more than \$927,000.

Apprenticeship programs also have support of Virginia's governor. Youngkin has stressed the importance of building Virginia's job training pipeline to meet employer needs across the state, especially with Virginia's workforce shrinking by about 125,000 people since the pandemic.

The state has streamlined its occupational licensing process to accept out-of-state licenses for 85 occupations, to make it easier for new residents to begin working right away. And since July, state agencies no longer require degrees for 90% of classified positions.

Virginia's youth apprenticeship program doesn't guarantee that young employees will stick around for their entire careers, or even that they'll complete their apprenticeship hours. Employers handle the expenses of training apprentices, though some grant money is available through the state.

Despite the risks, employers hope that it will provide much needed exposure for the various opportunities that are available within their firms.

“Anthony’s decorating his resume,” Byrd said. And if he moves on after his three-year stint, “We’ll miss him and hope that he comes back one day. But it’s not realistic to keep employees for life, especially at a young age.”

She plans to continue growing the YRA program for young people who follow in Garcia’s footsteps. Lawrence Companies wants to add one apprentice for each of its five programs each year. The company would also like to add apprenticeships to its Ashland and Waynesboro locations.

Getting the company name out there as an option for students is the hardest part, Byrd said. The company has hosted several field trips for schools to visit and see what each program has to offer. “We’re trying to make a name so that we have more of a pool of applicants as we go forward with the program,” Byrd said.

Suhr, who manages Roanoke County’s student involvement, would like to add not only more employers to the regional program but also additional school divisions where there may be some overlap in employer offerings, for instance in the Lynchburg area.

Suhr has been a champion for the Roanoke-area collaboration and frequently talks with other school divisions to offer guidance for starting YRA programs.

He's able to explain that getting registered isn't an arduous process, and offering apprenticeships provides a viable way for students to connect with local employment opportunities.

“We're really stressing the need to keep our students here. They need to know about the opportunities and companies need to get the word out that there's awesome opportunities in our area.”

He said that's a message that resonates well across the state.