

**Testimony Offered Regarding the Biennial Review of the Standards of Quality**  
**By the Virginia Education Association**  
**Presented by**  
**Dr. Kitty J. Boitnott, NBCT**  
**President, VEA**  
**June 27, 2012**

Dr. Cannaday, Members of the Standards of Quality Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon regarding the VEA's thoughts on the Standards of Quality. We appreciate the time you have offered us as we reflect on what we believe to be an important aspect of your job as Board members making recommendations to members of the General Assembly and to the Governor.

Virginians have high educational aspirations for our children, but for our entire history, matching these aspirations with the necessary resources required to reach them has been a challenge. It is a fact that Thomas Jefferson's proposal for the "More General Diffusion of Knowledge" failed in the General Assembly of 1779; and it wasn't until the Constitution of 1870 that Virginia established a public school system at all.

The 1971 Constitution established the Standards of Quality, and our Constitution's language speaks of the highest aspirations for our children, declaring that "an educational program of high quality is established and continually maintained."

As we look at the Standards of Quality today I would ask you to consider two things. First, today's standards are far different from the revisions which were adopted in 1986.

Indeed, the standards are suffering from death by a thousand cuts. We are providing you in our written documents with a list of the more significant cuts just since the 2009 session (Exhibit 1). Standards of Quality funding has been reduced by \$1.8 billion. Clearly, Virginia has profoundly reduced the extent to which these standards fund our schools.

Second, the Standards of Quality constitute Virginia's public education funding formula. We must ask, are the standards themselves adequate and do they match our educational aspirations for the next generation? Analysis of this question is multifaceted.

**With Regard to Adequacy**

We believe you should ask yourselves, do these standards provide an investment in the education of our children commensurate with our collective wealth, and are they sufficient to assure a competitively well trained work force? Virginia is the 7<sup>th</sup> wealthiest state (Exhibit 2) in the

nation; however, we currently rank 35<sup>th</sup> in state per pupil support for our public schools (Exhibit 3).

Student performance standards have continued to rise despite the fact that we are now operating our schools on less funding than was provided in 2008-2009. Divisions simply cannot meet the accreditation levels required on SOL tests by investing the level of funding required by the SOQ. We assert that the funding floor is set too low.

### **With Regard to Equity**

We must also ask ourselves, do these standards engender an equitable educational opportunity for every child in Virginia? We believe that the answer is clearly “no” – the 2011 per pupil expenditure of Alexandria (\$17,580) is 222% that of Orange County (\$7,934) (Exhibit 4).

### **Source of Virginia Public School Funding – CQ Education State Rankings 2011-2012**

Source	Percentage	National Ranking
Federal	6.1%	44th
State	42.1%	37 <sup>th</sup>
Local	51.8%	10th

Virginia public schools are heavily reliant on local funding, and state support is inadequate. This makes the quality of education offered in each locality highly dependent on local wealth and commitment to education for its youth. One need only visit the schools of our wealthier school divisions and examine the wide array of educational opportunities offered and then visit our poorer divisions to see the stark contrast. In his inaugural address, Governor McDonnell said, “A child’s future prospects should be as unlimited as his intelligence, integrity and work ethic can take him. No child in Virginia should have her future determined by her place of birth or zip code.” I happen to agree with that sentiment whole heartedly. Reaching this noble aspiration will require significant enhancements to Virginia’s Standards of Quality, however. Raising the state level of support would make the educational opportunity provided to Virginia’s students far more equitable.

### **With Regard to Attracting and Retaining High Quality Teaching Personnel**

The SOQ state that “The General Assembly and the Board of Education find that the quality of education is dependent upon the provision of ... benefits and salaries necessary to ensure the availability of high-quality instructional personnel.”

We believe you should be asking yourselves are we making the necessary investment to meet this goal. Virginia’s teacher salary is \$4,510 below the national average. In average teacher’s salary as a percent of average annual pay, Virginia ranks 50<sup>th</sup> among the 50 states. This begs the

question of why any talented young person might choose to go into teaching as a career or why he/she would choose to come to Virginia to teach given the current climate of disrespect and disregard being offered to the teaching profession in general in this current political climate.

### **With Regard to Possible Steps to Put Quality into the SOQ**

Clearly the Board of Education and the General Assembly are in a position to demonstrate leadership on teacher compensation. Indeed, you must do so if we are to attract high quality personnel to our classrooms. Enhancing state support for teacher compensation is a logical means of elevating Virginia's current substandard level of support for public education.

In that regard, no working condition has a greater impact upon teachers than class size. Virginia's pupil teacher ratio exceeds the national average by 2.2 pupils per teacher. In only eight other states are classes larger. Improved staffing standards are critical. We disagree with those who argue that class size does not matter. Those who make that assertion have clearly never taught in conditions that mirror what is happening in today's classrooms all across the country. We are selling our children short by short changing them on their overall educational experience. They deserve to be in classrooms with an appropriate student teacher ratio.

There is no better example of basing education policy decisions on budget constraints rather than the needs of children than the imposition of the cap on funding for support positions. That policy change has resulted in a \$754 million reduction in SOQ funding per biennium. When this policy change was implemented by the General Assembly in 2009, the budget included the following language:

*The Board of Education shall review the current Standards of Quality to evaluate the appropriateness of the existing staffing standards for instructional positions and the appropriateness of establishing ratio standards for support positions, with the objective of maximizing resources for the instructional program. (2009 Virginia Acts of Assembly, Chapter 781, Item 140, 3, page 122)*

To our knowledge the in-depth analysis envisioned by the language never occurred, and providing sufficient support to maximize the proportion of time instructional personnel spend on instruction would improve the quality public education in Virginia.

Your task at hand, revising Virginia's Standards of Quality, is one of enormous consequence, and much rests on the decisions and recommendations that you will make. It requires thorough analysis, thoughtful reflection, and most of all, a sense of direction. Bringing the General Assembly to invest in Virginia's future, as Mr. Jefferson discovered, is a daunting task. If you

act wisely, it will take years, and your names will be forgotten by the time hard fought investments in education pay their dividends. But that is the nature of true and meaningful progress.

As members of Virginia's Board of Education, we implore you to call on Virginia to make an investment in her future in keeping with her significant blessings and wealth. Use this opportunity to advocate for public education for Virginia's youth. Make your recommendations based on the needs of students in Virginia as opposed to what is politically popular or expedient. The children of Virginia from now until well into the future are depending upon you to stand up for them. Please take this opportunity to do that.

Thank you.