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SPECIAL NEEDS SCHOOLS

SOMETHING SPECIAL

Virginia receives \$1 million federal boost to retain special education teachers.

With national teacher shortages, nowhere is the pinch felt more than in the field of special education. But help is on the way. Last July, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) received a \$1 million grant from the Office of Special Education Programs, a division of the U.S. Department of Education, to reduce turnover and promote the retention of special education teachers.

"Special education has been the Commonwealth's most pressing critical shortage area for 15 consecutive years," says James Lane, Superintendent of Public Instruction, VDOE. "Keeping special educators on board is even more critical now," he says, as reopened schools "address the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, especially on students with disabilities and other vulnerable learners."

Virginia has 174,638 students with disabilities such as speech-language deficits, dyslexia, autism, traumatic brain injuries, and health and orthopedic impairments.

VDOE's grant application was prepared in collaboration with Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports Research and Implementation Center at the VCU Partnership for People with Disabilities and ODU's Center for Implementation of Education Systems.



The five-year grant will zero in on two to three school divisions with acute shortages, with funds targeted to existing programs to encourage the recruitment, development, and retention of special educators. Professional development for the teachers will focus on creating evidence-based classroom systems, defusing disruptive behavior, and data-informed decision-making practices.

"Special education is one of the most rewarding teaching fields, but it can also be one of the most challenging," says Lane. "Our efforts to reduce turnover among special educators are

grounded in the research that shows that when teachers are prepared to successfully manage the challenges, they are more likely to stay in the classroom."

Bear Creek Academy

Cumberland
BearCreekAcademy.org, 804-492-9940

The Personal Empowerment Program (PEP) at Bear Creek Academy gives students the opportunity to build self-worth and internalize positive behaviors. Depending upon grade levels, students may earn from three to nine patches signifying important milestones in their personal growth. Each patch brings with it privileges and responsibilities. Students earn their patches by following school expectations and accomplishing personal goals. Therapeutic advocates and teachers collaborate to address the needs of behaviorally challenged students.

Boys Home of Virginia

Covington
BoysHomeOfVa.org, 540-965-7700

Boys Home of Virginia is dedicated to helping young men ages 6-17 become productive members of society. Staff members help students develop their full potentials spiritually, mentally, physically, and socially in the school's beautiful rural setting. Open 365 days a year, the school endeavors to lead and mentor each young man in its care. Students typically come from homes impacted by poverty, addictions, incarceration, or adoptive settings that have become challenging.

enCircle Minnick Schools

Bristol, Harrisonburg, Roanoke, Wise, Wytheville
enCircleAll.org, 540-774-7100

Lutheran Family Services of Virginia recently became enCircle to better represent the care and support provided in all its programs. At its seven Minnick Schools, the educational team uses a Learning Management System that increases opportunities for vibrant, differen-

tiated education. Support from board-certified behavior analysts and student support professionals provide students structure to succeed, and families have a network to assist them in navigating how to best support their child's educational and behavioral needs.

Gateway Private Schools

Gloucester, Montross, Stafford
GatewayPrivateSchool.com, 804-493-8244

Each Gateway student is given the opportunity to work with a team of professionals to identify areas of concentration and to develop plans and solutions. Students are assigned a case manager who assists in developing an individualized plan, collaborating with teachers, parents, and other professionals and therapeutic staff as needed. Specific goals and achievement timelines are identified. Staff utilize natural consequences with cognitive/reality therapy to modify behavior and help students reach their potential.

Grafton Integrated Health Network - Richmond Campus

Midlothian
Grafton.org, 804-674-8888

Grafton School serves students ages 5-22 with complex disabilities in a therapeutic, private day school setting. Grafton focuses on building an environment of comfort versus control and does not use coercive behavior techniques such as restraint or seclusion. Career and technical education opportunities are offered as well as occupational therapy and speech therapy. Its Intensive Support Classroom offers a small staff-to-student ratio and is supervised by a board-certified behavior therapist.

Lafayette School

Troy
MyLafayetteSchool.org, 434-589-2370

Lafayette School is an accredited special education school for children and adolescents with emotional and behavioral concerns. The philosophy of the school is that all students have the capacity for learning and growth, regardless of a disability. Coping skills, such as anger management, problem-solving, and assertiveness training are taught and reinforced. A structured behavior modification program with rules, consequences, and reinforcement assists in motivating students to achieve academic and social goals.

Morrison School

Bristol
MorrisonSchool.org, 276-669-2823

Morrison School provides a safe, nurturing, stimulating, and personalized environment for students in grades PK-12. Morrison School ended the 2020-2021 school year with campus improvements and exciting goals for the current year. Students helped landscape an outdoor classroom and completed the Morrison Trail. Thanks to grants received, Morrison School was able to purchase a new math curriculum, musical instruments, sensory materials, and updated resources for physical education and health classes.

New Vistas School

Lynchburg
NewVistasSchool.org, 434-846-0301

New Vistas School provides grades 3-12 students with learning, attention, and emotional challenges the opportunity to reach their full potential by fostering academic and personal growth. NVS's philosophy is that students learn best from a variety of educational approaches aimed at meeting their individual

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needs. The school's Mind Body Spirit Capital Campaign, now entering its Finish Line Challenge, will add a gymnasium, two science classrooms, and one arts classroom to the NVS campus.

Northstar Academy

Richmond
NorthstarAcademy.net, 804-747-1003

As part of a multi-year capital campaign, Northstar Academy has purchased the former Strayer University campus in Henrico County, which will be transformed into the Academy's new home. The 10-acre, 21,000-square-foot facility, located just five miles from the school's current campuses at Staples Mill and Shroder Roads, will better serve Northstar's 160 students with fully ADA-compliant buildings, spacious hallways and classrooms, and access to nature and greenspace.

The Faison Center

Richmond
FaisonCenter.org, 804-612-1947

The Faison Center, with locations in Richmond and Newport News, serves children and adults with autism and related challenges from 35 localities across the Commonwealth. Its numerous programs are unique across Virginia, offering enriching, evidence-based services that support the entire lifespan. With early education services, schools, a diagnostic clinic, and adult residential and day programs, The Faison Center gives these individuals their best opportunity to live fulfilling lives.

The New Community School

Richmond
TNCS.org, 804-266-2494

After several years of assessing a traditional grading model, The New Community School (TNCS) adopted Standards Based Grading (SBG) school-wide in the 2017-2018 school year. The grading system keeps the focus on learning by demonstrating that it's a process not a product. TNCS believes that SBG helps pinpoint what is right with a student's work, not what is wrong, and meets students where they are, guiding them to higher levels of mastery.

Virginia Home for Boys and Girls' John G. Wood School

Henrico
VHBG.org, 804-270-6566

Students at Virginia Home for Boys and Girls' John G. Wood School have adapted to new emotional and behavioral support resources for fears and anxieties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Students are learning resilience skills thanks in part to the calming influence of school pets Lily the bunny, Little the dog, and Falkor the bearded dragon. VHBG's dedicated staff implements the "power of pets" to improve mindfulness—the foundation for attention, intention, compassion, and awareness.