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### Virginia Education Association's Comments on the SOA Revision

Thank you for the opportunity to present VEA's recommendations and comments relevant to Virginia's current Standards of Accreditation. The guiding questions contained in your written communication soliciting our views were very helpful in framing our ideas and potential suggestions.

We must place the elephant on the table. The *General Assembly* and the *Governor* have given you an ill-advised mandate. This is not something that can and should be done by the Board of Education or any school system at this point in time. This is not about not wanting accountability; it is about the need to create an accountability system that is authentic, achievable and based on sound educational practice using multiple measures that measure what you want to measure!

What you have been tasked to do is rework an accountability system that is not valid, unauthentic, and does not accurately measure what you wish to measure.

#### Closing the Achievement Gap

Our members feel strongly that a **reduction in current class size** is imperative in order to give each child the individualized attention and assistance needed for differentiated instruction to occur. Children come to school from diverse settings, some with full family support and academic preparation—others with almost no resources from their homes and communities. In order to provide the support each child needs in order to be successful, teachers need more time to work one-on-one with the neediest, as well as additional opportunity to enrich instruction for those who have been well prepared to learn. They also strongly feel that accommodations should be made in class size to account for the inclusion of students with disabilities and that a number should be set as to when a special education teacher must be in the inclusion class. In addition, the requirements for having Special Education teachers in collaboration classes should be strengthened and mandated. Too many school systems are doing "drive-bys" of the Special Education teachers.

Revisiting the Standards of Learning to permit more time for mastery by students instead of rushing to get everything covered in time for SOL testing would allow the necessary time to meet the needs of each student.

Increasing student and parental accountability, including establishing stricter attendance policies, is critical in closing the achievement gap. While schools need to focus on growth, the study "Does Capital at Home Matter more than Capital at School? Social Capital Effects on Academic Achievement" (Dufur, Parcel, Troutman, August 2012) provides conclusive evidence that non-school factors are a majority influence on student achievement. As such, use of growth indicators in accreditation may be more of a socio-economic measure than an indicator of academic progress, and put undue sway against schools that serve economically disadvantaged populations.

[http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/parentsandthepublic/2012/10/study\\_parents\\_more\\_infl\\_ual\\_than\\_schools\\_in\\_academic\\_success.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/parentsandthepublic/2012/10/study_parents_more_infl_ual_than_schools_in_academic_success.html)

Solving the lack of funding from the state, especially as it affects equity, along with providing salaries and benefits for attracting and retaining quality employees, would be a tremendous factor in giving schools the resources to close the achievement gap.

#### Student Growth Indicators (SGIs)

You ask how student growth indicators can be incorporated into accreditation, and VEA's response is that they should not be used as a variable in the school accreditation equation. We do not yet have sufficient data to support adding this factor to such a public label. With respect to accreditation, however, we do offer an important consideration that surfaced recently and repeatedly in a meeting of 700 teachers. Virginia must find a way to link student absenteeism to a teacher's student academic growth variable. If we do not hold schools accountable for excessive absenteeism's role in standardized test scores, a major factor in their accreditation rating, how, then, can we hold teachers accountable for this same chronic absenteeism? It does not make sense to have teachers held accountable for the learning that does not take place in an empty chair.

Concern over SGIs not being able to accurately measure growth, along with the lack of SGIs for non-tested subjects, has put considerable stress on educators. We are wading into murky waters with this concept, and this unproven method is being factored into both teacher evaluation and school performance. An evaluation of anything in education has many complex parts and most of those parts are not in the control of the schools and those who work in our schools. This, in turn, creates a climate of "gotcha" rather than a climate

that promotes working together to improve student performance. The result is not conducive to creating a culture of successful learning.

