

The Virginia NEWS LETTER

Virginia's Education Reform Works – II

By Mark Christie

Some time ago, I wrote an article for this publication that reported on the principles and progress of Virginia's education reform initiative, known by its shorthand title, the Standards of Learning, or SOLs ("Virginia's Education Reform Works," *The Virginia News Letter*, August 2001).

Two-and-a-half years later, the evidence is now even more persuasive that Virginia's historic effort to improve the quality of our public schools through statewide academic standards, objective testing and accountability for results is producing major positive academic and cultural change in Virginia's public school system and significantly higher student achievement. So it is timely to review again the progress and current status of the SOL program and consider what the future holds in terms of challenges and opportunities.

History of the SOL Program

What is known today as the Standards of Learning program was launched by the administration of Gov. George Allen shortly after he was inaugurated in 1994. The guiding vision was to ensure that all Virginia

students were taught the minimum skills and knowledge they would need to be successful in an increasingly competitive global economy, and to produce responsible citizens of Virginia and the United States who understood their history and system of government.

The first step was the development of statewide grade-by-grade academic content standards in English (reading and writing), mathematics, science, history (Virginia, United States and world) and social sciences (civics, Virginia and U.S. government, geography and economics). Governor Allen's state superintendent of schools, Dr. William Bosher, led this effort, working with the Virginia Board of Education.

It should be noted that this was not the first initiative to develop statewide academic content standards. The term "Standards of Learning" had actually been around since the early 1980s, when former superintendent Dr. S. John Davis led an effort to develop statewide content standards, which were then made available to local schools to use on an optional basis.



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After a nearly year-long process with contributions from numerous educators and others and many public hearings, the revised content standards were approved by the Board in June 1995 (see endnote). The new standards were far richer in content than any previous version and have been hailed as among the nation's best by several national independent reviewers. Following adoption of the revised standards, the Allen Administration and the Board turned to the next two major components of the reform effort.

In his budget submitted to the 1996 Session of the General Assembly, Gov. Allen included funding to develop tests that would measure student progress in learning the academic content in the new standards. Opposition to this proposal was strong, but fortunately, key legislators of both parties understood the need for testing to measure student achievement and worked to see that funding for the new SOL tests was included in the final budget.

With SOL test development underway by mid-1996, the Board then undertook a revision of the Standards of Accreditation (SOA). I noted above that Virginia's education reform is often labeled simply the "SOL program," but the real heart of the reform is the accountability measures included in the SOA. The SOA revisions adopted in September 1997 introduced an historic new concept to Virginia public education: accountability for results in terms of measurable student achievement. Schools would be accredited based not only on a plethora of inputs — such as staffing ratios, building and equipment features, number of fire drills and the like — but also based on whether students were actually learning core knowledge and skills, measured objectively.

Tests would be given in grades 3, 5, 8 and high school in the core academic areas of the Standards of Learning. The scores would be made public, thus giving parents, employers and the general public vital information on how well their local schools were doing. The 1997 SOA revisions required each public school to achieve a sufficient pass rate on the SOL tests to earn an accreditation rating, and required that beginning in the spring of 2004 students would be required to pass a certain number of tests to earn a diploma.

The first SOL tests were not given until the spring of 1998, three years after the adoption of the academic content standards upon which the new tests were based. It is relevant to recite this chronology because local school divisions had three years in which to incorporate the new

content standards into their local curricula before SOL testing ever began. They had nine years prior to the graduation of the first class that had to pass SOL tests to graduate (2004), and while school accreditation ratings incorporated SOL test results from 1998 onwards, schools were given 12 years (2007) before a school could actually lose accreditation because of poor SOL test results.

Making Reasonable Adjustments

From the beginning, the SOL program faced vociferous criticism, primarily from within the education community. The critics were not monolithic, however. There were ideological critics, such as professors at university schools of education who opposed the fundamental principle of the SOL program, i.e., that educators should teach a defined body of minimum academic knowledge and skills, with objective testing used to measure student progress and define accountability. Since most classroom teachers in Virginia and elsewhere have been trained by university education-school faculties lacking in intellectual diversity and intolerant of any challenges to their own orthodoxies, it was not surprising that many educators in the field also initially opposed the SOL program. Fortunately, however, there were other educators in the field who shared the Board's belief that standards and accountability could work to improve public schools and benefit students through higher achievement. Many in the latter group had criticisms of the SOL program in those early years, but their criticisms and proposals for changes were intended to improve the program and make it succeed, not gut it.

