

## **SOL Test Reduction Redux** *(continued)*

We are looking for more opportunities for students to engage in many types and genres of writing. We seek more creativity in student work. We crave more writing for real audiences who are interested in what students have to say and not just in how they score, and we look forward to more sustained engagement in the writing process. In other words, we'd like increased opportunities to teach our students to write just like people in the real world do. We want our kids to be poets, essayists, journalists, bloggers, novelists, analysts, technical writers, script writers, even tweeters and texters.

Reductions in high-stakes SOL tests create options for students, teachers, and the education community. Our critics assume that without tests to guide our instruction, we will be lost in an educational wasteland; that we will breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that we can stop working so hard and do whatever we like. They think that eliminating the test equals ignoring the standards. Nonsense. We know that a guaranteed and viable curriculum is essential to school quality and student learning. We've learned this from research. We have evidence of it. There's no desire in Virginia's education community to return to the days when teachers taught their own favorite content and gave academic credit for bringing in snacks on Fridays. Those were days when students from different zip codes might find little commonality in their opportunities to learn, and we are not in that century any more.

Rather than using the absence of an SOL test as an excuse to return to past practices, we will fill the gap created by these testing reductions to act on what we believe:

- that students need engaging, academically challenging and authentic learning experiences at school each day;
- that by choosing and designing richer instruments, we can assess student achievement, progress and needs in a more timely and effective way.
- that freeing teachers from the limitations imposed by lengthy multiple choice exams creates opportunities to discover and apply important content through investigation, analysis, and discovery—the ways we love to learn in real life.

I recently heard a presentation by Stephen Turnipseed, President Emeritus of LEGO Education. He told a story about a young woman he met on a plane. She was 19 at the time and in the process of enlisting in the Army. After some training, she anticipated being sent to a combat station in Afghanistan. But there was a catch. She was still working to complete her high school graduation requirements, and had one more multiple choice exam to pass. Turnipseed, thinking about what it must be like to be 19 years old and facing life as a soldier, asked her about her greatest fear. Her greatest fear, she said, was that she would not pass that multiple choice test.

In the coming weeks, there will be discussion and debate about further reductions in SOL testing, including at the high school level where test results are tied to course credit and graduation. The stakes could hardly be higher.

There will be those who will opine that high-stakes tests are the most effective way to document not only what students know, but also the quality of teachers and schools. We must not only make the argument but also show the evidence that in the absence of stress-producing, mind-numbing standardized tests- in the absence of fear- Virginia teachers have something better to offer.

As we get ready for round 2 of this debate, I hope you'll share not only your opinions but also your practice with your colleagues, your leaders, your communities, and your policy makers. They need to see what our teachers and leaders can and will produce when we bring our assessment and accountability systems into balance. Our time to make this case is now.