

2012 State of the Schools Remarks

Superintendent of Public Instruction Patricia I. Wright

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Thank you for the invitation to provide an overview of the state of Virginia's public schools — I never tire of speaking about the accomplishments of our students and teachers.

This month, the nation's leading education journal ranked Virginia as fourth in the nation in overall educational quality and performance.

Education Week's "Quality Counts 2012" report awarded the commonwealth a letter grade of B, up from a B- in 2011, when the commonwealth also ranked fourth.

Only Maryland — with a B+ — earned a higher overall letter grade, although Massachusetts and New York also received B's.

The Quality Counts report validates what we already know: Virginia has outstanding public schools and a bipartisan track record of effective policies and reforms.

But, as Governor McDonnell pointed out last week, the report also confirms that there is room for improvement and further reform.

So, in reporting to you on the accomplishments of our schools this morning, I will also describe related challenges — and the important policy work of the Board of Education to meet those challenges.

Let's start with the Standards of Learning program — the foundation of our K-12 system.

The SOL program establishes expectations for what students should know and be able to do at the end of each grade or course.

Schools are accredited based on the percentage of students who are able to demonstrate that they are meeting these expectations in English, mathematics, history and science.

In addition, high schools must now meet a minimum benchmark for graduation and completion on an index that awards full credit for students earning diplomas and partial credit for GEDs and other successful efforts to keep students from dropping out.

Based on achievement during 2010-2011, 96 percent of Virginia's 1,838 public schools are fully accredited.

As you can see on the handout, this represents a two-point decline from the previous accreditation cycle — a decline primarily attributable to the introduction of graduation and completion as a new accountability factor for high schools.

I know that for the 27 high schools that would otherwise have earned full accreditation, the introduction of the new benchmark has been painful.

Nevertheless, the General Assembly made the right decision last year in allowing the Board of Education to implement this new accreditation benchmark.

As Board President Eleanor Saslaw noted last fall, holding high schools accountable for outcomes encourages early interventions before students are at risk of dropping out. It is a critical component of the board's effort to ensure that Virginia high school graduates are college-and-career ready.

The proof is in the pie chart on the front page of your handout. School divisions knew this new standard was coming and began preparing for it even before the board added it to the Standards of Accreditation in 2009.

As a result of their efforts, I am happy to report to you that nearly 87 percent of the students in the class of 2011 graduated on time with a diploma.

The revised mathematics SOLs approved by the board in 2009 and the English and science standards adopted in 2010 constitute another critical component of the board's effort to promote college-and-career readiness.

The English and mathematics standards are fully aligned with the model Common Core standards and also meet national and international benchmarks for college-and-career readiness established by organizations such as the College Board.

Last year, I warned the education subcommittees of the House and Senate money committees that the implementation of these new standards — and corresponding assessments — would have a dramatic impact on accreditation. I repeat this warning today.

The new mathematics tests debut this spring — middle and high school students on block schedules are already experiencing the new Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II tests — and I guarantee that we will see mathematics pass rates fall sharply when results are reported in the summer.

But this will be an indication that we are now expecting more of students, not that they are learning less.

Three-year averaging will soften the blow, but there will be an impact on the accreditation ratings we announce in September. I anticipate a similar impact when students take the new English and science SOLs in the spring of 2013.

These new, technology-enhanced tests are moving the SOL program beyond multiple choice. They will require students to demonstrate critical-thinking and problem-solving skills — as well as content knowledge mastery. I encourage caution about entertaining proposals to make radical changes to the current testing calendar until we see how students perform on these assessments.

In the early years of the SOL program, our challenge was to “raise the floor” by holding schools and students accountable for meeting minimum grade-level standards.

Now, for our young people to compete in the global economy, we must build on the success of the SOL program by raising standards and vowing not to be discouraged by short-term consequences.

The Virginia Department of Education has been working in partnership with school divisions to prepare teachers and students for these more rigorous standards by providing resources and technical support. We will continue this effort this year — and next year as schools prepare for the new English and science tests.

