Albemarle County Public Schools

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Dr. Patricia Wright
Superintendent
Virginia Department of Education
Richmond, VA 23218

Dear Dr. Wright:

Attached is the completed application to request a waiver related to the Standards of Learning (SOL) Assessments and Testing Schedules that was approved at the regular meeting of the Albemarle County School Board on June 23, 2011. We are looking forward to our meeting on July 28 to continue discussions related to our proposal for waivers of the SOL.

The response to your questions will be forwarded to you as soon as they are completed.

Sincerely,

Pamela R. Moran, Ed.D

cc: Patrick J. Russo, Superintendent, Henrico County Public Schools
Jack Dale, Superintendent, Fairfax County Public Schools
Lorraine Lange, Superintendent, Roanoke County Public Schools
James Merrill, Superintendent, Virginia Beach County Schools

COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
BOARD OF EDUCATION
P.O. Box 2120
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA 23218-2120

REQUEST FOR WAIVER OF CERTAIN ACCREDITING STANDARDS AND/OR APPROVAL OF AN INNOVATIVE OR EXPERIMENTAL PROGRAM

The *Regulations Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia*, (8 VAC 20-131-05 et seq.) set the minimum standards public schools must meet to be accredited by the Board of Education. Accreditation of public schools is required by the Standards of Quality (§§ 22.1-253.13:1 et seq.). The annual accrediting cycle for public schools is July 1 through June 30.

This cover sheet, with the supporting documentation, must be submitted to the Department of Education for review and recommendation to the Board at least 90 days prior to the beginning of an accrediting cycle or the proposed implementation of the program or activity that precipitates the request for the waiver. The types of waivers available and the corresponding section of the standards are indicated below. Please attach additional sheets or information deemed appropriate. (The Board will consider this request in its monthly meeting and the superintendent or his designee **is required** to appear before the board **in person or electronically** to explain a waiver request.)

SCHOOL DIVISION: Albemarle County Public Schools, Fairfax County Public Schools, Henrico County Public Schools, Roanoke County Public Schools, and Virginia Beach Public Schools

TITLE OF PROGRAM/ACTIVITY: Request for Waivers Related to the Standards of Learning (SOL) Assessments and Testing Schedules

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:

- ☐ Approval of an Alternative to the Standard School Year and School Day (8 VAC 20-131-150)
- [X] Approval of an Alternative Accreditation Plan (8 VAC 20-131-280.D)
- ☐ Approval of an Experimental Program (8 VAC 20-131-290.D)
- ☐ Approval of an Innovative Program (8 VAC 20-131-290.D)
- [X] Approval of a Waiver of Other Provision(s) of the Standards (8 VAC 20-131-350)

SCHOOL(S) PARTICIPATING IN THE PROPOSED PROGRAM/ACTIVITY: Middle Schools in Albemarle County Public Schools, Fairfax County Public Schools, Henrico County Public Schools, Roanoke County Public Schools, and Virginia Beach Public Schools

6/23/11
Date Approved by the Local School Board

Signature
Chairman of the School Board

Submission Date

Signature
Division Superintendent

SCHOOL DIVISION Albemarle County Public Schools, Fairfax County Public Schools, Henrico County Public Schools, Roanoke County Public Schools, and Virginia Beach Public Schools

TITLE OF PROGRAM/ACTIVITY Request for Waivers Related to the Standards of Learning (SOL) Assessments and Testing Schedules

DESCRIBE THE WAIVER REQUESTED, INCLUDING A DESCRIPTION OF THE APPLICABLE PROGRAM, THE GRADES SERVED, DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION DESCRIBING THE STUDENTS WHO WILL BE PARTICIPATING, AND OTHER RELEVANT INFORMATION.

1. Request a waiver to allow SOL tests to be administered in middle schools during the January *Non-Writing* test administration to students who have demonstrated that they are well ahead in their learning although they will not complete classes until the spring semester beginning with grade 8 reading and mathematics in 2011-12 and expanding to grades 6 through 8 reading and mathematics in 2012-13.

2. Request a waiver to allow for retesting during the spring *Non-Writing* test administration of middle school students who have received additional instruction and, where necessary, intensive remediation after failing grades 6 through 8 *Reading, Mathematics, and Plain English Mathematics* SOL tests taken in January.

3. Request a waiver to allow for retakes in June for all middle school students who fail grades 6 through 8 *Reading, Mathematics, and Plain English Mathematics* SOL tests in May. (Both of these administrations would occur during the regular spring *Non-Writing* test administration windows.)

4. Request a waiver to allow the inclusion of passing scores from all administrations of grades 6 through 8 *Reading, Mathematics, and Plain English Mathematics* SOL tests and retests, with passing scores overriding previous failing scores in the same school year, for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and Accreditation calculations.

IF YOU ARE SEEKING A WAIVER OF A PROVISION OF THE *STANDARDS OF ACCREDITATION* OR ANOTHER BOARD OF EDUCATION REGULATION, CITE THE SPECIFIC REGULATION TO BE WAIVED, AND EXPLAIN THE RATIONALE FOR SEEKING A WAIVER FROM THE REGULATION.

- **Alternative accreditation plans: 8 VAC 20-131-280** of the Regulations Establishing the Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia (Standards of Accreditation) as permitted by **HB 2494**.

- **Special provisions related to the administration and use of assessments: VAC 20-131-280, subsection E**, of the *Regulations Establishing the Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia.*

- **Testing elementary and middle school students more than once in any content area each year:** Testing elementary and middle school students more than once in the elementary and middle grades would require a waiver of **8 VAC 20-131-30, subsection B**, of the Standards of Accreditation.

