

WEST VIRGINIA LEGISLATURE

2026 REGULAR SESSION

Introduced

House Bill 5356

By Delegates Pritt, Hanshaw (Mr. Speaker), Hornby,

Crouse, T. Howell, Street, Jennings, Brooks, Clay,

Martin and Toney

[Introduced February 09, 2026; referred to the

Committee on Finance]

1 A BILL to amend and reenact §18-2-6 of the Code of West Virginia, 1931, as amended, relating to
2 modifying the funding for the Mountaineer Challenge Academy.

Be it enacted by the Legislature of West Virginia:

ARTICLE 2. STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION.

**§18-2-6. Classification and standardization of schools; standards for degrees and
diplomas; certificates of proficiency; establishment of alternative education
programs.**

1 (a) The state board shall promulgate rules for the accreditation, classification, and
2 standardization of all schools in the state, except institutions of higher education, and shall
3 determine the minimum standards for granting diplomas, advanced certifications, and certificates
4 of proficiency by those schools.

5 (1) The certificates of proficiency shall include specific information regarding the
6 graduate’s skills, competence, and readiness for employment, or honors and advanced education
7 and shall be granted, along with the diploma, to every eligible high school graduate.

8 (2) The certificate of proficiency shall include the program of study major completed by the
9 student only for those students who have completed the required major courses, or higher level
10 courses, advanced placement courses, college courses, or other more rigorous substitutes
11 related to the major, and the recommended electives.

12 (3) Students who have completed a secondary education program in a public, private, or
13 home school and have continued to be enrolled in a program leading to an advanced certification
14 or an advanced career education program shall be considered adults enrolled in regular
15 secondary programs in accordance with §18-9A-2(i) of this code: *Provided*, That the State
16 Superintendent of Schools, the Chancellor for the Council for Community and Technical College
17 Education, the Chancellor of the Higher Education Policy Commission, and the Secretary of the
18 Department of Commerce may designate additional programs that provide valuable workplace

19 credentials and students enrolled in such programs shall also be considered adults enrolled in
20 regular secondary programs in accordance with §18-9A-2(i) of this code.

21 (b) An institution of less than collegiate or university status may not grant any diploma or
22 certificate of proficiency on any basis of work or merit below the minimum standards prescribed by
23 the state board.

24 (c) A charter or other instrument containing the right to issue diplomas or certificates of
25 proficiency may not be granted by the State of West Virginia to any institution or other associations
26 or organizations of less than collegiate or university status within the state until the condition of
27 granting or issuing the diplomas or other certificates of proficiency has first been approved in
28 writing by the state board.

29 (d) The state board shall promulgate a rule for the approval of alternative education
30 programs for disruptive students who are at risk of not succeeding in the traditional school
31 structure.

32 (1) This rule may provide for the waiver of other policies of the state board, the
33 establishment and delivery of a nontraditional curriculum, the establishment of licensure
34 requirements for alternative education program teachers, and the establishment of performance
35 measures for school accreditation.

36 (2) This rule shall provide uniform definitions of disruptive student behavior and uniform
37 standards for the placement of students in alternative settings or providing other interventions
38 including referrals to local juvenile courts to correct student behavior so that they can return to a
39 regular classroom without engaging in further disruptive behavior.

40 (e) The state board shall establish up to five pilot projects at the elementary or middle
41 school levels, or both, that employ alternative schools or other placements for disruptive students
42 to learn appropriate behaviors so they can return to the regular classroom without further
43 disrupting the learning environment. The state board shall report to the Legislative Oversight
44 Commission on Education Accountability by December 1, 2010, on its progress in establishing the

45 pilot projects and by December 1 in each year after that for the duration of the pilot projects on the
46 effect of the projects on maintaining student discipline.

47 (f) If a student attends an approved alternative education program or the Mountaineer
48 Challenge Academy, which is designated as a special alternative education program pursuant to
49 §15-1B-24 of this code, and the student graduates or passes the high school equivalency tests
50 within five years of beginning ninth grade, that student shall be considered graduated for the
51 purposes of calculating the high school graduation rate used for school accreditation and school
52 system approval, subject to the following:

53 (1) The student shall be considered graduated only to the extent that this is not in conflict
54 with any provision of federal law relating to graduation rates;

55 (2) If the state board determines that this is in conflict with a provision of federal law relating
56 to graduation rates, the state board shall request a waiver from the United States Department of
57 Education; and

58 (3) If the waiver is granted, notwithstanding the provisions of §18-2-6(f)(1) of this code, the
59 student graduating or passing the high school equivalency tests within five years shall be
60 considered graduated.

