

Virginia Dept. of Education releases report on student achievement

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The Virginia Department of Education painted a grim picture of student achievement in the state in a report released Thursday, asserting that children are performing poorly on national assessments in reading and math and falling behind peers in other states.

The 34-page report on students' academic performance, requested as part of Gov. Glenn Youngkin's [first executive order](#), says these trends are especially pronounced among Black, Hispanic and low-income students. The report further critiques what it calls school districts' lack of transparency regarding declining student performance — and it laments parents' "eroding" confidence in the state's public schools.

"We are not serving all of Virginia's children and we must," Youngkin said at a news conference in Richmond, where he and his education team presented the report. "We want to be the best in education. We should be the best in education. And the data that is compiled and shared with you today suggests that we have a lot of work to do to be the best."

A Washington Post analysis of the report, though, suggests its use of data is misleading, and shows Virginia students performed at least as well as or better than students nationwide over the past several years. And some educators and [politicians](#) took immediate exception to the report Thursday, criticizing its presentation and analysis of student test scores.

Senate Majority Leader Richard L. Saslaw (D-Fairfax) [said in a statement](#): "To accuse Virginia's education system of failure is an outright lie, supported by cherry-picked data and warped perspective."

Although Youngkin has rejected equity initiatives in education and called “equity” a “very confusing word,” he promised on Thursday to address racial and socioeconomic performance gaps by providing more funding for school facilities, raises for teachers, and innovation in early childhood and literacy programs — all things expected to be included in the two-year state budget that the General Assembly must finalize before July 1. And he vowed to employ the best teachers to serve the students most in need.

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The Education Department report also outlines steps to improve students’ academic skills, including developing an improved in-state assessment system, revising Virginia’s school accreditation standards and hiring reading specialists to improve student literacy.

At Thursday's news conference, Virginia's top education officials condemned education policy decisions made by previous administrations, especially a 2017 revision of Virginia accreditation standards that allowed students' academic progress to count toward accreditation along with their test scores. Education Secretary Aimee Guidera said such initiatives were part of a misguided push for equity.

"There was a general culture of lowering expectations," Guidera said. "What happened before was we took our eye off the ball in the state of Virginia."

Added Superintendent of Public Instruction Jillian Balow: "This report is a renewal of our shared purpose ... Virginia is moving forward in a new direction and we are focused on students first."

Exploring the 'honesty gap'

Asked about their biggest concerns with student performance, both Guidera and Balow pointed to the "honesty gap." This measures the difference between Virginia students' pass rates on state-level assessments known as Standards of Learning, or SOLs, and their performance on a test known as the National Assessment of Educational Performance, or NAEP.

The report compares the percentage of Virginia fourth- and eighth-graders who achieved passing rates in mathematics and reading SOLs in 2015, 2017 and 2019 with the percentage of Virginia fourth- and eighth-graders who scored "at or above proficient" on the NAEP in those same three years. In each of these three years, the percentage of Virginia students achieving passing rates on the SOL hovered around 70 percent — but the percentage of students scoring "proficient" on the NAEP measured between 30 and 40 percent. The report calls these differences "troubling."

But that's not an appropriate comparison, according to federal officials and education experts. The Virginia SOL passing rates for fourth- and eighth-grade reading and mathematics measure grade-level proficiency in reading or math. The NAEP rating of "proficient," however, is not equivalent to grade-level proficiency, as federal agencies and educational analysts have repeatedly said. Instead, the NAEP score of "at or above basic" is a better indicator of whether a student is at grade level, according to Peggy Carr, associate commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, which oversees NAEP. Federal studies have found year after year that the NAEP basic score best approximates state passing rates and that the appropriate comparison to draw is between state passing rates and the percentage of students scoring basic.

Drawing that comparison causes the honesty gap to disappear. In 2015, 2017 and 2019, the percentage of Virginia students scoring basic in the NAEP for fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math hovered in the high 70s. In almost every case it was above or equivalent to the percentage of children passing Virginia SOLs in those subjects. It was also above the national average, usually somewhere around the low 70s.