The Board, under the leadership of then-President Kirk T. Schroder, appointed by Gov. James Gilmore in January 1998, made a concerted effort to listen and work with those educators in the field who wanted to see the SOL program succeed for students and schools. Based on their recommendations, the Board made several revisions to the SOL program during the period from 1998-2000. Contrary to some self-serving criticism of the Board from a few on the ideological Right, those revisions did not retreat in the slightest from the fundamental principles of accountability, but instead brought some common sense to help make the SOL program more workable. At the other end of the ideological spectrum, those who opposed the basic principle of test-based accountability continued to criticize the SOL program (and still do), but many

Chart 1
1998-2003 Statewide SOL Spring Passing Rates (Shown in Percent Passing)

SOL Test	1998 Pass Rate	1999 Pass Rate	2000 Pass Rate	2001 Pass Rate	2002 Pass Rate	2003 Pass Rate	Change from 1998 to 2003
Grade 3							
English	55	61	61	65	72	72	17
Mathematics	63	68	71	77	80	83	20
History & Social Science	49	62	65	72	76	82	33
Science	63	68	73	74	78	82	19
Grade 5							
English: RLR	68	69	68	73	78	82	14
English: Writing	65	81	81	84	84	85	20
Math	47	51	63	67	71	74	27
History & Social Science	33	46	51	63	72	79	46
Science	59	67	64	75	76	79	20
Computer/Tech	72	81	85	82	86	N/A	N/A
Grade 8							
English: RLR	65	67	70	73	69	67	2
English: Writing	67	70	76	75	76	74	7
Math	53	60	61	68	71	72	19
History & Social Science	35	40	50	56	78	80	45
Science	71	78	82	84	85	84	13
Computer/Tech	63	72	78	79	76	N/A	N/A
HIGH SCHOOL							
English: RLR	72	75	78	82	86	93	21
English: Writing	71	81	85	84	86	91	20
Algebra I	40	56	65	74	78	78	38
Algebra II	31	51	58	74	77	81	50
Geometry	52	62	67	73	76	79	27
U. S. History	30	32	39	47	72	75	45
World History I	62	68	75	83	86	86	24
World History II	41	47	60	65	79	82	41
World Geography	N/A	N/A	76	77	74	76	N/A
Earth Science	58	65	70	73	70	73	15
Biology	72	81	79	81	83	82	10
Chemistry	54	64	64	74	78	84	30

Virginia Department of Education, Division of Assessment and Reporting
 Spring pass rates do not include summer or fall results.

educators who had opposed the SOL program at its inception came to see that the Board was sincere about raising student achievement and improving public education and was not trying to undermine the public schools.

I recount this history in some detail because it illustrates an apparent paradox — and fundamental challenge — for those seeking to bring serious reform to public education.

In its resistance to the major cultural change represented by standards and accountability, the public school system is no different from any other large bureaucratic institution; all such organizations naturally resist change to the status quo, especially change that is uncomfortable.

Yet while state policy makers must insist on accountability for student achievement, such major cultural change will never succeed on a

lasting basis without the active help, cooperation and trust of the majority of the educators who are in the trenches in the public school system.

Thus, those trying to bring about significant reform in public education face a difficult balancing act: Insist upon change that is met with reluctance, even hostility, from many educators in the system, while simultaneously seeking to earn the trust and cooperation of those same educators, without which the reform will not succeed in the classroom, where it counts, nor have any staying power. There is no magic formula to use to achieve this balance; it is an art, not a science. Policy makers must be resolute in the face of opposition from within the school system and refuse to retreat on core principles, yet also be flexible when justified and eager to work with those educators who want to make the reform succeed and whose help is essential.

At my last meeting as Board president in June 2003, a high school principal from Chesapeake, who recently had been selected by his peers as Virginia's secondary-schools Principal of the Year, appeared before the Board and said that when the SOL program was launched some eight years prior he was one of its most vocal critics. Yet he said that after seeing the results in his own school and statewide, he had changed his opinion of the SOL program "180 degrees" and now believed it is the most important positive change ever to have taken place in our public schools. At that moment I knew that we on the Virginia Board of Education had managed to strike the right balance and produce a reform that is working and paying off for our schools and students.

