

Virginia Board of Education Public Hearings Meeting #3: Harrisonburg, July 18, 2017

Overview

Between June and August 2017, the Virginia Board of Education (the Board) conducted a series of public hearings to obtain feedback from families, educators and community members on expectations for graduating students, how schools are accredited, and the conditions and needs of the Commonwealth's public schools. The hearings were held in five sites across the state: **Fairfax** (June 27), **Wytheville** (July 13), **Harrisonburg** (July 18), **Virginia Beach** (August 9), and **Mecklenburg County** (August 23).

The Board solicited feedback on the following topics:

- The proposed **Standards of Accreditation** including changes to high school graduation requirements aligned with the *Profile of a Virginia Graduate* and changes to how schools are accredited
- The **Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** state plan
- **Conditions and needs of public education** in the Commonwealth

This document provides information about participants at the third hearing in Harrisonburg on July 18, 2017, followed by a detailed summary of the feedback received. Similar summary documents were provided to the Board for the other four hearings along with a synthesis report highlighting common feedback and issues raised across the five hearings.

Participants

Approximately 52 participants attended the Harrisonburg public hearing. There were 15 participants providing comments in person and four who provided written comments, including administrators, representatives of educator organizations, teachers, students, parents, and business and community leaders. Represented organizations included: Harrisonburg Education Association; James Madison University, College of Education; Shenandoah Valley Workforce Development Board; Staunton City School Board; Virginia Coalition for Fine Arts Education; Virginia Latino Advisory Board; and Virginia School Boards Association.

Summary of Public Feedback

Standards of Accreditation

Several administrators and parents applauded the Board's proposed revisions to the *Standards of Accreditation* and its efforts to change the current system by reducing the number and impact of standardized assessments – Standards of Learning (SOLs) – on schools, teachers, families, and students, and focusing on performance-based assessments and varied measures of learning and performance.

A local administrator encouraged the Board to continue taking decisive steps to reduce SOL testing and increase the expectations that school divisions incorporate performance-based assessments that focus on problem solving, critical thinking, and collaboration. He noted that students will have to navigate a highly technical environment that integrates many disciplines and, unlike SOL tests, performance- and project-based assessments will prepare students for the careers that await them.

Several administrators and community members expressed support for the use of multiple measures that will determine a school's performance and accountability status, but also relayed their issues with the current and proposed accreditation system.

- One administrator suggested that the proposed system will select and sort school divisions based on demographics.
- A parent and school board member indicated that further consideration needs to be given to school divisions that have a high percentage of children living in poverty in communities that are also struggling.
- A representative from the Staunton City School Board noted that the current accreditation system fails to reflect the achievement gaps of students of color and economically disadvantaged students, and fails to celebrate the success that schools have achieved over the years because their gains have not met the targets set by the state.

Two administrators and a representative of James Madison University's College of Education conveyed their recommendations to the Board:

- Schools not meeting expected standards should have the option to work with successful schools with similar profiles instead of only working with VDOE staff.
- Local school boards should be given the opportunity to work with schools to develop comprehensive school improvement plans in a manner that the community will come to appreciate and value.
- The Board should provide challenged schools more adequate resources to support school improvement.

One parent noted that the accreditation system continues to rely on SOL testing and shared her opinion that students who require an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) are not receiving the assistance necessary to pass the SOL test or develop the skills they will need to obtain the careers they want.

School Accreditation Matrix and Review Cycle

A representative from the Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA) expressed support for the proposed accreditation matrix but also concern about the implementation of the matrix and the proposed requirements for schools that fall to Level II or near standards for improvement from Level III. He noted that the proposed language includes potentially onerous requirements for improvement that schools will face if they fall to Level III. Furthermore, he indicated that local school boards with Level II schools should have the ability to solely evaluate, plan, and implement appropriate action to address weak performance indicators rather than implement Board-specified requirements.

Profile of a Virginia Graduate

Participants expressed their appreciation for the Board’s work in developing the *Profile of a Virginia Graduate*.

- A principal encouraged the Board to continue to work diligently on the *Profile* and to commit to an appropriate timeline and resources for teachers to change practice and prepare students.
- One parent spoke highly of the *Profile*, indicated that it focuses on important life skills, such as critical and creative thinking, communication, collaboration, and citizenship (also known as the “5Cs” outlined as priorities in the *Profile*) but questioned how the skills will be taught. A second parent asked the Board to continue reducing the number of required SOL tests and instead focus on the 5Cs.

One participant, representing the Virginia Coalition for Fine Arts Education, requested that the Board take into consideration the range of the 5C skills necessary for the acquisition of 21st century skills and success of high school graduates by transforming Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) education to Science Technology Engineering Arts and Math (STEAM) education. He also expressed concern that the career investigation course requirement will have a negative impact on fine arts courses as many music students will be forced to interrupt their sequential music study.

A representative from the Shenandoah Workforce Development Board expressed appreciation to the Board and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) for providing opportunities for educators to meet with employers and discuss what schools are doing to prepare students for future employment. She shared findings from a 2016 survey administered with employers in which they identified lack of basic work skills as their most pressing issue. She called for the Board to continue to support and make available the “extra” tools and initiatives currently available to students (e.g., Governor’s School, Khan Academy, etc.) and argued that these are the opportunities that are preparing students for the workforce (i.e., don’t take away from one to give to another).

Graduation Requirements and Verified Credits

A representative from the VSBA noted the organization’s support for the proposed reduction in the number of verified credits for graduation and indicated that this decision would lead toward greater school division flexibility to provide students with civic engagement and career exposure opportunities.

