

Highland County Public Schools Budget Factors

The Schools Our Children Deserve

We all want our children to attend schools that are well-resourced and able to provide reliable transportation, nutritious meals, quality instruction, and essential health services. Since the pandemic, our roughly 200 students in Highland face more challenges than ever, from staff shortages, drops in academic achievement, and additional mental health needs. When looking at our current local spending, it's clear our budget comes up short in meeting the most pressing challenges our students and schools face today. Highland can step up to fund our schools at levels that meet our students' needs and better reflect our capacity and commitment to our children.



Budget

In the 2022-2023 school year, Highland County spent \$21,700 per student, ranking us 5 out of 131 school divisions in the state. When adjusted for the high cost of living, the spending power drops to \$20,315 per student and Highland County ranks 3 out of Virginia's 131 school divisions.

Highland has seen a drop in local per student spending of \$2,503 or 18% between the 2014-2015 and 2022-2023 school years (adjusted for inflation). The Valley region decreased local per pupil spending by 3% over this time.



Capacity and Effort

Virtually every locality in the state spends beyond what the state requires it to match (referred to as Required Local Effort) because the state vastly underestimates what it actually costs to run schools. In aggregate, divisions spent 107% above the Required Local Effort, but Highland County only spent -19%, which is 126 percentage points below the state average. Highland would need to spend \$3,146,824 more annually to be at the average state percent above the Required Local Effort (this reflects the low level of effort the division puts into per pupil spending relative to the state).

Highland County has capacity to do more to raise adequate revenue for its schools. The locality has one of the top revenue capacity scores according to the Virginia Auditor of Public Accounts and a low level of fiscal stress. Highland County's property tax effort is 40% below the average state rate.

A one penny property tax increase in Highland County would raise approximately \$70,000 annually.



Outcomes

Many students lost significant ground on state academic achievement between the 2018-2019 and 2022-2023 school years. Students in Highland saw a drop in pass rates on the reading SOL test of 9.6% and 25.9% in math - among the largest declines in the state. Yet further disparities exist, with math SOL pass rates dropping 37.0% for economically disadvantaged students. Highland must do more for its students who face significant barriers to education.



Staffing

The teacher vacancy rate in Highland was 3.5% as of October 2023. The overall staffing vacancy rate was 4.4% as of October 2023, adding pressure for all staff to cover shortage areas.

Highland had an average budgeted teacher salary of \$44,329 in the 2023-2024 school year, which is \$26,112 below the state average. Adjusted for the relatively high cost of living in the locality, the average teacher salary drops to \$41,500. With high salaries and lower cost of living in nearby communities, on top of a dwindling supply of graduates with teaching degrees, Highland is not in a strong position to compete for high-quality educators in the future.