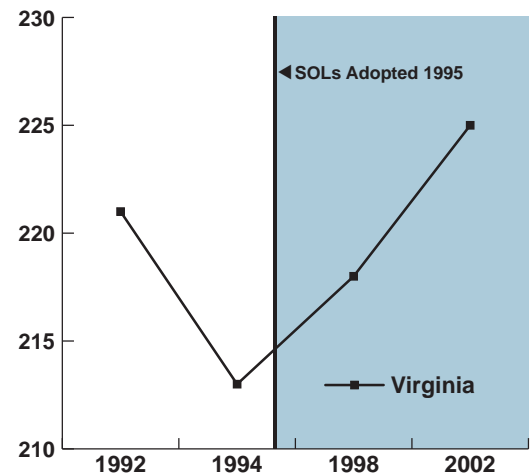
Progress on State Tests

As Chart 1 demonstrates, Virginia students have made remarkable progress on our own SOL tests. Students have made significant gains on all 25 tests given since testing began in 1998 (a 26th test, in World Geography, was added in 2000).

These tests are — and will remain — the single most accurate gauge of how well our education reform is working, because our SOL tests are the only tests that are based directly on the content knowledge contained in our academic standards. They measure how well our students are learning the minimum skills and knowledge that is required to be taught in all Virginia classrooms.

Some of the most remarkable gains in pass rates have come in mathematics, with gains of 20 percentage points in Grade 3, 27 points in Grade 5, 38 points in Algebra I, 50 points in Algebra II and 27 in Geometry.

Chart 2
NAEP Average Scale Scores: Reading Grade 4

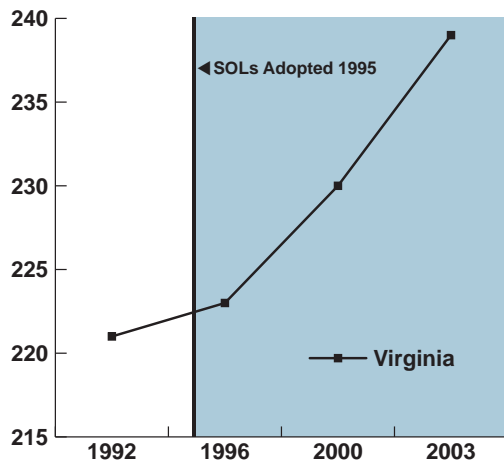


Note: The national schedule for administration of the NAEP reading tests was changed in 2003 from every four years to every two years. As part of the reconfiguration, Virginia students took a Grade 4 reading test again in 2003 and achieved an average score of 223, which NAEP described as a statistically insignificant change from the 2002 scale score.

Critics claim that these dramatic gains merely reflect "teaching to the test." This cliché is the most intellectually shallow of all the arguments made against the SOL program. The SOL tests measure student learning of the SOL academic content, and our academic content standards in English, math, science and history are among the best in the nation. The SOL reading tests measure a student's ability to read, the SOL writing tests measure the ability to write, the SOL math tests measure the student's ability to do math. Do we want teachers to teach these skills? Of course we do. If a focus on teaching basic reading, writing and math skills is belittled by so many educators and education-school professors as merely "teaching to the test," then now we know why reading, writing and math test scores on Virginia's own Literacy Passport Test, as well as on national tests, stagnated or declined in the years prior to the launch of the SOL program.

Reading, writing and math are skills. The content areas of science and history involve not skills but knowledge. In these areas, if a teacher chooses to prepare students for the SOL tests by simply drilling students to memorize the minimum content and nothing more, that practice could be termed "teaching to the test" in a negative sense. Retrograde teaching practices, however, are not required to prepare students to pass

Chart 3
NAEP Average Scale Scores: Mathematics Grade 4



SOL tests in science and history, and in fact many Virginia classroom teachers teach science and history in creative and innovative ways that ask students both to learn the content and to think analytically about the content they have learned. Requiring teachers to teach students a defined body of content knowledge in science and history is not antithetical to helping students develop higher-order thinking skills, yet this false dichotomy is dogma on many education-school faculties.

Good teachers can teach a defined body of academic content, as the SOL program requires, using creative pedagogical methods that give students knowledge, skills and a love of learning, and equip students to think analytically about the content they have learned.

