



COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION POLL

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE April 8, 2004

Contact:

Cary Funk, Director of the Commonwealth Poll 804 827 1430 or clfunk@vcu.edu

William C. Boshier, Jr., Dean of the VCU School of Education and

Executive Director of the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute 804 828 3382

Robert Holsworth, Director of the VCU Center for Public Policy 804 828 8033

Majority Sees SOL Test as Appropriate Requirement for Graduation and Holds Positive Evaluation of Schools

Richmond, VA— This June marks the first year in which students will be required to pass certain Standards of Learning (SOL) tests in order to graduate from high school with a standard diploma. A majority of Virginians think this is an appropriate requirement for graduation (59 percent) while 37 percent think it is not appropriate. Public schools, state-wide and in the local community, are evaluated positively by a majority of Virginians; nearly seven in ten (68 percent) think schools in the local community have either remained the same or improved over the past five years.

These are results from the new state-wide Commonwealth Education Poll of 803 adults. The poll was conducted March 3-10 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. The survey was conducted by the VCU Center for Public Policy.

SOLs and SOL tests

There has been some controversy in past years over the SOL program and in particular over the use of SOL test results in high school graduation requirements. The poll found that 59 percent of Virginians think it is appropriate to include the SOL tests in graduation requirements while 37 percent think this is not appropriate.

William C. Boshier, Jr., dean of the VCU School of Education and executive director of the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute noted, “Virginians have again indicated that standards alone are not enough. You must also have tests and consequences.”

One of the chief aims of the SOL testing program was to improve accountability of the schools. Three-quarters of Virginians think the SOL tests are reaching this goal. Fifty-seven percent agrees and another 18 percent strongly agrees that “the SOL tests hold schools accountable for student achievement.” These results are consistent with findings from past years on the Commonwealth Education Poll where better than seven in ten agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

At the same time, there is some ambivalence toward the SOL tests. A majority (53 percent) agree or strongly agree that “the SOL tests are putting too much pressure on students” while 43 percent disagree or strongly disagree. The proportion indicating agreement to this question is comparable to findings from 2002; a somewhat smaller portion tends to agree with this statement in 2004 compared to two years ago. Fifty-three percent agreed in 2004; this compares to 61 percent who agreed in 2002.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	No answer	Number of cases
"The SOL tests hold schools accountable for student achievement."	18%	57%	17%	3%	4%	1%	803
"The SOL tests are putting too much pressure on students."	22%	31%	35%	8%	3%	1%	803

Overall Evaluation

A majority of Virginians (52 percent) rate the education provided by the public schools as good while another 11 percent say it is excellent. Twenty-four percent say it is fair and just 5 percent say it is poor. Ratings were a bit more positive when evaluating the education provided in local community public schools. Twenty-one percent say schools in their community provide an excellent education and 43 percent say it is good. Twenty-two percent say it is fair and six percent say it is poor. When asked whether schools in the local community have gotten better, worse, or stayed the same over the past five years, just 14 percent think they've gotten worse. Nearly four in ten (39 percent) say schools have stayed the same and nearly three in ten (29

percent) say they've gotten better. Opinion about the overall quality of education provided by the schools has been fairly stable over the past five years of Commonwealth Education Polls.

State schools were also evaluated in three specific areas compared to five years ago: providing skills useful in obtaining a job, teaching the basics such as reading, writing, and mathematics, and providing skills needed for pursuing a four-year college degree. The results are similar to that for overall performance of the schools. About seven in ten Virginians see the schools as either better than or about the same as they have been in these areas (69 to 70 percent across the three measures). A minority (ranging from 14 to 17 percent) sees the schools as deteriorating in these areas compared to five years ago.

No Child Left Behind Act

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is bringing a series of changes into educational practice and evaluation around the country. Public reaction to whether the NCLB will help, hurt, or make no difference in school performance shows that a plurality are optimistic (46 percent), almost a quarter (23 percent) think it will make no difference and 24 percent think it will hurt school performance. These results are similar to findings from one year ago. The changes brought by the law are still fairly new and in some cases the implications of the act are still uncertain. Over six in ten Virginians (61 percent) consider themselves not too or not at all informed about the act. About three in ten Virginians (31 percent) consider themselves informed about the act and another 8 percent consider themselves very informed.

