

**News Conference Statement, 2-16-12**  
**Dr. Kitty Boitnott, VEA President**

Good morning. Thank you for taking the time from your busy schedules to be here today.

This weekend, members of the General Assembly in the House and Senate will issue their respective budget proposals.

The question we're asking them is this—Will you do what is right for the children of this great Commonwealth, or will you be content to allow the continuing downward spiral in school funding, forcing our students to suffer an inferior education?

If you doubt my words, I'd ask you to consider these facts:

- The state's per-pupil support for public education was at \$5,277 in 2009. The governor's budget would bring it to only \$4,730 by 2014. That's a 12% cut.
- As a result of the cuts in state support, Virginia now ranks 35<sup>th</sup> in the nation in state per-pupil funding. This is despite the fact that we rank 7<sup>th</sup> in per-capita income.
- Changes in the funding formula for the state's Standards of Quality for schools have, in effect, permanently cut \$1.4 Billion from the state's funding stream to localities. Other policy changes, including those proposed by the Governor, take this total to more than \$1.6 billion

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These cuts reach deep into every school and classroom across the state.

Class sizes are up. At one time, Virginia ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in the nation in providing small class sizes. We're now 41<sup>st</sup>. That means less individual attention for students. Our teachers WANT to give every student the care and attention he or she deserves. Increasingly, they CAN'T do that.

We've seen numerous programs cut by localities unable to make up the funding gap—good programs that help prevent dropouts or provide enrichment for students who need

it most. We've seen offerings in foreign languages and the arts dwindle. We've seen maintenance of school buildings and replacement of school buses delayed.

Virginia recently ranked 4<sup>th</sup> in the *Education Week* rankings of school system success. But it's clear to me that—unless we stem the funding decline and renew our investment in children—we cannot continue to reach those heights.

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The most important in-school factor in our kids' education is the teacher. They are the ones who train the next generation of leaders, and they deserve to be treated with respect.

I talk every day with teachers from across the state. What they tell me, overwhelmingly, is that Virginia is becoming a place where the considerable demands heaped upon them are not balanced by support for their efforts.

If we truly supported our teachers, would we allow the average teacher salary in this state to slip to \$4,510 under the national average? Is that going to help us recruit the great teachers our kids need to be competitive in this global economy?

If we truly supported teachers, would we attempt to cut their retirement benefits and advance legislation that would undermine the health of the Virginia Retirement System? We are told that Virginia cannot afford the meager retirement benefits our teachers earn, when, in fact, Virginia invests only half the percentage of its budget for this purpose than the average state does.

Would we take credit for the great achievement of Virginia students—then turn and tell those who do so much to produce it that every three years they can be fired with no reason given?

Of course not. Yet House Bill 576, which would do just that, is still alive in the Senate.

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We stand behind the idea that every student in this state deserves the best possible teacher up there in the front of the classroom.

But I fear that the actions taken by our elected officials too often have the opposite effect. We are making Virginia a very UN-welcome place to start a teaching career. That is at our great peril.

The turnover rate of Virginia teachers is 9 percent, according to the Virginia Department of Education. Many of our best and most experienced teachers are now or will in the

next five years be eligible for retirement. Virginia teacher education programs provide only a fraction of the new teachers required by Virginia school divisions—the rest must come from out of state.

What is the message we are sending those teacher candidates in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, and other states? Come to Virginia: earn less, do more, and go without job security? That is a recipe for disaster. And it would be a disaster for our students, who rely on US to provide a dedicated, well-trained teacher to guide them.

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One of our VEA members last week suggested that, in light of these budget cuts and attacks on teachers, we ought to declare a day of mourning. And so, tomorrow for us is Black Friday, and we are encouraging educators across the state to wear black to protest the lack of commitment our elected officials have shown to our students and our public educators. Thousands of individuals have indicated via Facebook that they will participate in this silent protest.

Article VIII, Section 1 of our Virginia Constitution says, “The General Assembly shall provide for a system of free public elementary and secondary schools for all children of school age throughout the Commonwealth, and shall seek to ensure that an educational program of high quality is established and continually maintained.”

The General Assembly is falling short in this regard.

We simply cannot sit idly by and permit additional cuts to the funding lifeblood of our schools. We call on our elected leaders to pass a budget that truly reflects the commitment Virginia owes its children.