National Tests Show Progress Also

While Chart 1 demonstrates that Virginia students have made remarkable progress as measured on our state tests, our students have also made significant progress on national tests.

On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), sometimes called the "Nation's Report Card," our students have made significant gains in both reading and math.

As Chart 2 shows, our fourth-graders suffered a significant drop in reading scores on the 1994 NAEP reading test, just before the SOL program was launched. This statewide drop in reading ability on the 1994 NAEP test came after several years of stagnant scores on Virginia's own Literacy Passport Test, an elementary-level reading, writing and math skills test given to school children from the mid-1980s until phased out in the 1990s. Chart 2 demonstrates that after

the launch of the SOL program in 1995 a clear upward trend in reading scores on the NAEP began.

Chart 3 shows a similar upward trend on the NAEP Grade 4 math test.

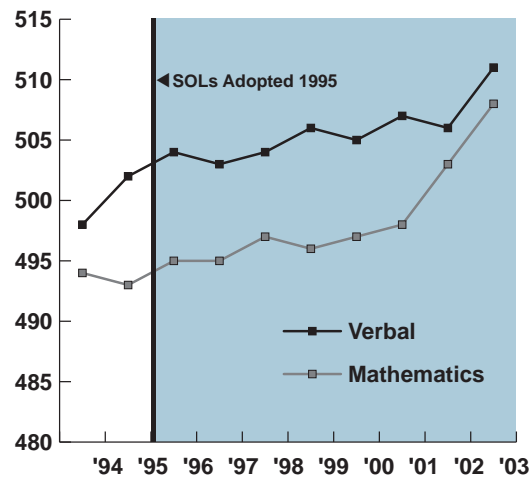
The NAEP gains are even more significant considering that the scores of minority, Limited English Proficient and special education children have been given even heavier weighting in our most recent NAEP scores than in earlier results.

The SAT-1 is a test that is taken by high school students, usually by those planning to go to college. As Chart 4 shows, since the launch of the SOL program SAT-1 scores of Virginia public school students in both verbal and math have risen significantly, with gains of 9 points in verbal and 15 in math, for a combined rise of 24 points. These significant gains are even more remarkable considering that since 1995 Virginia's participation rate (the share of all high school students who take the SAT) has risen to 71 percent, which is 23 percentage points higher than the national rate. Generally, higher participation rates mean lower, not higher, scores, but in Virginia we have achieved both higher scores and higher participation since the SOL program began.

We should always keep in mind that no single year's test results are conclusive, whether on our state SOL tests or on any single national test. Test scores will fluctuate from year to year, and no doubt in the future we will have years in which scores on some tests decline from the prior year, because it is a different set of students taking the tests each year. What is important, however, is the trend over a number of years and, by this measure, results on both state and national tests since the SOL program was launched in 1995 demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that we have made major progress in Virginia in raising student achievement levels.

Is our progress to date enough? No, of course not. We have not even scratched the surface of the potential that standards and accountability can produce in terms of raising the achievement levels of our students. We have several trouble spots where progress is insufficient, especially in reading. See, for example, in Chart 1 the reading scores for Grades 3, 5 and 8, which illustrate that far too many Virginia children still cannot read at grade level. We must do better in reading, as that is the most important skill that all students need for success not only in school, but in life and career after school, whatever path they choose (see also endnote on this subject).

Chart 4
Virginia SAT Scores 1994-2003
 (Public School Seniors)



Staying the Course for the Future

Since the SOL program began, we have made remarkable progress. Standards-and-accountability reform has worked in Virginia in contrast to failures in other states for several reasons.

First, the Board of Education held firm on the fundamental principles of the SOL program, despite fierce and often personal criticism aimed at the Board, while at the same time showing a willingness to listen to constructive critics and make reasonable, common sense adjustments to the program.

Second, Virginia's elected leaders courageously backed the SOL program and refused to pressure the Board to retreat on the core principles of accountability. Governors Allen and Gilmore backed the Board, and our current governor, Mark Warner, has also embraced the SOL program and refused to retreat. Governor Warner's courage is particularly noteworthy, since it is no secret that the public-educator organizations which have been intensely hostile to the SOL program are among the largest and most powerful components of his political party's base. Placing the public interest ahead of the special interest of your own political party's foot soldiers is one of the most courageous acts any elected leader can perform and Warner deserves tremendous credit for doing so.

