

We Can Not Afford to Wait

The SOL Innovation Committee was established by law in June of this year. According to the language adopted by the General Assembly: “The Committee, under the direction of the Secretary, shall periodically make recommendations to the Board of Education and the General Assembly...” (HB 930)

The 2015 General Assembly session is a mere three months away. In order to introduce new, exciting and innovative ideas to the legislature, however, the Committee must formulate and agree upon recommendations by November.

That means working harder, faster, and longer.

But why? Why are we calling the best and brightest from all across the Commonwealth to Richmond to develop in-depth analysis and provide concrete recommendations in such a short timeframe?

The answer is simple, and one I’m sure every reader already knows: Because we cannot afford to wait any longer.

In 1995, after decades of trial and error, Virginia led the way in assessment reform by establishing the Standards of Learning. Prior to this, instruction could vary not only from school to school, but from classroom to classroom. Like today, it was clear something had to be done.

Our accountability and assessment systems have helped improve student performance over time. While this legacy of action is one to be proud of, we are eager to lead the way yet again in reforming the current system. As it stands, our SOL tests are great at identifying problems, but fall short when it comes to addressing those problems.

I also often hear from educators who feel hamstrung by assessments that have unintentionally made it harder to be creative in the classroom.

That is why the work of the SOL Committee is so important; in its current form, our system has led to teachers spending too much time teaching to a test, not to students. We can do better.

It is clear that we are not where we want to be as a state. Only 68% of our schools achieved full accreditation this year. Much of this decline can be attributed to the increased rigor of the science, math and writing tests in 2011, and we hope and expect to see better results as teachers and students adjust to the new tests. However, we believe our accountability system can work better to promote growth, creativity and the joy of learning, and we are working urgently to produce recommendations toward that end.

The full committee met for the second time on September 30th. At that meeting, the members honed their list of desired results and heard feedback from members of the public. The committee is scheduled to meet again on November 6th. In between, subcommittees will congregate, discuss, debate, and hammer out the first round of recommendations for the General Assembly.

I am confident that this collaborative reform effort will not only improve education across the Commonwealth, but will give our students, teachers, administrators and divisions the means to succeed.