

THE JEFFERSON JOURNAL

...a commentary from

THE THOMAS JEFFERSON INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

The Two-Edged Sword of SOL Reform

By Chris Braunlich

Judging from the platforms of both gubernatorial candidates, Virginia's Standards of Learning exams may be in for a tougher time next year.

Both Ken Cuccinelli and Terry McAuliffe have called for a commission to review and revise the SOLs and SOL exams, even though the Standards are regularly benchmarked against the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) exams, and revised accordingly along with their accompanying tests and "passing scores."

But before we go down that road, it may be worthy to step back a bit and look at where we started, as well as the possible consequences of reform done badly.

A particularly sharp two-edged sword is the charge that "students aren't being taught to think critically." But knowing facts is important. Without having these facts at hand, it leads to the kind of critical thinking demonstrated by Candidate McAuliffe, who proclaimed that the SOL exams are "multiple-choice tests" and we need to move "to essay or short answer-based testing" -- ignoring the fact that English essays have been part of SOL testing since the beginning. And that "fill in the blank" questions were included in Math for the last two years and in writing and science last year. (Memo to Campaign Policy Staff: One should not engage in critical thinking unless one first knows the facts about which to think critically.)

But this "critical thinking vs. facts" argument is one that could have the most repercussions for low-income students. It, and many of the other arguments against standards-based education, appears to look at education's past through a gauzy mist as if there was, as Change the Equation CEO Dr. Linda Rosen put it, some sort of "golden age before standardized tests when all teaching was inspired and all children – poor or rich, black, Hispanic or white – left school ready to take on any challenge. Instead, the lack of any standard measure of student success made it all too easy to turn a blind eye to the yawning achievement gaps that put poor and minority students at a severe disadvantage."

When I was first elected to the Fairfax County School Board at the dawn of the SOL tests, I found myself representing schools whose student populations were from extremely low-income families (as much as 80 percent of the students were eligible for free and reduced meals). I soon found what I came to call a "Tysons Corner Curriculum" that worked great for the sons

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and daughters of doctors and lawyers, accountants and professors ... but not so well for the sons and daughters of low-income single Moms, custodians and parents who did not understand English.

That should surprise no one. By the age of four, children from low-income families hear as many as 30 million fewer words than their higher income peers, and their vocabulary is consequently much smaller by the time they reach school, making learning a greater challenge. For the most part, they need different strategies and a better foundation in the basic skills they don't automatically learn at home or in their neighborhoods.

Fairfax County had, and has, a well-deserved reputation for excellence. But part of that reputation – there and elsewhere – was built on the backs of well-educated and highly engaged parents. Low-performers, whose parents struggled just to make it each day, escaped scrutiny behind a curtain of high scores. The Standards of Learning tests (and the subsequent federal requirement to separate test scores by demographic) tore away that curtain.

Dr. Daniel Domenech, now president of the American Association of School Superintendents, was Fairfax County's superintendent shortly after SOL implementation began. He admitted some years later that there never would have been the political will to provide the resources for the instructional changes he implemented in the system's low-income schools without the transparency provided by the Standards of Learning and their tests.

Parents know what's at stake, too. A recent Harris Interactive survey of parental expectations concluded that "lower-income parents have a more pragmatic outlook on the purpose of education (developing college and/or job skills). Higher income parents, on the other hand, may take it for granted that their children will be well-prepared for college and career, and are thus at liberty to voice more specific academic aspirations," specifically citing among those aspirations "a focus on critical thinking."

Thus, the conundrum for the SOL debate: How do we meet the demands of high performers while simultaneously meeting the needs of students who too often lack the basic skills necessary for employment?

By all means, let's ensure that high-performing students are prepared in the high-level skills increasingly necessary for many careers. But let's also make certain we don't do so at the cost of denying all children the education they need to move ahead in life and be prepared for 21st century citizenship.