61 (g) The state board shall promulgate a rule to support the operation of the National Guard
62 Youth Challenge Program operated by the Adjutant General and known as the Mountaineer
63 Challenge Academy which is designated as a special alternative education program pursuant to
64 §15-1B-24 of this code for students who are at risk of not succeeding in the traditional school
65 structure. The rule shall set forth policies and procedures applicable only to the Mountaineer
66 Challenge Academy that provide for, but are not limited to, the following:

67 (1) Implementation of provisions set forth in §15-1B-24 of this code;

68 (2) Precedence of the policies and procedures designated by the National Guard Bureau
69 for the operation of the Mountaineer Challenge Academy special alternative education program;

70 (3) Consideration of a student participating in the Mountaineer Challenge Academy special
71 alternative education program at full enrollment status in the referring county for the purposes of
72 funding and calculating attendance and graduation rates, subject to the following:

73 (A) The student shall be considered at full enrollment status only for the purposes of
74 calculating attendance and graduation rates to the extent that this is not in conflict with any
75 provision of federal law relating to attendance or graduation rates;

76 (B) If the state board determines that this is in conflict with a provision of federal law
77 relating to attendance or graduation rates, the state board shall request a waiver from the United
78 States Department of Education;

79 (C) If the waiver is granted, notwithstanding the provisions of §18-2-6(g)(3)(A) of this code,
80 the student shall be considered at full enrollment status in the referring county for the purposes of
81 calculating attendance and graduation rates; and

82 (D) Consideration of the student at full enrollment status in the referring county is for the
83 purposes of funding and calculating attendance and graduation rates only. For any other purpose,
84 a student participating in the academy is considered withdrawn from the public school system;

85 (4) Articulation of the knowledge, skills, and competencies gained through alternative
86 education so that students who return to regular education may proceed toward attainment or may
87 attain the standards for graduation without duplication;

88 (5) Consideration of eligibility to take the high school equivalency tests by qualifying within
89 the extraordinary circumstances provisions established by state board rule for a student
90 participating in the Mountaineer Challenge Academy special alternative education program who
91 does not meet any other criteria for eligibility; and

92 (6) Payment of tuition by a county board to the Mountaineer Challenge Academy for each
93 student graduating from the academy with a high school diploma that resides in that county
94 board's school district. For purposes of this subdivision, "tuition" means an amount equal to ~~75~~ 100
95 percent of the amount allotted per pupil under the school aid formula. One hundred percent of the

96 funding shall be retained by the Mountaineer Challenge Academy. For federal funding, 100% of
97 such available federal funding per student shall be retained by the Mountaineer Challenge
98 Academy, and 0% of federal funding shall remain in the county.

99 (h) Nothing in this section or the rules promulgated under this section compels the
100 Mountaineer Challenge Academy to be operated as a special alternative education program or to
101 be subject to any other laws governing the public schools except by its consent.

102 (i) The Legislature makes the following findings regarding students at risk:

103 (1) Defeated and discouraged learners. —

104 (A) Any child who is unlikely to graduate on schedule with both the skills and self-esteem
105 necessary to exercise meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, and
106 personal relationships may be defined as being an at-risk student;

107 (B) Problems associated with students at risk often begin for them in the early grades as
108 they gradually fall further behind in the essential skills of reading, writing, and math;

109 (C) These problems may be accompanied by such behavior patterns as poor attendance,
110 inattentiveness, negative attitudes, and acting out in class. These patterns are both symptoms of
111 and added catalysts for students to become increasingly defeated and discouraged learners;

112 (D) By the middle grades, students with growing skill deficits usually know they are behind
113 other students and have good reason to feel discouraged. A growing lack of self-confidence and
114 self-worth, limited optimism for the future, avoidance of school and adults, and a dimming view of
115 the relationship between effort and achievement are among the characteristics of defeated and
116 discouraged learners;

117 (E) Public schools are expected to address the needs of all students, minimizing the
118 likelihood that they will become at risk and giving additional attention to those who do; however,
119 the circumstances involved with a becoming at risk often are complex and may include influences
120 both within and outside of the school environment; and

121 (F) In fragile homes, a child who is at risk and is becoming a discouraged and defeated
122 learner often lacks adequate support and may develop peer relationships that further exacerbate
123 the difficulty of reengaging him or her in learning, school, and responsible social behavior.

124 (2) The Legislature further finds that the public schools should not be deterred from
125 seeking and assisting with enrollment of students in an alternative program that helps remedy the
126 discouragement, lessens skill deficits, and facilitates a successful return to public school.

127 (j) For this purpose, subject to approval of the county superintendent, a student enrolled in
128 the public schools of the county may continue to be enrolled while also enrolled in an alternative
129 program subject to the following conditions:

130 (1) The alternative program is approved by the state board;

131 (2) The student meets the general description of an at-risk student and exhibits behaviors
132 and characteristics associated with a discouraged and defeated learner;

133 (3) The alternative program complies with all requests of the county superintendent for
134 information on the educational program and progress of the student;

135 (4) The alternative program includes a family involvement component in its program. This
136 component shall include, but is not limited to, providing for student and parent participation in
137 activities that help address the challenging issues that have hindered the student's engagement
138 and progress in learning;

139 (5) The alternative program includes an on-site boarding option for students;

140 (6) The alternative program provides an individualized education program for students that
141 is designed to prepare them for a successful transition back into the public schools; and

142 (7) The parents or legal guardian of the student make application for enrollment of the
143 student in the alternative program, agree to the terms and conditions for enrollment, and enroll the
144 student in the program.

NOTE: The purpose of this bill is to modify funding for the Mountaineer Challenge Academy.

Strike-throughs indicate language that would be stricken from a heading or the present law and underscoring indicates new language that would be added.