

REGENT UNIVERSITY LAW REVIEW

VOLUME 9

FALL 1997

REFORMING VIRGINIA'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: A PRINCIPLED APPROACH*

HONORABLE GEORGE ALLEN**

I. INTRODUCTION

I was elected Governor with an important promise to bring accountability to Virginia's public schools. Over the past four years, we have worked very hard to implement our Three-Phase Academic Improvement Plan.

First, we laid a strong foundation with the adoption of new, rigorous academic Standards of Learning. Second, we implemented a fair testing program of those higher academic standards. And third, we revised the Standards of Accreditation based upon student academic performance and the development of School Report Cards.

* This essay is based on my remarks to the 12th Annual Governor's Conference on Education on July 22, 1997 in Richmond, Virginia.

** Governor of Virginia, 1994-1998. B.A., University of Virginia, 1974; J.D., University of Virginia, 1977.

II. IMPLEMENTING HIGH ACADEMIC STANDARDS

In 1994 and 1995, we laid the foundation for our school reform and improvement plan by developing high academic standards. Young people must have a firm grasp of the basic core subjects in order for them to lead fulfilling and self-reliant lives. Students must be able to read, write, and speak proper English. Students need to understand the fundamentals of math and science and to know about the history and formation of our nation as well as the significant civilizations of world history and geography.

To create effective new standards, we enlisted the help of teachers, parents, business and community leaders from across Virginia. Over 5,000 Virginians participated in the formation of these Standards. Working together with our State Board of Education, consensus was forged on what should be taught and learned in Virginia public schools.

Virginia's new Standards of Learning are clear, measurable, and rigorous. They outline in plain language the content students should be taught each year in the four core subjects of English, math, science and history. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) rated Virginia as the only State in the Union to have "exemplary" standards in all four core subjects. The AFT also recognized our standards as worthy of a close look by other States for their "clarity, detail, content and precision."

*Education Week*¹ recently noted the eyes of the nation are focused on Virginia's standards—from Maine, Vermont, South Carolina, Louisiana, and Texas to Michigan, Wisconsin, Idaho, and all the way to California. Several States are planning to borrow heavily from us and follow our lead. Virginia is clearly a standard-bearer for the nation!

1. Vol. XVI, No. 3-7, June 11, 1997, 1.

III. MEASURING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH TESTING

In 1996, we began the second phase of our education reform efforts—developing a comprehensive, credible and fair testing program to measure student performance in learning these basic subjects. This endeavor succeeded with the help of parents, teachers, business leaders and Virginians from all walks of life.

Beginning this past school year with a pilot test, and with the first actual test beginning in the 1997-1998 school year, Virginia's students will be tested in the third, fifth and eighth grades as well as end-of-the-course exams in high school in the four core subjects outlined in our Standards of Learning. Through these important assessments, we can measure students' proficiency, reinforce those who are succeeding and better serve those who are falling behind.

IV. ENSURING ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH STANDARDS OF ACCREDITATION

In 1997, to implement the third phase of our academic improvement plan, the State Board of Education proposed more logical and accurate Standards of Accreditation (SOA) for our schools. The SOA's are the linchpin in our efforts to bring enduring accountability to Virginia's public schools.

The Board has proposed several important changes to Virginia's Standards of Accreditation. We will strongly encourage local school boards to consider student performance on the Standards of Learning tests as part of the criteria when making decisions to promote or retain students. No longer should we promote students to the next grade if they have not mastered an appropriate level of learning. Students should not just be another year older, they should be another year wiser because the public education system has improved in Virginia.

We all agree that if our children are to be prepared for the opportunities of the future, they need to be challenged now. That is why our proposed accountability measures raise graduation requirements for students. The standard high school diploma would

include an additional class in math and an additional class in science. In all, graduation requirements would increase to 22 credits for standard diplomas. Those for advanced diplomas would increase to 24 credits.

Our emphasis remains on ensuring that a Virginia high school diploma represents true achievement in the essential subject areas. Most importantly, our Standards of Accreditation will eventually require students to pass end-of-course exams—in English, math, science and history—to graduate. Some say standards and exams are too hard, may lessen students' self-esteem, or that our students are not up to the challenge. Our testing initiative will not only measure students' acquisition of knowledge, but also their progress in analyzing and applying that knowledge.

Requiring students to demonstrate mastery of the core subjects by passing end-of-course tests will help instill in students a positive work ethic as well as a sense of personal responsibility and a sense of accomplishment. Virginians graduating from high school are no longer just in competition with students from the Carolinas or Tennessee. Today, Virginians are in world-wide competition. And the best jobs and best opportunities are going to those best prepared!

For example, under the able leadership of Principal Ethan Pitts, Kennedy High School saw a 62 percent increase in the number of students taking Advanced Placement examinations between 1992 and 1996. This magnet school for mathematics, science and technology requires students to enroll in rigorous classes that include college algebra/trigonometry, AP courses, calculus, foreign languages, biochemistry, probability/statistics, human anatomy and physics. As a result of these high standards, 38 percent of the graduates in 1996 received advanced studies diplomas.

