



COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION POLL

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Virginians Believe SOLs Are Achieving Objectives But Have Reservations About the Impact of the SOL Tests

Richmond, VA—A majority of Virginians feel the SOL tests meet the program's objectives of holding schools accountable and improving student achievement, according to a new Virginia Commonwealth University poll. At the same time, however, many of these same individuals express reservations about the pressure SOL tests place on students and whether or not all important topics are being covered in the curriculum. The Commonwealth Education Poll was conducted April 24-May 2 with 804 adults; it has a margin of error of +/- 4 percentage points. The poll was conducted for the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute and sponsored in part by the Regional Educational Laboratory at AEL, Inc. The survey was conducted by the VCU Center for Public Policy.

Virginians are uncertain whether the SOLs have helped improve the quality of schools in Virginia; a plurality of 44 percent say they have not helped while 38 percent say they have helped. A slight plurality are not confident that the SOL tests are an accurate indicator of student academic achievement (47 percent to 44 percent).

Nearly three-quarters of Virginians agree with the statement that the SOL tests hold schools accountable for student achievement (74 to 17 percent). Clear majorities across the board agree with this statement. Majorities of both those who think the SOLs have helped as well as those who say the SOLs have not helped improve school quality agree that the SOL tests hold schools accountable for student achievement. Among those who think the SOLs have helped school quality, 85 percent agree the tests hold schools accountable and, so do seven in 10 of those who think the SOLs have not helped.

A majority of Virginians endorse the idea that the SOL tests help improve student achievement (55 percent compared to 37 percent who disagree). Further, better than six in 10 (63 percent) think the SOL tests make sure all students in Virginia meet the same academic standards while 29 percent disagree.

Despite majority agreement that the SOLs are meeting their objectives, an equally large portion of Virginians appear to be concerned about the impact of the SOL tests. Seventy-two percent agree with the statement that “so much time is spent preparing for the SOL tests that teachers can’t cover all the important material.” Just 17 percent disagree. Both those who think the SOLs have helped as well as those who think they have not helped improve school quality tend to agree with this statement. Eighty-seven percent of those who think the SOLs have not helped improve school quality agree with this statement but so does 65 percent of those who say the SOLs have helped. Concern over the impact of the SOL tests on the curriculum, then, are widespread even among those who see the SOL program as meeting its objectives.

Similarly, just over six in 10 Virginians (61 percent) agree that “the SOL tests are putting too much pressure on students” while 32 percent disagree. Better than eight in 10 of those who think the SOLs have not helped school quality think the tests are putting too much pressure on students. Those who think the SOLs have helped improve school quality are more divided on this issue but, a majority (at 51 percent) agree that the tests are putting too much pressure on students.

William C. Boshier, Jr., executive director of the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute observed, “The strong support Virginians show for holding schools accountable is well founded given the significant increases we’ve seen in the performance of students and schools. Concern about pressure is a natural byproduct of any effort to improve performance.”

“The SOL tests hold schools accountable for student achievement.”

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Don’t know No answer	Number of cases
All Respondents	29%	45%	11%	6%	9%	804
SOLs have helped	37%	48%	9%	2%	3%	302
SOLs have not helped	27%	43%	13%	11%	6%	357

“The SOL tests make sure all students in Virginia meet the same academic standards.”

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know No answer	Number of cases
All Respondents	22%	41%	17%	13%	8%	804
SOLs have helped	38%	48%	8%	3%	3%	302
SOLs have not helped	10%	34%	26%	25%	4%	357

“The SOL tests help improve student achievement.”

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know No answer	Number of cases
All Respondents	13%	42%	22%	16%	8%	804
SOLs have helped	29%	57%	9%	2%	2%	302
SOLs have not helped	2%	27%	37%	31%	4%	357

“So much class time is spent preparing for the SOL tests that teachers can't cover all the important material.”

