



CENTER FOR CIVIC EDUCATION



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TO PROMOTE
CIVIC EDUCATION

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May 27, 2009

Mark E. Emblidge, Ph.D.
President, Virginia Board of Education
Virginia Commonwealth University
413 Stuart Circle, Suite 130
Richmond, VA 23220

Dear Dr. Emblidge,

On behalf of the Center for Civic Education's national Campaign to Promote Civic Education, we write to encourage the Virginia Board of Education to support the continued state testing of the K-3 History and Social Sciences Standards of Learning (SOL) in the third grade.

The Center's Campaign to Promote Civic Education strongly recommends education policy that promotes 30 to 40 hours per school year dedicated to civic instruction in each grade. In the early grades this instruction often focuses on rules, authority, justice, and responsibility. In addition, we recommend a minimum of 30 hours per school year as part of instruction in reading, language arts, math, science, physical education.

The Commonwealth of Virginia led the nation in high-quality standards in the social studies that includes specific attention to civic education. As the American Federation of Teachers reported in their 2008 study titled *Sizing Up State Standards*, Virginia is one of only three states in the country with elementary standards in social studies that are adequate and teachable. Unfortunately, as we educators are all too aware, if it is not tested, it is not taught. Although we certainly advocate for more authentic assessments of student learning, the result of eliminating the third-grade social studies test in Virginia would be detrimental to the teaching of the subject at such a crucial age. We applaud the specific attention Virginia currently gives to civics in the K-3 standards.

Although we all must deal with the pressures of reduced budgets, pursuing such a course of action will only lead to the continued narrowing of the curriculum at the elementary grades. This is a national trend recently highlighted in research conducted by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). In *Getting Narrower at the Base: The American Curriculum after NCLB*, published in December 2008, CIRCLE notes, "In grades

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one through five, the curriculum has narrowed over the last ten years, with more time devoted to reading and math and less to science, arts, and social studies." Eliminating the assessment will fundamentally change the course of education in Virginia, a state that previously set the bar in social studies and civic education for the early grades.

As you know, we are but one of many passionate stakeholders in the education of our nation's youth. We hope that you will continue to solicit the input of all parties as you make important decisions about the future shape of their public instruction.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Liza Rydstrom" followed by a stylized flourish.

Liza Prendergast and Justin Rydstrom
Co-Managers, Campaign to Promote Civic Education

Early history SOL promotes reading, citizenship

The Roanoke Times

By Michael Wildasin and James Dillard

Published: June 6, 2009

Dillard is a member of the Virginia Commission on Civic Education in Fairfax. Wildasin, of Millboro, is a 2001 and 2008 History and Social Science SOL Review Committee member and a retired social studies coordinator for Fairfax County Public Schools.

Both of us most always agree with the editorial voice of this newspaper. Now we have read the June 3 editorial "SOLs and the third-grader," and you need to know we could not disagree more. A career in education tells us that the elimination of the Grade 3 History and Social Science SOL test would not be "a smart move."

First off, the SOLs have moved beyond rote memorization of meaningless facts. Topics from the K-3 History and Social Science SOLs embrace foundational knowledge and skills from the disciplines of history, civics, economics and geography.

Topics from the K-3 History and Social Science SOLs are used by primary grade teachers to teach reading. The era of Dick, Jane and Spot has ended. Reading teachers would be the first to tell you that any proposal that would reduce the amount of time devoted to history and social science instruction would undercut their efforts to promote reading comprehension.

Grade 3 reading test scores would fall if the Grade 3 History and Social Science test is eliminated. The Virginia superintendent of public instruction is misguided in advancing this proposal.

The history and social science foundational knowledge and skills would be less well taught because this core discipline would be relegated to 30 minutes on Friday afternoons.

This is not meant to insult Virginia's education professionals. This assessment acknowledges the realities of a high-stakes model of accountability.

Incorporating history and social science passages in the third-grade reading test is not teaching the knowledge and skills required by the K-3 SOLs and upon which History and Social Science SOLs, Grades 4 through high school, are grounded. Take the Grade 3 history test away, and the Grade 4 Virginia Studies SOL test scores will be the first to drop.

The statewide pass rate on the Grade 3 History and Social Science test is 93 percent. Why penalize teachers for doing a superior job? This high test score helps elementary schools meet Virginia SOL accreditation requirements.

Eliminating this test makes no sense for the 364,000 K-3 students across the commonwealth, for schools seeking SOL accreditation and, most especially, for the future of our democratic republic, which is dependent on young learners understanding what it means to be an American and the responsibilities of citizenship.

<http://www.roanoke.com/editorials/letters/wb/207426>

Testing, Testing

Richmond Times-Dispatch

By Staff Reports

Published: June 7, 2009

Virginia's Standards of Learning for history and social science set national standards. The process leading to their adoption and implementation sparked contentious debate. Officials successfully managed the situation. The SOLs have become part of the fabric of education in Virginia.

One purpose of the SOLs is to ensure that certain subject matter is taught. History occasionally falls victim to so-called hobby teaching, in which even the best of teachers stress their favorite topics at the expense of others. Thus, in a course on the Civil War and its aftermath, a devotee of Robert E. Lee might spend inordinate time on the campaigns of the Army of Northern Virginia, while slighting turning points in Tennessee and along the Mississippi. The practice is not nefarious; it just reflects human nature. The SOLs rose in part because of concerns that American students simply were not learning enough about the history and culture not only of their own country but of the world. Citizenship depends on shared knowledge.