Another example of academic excellence in action is Twin Springs High School in rural Nickelsville out in Scott County. I had the opportunity to visit Twin Springs last fall where I spoke to Sam Park's government class of senior honors students. Students attending rural Twin Springs High School have SAT scores above the regional average. In 1996, more than 20 percent of the graduating class

received academic scholarships. Twin Springs also has experienced an increase in the number of students taking AP courses as well as other honor courses and dual enrollment classes.

Principal Jim Williams attributes the school's success to higher student enrollment in more rigorous courses, more parental involvement, higher expectations by teachers and staff, and higher expectations of students by their parents and themselves! We must not be discouraged by naysayers who say we should hold students from so-called "socio-economically disadvantaged" areas to a different set of standards than those students from more affluent areas.

Who wants to tell a parent, or tell a youngster, "Sorry, we don't expect you to be able to succeed in life like other kids?" Who wants to tell a third- or fifth-grader, who is full of vigor, curiosity and imagination, that he or she should stop dreaming about becoming an astronaut, the President, a doctor or dolphin trainer; or that we won't make you try to reach out for your dreams?

About a month ago, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute testified before the U.S. House of Representatives on issues related to education and the workforce. Carol D'Amico, co-author of *Workforce 2020*², said in part:

The days of low-skill, high-wage jobs are over We will need workers . . . with a strong grounding in reading, writing, math, reasoning and computing.

I vehemently disagree with the notion that many of our students, particularly the non-college bound, are either incapable—or don't need to—achieve high standards. Some students may need extra time or a less theoretical approach, but we should not expect less of 40 to 50 percent of our students who do not go to college.

2. Carol D'Amico, *Testimony, U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce*, June 5, 1997 (visited November 24, 1997) <<http://www.a1.com/hudson/wf2020/frame4.html>>.

Vocational programs within high schools should have a strong academic component and the students in them be held accountable to the same high standards as college bound students. Every young person leaving high school needs a strong academic foundation to be able to constantly upgrade and adapt their skills, particularly in light of our expectation that individuals may have as many as 10-20 jobs in their future. . . . The emphasis in secondary schools should be on ensuring that every student leaves high school with a strong academic background.³

There is no basis for the notion that someone who is “pro-academics” is therefore somehow “anti-vocational education.” The two terms are not mutually exclusive. The proposed Standards of Accreditation will continue to support vocational education in our schools. We recognize the importance of subjects such as vocational education, art, music and foreign languages. That is why the proposed revisions to the Standards of Accreditation continue to provide schools with the latitude to keep offering electives and extracurricular activities.

Another important recommendation from the State Board correlates accreditation of schools with how well teachers are teaching students and how well students are learning the material. Schools should be accredited based on student performance. The most significant accountability factor will be the School Performance Report Card starting in this upcoming year. Report cards should not be something too unusual for those in education. Providing parents, taxpayers and communities with sound and accurate information is the best way to hold our schools accountable for their performance. Accordingly, the Standards of Accreditation we have adopted will require schools to publicly and annually provide information regarding: school-wide test scores, average attendance rates for students and teachers, dropout rates, the number of violent incidents and other important information.

3. *Id.*

V. INCREASING INVESTMENTS IN EDUCATION LINKED TO ACCOUNTABILITY

With these accountability measures in place and moving forward, our administration increased the investments in education. We gained a \$763 million increase in K-12 funding in the biennium over the previous one. In addition, we proposed and enacted \$120 million more for an advanced educational technology initiative, including \$20 million for graphing calculators and probing kits to support our new academic standards in math and science.

During the 1997 Session, our administration proposed and secured \$6.7 million for a reading readiness initiative to identify first-graders who had difficulty learning to read. This enables an additional two-an-one-half hours per week of personal attention to be provided for these students at a ratio of one teacher for every five students. We also successfully added \$6.2 million for instructional materials associated with our new academic standards and \$9.6 million to reduce class sizes in kindergarten through third grade.

The legislature finally joined me in backing our hard-working teachers by granting them statutory civil immunity. If teachers are trying in good faith to maintain order and discipline in their schools and classrooms, they should not have to worry about frivolous lawsuits. I also supported and signed good bipartisan legislation to help streamline the process for suspension of an unruly student by a superintendent. We want all students in Virginia to have a safe, academic environment that is conducive to learning. This legislation will be a big help to you on local school boards. I also thank Virginia school boards for standing with us in our principled fight with the federal government over school safety and the rights of the people of Virginia and other States to discipline students for dangerous behavior in a uniformly fair manner.

VI. KEEPING VIRGINIA MOVING FORWARD IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Many States have just tinkered around the margins with education reform. In some states—including our own just a few years ago—so-called “reform” plans were pushed that would have weakened our schools’ curricula, and left our children unprepared for the international economy in which they must compete. In particular, a trendy experiment, known as Outcome-Based Education, was pushed in Virginia. Many of the same voices who were responsible for pushing those now discredited education experiments are now heard loudly denigrating and criticizing Virginia’s new academic reforms, measurement and improved accountability plans.

Despite the critics, I believe the values of these changes are absolutely clear. While the rest of the nation is admiring and emulating Virginia, some nevertheless continue criticizing because the real agenda of many of these critics is to avoid accountability. Without high standards and objective testing, we cannot accurately measure our children’s proficiency and progress, or have true accountability. Ultimately, high academic standards and accountability are what Virginians rightfully expect and deserve for the billions of tax dollars they spend each year on public education.