



COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION POLL

*Conducted for the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute
by the VCU Center for Public Policy*

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Contact:

Cary Funk, Director of the Commonwealth Poll 804 827 1430 or clfunk@vcu.edu
William Boshier, Exec. Director of the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute 804 225-3290
Robert Holsworth, Director of the VCU Center for Public Policy 804 828 8033

Virginians Rate Schools and SOL's

Richmond, VA— A new Commonwealth Education Poll shows that Virginians are more positive than negative about the quality of public schools and the impact of the SOL's on school quality, though the picture is not all rosy. The Commonwealth Education Poll was conducted by Virginia Commonwealth University April 17-24 with 814 adults in Virginia. The margin of error for the poll is +/- 4 percent.

About three in ten Virginians (29 percent) say schools in their community have improved over the past five years and another thirty-five percent think the schools have held steady. Just 16 percent think the schools have gotten worse. Those with more direct experience in the schools—parents of children attending the schools—are especially positive. A plurality of public school parents (41 percent) say the schools have gotten better and another third say they have stayed the same, leaving just 17 percent who feel they have gotten worse. Others on or close to the front lines—households with school employees—are also positive about school progress. 45 percent of this group think the schools have gotten better; 28 percent say they have stayed the same and only 16 percent say they have gotten worse.

School Quality in Community Over Last 5 Years					
	Better	Same	Worse	Don't know/ No answer	Number of cases
All Respondents	29%	35%	16%	20%	814
Public School Parents	41%	33%	17%	9%	266
School Employee Households	45%	28%	16%	12%	100

Opinion on whether the SOL's help improve school quality tracks well with overall views of school performance. Sixteen percent of Virginians say the SOL's have helped improve

the quality of schools in Virginia a lot and another 36% say they have helped a little. Nearly a third of the public are more pessimistic; 31% think the SOL’s have not helped the schools at all.

The Standards of Learning were designed as a school reform to guarantee that public schools taught a set of basic skills and knowledge appropriate to different subject areas and grade levels. The SOL objectives and the tests to measure whether students are reaching those goals have generated a lot of public debate over how they affect the classroom and the appropriate uses of the tests. “Despite all the political heat on this issue, a good portion of the public believes that SOL’s are helping the schools. But, concerns surface when it comes to evaluating the tests used to measure achievement of the SOL’s” said Cary Funk, Ph.D., Director of the Commonwealth Poll.

Virginians are about evenly split over the accuracy of the SOL test scores. A net 44 percent of all Virginians are either very or somewhat confident that the SOL test scores are an “accurate indicator of student progress and school achievement” while 46 percent have either not much or no confidence that the tests are a valid measure.

	SOL's Helped Schools in Virginia?				Number of cases
	A lot	A little	Not at all	Don't know/ No answer	
All Respondents	16%	36%	31%	17%	814
Public School Parents	17%	43%	34%	7%	266
School Employee Households	8%	42%	41%	9%	100
Democrats	15%	39%	31%	15%	225
Republicans	20%	29%	34%	16%	236
Independents	13%	38%	33%	17%	257
African-American	13%	47%	30%	11%	130
White	15%	35%	33%	18%	601

While the issue of SOL’s has often divided elected officials along partisan lines, rank and file partisans hold remarkably similar views of their impact on school quality. Fifteen percent of Democrats and twenty percent of Republicans feel the SOL’s have helped a lot while 31 percent of Democrats and 34 percent of Republicans feel SOL’s have not helped at all. “Given all the debate over SOL’s among elected officials and others, it is surprising to see very few divisions between social groups on this issue. Democrats, Independents, and Republicans are all fairly similar in their views of SOL’s,” said Funk. “African-Americans are slightly more positive about

the effect of SOL’s on the schools, but overall similar portions of whites and blacks view the SOL’s as helping or not helping the schools.”

Parents of children attending public schools had views similar to those of Virginians as a whole. Forty-three percent of parents think the SOL’s have helped Virginia schools a little and another 17 percent say they have helped a lot. Thirty-four percent of parents feel SOL’s have not helped the schools.

