



For Immediate Release:
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State of the Commonwealth's Public Schools — 2011 **Superintendent of Public Instruction Patricia I. Wright**

The young men and women who will graduate from Virginia high schools in May and June make up a historic class.

Most of them began their public school careers as kindergartners in 1998, the year Standards of Learning (SOL) accountability began.

They represent the first cohort of students whose *entire* education has taken place in schools subject to achievement-based accreditation standards.

There are few today who would dispute that the SOL program — which has enjoyed broad bipartisan support — has led to significantly higher student achievement.

The performance of Virginia students has risen during the last 12 years on every state and national measure.

I won't bombard you with a lot of statistics today, but I will share a few facts:

- Our students are now among the highest achieving in the nation on Advanced Placement tests and on SAT and ACT college-entrance examinations.
- In 2009, 22.9 percent of the commonwealth's public high school seniors earned a grade of 3 or better — qualifying for college credit — on at least one Advanced Placement examination. Only two states, New York and Maryland, have higher percentages of seniors earning grades of 3 or better on AP tests.
- Virginia also achieved nation's largest five-year increase in student achievement on AP examinations as the percentage of public high school seniors earning a grade of three or higher — generally qualifying for college credit — on at least one test grew by 5.8 points.
- Education Week — the journal of record in public education — ranked Virginia fourth in the nation for education policy and performance in its 2011 "Quality Counts" report.
- Just this week, results of national science tests were announced that show Virginia fourth graders in a virtual tie with students in New Hampshire as the highest-achieving in the nation.

Results from national reading tests taken last year show that Virginia elementary and middle school students continue to outperform their peers nationwide and are among the nation's strongest readers.

Many of you may recall how a plunge in fourth-grade reading performance in the early 1990s provided the "wake-up call" that led to reform.

How far have we come since then? Today, students in only one state — Massachusetts — perform at what the national testing program describes as a statistically higher level on the fourth-grade reading test.

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This is a reflection not only of the efficacy of our standards-based accountability program, but also of your support since 1997 for early reading intervention programs in our elementary schools.

Because of your support since 2004, Virginia now boasts a nationally recognized statewide student data system that puts powerful information in the hands of educators and enables the commonwealth to account for every student and report accurate graduation rates.

More than 85 percent of the students in the class of 2010 graduated on time with a diploma last spring — a three-point increase since 2008, which was the first year VDOE had sufficient data to report cohort four-year graduation rates for the state and every school division and high school.

The success of Virginia schools in raising graduation rates is the result of a sustained student-by-student effort focused on the young people who are the most challenged by the commonwealth's diploma standards and who are the most susceptible to the pressures that cause students to drop out.

To assist school divisions in identifying students who are at-risk of not graduating, the Department of Education worked with the federal National High School Center and the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center to develop a "Virginia Early Warning System" that schools are now using to monitor student progress and flag students at risk of not earning a diploma.

I also believe that our success in raising graduation rates and overall achievement is a reflection of the willingness of Virginians — governors, legislators, policymakers, superintendents, teachers, students and parents — to embrace new technologies, new practices and forward-looking policies.

We are a state steeped in tradition but with a growing national reputation for innovation in public education. Here are some examples:

The student data system that allows us to report accurate graduation and dropout rates also allows the department to measure the growth of individual students from year to year.

This gives us a clearer picture of the impact of instruction on learning and provides a foundation for including student achievement as a significant factor in evaluating the performance of teachers.

The student data system also supports pioneering policy work that will help Virginia realize Governor Bob McDonnell's objective of increasing the number of four-year degrees earned by Virginia students.

The Board of Education's College and Career Readiness Initiative — a collaboration of the Department of Education, SCHEV, VCCS, and SREB — is intended to increase the number of high school graduates prepared for college and work.

The goal is to identify students who may not be fully prepared for success during their freshman year of college — even though they are on track to earn a high school diploma — and address their deficiencies through specially designed "capstone" courses.

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The department's "Beyond Textbooks" initiative, in partnership with Arlington County, Henry County, Newport News and Pulaski County, is exploring the potential of wireless technology to enhance teaching and learning — and cut costs.

Last fall, students in selected schools in these four divisions exchanged traditional textbooks for Apple iPads loaded with interactive content, media and applications aligned to the commonwealth's history and social science standards.

School divisions currently spend \$70 million a year on textbooks and a relatively modest investment from the Governor's Productivity Fund is allowing us to explore the potential of digital technology for cost savings.

The expanding capacity of Virginia schools and school divisions to exchange student records and forward transcripts to colleges and universities electronically also is receiving national recognition.

Electronic data sharing eliminates opportunities for error. Students and parents are assured of accuracy — and they can track transcripts securely online. Nearly all of the commonwealth's school divisions have adopted the necessary data-sharing framework, and students and school counselors in 16 divisions are now sending electronic transcripts to colleges and universities.