Third, and most importantly, a majority of Virginia's educators came to realize that the SOL program could benefit both students and public schools. They overcame their initial misgivings and worked extremely hard to implement the SOL program and make it a success, and they

deserve the lion's share of the credit for the SOL success to date.

Pressure to retreat on the SOL program will grow in the years to come, as we reach the deadlines for some major consequences of failure. The members of this coming spring's class of 2004 will be the first required to demonstrate on objective tests that they really do have adequate reading and writing skills to earn a high school diploma. "Social graduation" – the practice of giving diplomas to students who are functionally illiterate — which has been done in far too many instances in Virginia public schools in years past, as Virginia's employers have frequently complained, comes to an end. Students lacking necessary reading and writing skills must be given every opportunity to acquire them, but not simply given diplomas anyway.

By 2007, the first schools to lose accreditation will be identified. In some local school divisions, based on current and past performance, the number of schools losing accreditation may be large. That is no reason to retreat or water down the accreditation requirements, however. On the contrary, that is even more evidence demonstrating that in some local school divisions, management by the local school board and central office administration is dysfunctional and failing, as recently described in a study by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) ("Review of Factors and Practices Associated with School Performance," Senate Joint Resolution 349 [2003 Session]).

The answer is not to back down on student achievement requirements for accreditation, but to address a flaw in Virginia's Constitution. The state should have the constitutional authority to take over dysfunctional local school divisions, an authority many other states have and use when necessary. It is indefensible to elevate preserving the perks, salaries and powers of local school boards and administrators over the educational needs of schoolchildren.

Threat from Federal Interference

There is another threat to the future success of Virginia's education reform that I must note. The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act purports to promote accountability. It may do so in states that have done little to nothing to implement accountability, but in Virginia, which has led the nation since Governor Allen launched the SOL accountability program, NCLB is at best unnecessary.

Unfortunately, however, NCLB is worse than unnecessary. It represents the most massive

federal assault in American history on a state's prerogatives to run its own public schools. The law's formula for what is termed Adequate Yearly Progress, which is required of all schools, is utopian nonsense. NCLB, as currently structured, will not promote accountability. On the contrary, NCLB is a threat to accountability because it is so lacking in common sense that it will undermine public support for accountability. Virginia's congressional delegation needs to take the lead in amending NCLB to follow the principle established in the federal welfare reform law passed by Congress in 1996. In that law, states like Virginia that already had successful welfare reforms underway were exempted from federal micromanagement. That same principle needs to be brought to NCLB.

SOLs Are Improving Public Education

Let me conclude by quoting from my own article in the August 2001 issue of this newsletter, because the events of the ensuing years make those words just as relevant now as then:

The evidence that the SOL program is working grows daily...it would be a tragedy to retreat on the fundamental principles of accountability that are producing this success...

For nearly two centuries, our public schools have been the primary engine of opportunity for the vast majority of children. They have offered children not born into wealth or privilege the tools to fulfill the traditional American parents' dream that their children shall have better lives than they did. That is what this reform is

all about: Ensuring that all our public schoolchildren get the opportunity for a better future by giving them the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in a global economy and to be informed, responsible citizens of our commonwealth.

Endnote: The content standards for English, mathematics, science, history and social sciences were revised again as part of a regularly scheduled review during the 2001-03 time period. Those revisions maintained and built upon the content-rich character of the 1995 standards. In revising the English standards, we strengthened the phonics and vocabulary development components to improve reading instruction for children in the early grades, an area where we as a commonwealth have a real need for improvement. We also added to the writing strand of the English standards a greatly increased emphasis on grammar instruction, including the explicit study of the parts of speech and the use of sentence diagramming, both practical and effective tools to improve students' writing skills. The primary purpose of the increased emphasis on grammar in our English standards is, of course, to improve all our students' writing skills; however, an additional benefit is that it will help prepare our college-bound students for the increased emphasis on writing skills and grammar contained in the changes being planned for the national SAT test.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mr. Christie served on the Virginia Board of Education from 1997 to 2003, and was elected by his fellow Board members to serve as President in 2002-03. Prior to his appointment to the Board, he was Governor George Allen's Counselor and Director of Policy. An attorney, he teaches constitutional law and public policy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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