

**Standards of Learning (SOL) Innovation Committee
Recommendations:
Goal-Global Competitiveness**

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“We need to prepare children for their future, not our past.” Mark Edwards,
“2013 Superintendent of the Year”-Former Superintendent, Mooresville, N.C.

“We know much more than what’s on the tests — not only the “what” but the
“why.” Student, Mooresville, N.C.

The Committee

Virginia Governor McAuliffe’s Standards of Learning (SOL) Innovation Committee has provided the Commonwealth with its first interim report. As you know he approved a non-partisan committee of educators, parents, members of the General Assembly to participate in a two-year appointment to review and revise the SOL test. This committee was appointed and is under the direction of the Secretary of Education, Anne Holton. I was fortunate to be one of the twenty-eight Virginians appointed. Two other members are representing Prince William County (PWC), Meg Gruber, a teacher with our system and Virginia Education Associations President and a local parent, Dr. Tarannum Lateef of Manassas. The committee also consists of four members of the House of Delegates and two Senators. The goal of this committee: the above quote from a school district that is visited by school systems all over the world says it all!

I have presented the interim recommendations to principals. I will follow up with teachers and parents (Superintendent’s Parent Advisory Council) as promised. As I prepared for this article I thought the opening quote capsulized what we have to be all about. About five years ago my daughters laughingly said, “mom, there is a channel above nine.” Our past cannot be our children’s future. We were reminded during the past few weeks of the power of 21-century technology skills when the entire movie industry was brought to its knees by what is presumed to be another country’s skills in this area. The Governor, Secretary of Education and those of us on the committee know that our students must be prepared to think critically on a global level if we want them to be competitive. We also know that the education of our kids has to be a top priority and thus a non-partisan issue. The way I see it, the world will change. The question is whether the Commonwealth of Virginia and America will “respond” to the change of others or be in the forefront “initiating” the change. If it is the latter, it begins with what and more importantly “how” we teach our students.

The Terminology Using Family Friendly Language

As we review the twelve recommendations, you will find that the committee and Secretary Holton frequently use words like, “authentic assessment, project-based learning and alternative assessments.” Project-based learning and authentic assessments are similar but different. The research and our own common sense tells us that we enjoy and learn more when we are actively engaged in learning. I have often used the analogy of building a house. Would a student be better able to respond to questions on building a house by teaching using numerous worksheets or by actually building a house physically or electronically? Do we learn to drive a car by worksheets or by driving the car and learning the dynamic in concert with engagement? Authentic means relevance to what they will see in the actual workforce. In some countries, teachers are allowed the luxury of actual working under the guiding eyes and tutelage of a committee of experts before entering the profession.

Authentic teaching can began at home. During the holidays my family and I did something that was so simple yet meaningful when it comes to authentic learning. A friend of my daughter took us on a guided tour of Marjorie Merriweather Post’s Hillwood Estates where he works. In addition to the Cartier jewels and Faberge Eggs there were numerous sets of hand-designed, delicate dinnerware from all over the world including 1860 demitasse cups from Japan. All were encased behind glass and not to be touched. It occurred to me that my husband and I had a small collection of demitasse cups and other china pieces from Adelaide his now deceased cousin who we found at age 99. She died at the age of 107. Much like the display in the Post mansion, I had much of it on display but no one was allowed to touch it.

After the Hillwood visit I made a decision to have what I called a “Legacy Dinner” for Christmas. We used Adelaide’s china and shared my husband’s history of finding that Adelaide had save his deceased mother’s 12-piece ornate silverware in a shoebox under her bed for more than forty years in hopes of finding him. We had never shared the stories behind Adelaide’s collection with my extended family. We used the silverware, Adelaide’s wedding china and demitasse cups while sharing the story. I think this experience now has a better chance of staying in the memory banks of my family than showing them pictures, a worksheet or housing it in a cabinet for viewing only. For learning to be effective it must have meaning and staying power! To have staying power it must be hands on and relevant.

The Twelve Recommendations

The committee also understood the importance of using research-based practices in our schools. During the first meeting training and information on the status of what works and how we compete as a nation was presented by Dr. Linda Darlin-Hammond, world renowned educator, author and researcher. There are sub-committees for elementary, secondary and accountability. The recommendations below represent the first interim

report. This committee will continue to make recommendations during its two-year tenure. Members of the public are invited to sit in on meetings. Input is welcomed by Secretary Holton, as are they by those of us representing PWCS. Now that I have provided you with background information and thinking of the committee, listed below are the recommendations:

The recommendations are grouped into four overarching principles regarding the purpose of the SOL Tests:

Principle I- Accountability (5):

1. Schools recognized for making “progress” towards accreditation benchmarks
2. An appeal process for schools not making accreditation
3. Flexibility in how often schools are accredited
4. Retest opportunities that demonstrate growth from the beginning of the year until the end
5. Retest opportunities for middle and elementary students, similar those given to high school

Principle II-College-Career Readiness (3)

6. Alternative ways of accruing credits outside of traditional seat time (apprenticeships-shadowing and other “authentic/project-based opportunities). Other ways of obtaining verified credits instead of SOL tests
7. Expansion of verified credit opportunities through an alternative assessment
8. Attention to skills important to college success (Problem-solving, communication and creative thinking)

Principle III-Global Economy (2)

9. Re-structured schedule that give school divisions more time to incorporate the new curriculum
10. Interdisciplinary assessments (assess across content areas, ex. writing while teaching science)

Principle IV-Authentic and Alternate Assessment (2)

11. Funding Initiatives for Professional Development at the state/local level-Alternate and Authentic Assessment
12. Dissemination of best practices in the use of alternative and/or authentic assessment

Now that you know the goals of the committee, how it was formed, and an introduction to some of the terminology the next item of discussion is what this all means and next steps. What’s in it for teachers?

- The Legislature has already responded to the request to reduce the number of SOL by eliminating five SOL tests: Grade 3 History, Grade 3 Science, Grade 5 Writing, U.S. History to 1865 and U.S. History: 1865 to the present. School divisions, however, are required to develop their own alternative assessments. For example, some are planning to assess writing while teaching other content. The next step is innovation of existing practices.
- The concern expressed when Sanford William (Manassas City School Board) and I presented at the Virginia School Board Association was the funding source, training and support needed for local school divisions to write the alternative assessments required.
- Authentic and project-based assessments are also a professional development issue as teachers need training but once done they will see that a deeper or power standard approach will reduce the number of small often insignificant assessments given they will embrace it. Presently, there are too many standards for teachers to teach in a year.
- Common Core versus SOLs: The reality is we will need to provide the professional development and materials for teachers since it is not planning to participate in the Common Core. Having the same common standards has allowed teachers to share lesson plans and other ideas and training nation-wide. Nationally, instructional materials are designed with the common standards in mind. We will need to provide our own training and materials.

At the end of the day the quote shared in an earlier article says it best:

“Our goal for students is *not* for them to be
 Doctors, scientists, businesspersons, teachers or lawyers...
 But rather doctors, scientists, businessmen, teachers or lawyers
Who will change the world!”

Equity Commitments Statement Stults
 Elementary School in Richardson, Texas