

## *Educational Accountability for Politicians*

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Virginia like most states has entered an era of high-stakes testing for public schools in which the scores on tests determine whether schools are accredited and students pass or graduate. On top of Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) has been added the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. More instructional time is being devoted to test preparation and drills, and the administration of tests reduces time available for teaching.

A future column will look at the pitfalls and shortcomings of standardized testing that determine if your child graduates from high school and whether your local school is accredited or its teachers get a pay raise. This column questions the lack of accountability standards for politicians who put standards in place for everyone else in the educational system but themselves.

At about the same time that Virginia was starting with the SOLs, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC), the General Assembly's version of the GAO, looked at how the state legislature provides funding for public education. It found that the legislature underfunds its own Standards of Quality (SOQ) for public schools by a billion dollars a year!

In other words, the legislature establishes the basic requirements of staffing and programs required of public schools in the SOQs. It then underfunds its share of the cost of the SOQs by a billion dollars a year while supporting the State Board of Education SOL requirements for high-stakes testing and greater accountability.

And Virginia's politicians do not rank well on other standards of accountability for educational funding. The same JLARC report ranked Virginia as 13th in the nation in per capita income, but 40th in the nation in state funding of K-12 education.

The Virginia School Boards Association recently cited the *Congressional Quarterly's* "State Fact Finder" in stating that Virginia ranks 49th in the nation in state aid per pupil in average daily attendance. Only Nevada invests fewer state funds than Virginia in its children.

According to the Education Trust, Virginia spends \$885 per student less on the education of children in high poverty districts than in low poverty districts. Virginia's average teacher salary has fallen approximately \$3,000 behind the national average according to the Virginia Education Association.

More than one-third of Virginia's schools cannot meet its own accreditation standards. Beginning in 2004, thousands of students will not be able to graduate because they have not passed the SOL tests. Teachers and principals should be held accountable, but so too should the public officials who fail to provide the resources schools need.

There is nothing new in this column that I have not said on the floor of the House of Delegates and on the Appropriations Committee when I was a member of that committee. But we need a stronger chorus of objections from the community for the lack of educational accountability on the part of elected state officials.