The report neglects to mention that seeing 30 to 40 percent of students earn a "proficient" in reading and math on the NAEP means Virginia students scored "significantly higher" on average than students nationwide.

In 2019, NAEP results show that 48 percent of Virginia fourth-graders scored proficient in math while 38 percent did so in reading. By comparison, the national public average showed 40 percent of students scoring proficient in math while 34 percent did so in reading. Virginia's scores meant it ranked third in the nation for fourth-grade math performance and ninth in the nation for fourth-grade reading performance.

In the same year, NAEP results show that 38 percent of Virginia eighth-graders scored proficient in math and 33 percent did so in reading. By comparison, the national public average showed 33 percent of students scoring proficient in math while 32 percent of students did so in reading. Virginia's scores meant it ranked seventh in the nation for eighth-grade math performance.

Asked why the Education Department chose to compare Virginia SOL pass rates with the NAEP's proficient rating, rather than with the basic rating, Balow said in a statement that "the proficiency benchmarks on Virginia's fourth- and eighth-grade reading tests map below the Basic level on NAEP," adding that "low standards do not benefit students."

Asked about the same issue Thursday, Youngkin said, "One of the biggest mistakes that we can make is to try to refute data that's overwhelmingly clear."

Youngkin's office released statements Thursday from some public and educational leaders — including former governors L. Douglas Wilder (D) and Robert F. McDonnell (R) — praising the Education Department report.

"I am grateful that the commitments made by state officials and the VDOE will shine a light on our students who do not always have the same access to opportunities in school as other students in Virginia," said Maria Pitre-Martin, superintendent of Petersburg Public Schools.

But others disagreed. The Virginia Education Association, a teachers union, called the report "biased" and designed to "get the public to want school choice measures like vouchers." The association shared a video of Guidera speaking at an April panel hosted by the American Enterprise Institute, in which she promised to publish data on students' poor academic performance to "hopefully ... have those conversations about expanding choices outside the public system."

The superintendent of Alexandria City Public Schools, Gregory C. Hutchings Jr., said the report inspired him to navigate to the NAEP website, where he discovered that Virginia students had consistently scored above the national average.

"So I'm not really understanding the whole premise of this report," he said, which "was around us performing so much lower than everyone else."

As for the report's discussion of racial and socioeconomic disparities in student outcomes, Hutchings said that data has been publicized — including by the Northam administration, which published an "EdEquityVA" report including a plan to boost Black and Hispanic student performance.

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Hutchings pointed out that the EdEquity report is no longer available on the state Education Department website. It was removed as part of the Youngkin administration's far-reaching purge of policies, memos and programs that his predecessor had launched to further diversity, equity and inclusion in schools.

Concerns over 'age-appropriate' teaching, accreditation

At his news conference Thursday, Youngkin sounded the alarm over age-inappropriate teaching. His language recalled rhetoric that has been used to justify bills limiting education on gender identity and sexual orientation in other states, most notably Florida.

But Youngkin declined to explain what he meant.

“I think one of the biggest challenges that we have is that we aren’t allowing our children to, in fact, be children,” he said. “And they’re being forced into discussions that, in all candor, they’re not ready to be — they’re not ready to have, all in the name of wanting to enlighten them.”

Asked if he was talking about race or sexuality, Youngkin refused to elaborate. Spokeswoman Macaulay Porter said she thought the governor was referring to sexually explicit material. Guidera said she was uncertain.

Education Department officials, meanwhile, reserved their heaviest criticism for a 2017 change to Virginia standards for school accreditation, an important state-level measure of school quality and performance. That revision, enacted by the Virginia Board of Education, said schools would be graded on student progress in subjects as well as on student test performance.

Balow said this change was responsible for what she called the state’s dropping academic standards and said officials are working to overhaul the accreditation standards.

“Looking at growth measures is incredibly, incredibly important but we should not look at them as being the same as proficiency,” she said.