The department also is working closely with school divisions in carrying out the General Assembly's mandate to phase out reading and mathematics portfolio assessments for students with disabilities and ensure that the best interests of students inform decisions about which students are allowed to take the new Virginia Modified Achievement Standards Test.

The rollout of the VMAST — in mathematics this spring and in English reading in 2013 — also represents a needed increase in the overall rigor of the Standards of Learning program.

I mentioned Quality Counts; next month, another highly anticipated state-by-state comparison will be available when the College Board reports on the percentage of 2011 high school graduates who qualified for college credit on at least one Advanced Placement examination.

While data for the class of 2011 won't be available until then, as you can see on your handout, Virginia currently ranks third in the nation on this vital indicator of college readiness.

- 23.7 percent of the commonwealth's 2010 graduates earned a score of three or higher on an AP exam compared with 22.9 percent of 2009's graduating seniors.
- Translated into actual numbers, 19,162 of Virginia's 2010 seniors scored a three or higher on an AP exam at some point during their high school careers.
- This compares with 2001, when only 17,150 seniors even took an AP exam and only 10,900 earned a score of three or higher.

These figures reflect our aggressive efforts to promote increased participation in Advanced Placement courses through the Virtual Virginia program and our partnership with the National Math and Science Initiative. This public-private initiative provides support for teachers and incentives for students in high schools with traditionally low AP participation rates. Most of these schools are in Southside and Southwest Virginia.

The Board of Education also encourages Advanced Placement participation through Virtual Virginia — an online program offering AP, foreign language and other advanced courses — and through the Virginia Index of Performance, the incentive program for schools that was codified in 2010 and modified last year to increase the program's focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Just after the holidays, the governor and Board of Education announced that 447 schools and two school divisions earned 2012 VIP awards for advanced learning and achievement:

- 86 Virginia schools earned the Governor's Award for Educational Excellence;
- 188 schools and two school divisions earned the Board of Education Excellence Award;
- 171 schools earned the Board of Education Competence to Excellence Award; and
- 2 schools earned the Board of Education Rising Star Award.

On your handout, the 2012 VIP school-level awards are displayed in blue and the 2011 awards in red. Let me assure you that there was no sudden drop in performance on the various indicators that determine which schools and divisions earn awards.

Rather, the sharp decline in the number of schools earning VIP awards is a factor of eligibility. To be eligible for the program, schools must meet all state and federal accountability benchmarks, in other words, earn full accreditation AND make adequate yearly progress — AYP — under No Child Left Behind, for two consecutive years.

We have already discussed the impact of the new graduation benchmark for state accreditation. But the increasingly unrealistic requirements of the federal law were primarily responsible for the sharp drop in schools earning VIP awards.

Because of the intricacies of the AYP calculation and unrealistic benchmarks, only 38 percent of the commonwealth's schools made AYP based on achievement on 2010-2011 state tests. Sixty-one percent of schools made AYP during the previous ratings cycle. Only four of Virginia's 132 school divisions made AYP, compared with 12 during the previous cycle.

Accountability is not advanced by arbitrary rules and benchmarks that misidentify schools. When the department reported AYP results last August, I said that I would recommend that the Board of Education ask U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan for a waiver from NCLB's increasingly inflexible requirements.

The proposed waiver request I presented to the board last week dispenses with NCLB's 29 indicators and the law's now unrealistic annual objectives.

Rather than confusing the public with two often conflicting accountability ratings, the plan would eliminate AYP and instead supplement state accreditation with a prominent "dashboard" on each school's report card that would speak clearly and graphically to progress — or the lack thereof — toward closing achievement gaps.

Under the waiver plan, we would continue to require that schools test at least 95 percent of students in all subgroups and we would continue to report disaggregated achievement data by grade level and test for every school and school division.

I believe this new model for measuring progress and providing accountability for the federal education dollars Virginia receives maintains high expectations for student achievement, recognizes growth by subgroup, and accurately identifies the schools most in need of improvement and additional support and resources.

