

WEST VIRGINIA

Perhaps more than any of the Final Ten States, West Virginia has been most silent, almost seeming to have acquiesced to a position that it might never make it to the charter championships. A small state with areas beset by poverty, poorly performing schools and economic troubles, charter school legislation might help reinvigorate a state in need of a boost.

Even the state's teachers union recognized the need for alternatives. While the American Federation of Teachers affiliate has not proposed a charter solution, it is pushing a proposal to increase funding and create some alternative programs and schools, though the devil may be in the details.

The state offers limited public school choice. Some other school choice measures have come and gone since the mid-1990s, but no legislation since 2001 has even mentioned charter schools.

Students in West Virginia routinely struggle on standardized tests. In every subject and grade level but one, West Virginia's scale scores are below the national average. Only in 4th grade math did the state's students manage to tie the national average scale score of 151.

Only 26 percent of the state's 4th graders score advanced or proficient on the 4th grade math NAEP test. For 8th grade, only 17 percent of the students scored advanced or proficient. These are in comparison to national scores of 35 percent and 29 percent, respectively. In reading, 26 percent of 4th graders scored advanced or proficient, as did 22 percent of 8th graders. Nationally the numbers were 30 percent and 22 percent, respectively. The higher West Virginia students move up through the grades K-12 in the public school system, the more likely their test scores will go down.

While high school graduation numbers are close to the national average, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education reports that only 30 percent of eligible 18-24 year olds in the state are enrolled in college, and only 2.9 percent of 25-49 year olds are enrolled in any type of higher education. This dramatic deficiency in college participation directly affects the state's ranking in the *Education Week's*



Quality Count Publication's "Chance for Success" section. Here the state ranks 43rd.

With Pennsylvania to its north and Maryland to its east, and the District of Columbia just around the bend, a road trip by sincere and open-minded legislators would barely take a day. Starting out east to Washington, DC, they could wind their way through Wards 7 and 8, where students who had been lost to DC public schools are now meeting higher levels of achievement at schools like Friendship Edison Public Charter Schools, a group of five schools with 3,000 students that has won national awards, including one for building a robot. If special education is a concern, Options Public Charter School could help guide the lawmakers in a way that shows how freedom and flexibility can create a great school. After a few more stops – there is the new Washington Latin School and even the famous SEED residential charters – the lawmakers could get back on the bus and head to Baltimore, where despite a restrictive law and an overly bureaucratic school system, 16 charters thrive as parent and teacher-led institutions. Only a couple of hours north to Philadelphia (with a stop in South Philly for a quick Cheese Steak), there are opportunities to see big and small charters, one that is based on architecture and one on literature, some that do back to basics, and some that serve drop outs. With a ten-year history of charters, the Keystone State offers models that West Virginia cannot afford to ignore.

Back by night, the plan that might best suit West Virginia would include the involvement of the state's University, a strong system that has often taken an interest in the quality and product of K-12 education. Such a model made Michigan public universities more engaged in primary education and leaders to whom many policymakers from around the nation look.

CONCLUSION

Advocates for education reform in all of the Last Ten States are gathered in their huddles, scratching out the endgame strategies that will win over lawmakers. Some may require changing the play at the line of scrimmage and sometimes policies end up being decided in the replay booth of the courts. While football offers some interesting analogies in what can be a rough political contest, the future of our children is not a game where losing is an option. Every child deserves access to the best education possible, a goal that we'll be closer to reaching when every state offers full school choice by passing charter laws.