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know No answer	Number of cases
All Respondents	45%	27%	11%	6%	11%	804
SOLs have helped	34%	31%	21%	9%	5%	302
SOLs have not helped	63%	24%	4%	5%	4%	357

“The SOL tests are putting too much pressure on students.”

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know No answer	Number of cases
All Respondents	36%	25%	20%	12%	7%	804
SOLs have helped	20%	31%	28%	19%	2%	302
SOLs have not helped	56%	25%	10%	7%	2%	357

Cary Funk, director of the poll, said, “This poll tells a fascinating story. While legislative battles over the SOLs are sometimes seen as being split along party lines, public views are not particularly partisan. The public split is between those who see the SOLs as helping or not helping improve school quality. But even this distinction is too simple because on the one hand, majorities of both sides seem to agree that the SOL tests hold schools accountable for student

achievement. On the other hand, majorities of both sides appear concerned about the impact of the SOL tests on the students and the school curriculum.”

Overall Evaluation of Schools

Overall, more Virginians are positive than negative about the quality of schools in the state. Nearly six in 10 (59 percent) say the schools are excellent or good compared to about three in 10 (32 percent) who say they are fair or poor. Similarly, schools in the respondents’ local community are rated as excellent or good by 65 percent while 29 percent say they are fair or poor. Three in 10 Virginians say schools in their community have improved over the past five years and another 37 percent think the schools have held steady. Just 15 percent think the schools have gotten worse. In terms of academic achievement, a plurality (45 percent) of Virginians think the expectations for student learning are about right, three in 10 think the expectations are too little and 15 percent say the expectations are too much. These results are quite similar to findings taken a year ago in the Commonwealth Education Poll. The schools on the whole, then, continue to be evaluated positively by a majority of Virginians and most think they have either held their ground or gotten better in the past five years.

Perceptions of School Leadership and School Performance

On the subject of school performance, Virginians appear especially focused on teachers. Good quality teachers are more likely to be considered the key to better school performance than any other group in the schools. The poll asked a series of questions about reasons for better school performance. Eighty-five percent of Virginians considered good quality teachers to be a top reason for better school performance. Nearly seven in 10 (69 percent) cited parent involvement in the schools as a top reason and 65 percent said that students with a strong motivation to learn were a top reason for better performance. Less important in the public view was leadership from school principals and district superintendents. Four in 10 consider leadership from school principals to be a top reason for better school performance and a quarter of Virginians said the same about district superintendents.

Reasons for better school performance	A top reason	Important, but not a top reason	Not too or Not at all important	Don't know No answer
Good quality teachers	85%	12%	2%	1%
Parents who are involved in the school	69%	25%	4%	1%
Students with strong motivation to learn	65%	28%	5%	2%
Leadership from school principals	40%	47%	11%	2%
Leadership from district superintendents	25%	45%	26%	4%

William C. Boshier, Jr., executive director of the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute noted that “ While the effective schools research has long held that principals were critical to school success, public perceptions seem to focus on the front lines first, with teachers, parents, and students, followed by principals and other school administrators second.”

Questions asked on the Commonwealth Education Poll
 Virginia Commonwealth University
 April 24 - May 2, 2002
 Number of Respondents: 804

Overall Evaluation of Schools

First, thinking about the public schools in Virginia as a whole, would you say that they provide an excellent, good, fair, or poor education?

	2002	2001
Excellent	10%	11%
Good	50	47
Fair	26	26
Poor	5	4
Don't Know/No Answer	9	11

What about the public schools in your community-would you say that they provide an excellent, good, fair, or poor education?

	2002	2001	2000
Excellent	18%	18%	15%
Good	47	42	44
Fair	21	22	22
Poor	8	7	6
Don't Know/No Answer	6	10	12

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

	2002	2001	2000
Better	30%	29%	33%
Worse	15	16	14
Stayed the same	37	35	34

Don't Know/No Answer 19 20 20

In terms of academic achievement, do you think the public schools in Virginia expect kids to learn too much, too little, or are the expectations about right?