VDOE and Virginia Commonwealth University's newly-established Center of Excellence for Autism Spectrum Disorders is providing a focal point for research, professional development for educators and technical assistance in implementing effective practices and comprehensive services for students with autism.

Together, VDOE and VCU are laying a foundation for significant improvements in outcomes for students with autism.

Working with local school divisions, we have built on the concept behind Virginia's nationally recognized Governor's Schools by creating a system of nine regional career and technical academies that emphasize science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

These CTE "STEM" academies present programs that prepare students for careers related to regional economic needs and employment trends.

The General Assembly in recent years has expressed its concern about online safety and cyber bullying and the centerpiece of VDOE's effort in this area recently received VCU's annual "Innovation in Government Award."

VDOE's "Internet Safety and You" campaign — which is built around a collection of animated, online lessons starring Garfield the cat — is being used by teachers and students across Virginia and around the world. A study of fourth-grade participants found a significant improvement in Internet-safety knowledge.

Every flu season presents a challenge for schools and this was especially true last year with worldwide concern over the H1N1 virus.

Virginia schools met this challenge with a digital communications campaign — led by VDOE — that won national recognition for its innovative use of technology and aggressive use of the web to keep students, parents and school division employees informed.

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With your continued support, and the leadership of the governor and Board of Education, Virginia's nationally recognized accountability system is moving beyond pencils and "bubble" sheets.

Virginia students now take more than two million SOL tests online annually and by 2013, online will be the primary delivery mode for all SOL assessments.

Online testing allows Virginia's assessment program to provide innovative test items that allow students to demonstrate what they've learned.

Students will encounter this new generation of online items beginning with mathematics testing next year and English and science testing in the following year.

The new mathematics and English tests also will represent a significant increase in rigor for students.

They will assess students against revised Standards of Learning that I can say confidently are fully aligned with the Common Core State Standards promoted by the U.S. Department of Education and fully aligned with national and international definitions of "college and career-ready" content.

The rigor of our accountability program also will increase as we respond to your directive to phase out a portfolio assessment for students with disabilities that has been at the center of several much-publicized testing investigations.

I am happy to report to you that this assessment — the Virginia Grade Level Alternative — will be replaced by a new online test — beginning with mathematics in 2011-2012 and reading in 2012-2013.

Items on the "Virginia Modified Achievement Standards Test" — or VMAST — will include supports and simplified items not available to students who take standard SOL tests.

There will be strict criteria for the selection of students for the VMAST and safeguards to prevent misuse. And because it will be computer scored like SOL tests, VMAST will be an objective and reliable measure of student achievement.

The core principle of the SOL program is that every child in Virginia — regardless of where he or she lives — has a right to an education that meets state standards and provides the knowledge and skills required for success in college and the workplace.

This consensus has produced an approach to accountability and school improvement that I like to call the "Virginia way."

Rather than punish schools, the Virginia way is to create partnerships between the state and school divisions to implement reforms that put the interests of students first — and include accountability for results.

"Turning around" a chronically low-performing school is not easy. Often the first challenge is to create a capacity at the local level for effective reform.

To help school divisions create this capacity — and ensure that state and federal funds allocated to raise achievement are spent wisely and effectively — VDOE last year approved a list of state-approved "lead turnaround partners."

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The lead turnaround partners are working in partnership with educators in 16 low-performing schools in 12 divisions to provide instructional services and programs aligned with the SOL to raise achievement to state and federal standards.

In dozens of other schools, we've required the hiring of VDOE-approved coaches to help administrators and teachers implement best practices and improve instruction.

When students in these schools are sharing the success of their peers in the 98 percent of Virginia schools that are fully accredited, we will have significantly narrowed the achievement gaps that leave large numbers of black and Hispanic children unprepared for college or the workforce.

While achievement gaps remain, Virginia schools have achieved a goal that many thought was unrealistic when SOL accountability began in 1998.

I want to thank you for your commitment to public education and reform during this journey. And I want to thank — as I do whenever I am out in the schools — the thousands of Virginia teachers, principals and other educators whose extraordinary efforts and dedication have brought us so far.

We must keep this success in mind as we provide the funds, the policies, the support and the instruction students will need to meet even higher expectations in English, mathematics and other subjects — as well as new accreditation provisions related to graduation.

Our schools will begin a new trend line as these more rigorous standards and benchmarks become effective over the next few years.

I will tell you plainly today that we will see pass rates slip and the percentage of schools earning full accreditation fall.

But we must not become alarmed or discouraged.

And we must not give in to the temptation to preserve the status quo when we know in our hearts that we must raise standards for our young people to remain competitive in the 21st century.

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