Another part of this complex equation is the education and scoring of students who have not spent the entire year in the same school, or even in the same school division. How much instructional time with a teacher is enough time to use that student's scores for a teacher's evaluation? How much time in the school is enough to use that student's scores to determine a school's grade? Our student population is becoming more itinerant with each passing month due to family difficulties. Obviously, that has a tremendous impact on student learning and the student's SGI.

### Best Practices

In terms of best practices from Virginia school divisions, other states or countries, we have several pertinent comments. First, we would very much like to see our universities' teacher education programs establish a focus on helping prospective teachers to learn the best ways to assess their students so that they have a day-to-day understanding of how well their students are mastering the concepts that have been taught. The ability to create strong, accurate formative assessments would help to eliminate negative surprises at standardized testing time, and would offer an opportunity for targeted, ongoing remediation throughout the school year.

In addition, teacher preparation should focus on the practical knowledge a new teacher needs to be successful in the classroom, from basic procedures to communication with parents and administrators.

Lessons that research has highlighted from other educationally progressive countries point markedly to several areas that differ from education in the U.S. First, the most successful countries have greatly reduced the amount of standardized testing in their schools, and have freed their highly respected and professionally compensated teachers to determine the most essential concepts to be taught in their disciplines. Teachers have much greater autonomy than in our "one size fits all" educational process, and their results are stellar. We would ask, "Are our teachers less capable of making important decisions than those in Finland or Singapore?"

### Other Changes Needed in the Accreditation Requirements

One outdated provision that needs to be amended immediately deals with teacher load and class size in 8 VAC 20-131-240. This calculation is currently based, at the secondary level,

on a master schedule that is obsolete in many school divisions. The concept of student periods no longer works with the myriad of different schedules used in middle schools and high schools, and the intent of the Board is being lost. Your intent is that teachers of academic subjects should teach no more than 150 students. I have provided you with an example of where the current language would allow a school on an A/B block schedule to permit a teacher to have 250 students, with 50 students per class, and still be accredited. That certainly does not allow students to receive a quality education. On a 4x4 block, where teachers teach an entire year in one semester, teachers could theoretically have 150 students a semester or 300 students for the entire year. A solution to this dilemma would be to no longer use the concept of student periods but to refer to the maximum number of students that a teacher could have on his or her class rolls at any given time.

The other problem occurs when school divisions try to require secondary teachers to teach an additional class period for no additional compensation. Again, the current language in the SOAs has the intent of teachers teaching 150 students and five classes a day. The language in the SOAs needs clearer direction, on the secondary level, regarding what actually constitutes the instructional day versus the school day. While the school day is from the beginning bell to the final dismissal bell, lunchtime is not part of the instructional day. I look forward to VEA's continuing dialogue on this with Dr. Wright.

We also believe that the SOAs should require every teacher to have a duty free lunch. I cannot stress the importance of this enough. Who does not need to eat their lunch in peace along with a mental break to rest and regroup?

Finally, the language needs to be strengthened to guarantee the protection of individual planning time. Planning time should be just what its name implies; it is not meeting time, team time, PLC time, etc. Teachers should not be forced to use more and more of their personal family time away from school for work that could and should be done during the student day.

#### Technology Changes

Finally, in thinking about new standards for technological changes, we believe that minimal technology standards must be updated and developed so that students, teachers and parents across the Commonwealth have the ability to access and use the myriad of electronic resources available to our more fortunate citizens. Money must be dedicated to technology hardware and software additions and updates. This not only includes up-to-date computers and electronic devices, but also requires the proper physical infrastructure to support technology fully. Our school buildings must provide the proper bandwidth, server

capacity, and electrical infrastructure in addition to the proper temperature, airflow and physical space needed for learning. Our schools in rural areas cannot teacher 21<sup>st</sup> Century technology skills using dial-up internet access! An increase in meaningful and relevant new programs and apps is essential in order for teachers to fully integrate instructional technology into their teaching.

Thank you for giving Virginia's teachers the opportunity to participate in this important discussion of the critical issues that define public education in the Commonwealth.

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