



COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION POLL

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Virginians Perceive SOL Tests Holding Schools Accountable

Richmond, VA— One of the chief aims of the Standards of Learning (SOL) testing program was to improve accountability of the schools for achievement. A clear majority of Virginians agrees “the SOL tests hold schools accountable for student achievement”. Sixty-seven percent of Virginians agree that the tests hold schools accountable while 26 percent disagree. These are results from a new poll conducted by Virginia Commonwealth University. The Commonwealth Education Poll with 801 adults was conducted March 25-April 2 and has a margin of error of +/- 4 percentage points. The poll was conducted for the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute in the VCU School of Education. It was also sponsored in part by the Regional Educational Laboratory at AEL, Inc. The survey was conducted by the VCU Center for Public Policy.

Are the SOL test scores seen as an indicator of school performance? Overall, a clear majority of Virginians think they are. Nearly six in ten (58 percent) agree that the “SOL tests give helpful information about school performance” to parents; 34 percent disagree.

While public response to these two specific statements about SOL tests was quite positive, opinion is more mixed when it comes to a more general assessment of the SOL program’s impact on education quality. Overall, 43 percent of Virginians say the SOLs have not helped improve the quality of education in the state, an approximately equal portion (42 percent) feel the SOLs have helped.

Interestingly, views about the SOL tests tend to vary with one's overall view that the SOL program has helped or not helped improve the schools. Those who feel the SOLs helped improve school quality, strongly endorse the idea that the SOL tests hold schools accountable. Nine in ten of this group strongly or somewhat agrees that the SOL tests hold schools accountable while just seven percent disagree. Among those who say the SOLs have not helped improve education quality, opinion is not nearly as uniform. Almost half of this group (48 percent) strongly or somewhat agrees that the SOL tests hold schools accountable while 50 percent disagree.

"The SOL tests hold schools accountable for student achievement."				
	Agree strongly or somewhat	Disagree strongly or somewhat	Don't Know or No Answer	Number of cases
All	67%	26%	7%	801
SOLs Helped	90%	7%	4%	325
SOLs Not Helped	48%	50%	2%	350

Similarly, those who feel the SOLs have helped the schools are quite likely to endorse the idea that SOL tests give parents information about school performance. Among this group, 84 percent think the SOL tests give parents helpful information about school performance while just ten percent disagree. In contrast, those who think the SOLs have not helped, tend to disagree with this statement by a margin of 65 to 33.

"The SOL tests give parents helpful information about school performance."				
	Agree strongly or somewhat	Disagree strongly or somewhat	Don't Know or No Answer	Number of cases
All	58%	34%	8%	801
SOLs Helped	84%	10%	6%	325
SOLs Not Helped	33%	65%	2%	350

Student performance on the SOL tests has shown a strong improvement since the start of the testing program in 1998. Forty-five percent of Virginians are aware of this increase in test scores; 18 percent falsely believe test scores to have been stable over time and only 6 percent

think test scores went down. Nearly three in ten (29 percent) had no information about SOL test score trends. Those with more direct experience with the schools are more likely to be aware of the increase in test scores. Parents with children in the public schools are more likely to be aware of the SOL test scores; 56 percent of this group correctly assessed the scores to have gone up over the past five years. Similarly, two thirds of respondents who either work for the schools or who have a household member who works for the schools are aware of the increase in SOL test scores over the last five years.

William C. Boshier, Jr., dean of the VCU School of Education and executive director of the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute commented, "Most Virginians recognize that the SOL program is holding schools accountable and providing useful information about performance but, there is still room to increase public awareness of the significant improvement in student performance on the SOL tests."

Whatever their opinion of the SOLs and the SOL tests, a majority of Virginians hold positive views of the overall quality of education in the state. Most view the quality of education provided in the state as good (51 percent) and another 15 percent say that it is excellent. Twenty-three percent think the education is fair and just 4 percent say it is poor. Similarly, schools in the respondents' community are thought to provide either an excellent (22 percent) or good education (46 percent) by two thirds of Virginians. Two in ten say the education is fair and just 5 percent say schools in their community provide a poor education. Four in ten Virginians say the schools in their community have stayed about the same over the last five years while 32 percent say schools have gotten better and just 12 percent think they have gotten worse.

Questions asked on the Commonwealth Education Poll
March 25-April 2, 2003
Number of respondents: 801

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?

	2003	2002	2001
Excellent	15%	10%	11%
Good	51	50	47
Fair	23	26	26
Poor	4	5	4
Don't Know/No Answer	8	9	11

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

	2003	2002	2001	2000
Excellent	22%	18%	18%	15%
Good	46	47	42	44
Fair	20	21	22	22
Poor	5	8	7	6
Don't Know/No Answer	7	6	10	12

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

	2003	2002	2001	2000
Better	32%	30%	29%	33%
Worse	12	15	16	14
Stayed the same	40	37	35	34
Don't Know/No Answer	17	19	20	20

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?

	2003	2002
Helped	42%	38%
Not Helped	43	44
Don't Know/No Answer	15	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

	2003	2002
A lot	57%	45%
A little	36	44
Don't Know/No Answer	7	4

Combined:

	2003	2002
Helped a lot	24%	17%
Helped a little	15	17
Don't know how much helped	3	4
Not Helped	43	44
Don't know if helped or not helped	15	18

Please tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements.

(The next two questions were asked in random order.)

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

(Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement?)

	2003	2002
Strongly agree	26%	29%
Somewhat agree	41	45
Somewhat disagree	15	11
Strongly disagree	11	6
Don't Know/No Answer	7	9

“The SOL tests give parents helpful information about school performance. “

(Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement?)

Strongly agree	21%
Somewhat agree	37
Somewhat disagree	18
Strongly disagree	15
Don't Know/No Answer	8

The SOL tests have been given in Virginia since 1998. As far as you know, have test scores on the SOLs for students across the state gone up, gone down, or stayed about the same over the last five years?

Gone up	45%
Gone down	6
Stayed the same	18
Don't Know/No answer	30

The SOL tests are used to determine school accreditation. In order to be fully accredited by the state, 70 percent or more of a school's student body must pass the SOL tests on all subjects. As far as you know, has the number of accredited schools in Virginia gone up, gone down, or stayed about the same over the last five years?

Gone up	33%
Gone down	6
Stayed the same	25
Don't Know/No Answer	36

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 43% percent. Using the Council of American Survey Research Organization (CASRO) response rate calculations, interviews were obtained with respondents in 37% 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 clfunk@vcu.edu. Other results from the Commonwealth Education Poll can be found at <http://www.cepionline.org/>.

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