Households with school employees are more skeptical about the impact of the SOL’s, despite their decidedly positive outlook on the progress schools have made over the last five years. Just 8 percent think the SOL’s have helped a lot. School employee households are split 42-41 over whether the SOL’s have helped a little or not at all, respectively. This group is also more skeptical about the SOL tests. Only 28 percent are either “very” or “somewhat” confident that the SOL tests are “an accurate indicator of student progress and school achievement” while 66 percent have either not much or no confidence in the tests.

Confidence SOL Tests are Accurate Measure						Number of cases
Very	Somewhat	Not too	Not at all	Don't know/ No answer		
All Respondents	9%	35%	27%	19%	10%	814
Public School Parents	8%	35%	28%	25%	4%	266
School Employee Households	11%	17%	27%	39%	5%	100

William C. Boshier, Jr., former state superintendent during the development of the SOL’s and Executive Director of the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute said, “These findings seem to be optimistic since a majority of Virginians view the impact of the SOL’s positively. This implies clear support for standards and accountability. But, the poll raises caution flags. There seems to be less agreement on the tests used to measure achievement of SOL goals. Addressing this issue will be crucial to maintaining the momentum of educational reform.”

Questions Asked on the VCU Commonwealth Education Poll
 April 17-24, 2001
 Number of Respondents: 814

1. Over the past five years, have the public schools in your community gotten better, worse, or stayed the same?

	Apr 2001	Jan 2000
Better	29%	33%
Worse	16	14
Stayed the same	35	34
Don't Know/No Answer	20	20

2. As you may know, there's been a lot of talk lately about the Standards of Learning tests (or SOL's) in Virginia schools. Overall, do you think the SOL's have helped improve the quality of schools in Virginia--a lot, a little, or not at all?

A lot	16%
A little	36
Not at all	31
Don't Know/No Answer	17

3. What about for the public schools in your community? Overall, do you think the SOL's have helped improve the quality of schools in your community--a lot, a little, or not at all?

A lot	16%
A little	34
Not at all	31
Don't Know/No Answer	18

4. How confident are you that the test scores on the SOLs are an accurate indicator of a student's progress and school achievement--very confident, somewhat confident, not too confident, or not at all confident?

Very confident	9%
Somewhat confident	35
Not too confident	27
Not at all confident	19
Don't Know/No Answer	10

METHODOLOGY OF THE COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION POLL

The Commonwealth Education Poll is a public opinion survey of Virginia residents on education issues. The survey is conducted by telephone with a randomly-selected sample of adult Virginians. Interviewing for The Commonwealth Education Poll was conducted by telephone from the facilities of the Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. The interviewing is conducted by a staff of professionally trained, paid interviewers using computer-assisted telephone interviewing software.

The sample of telephone numbers was prepared by Genesys Sampling Systems of Ft. Washington, Pennsylvania, and was designed so that all residential telephones, including new and unlisted numbers, had a known chance of inclusion. The cooperation rate for the survey was 53%. Using the CASRO response rate calculations, interviews were obtained with respondents in 45% of the known or assumed residential households in the sample.

The data were weighted to adjust for unequal probabilities of selection due to multiple telephone lines and multiple adults living in the household. In addition, the data were weighted on sex, race, age, and region of residence to reflect the demographic composition of the Virginia adult population. Percentages reported in the text and tables are weighted, while the number of cases shown in the tables for various subgroups is the actual number of respondents.

Questions answered by the full sample of adults are subject to a sampling error of plus or minus approximately 4 percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence. This means that in 95 out of 100 samples like the one used here, the results obtained should be no more than 4 percentage points above or below the figure that would be obtained by interviewing all adult Virginians with telephones. Where the answers of subgroups are reported, the sampling error would be higher. Because of nonresponse (refusals to participate, etc.), standard calculations of sampling error are apt to understate the actual extent to which survey results are at variance with the true population values. Surveys are also subject to errors from sources other than sampling. While every effort is made to identify such errors, they are often difficult or impossible to measure. Readers making use of the results are urged to be mindful of the limitations inherent in survey research.

More information on the methodology is available from the Director of the Commonwealth Poll, Dr. Cary Funk, at 804 827 1430 or clfunk@vcu.edu. Other results from the Commonwealth Education Poll can be found at <http://www.edpolicyvcu.org/>.

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