Will Secretary Duncan approve Virginia's waiver application?

I think it is in our favor that the proposal before the board reflects themes present in the applications of other high-performing states.

Also, Secretary Duncan has personally assured me that Virginia's decision against word-for-word adoption of the national Common Core standards will NOT disqualify the commonwealth from receiving a waiver or federal funds.

If we are unsuccessful in securing flexibility through a waiver, I will recommend to the Board of Education that it remove AYP as an eligibility factor for awards through the Virginia Index of Performance.

The purpose of the VIP program is to recognize schools and divisions that consistently exceed accountability standards. This purpose is thwarted if schools that deserve carrots receive sticks instead because of inflexible and overly prescriptive federal requirements.

Let me now discuss several areas that have been of particular interest to members of the General Assembly: teacher quality, STEM, and career and technical education.

Significant work has been done in the area of teacher and principal quality since your last session.

In April, the Board of Education approved new performance standards and a new model for evaluating teachers. Under the new model, 40 percent of a teacher's evaluation is based on multiple measures of student academic growth.

Performance standards related to professional knowledge, instructional planning, instructional delivery, assessment of student learning, learning environment and professionalism each account for ten percent of the evaluation and performance rating.

The new standards and evaluation model are already being implemented in the 25 schools participating in Governor McDonnell's performance-pay pilot initiative.

The work group that developed the new standards and model included representatives of the Virginia School Boards Association, Virginia Association of Elementary School Principals, Virginia Association of Secondary School Principals, Virginia Education Association, Virginia Parent Teacher Association, Virginia Association of Elementary School Principals and Virginia Association of School Superintendents.

These same stakeholder groups were also at the table last fall as the department began developing new performance standards and a new evaluation model for principals.

The new standards and model – which are awaiting Board of Education approval in February – recognize the role of principals as instructional leaders. Under the model, 40 percent of the evaluation of a principal's effectiveness would be tied to multiple measures of student academic growth.

With the decline of traditional industries such as textiles, furniture and tobacco; science, technology, engineering and mathematics — known collectively as STEM — and rigorous career and technical education programs are increasingly critical in preparing young Virginians for lives as successful and productive citizens.

There are now 10 Governor's STEM academies preparing students for high-demand, high-wage, and high-skill careers in Virginia. Each academy is a partnership among school divisions, postsecondary institutions and business and industry.

The number of industry-recognized certifications earned by Virginia students has increased by 56 percent since 2008, and nearly half of the students completing a CTE program also earn an Advanced Studies Diploma.

Those of you who were here during the early days of the SOL program remember when pass rates were low and less than half of the state's schools were fully accredited.

You may also remember the fear as 2004 approached that thousands of students would not be able to pass the SOL tests required to earn a high school diploma.

There was great pressure to weaken or abandon the SOLs.

But the General Assembly, the Board of Education and governors maintained a bipartisan consensus in support of the SOL reform and, today, there is much to celebrate.

But the data that illustrate our progress also illuminate today's challenges.

As you can see by the pie charts on the back of your handout, 85-90 percent of our students now routinely pass the SOLs in reading and mathematics. But less than 40 percent are able to demonstrate advanced proficiency, the level of achievement indicative of students on their way to college-and-career readiness.

Results from the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress show that Virginia students continue to outperform their peers nationwide in reading and mathematics. Our fourth graders are among the highest achieving on the national reading test and Virginia eighth graders made significant gains in mathematics last year.

But a closer look at the data reveals that eighth-grade reading achievement has been flat for a decade and minority students continue to lag far behind in both subjects at both grade levels.

These achievement gaps remind us — even as we celebrate national recognition — of the importance of the student-by-student efforts underway to raise achievement in persistently low-performing schools.

You have many proposals before you this session to expand the educational opportunities available for young Virginians. The data we have discussed this morning make the case for further reform and innovation.

The data also speak to the soundness of the SOL program that remains the foundation of our statewide systems of accountability and support for K-12 education.

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