The Virginia Coalition for Fine Arts Education recommended that the new diploma requirements include one full credit in the fine arts, separate from credits granted for Career and Technical Education, foreign language, or other disciplines.

ESSA State Plan

A small number of participants communicated their views of the state’s ESSA plan and their perspective of the federal legislation.

- Two community members and educators noted that ESSA provides an opportunity to move forward for and with students by moving away from testing to problem solving, using multiple measures for students success, and devoting more time to teaching.
- A parent indicated that the long-term goals that ESSA seeks to achieve are laudable but expressed concern about the lack of an action plan to support their achievement. She urged the Board to move the focus from “what we teach” to “how we teach” and to embrace methodology and universal design for learning.

A parent and teacher called to the Board’s attention that the federal legislation allows for a 6th standard of measurement (i.e., school quality measure) that could be based on the results of school climate surveys. She explained that teachers in the state were hopeful that this measure would be included in Virginia’s ESSA plan given the impact of school quality on student achievement.

A representative of the Virginia Coalition for Fine Arts Education argued that a well-rounded education, as defined in ESSA, is not complete without the arts and recommended that the state ESSA plan include arts assessments and arts education as a requirement for school accreditation.

A community member pointed out that, although ESSA focuses on preschool English Learner (EL) students, preschool students are not currently included in the EL population and therefore, are not accounted for in the Standards of Quality (SOQ) for staffing. She noted that although school divisions may want to provide more comprehensive services to preschool EL students, they are unable to do so without the required staffing.

Conditions and Needs of Public Education

Participants’ comments around the conditions and needs of public education in Virginia centered on teacher recruitment, retention, and effectiveness, and parent and community engagement.

Teacher Recruitment, Retention, and Effectiveness

One administrator expressed concern about the lack of minority candidates applying for teaching positions and the ways in which the inability to hire and retain a diverse staff affects student performance. This individual called for programs that enable school divisions to hire minority teachers and support them in their job growth.

Several participants urged the Board to dedicate more resources for professional development for teachers, school leaders, and support staff.

- A member of the Virginia Latino Advisory Board (VLAB) asked for the provision of training on cultural responsiveness for teachers, counselors and administrators to help them understand the fears that students bring to school – as a result of the current political climate – and how it can manifest itself (e.g., children may experience depression, exhibit a lack of interest in learning, and experience bullying by their peers). She also emphasized the need to require

training for teachers and administrators on effective instruction for various groups of ELs to ensure equitable education for all children.

- A parent noted that meeting the goals in the proposed *Accreditation Plan* – to provide students with additional instruction – will require intensive professional development for all teachers, especially in reading, literacy, and math, but particularly for teachers working with special needs population of students.
- In the context of ESSA, another parent suggested that the Board look closely at what higher education is doing to prepare teachers for the reality of what students will need to be successful.

In addition to the request for professional development, the VLAB representative:

- recommended that the Board increase the number of state funded English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers from the current rate in the SOQ of 17/1000 to 20/1000 to provide additional support to ELs; and
- asked VDOE to develop descriptive guidelines on how counties should be providing services to ELs and to be more vigilant in auditing counties in regards to English Language Learner (ELL) programs to ensure that local school districts provide high quality equitable education and access to current and cultural sensitive materials and electives.

Parent and Community Engagement

Participants identified parent, educator, and community engagement as a critical component to the success of education in the Commonwealth and urged the Board to prioritize stakeholder communication and engagement.

- The president of the Harrisonburg Education Association noted that the implementation of ESSA will require full collaboration among stakeholder groups and asked the Board to provide opportunities for educators to weigh in and have a voice given their knowledge of students and their needs. She indicated the Association’s willingness to play an active role in this process.
- An administrator spoke of the importance of educating legislators and other stakeholders about the needed changes to current practice.

Several participants called for concrete parent engagement and communication strategies.

- A VLAB representative indicated that families would benefit from sustainable parent engagement initiatives where the goals are to educate families on how to navigate the school system and support their children’s success in school. She maintained that a holistic approach to educating families of immigrant children is key to education reform in Virginia and a win-win for business and economic development. This individual also expressed interest in supporting the Board/VDOE’s efforts in planning meetings with parents and community members and indicated that the organization is not currently invited to be a part of the planning process.
- A parent and community leader spoke of the need to communicate with parents often and in simple ways and suggested that VDOE consider making key information available in other languages on its website as one strategy to educate Latino communities about education reforms.

Miscellaneous

A representative of the Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA) pointed out that the VSBA has created a task force to help local school boards implementing alternatives to reduce the use of student suspensions and expulsions. As the Board develops guidelines for alternatives to short- and long-term suspension for consideration by local boards, and in accordance with recently passed state legislation, the VSBA urges the Board to recommend additional state funding to assist local school boards with implementing these programs.

A parent – known to many as Recess Mom – and two students conducted a demonstration lesson to show the importance of recess. The parent discussed the ways in which learning and recess go hand-in-hand leading to proper development for children, and shared her plan to work with legislators to make recess a part of the curriculum.

The Virginia Coalition for Fine Arts Education requested a change in the funding formula used for elementary arts, music, and physical education. The Coalition requested that the state provide full funding of licensed elementary art and music teachers sufficient to provide a minimum of 60 minutes each of art and music instruction per week for kindergarten-fifth grade students.

A community member asked the Board to reconsider the use of a single measure (the WIDA test) to determine a student's entry into and exit out of EL status, noting that although WIDA is a good comprehensive assessment, students do not understand why they have to take the WIDA test after they have reached the milestone of passing the SOL test, and are consequently not invested in the WIDA assessment.