An item in last Saturday's Week's End selection noted that our initial reaction to proposals to eliminate the third-grade history/social science test was one of distress. During the past week we read numerous documents relating to the issue and have held numerous conversations on the matter. We have studied the tests themselves (we think we could pass them, we proudly report -- thank heaven and Mrs. O'Connor). We heard from all sides. Every exchange was informative and agreeable. We thank everyone who contacted us, as well as those who answered our calls.

Virginia's students take tests -- perhaps too many of them. Although we have supported the SOLs from the beginning and although we remain fans of pop quizzes and other devices to keep youngsters on their toes, we increasingly wonder whether testing has gone too far. Surely opportunities exist for scaling back the number of exams.

The core SOL exams are not the place to start.

The third-grade test is not onerous. Questions do not ask about the Hayes-Tilden election, for instance, or about disputations in the Balkans. Test-takers do not need to explain Marx's theory of surplus value or Milton Friedman's thinking regarding monetarism. The exam probes the basics that introduce youngsters to the study of history and the social sciences (including civics, economics, and geography). These subjects are easy to neglect in the early grades. The test establishes history/social science as an integral part of the K-3 curriculum -- which stresses concepts that will persist and be built upon until high school graduation. The concepts will stretch well beyond, to tell the truth, for civic learning occurs throughout a person's lifetime. Although students will be tested in history/social science at higher grades, we believe it is important to keep a K-3 focus on the disciplines as well. A stress on history/social science also enhances reading skills.

A statement by the Virginia Consortium of Social Studies Specialists and College Educators in support of the third-grade test says:

"By removing the third-grade assessment, the basic educational foundation of history and social science will disappear as more instructional time is devoted to those areas which are tested. This is a major concern. The value of history and social sciences as part of the four core areas of study in grades K-12 has always been recognized by the commonwealth. It is essential that we continue to stress the importance of history, economics, civics, and geography. History and social sciences are at the heart of preparing students for responsible citizenship."

A statement by the Virginia Council of Economic Education, which also supports the third-grade test, says:

"Students need to understand that they are human resources and that when they learn something new, they are investing in themselves. Education is an investment in oneself; dropping out of school is a sure route to poverty. Understanding this provides an incentive to learn. Middle school is too late to introduce this concept to students. At this point, too many students are already in trouble -- both in the habits and attitudes they have formed, and in the knowledge and skills they've acquired."

Keep the test.

http://www.timesdispatch.com/rtd/news/opinion/editorials/article/ED-SOLS07_20090605-203406/272115/



June 15, 2009

Mark E. Emblidge, Ph.D.
President of the Virginia Board of Education
Virginia Commonwealth University
413 Stuart Circle, Suite 130
Richmond, VA 23220

Dear Dr. Emblidge,

On behalf of the staff at James Madison's Montpelier, I would like to express my concern with the potential elimination of the K-3 Social Studies Standard of Learning Assessment. Currently, the assessment evaluates the knowledge of students on key principles that Madison himself thought important to impart to an educated electorate. These principles of rules and laws, rights, liberty and equality, citizenship, and the basic principles of a republican form of government are all assessed in the third grade Standard of Learning examination. These basic principles lay a foundation of civic knowledge for students as they progress through primary, middle and secondary grades.

Studies consistently demonstrate that what is not tested will not be taught in the classroom. With the added pressure placed on teachers through No Child Left Behind, I am gravely concerned that eliminating the K-3 Social Studies Standard of Learning Assessment will mean a decrease in the teaching of these important principles that students need to understand as citizens of this country. Eliminating an exam that ensures that quality instruction focus on the foundational knowledge that Madison and the founding fathers entrusted in us is a slippery road that I encourage you to reconsider.

I understand that there are serious financial considerations with this decision and I can appreciate the challenge the economy is placing in all sectors of our state and country. I also realize that you are trying to compromise by including social studies passages in the reading examinations as an alternative to the social studies examination. Unfortunately, this solution will not guarantee that instruction time be dedicated to these important principles. Being able to read social studies passages is only one small step in educating students to be responsible citizens and understanding the principles that got us to where we are today as a nation.

James Madison once said, "The people ought to be enlightened, to be awakened, to be united, that after establishing a government they should watch over it, as well as obey it." How will we enlighten our students to watch over our government if we do not teach these constitutional principles?

Virginia leads the nation for the emphasis we place on social studies standards. Given the wealth of events that have taken place in Virginia since the settlement of Jamestown, it is no wonder that Virginia emphasizes social studies instruction more than other states. I urge you to consider alternative budgetary options that will continue to keep Virginia as a national leader in social studies and civics instruction. By keeping the K-3 Social Studies Standard of Learning Assessment in place, you guarantee that Virginia students learn the history and founding principles of our nation and the skills needed to become an educated electorate that can practice the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael C. Quinn", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Michael Quinn

President of The Montpelier Foundation

cc Governor Tim Kaine,

Virginia Superintendent of Public Instruction Patricia Wright,

Virginia Secretary of Education Tom Morris,

Virginia Board of Education,

House Education Committee,

House Appropriations Committee,

Senate Education and Health Committee,

Senate Finance Committee,

Delegate Edward T. Scott