

# A BIG WIN FOR VIRGINIA STUDENTS



## Virginia's Standards of Learning

In 2014, Virginia's on-time high school graduation rate was 90%—one of the highest in the nation. Unfortunately, there was another story to be told. On the most recent Nation's Report Card, also known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), less than half of 4th and 8th grade students demonstrated proficiency in reading and math. In 2007, the Virginia Board of Education requested the State Department of Education to begin a College and Career Readiness Initiative. As a result, the Board of Education adopted revised Standards of Learning (SOL) in math in 2009 and in English in 2010.

Virginia's Proficiency Rates on the Nation's Report Card				
Year	4th Math	4th Reading	8th Math	8th Reading
2013	47%	43%	36%	36%

The revised standards were designed to ensure that students graduate prepared for college and careers. They include performance expectations in math and English to identify the minimum level of comprehension that all high school graduates must attain to successfully complete college-level work or career training.

With the adoption of revised standards, Virginia is one step closer to ensuring that students will have the opportunity to reach their full potential. By 2020, 66% of jobs in the state will require a postsecondary credential. However, only 42% of adults currently have such a credential, resulting in a 24% skills gap. Higher standards are essential to helping close this gap.





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## Better Standards Deserve Better Assessments

With the adoption of updated standards, Virginia needed an improved test that was more meaningful to students, teachers, and parents in determining which skills a student has or has not yet mastered. The state also needed a test that measured the critical thinking and problem solving skills that students need to succeed—and previous state tests did not evaluate this level of learning. Improved assessments present an opportunity to move beyond tests that simply measure rote memorization skills to ones that mirror the higher standards and provide teachers with valuable information on how effectively they are teaching and students are learning.

The SOL assessments were upgraded to align to the more rigorous revised standards. The revised SOL assessments go beyond measuring content knowledge and assess mathematical processes, reasoning, and critical thinking skills. Writing skills are measured through multiple choice questions and essay questions that require students to read and analyze complex texts. Math, science, reading, and writing SOL tests also include technology-enhanced items that require answers to be indicated in ways other than a multiple choice format. Students are asked to create graphs and visual representations of mathematical concepts, and type open-response answers.

In fall 2014, improved SOL score reports were developed in reading, math, science, and history. These reports, which will be issued for the spring 2015 assessments, provide clear information about student performance, making it easier for school personnel and parents to understand how to best support their students. The reports identify the skills a student has mastered and those he or she is struggling with so that appropriate supports can be implemented.

Putting better assessments in place needs to be part of a larger system of accountability that supports

student achievement and holds schools accountable for successfully teaching the content outlined in the standards. At the heart of accountability is the need to ensure that all students across Virginia receive a high-quality education. Meaningful tests serve as school-wide academic checkups that can identify struggling students and schools in need of extra support and interventions. In addition, improved assessments can identify high-achieving students who require support to maintain their academic engagement and provide them with the resources necessary to continue to excel.

It is important to advocate for key criteria that will make the state assessments a strong measuring stick of how Virginia students are doing on the path to college and careers at the state and national levels. Leaders continue to be enthusiastic about the SOL tests because they meet so many of the criteria that make up a high-quality aligned test. As advocates, we need to ensure that our state tests accurately measure college and career readiness and have these characteristics to serve as a useful tool to benefit students.

## A High-Quality Assessment:

- Is developed with input from academic and testing experts, as well as teachers.
- Is field tested and reviewed before full implementation.
- Assesses a wide range of real-world skills using a variety of question formats.
- Includes formative or interim assessments that act as academic checkups to ensure that students are keeping pace.
- Provides detailed and timely feedback that sends an early warning signal to teachers if students are not on track so that interventions can be put in place.
- Is comparable across states.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. What is the difference between standards and curriculum?

- Standards are a set of guidelines for what students are expected to know and be able to do at specific points in their education. Standards provide the foundation for key components of the education system, including curricula, instructional materials, teacher training, and assessments.
- A curriculum is the course of study covering the standards. It is set by local school districts and includes the lesson plans, programs, and textbooks that teachers use to teach the content and skills outlined in the standards.

### 2. Do test scores impact schools and districts?

- School-wide test results will be used as one measure for school accountability. Just as we use tests as academic checkups for individual students, they are also checkups for our schools. We need to identify schools in need of extra support so that interventions can be put in place to ensure that all students receive a high-quality education.

### 3. What grades and subjects are tested?

- All students in grades 3–8 take the SOL tests in reading and math. Fifth graders take writing and science exams, and third graders take science and social studies exams. In eighth grade, students also take writing, science, and social studies tests. High school end-of-course tests are given in grades 9–12 in various courses, including English 11, Algebra 1 and 2, Geometry, Biology, Chemistry, Earth Science, Virginia and U.S. History, and World History 1 and 2.

### 4. Do test scores impact teachers?

- Forty percent of a teacher's evaluation is based on student academic progress, which can be determined by various tools, but should include student-growth data from the SOLs when applicable.



## The Virginia Standards of Learning:

- Are designed to ensure that college- and career-ready learning standards are taught in every Virginia classroom.

## Better assessments:

- Give us an honest, objective report of how our students are doing.
- Ensure all students are held to the same expectations.
- Identify struggling students so they can get the help they need.
- Identify high-achieving students to provide them with the resources necessary to continue to excel.

## **5. How do test scores impact students?**

- To earn a high school diploma, students must pass at least six end-of-course SOL tests. This includes two English tests, one math test, one history or social science test, one science test, and another test in any subject area.
- There are no test requirements for promotion.

## **6. How are teachers involved in the test development process?**

- Virginia teachers serve on SOL committees and review test items and forms to ensure that they measure student knowledge accurately and fairly.

## **7. What kind of data is collected? Is it released?**

- Under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Virginia is required to collect data on school performance. Aggregate data collected includes student test scores and information such as attendance, support services, and academic growth. *The state will not release any personally identifiable student information.*
- Only individuals who interact with students on a daily basis, such as teachers and parents, are allowed to see student-specific information. Federal law protects the privacy of student information and education records through the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The only information that will be publicly available will contain aggregate data for schools, districts, and subgroups.

## **8. Do students need to be computer literate?**

- Students need to be computer literate. Virginia schools have been using online tests for more than a decade. The math, science, reading, and writing tests also use technology-enhanced items that require students to answer more extensive open-ended questions.
- This year, Virginia will also begin using computer adaptive testing (CAT) for the grade 6 math test. This testing format customizes each question for every student based on how they responded to previous test questions. Additional tests will be converted to the CAT format as funding becomes available.

## **9. Where can I go for more information?**

- [www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/index.shtml](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/index.shtml)
- [www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/college\\_career\\_readiness/index.shtml](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/college_career_readiness/index.shtml)
- [www.BusinessForCore.org](http://www.BusinessForCore.org)