	2002	2001
Too much	15%	17%
Too little	30	32
About right	45	39
Don't Know/No Answer	10	12

SOLs and SOL tests

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

Helped	38%
Not Helped	44
Don't Know/No Answer	18

IF HELPED: Would you say the SOLs have helped improve the quality of schools in Virginia a lot or a little?
OF THOSE SAYING HELPED

A lot	45%
A little	44
Don't Know/No Answer	11

Combined Responses:

Helped a lot	17%
Helped a little	17
Don't know how much helped	4
Not Helped	44
Don't know if helped or not helped	18

How familiar are you with the content of SOL tests-very familiar, somewhat familiar, not too familiar, or not at all familiar?

Very familiar	23%
Somewhat familiar	42
Not too familiar	17
Not at all familiar	16
Don't Know/No Answer	1

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?

	2002	2001
Very confident	6%	9%
Somewhat confident	38	35
Not too confident	31	27
Not at all confident	16	19
Don't Know/No Answer	9	10

IF NOT TOO OR NOT AT ALL CONFIDENT: Why do you say that?
(Open-ended responses recorded verbatim)

There are a number of different views about academic standards and the SOL tests in Virginia. Please tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements.

The next 5 questions were asked in randomized order.

The SOL tests make sure that all students in Virginia meet the same academic standards.
 (Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement?)

Strongly agree	22%
Somewhat agree	41
Somewhat disagree	17
Strongly disagree	13
Don't Know/No Answer	8

The SOL tests are putting too much pressure on students.
 (Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement?)

Strongly agree	36%
Somewhat agree	25
Somewhat disagree	20
Strongly disagree	12
Don't Know/No Answer	7

The SOL tests hold schools accountable for student achievement.
 (Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement?)

Strongly agree	29
Somewhat agree	45
Somewhat disagree	11
Strongly disagree	6
Don't Know/No Answer	9

So much class time is spent preparing for the SOL tests that teachers can't cover all the important material.
 (Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement?)

Strongly agree	45%
Somewhat agree	27
Somewhat disagree	11
Strongly disagree	6
Don't Know/No Answer	11

The SOL tests help improve student achievement.
 (Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement?)

Strongly agree	13%
Somewhat agree	42
Somewhat disagree	22
Strongly disagree	16
Don't Know/No Answer	8

School Leadership and School Performance

There may be a number of reasons why some schools perform better than others. For each of the following, please tell me how much you feel this is a reason for better school performance.

The next 5 questions were asked in randomized order.

Good quality teachers?

(How much is this a reason for better school performance-would you say it's a top reason, important but not a top reason, not too important, or not at all important?)

A top reason	85%
Important but not a top reason	12
Not too important	1
Not at all important	1
Don't Know/No Answer	1

Students with a strong motivation to learn?

(How much is this a reason for better school performance-would you say it's a top reason, important but not a top reason, not too important, or not at all important?)

A top reason	65%
Important but not a top reason	28
Not too important	4
Not at all important	1
Don't Know/No Answer	2

Leadership from school principals?

(How much is this a reason for better school performance-would you say it's a top reason, important but not a top reason, not too important, or not at all important?)

A top reason	40%
Important but not a top reason	47
Not too important	8
Not at all important	3
Don't Know/No Answer	2

Leadership from district superintendents?

(How much is this a reason for better school performance-would you say it's a top reason, important but not a top reason, not too important, or not at all important?)

A top reason	25%
Important but not a top reason	45
Not too important	20
Not at all important	6
Don't Know/No Answer	4

Parents who are involved in the school?

(How much is this a reason for better school performance-would you say it's a top reason, important but not a top reason, not too important, or not at all important?)

A top reason	69%
Important but not a top reason	25
Not too important	3
Not at all important	1
Don't Know/No Answer	1

METHOD 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 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 49 percent. Using the CASRO response rate calculations, interviews were obtained with respondents in 42 percent 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 cfunk@vcu.edu. Other results from the Commonwealth Education Poll can be found at <http://www.edpolicyvcu.org/>.

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