Those more informed about the No Child Left Behind Act were a bit more pessimistic about its likely impact on school performance. Among the more informed, 38 percent think the federal government's involvement in the schools will hurt, 40 percent think it will help, and 20 percent think it will make no difference in school performance. Among those less informed about the act, just 16 percent think it will hurt, half think it will help, and 26 percent think it will make no difference in school performance.

		No Child Left Behind Act ...federal government's involvement in the schools will help, hurt, or make no difference in school performance?					Number of cases
		Help	Hurt	Make no difference	Don't know	No answer	
	Informed or very informed about NCLBA	40%	38%	20%	2%	1%	310
	Not too or not at all informed about NCLBA	50%	16%	26%	7%	2%	490
All respondents		46%	24%	23%	5%	2%	803

Questions asked on the Commonwealth Education Poll
March 3-10, 2004

Number of respondents: 803

See full report at <http://www.cepionline.org> for exact order of questions

SOLs and SOL tests

This year for the first time, students will not be able to graduate with a standard high school diploma unless they pass required SOL tests. Do you think it is appropriate or not appropriate that students pass SOL tests in order to graduate from high school?

Appropriate	59%
Not appropriate	37
Don't Know/No Answer	4

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

Next 2 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?)

	2004	2003	2002
Strongly agree	18%	26%	29%
Somewhat agree	57	41	45
Somewhat disagree	17	15	11
Strongly disagree	3	11	6
Don't Know/No Answer	5	7	9

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

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

	2004	2002
Strongly agree	22%	36%
Somewhat agree	31	25
Somewhat disagree	35	20
Strongly disagree	8	12
Don't Know/No Answer	4	7

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?

	2004	2003	2002	2001
Excellent	11%	15%	10%	11%
Good	52	51	50	47
Fair	24	23	26	26
Poor	5	4	5	4
Don't Know/No Answer	8	8	9	11

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

	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000
Excellent	21%	22%	18%	18%	15%
Good	43	46	47	42	44
Fair	22	20	21	22	22
Poor	6	5	8	7	6
Don't Know/No Answer	8	7	6	10	12

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

	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000
Better	29%	32%	30%	29%	33%
Worse	14	12	15	16	14
Stayed the same	39	40	37	35	34
Don't Know/No Answer	19	17	19	20	20

(break in question order)

Next, I'm going to ask whether you feel the public schools in Virginia have gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed the same during the past five years in each of the following three areas. First, ...

Next 3 questions were asked in random order.

In providing skills that will be useful in obtaining a job? (Do you think the public schools in Virginia have gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed the same during the past five years in providing skills that will be useful in obtaining a job?)

Better	30%
Worse	16
Stayed the Same	39
Don't Know/No Answer	15

In teaching the basics such as reading, writing, and mathematics? (Do you think the public schools in Virginia have gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed the same during the past five years in teaching the basics such as reading, writing, and mathematics?)

Better	35%
Worse	17
Stayed the Same	35
Don't Know/No Answer	14

In providing the skills needed for pursuing a four-year college degree? (Do you think the public schools in Virginia have gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed the same during the past five years in providing the skills needed for pursuing a four-year college degree?)

Better	34%
Worse	14
Stayed the Same	36
Don't Know/No Answer	16

No Child Left Behind Act

In the past, state and local governments oversaw most decisions related to the schools. The federal government in Washington has recently passed a law called the No Child Left Behind Act that increases the federal government's role in decisions about the schools. Do you think the federal government's involvement in the schools will help, hurt, or make no difference in school performance?

	2004	2003
Help	46%	42%
Hurt	24	22
No difference	23	29
Don't Know/No Answer	7	7

How much information do you have about the No Child Left Behind Act—would you say that you are very informed, informed, not too informed, or not at all informed?

Very informed	8%
Informed	31
Not too informed	42
Not at all informed	19
Don't Know/No Answer	0

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 42% percent. Using the Council of American Survey Research Organization (CASRO) response rate calculations, interviews were obtained with respondents in 36% 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/>.

Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute
P.O. Box 842020
Richmond, VA 23284-2020
804 827 3290
Email: cepi@vcu.edu
Website: <http://www.cepionline.org/>

####