

The Impact of Virginia's Accountability Plan on High School English Departments, Daniel Duke, Dan Butin and Amy Sofka, University of Virginia, In *Educational Leadership in an Age of Accountability: The Virginia Experience* (Eds), D. Duke, M. Grogan, P. Tucker, & W. Heinecke, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003.

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Survey results from 130 high school English Department chairs indicated that the Virginia SOL resulted in:

“Over half of the respondents mentioned in an open-ended question that increased stress levels were the biggest impact of the SOL on their departments. Many chairs wrote that pressure from their communities and administrators added to the stress level of teachers. One chair noted that ‘many [teachers] mention increased stress levels caused by negative media coverage, despite our students’ excellent scores. Being held accountable for forces beyond their direct control also reduces the job [of teaching].” (p. 139).

“Teachers were perceived to be moving too quickly through the curriculum in order to cover all of the Standards of Learning before state tests were given.” (p. 139).

“There was some feeling that higher-level skills and content were not being covered adequately in order for teachers to focus more on covering the Standards of Learning. Teachers of advanced courses consequently were worried that students would come to them inadequately prepared. Department chairs felt that rushing to cover all of the Standards of Learning before state tests were given was adversely affecting the achievement of students who took longer to learn.” (p. 140).

“It was felt my many respondents that the accountability plan compelled teachers to emphasize conventional assessment rather than performance assessment. It is interesting that many chairs, in their open-ended responses, did not express hostility for the state initiatives. Rather, they agreed with the standards in theory, but not with the implementation of testing that was characterized as ‘unfair.’” Some chairs wrote statements such as: “Give teachers control of testing.” (p. 140).

“More than four out of five chairs reported SOL-type tests and test items have been incorporated into class-based testing in English and that review sessions are scheduled prior to state tests. Others frequently mentioned interventions included sharing English standards with students (72.3%); instruction in test-taking skills (70%); reduction in enrichment activities to accommodate greater focus on state standards (68.5%); reduction in field trip, assemblies, and other instructional interruptions (6.2%); use of pretests to assess student knowledge of SOL

(63.8%); increased use of direct instruction by English teachers (59.2%); use of information-management systems to track student progress on standards (36.9%); and use of the a focal Standard of Learning each day in class (36.9%).” (p. 143).

“In 77.7% of the 130 schools, teachers’ lesson plans were expected to reflect Standards of Learning and pacing guides. In almost as many schools (75.4%), teachers were expected to set targets for improving their students’ pass rates on state tests.” (p. 143).

“The pass rate on SOL tests in English was positively related to the chair’s perception that English teachers had to move too quickly through the curriculum in order to cover all the Standards of Learning before the state tests were given. While speeding through course content might make teachers feel they were overlooking valuable supplementary material, their commitment to covering, however briefly, material on which students were to be tested could help explain higher test scores.” (p. 144).

“More affluent schools tended to have higher pass rates on the SOL tests...The size of the high school was correlated to the pass rate on state SOL tests in English (Pearson  $r = .393$ ). Many of Virginia’s largest high schools are located in relatively well-to-do suburban areas.” p. 144).

“Lower-spending schools [94 schools spending less than \$6,000 per student compared to 36 higher-spending schools] were more likely to have adopted the following responses [to the SOL]:

- after-school tutoring programs
- reduction in field trips, assemblies, and other interruptions in instruction
- use of pretests based on SOL items
- use of SOL-type tests and test items throughout year
- instruction in test-taking skills
- SOL shared with students at beginning of course
- increased direct instruction
- reduction in or elimination of enrichment activities
- require that lesson plans reflect SOL and pacing guides
- require that teachers prioritize course objectives
- require that teachers set goals for improvements in SOL test scores
- K-12 curriculum alignment based on SOL
- faculty analyzes SOL test results” (p. 150).