- **Permitting the passing scores of the fall and spring tests to be used in calculating federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP):** Requires an amendment to Virginia's Accountability Workbook and the approval of the U.S. Department of Education.

EXPLAIN HOW AND WHY APPROVAL OF THIS REQUEST WOULD BENEFIT STUDENTS.

Each of our school divisions is committed to preparing *all* of our students to graduate from high school having mastered the skills necessary to succeed as 21st century learners, workers, and citizens. Our successful attainment of this goal is grounded in building our students' capacity with respect to the 21st century skills that are critical to their future success. These skills include, but are not limited to: critical and creative thinking, problem solving, collaboration, communication, social responsibility, and interdependence. Our educators are focusing on mastery learning as the means with which to teach and engage students in developing these skills. As part of this process, we are working to develop project-based learning units and performance-based assessments focused on 21st century skills with mastery learning as the vehicle.

We are requesting waivers related to the Standards of Learning (SOL) assessments and testing schedules in an effort to include the SOL assessment experience as part of our effort to expand the competencies of our middle school students. The SOLs allow divisions

to benchmark against a standard. The results can assist school in examining policies related to curriculum and instruction. SOLs are also a measure to determine the quality of programs and resource allocations. Some say that SOLs given to 3rd – 8th grade students are not high stakes, because students do not have their high school diploma at risk. However, SOLs for 3rd - 8th grade students can be seen as high stakes for other reasons. Scores from SOLs are labeled as fail below basic, fail basic, pass proficient, or pass advanced. Having this scale implies to the unsuccessful SOL taker that he/she did not pass an important assessment. This label alone can be detrimental to a student's future. Some teachers may put an immense amount of pressure on students to pass. Testing on this level can frustrate students and discourage them from trying as well as devalue grades and other school assessments (Stecher, Brian M. 2000. *Consequences of Large Scale, High Stakes Testing on School and Classroom Practice.* pp. 79-100).

Retakes lower the stress on both the teacher and the student while providing valuable information. For example, the Student Performance by Question reports identify areas of need and help to focus instruction. Providing retakes allows the opportunity to lower the pressure for students with test anxiety, so that assessments can better determine what students know and can do.

The requested waivers are designed to impact and change conversations middle school students have with themselves, their parents, and their teachers. Our goal is to more fully engage students in discussions related to their learning goals and plans, rather than just providing students with their SOL scores at the end of the school year. These conversations would focus on the following:

- Am I proficient? Advanced?
- If I'm proficient and/or advanced, what can I do to deepen and expand my knowledge and skills?
- If I'm not proficient, what must I do to become proficient?
- Did I grow since the last test administration?
- How much did I grow? Did I grow enough?
- In what areas am I deficient, and where do I need to focus my energies?

In mastery learning, students begin together. The student who does not master the material is given additional instruction until they succeed while the student who masters the material early is engaged in additional academic activities to deepen and expand his/her knowledge and skills until the class is able to progress further together.

Our goal is to mirror the philosophy of mastery learning in our assessment practices. In order to accomplish this, the assessment process must be more transparent to students and more related to students' out-of-school experiences. It is our belief that a more flexible assessment system, including opportunities for early test administrations as well as opportunities to retake tests not passed, will make the process more meaningful to students; and that this shift will encourage students to become more engaged in the development of personal learning plans that are focused on growth toward standards and future success.

To this end, the school divisions listed above request permission from the Virginia Board of Education to administer the reading and mathematics Standards of Learning (SOL) tests as early as the end of the first semester (January) in select middle schools. Students who do not pass the first administration will be given another opportunity to test during subsequent regular administrations. By allowing students the opportunity to demonstrate SOL proficiency earlier in the school year, our schools will have the opportunity to implement intensive, focused remediation before retesting takes place for those students who fail the SOL during the January administration; likewise, our divisions will have the opportunity to increase our emphasis on the development of project-based learning units and the implementation of performance-driven assessments for those students who pass the SOLs during the January administration.

Providing students with multiple opportunities to test with an emphasis on mastery learning requires a radical shift in responsibility for both teachers and students. As Virginia moves toward linking teacher data to student data, additional testing windows to support mastery learning for middle school students appear to be the next logical step. Moving forward, teachers and students will be jointly responsible for developing learning plans that increase the potential for all of our students to be successful in the 21st century.

SCHOOL DIVISION	Albemarle County Public Schools, Fairfax County Public Schools, Henrico County Public Schools, Roanoke County Public Schools, and Virginia Beach Public Schools
TITLE OF PROGRAM/ACTIVITY	Request for Waivers Related to the Standards of Learning (SOL) Assessments and Testing Schedules

With the Board's approval of the requested waivers, our school divisions will take the lead in developing and field testing performance- and project-based learning units at the middle school level for students who demonstrate that they are advanced in their learning as well as for students who need additional time and remediation to accomplish their goals. The assessments associated with these units will be carefully designed performance tasks that will assess student mastery of the required Standards of Learning content as well as key 21st century skills that are linked to college and career readiness.

Our five divisions educate nearly 322,000 students – more than 25 percent of Virginia's public school enrollment – and represent the diverse geographic regions of the Commonwealth. We believe that the results of our efforts will be instrumental in developing a new model for middle school assessment in Virginia. By working in partnership with the Virginia Department of Education, we hope to take the lead in transforming how Virginia's middle schools educate, engage, and assess students across the Commonwealth. It is anticipated that our collaborative work will assist Virginia in maintaining its position as a leader in student learning and assessment.

In summary, our goal is to provide middle school students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery of Virginia's SOLs within the existing end-of-course test administration windows. Intensive, focused remediation will be provided to students prior to retesting. In addition, students who demonstrate SOL proficiency earlier in the school year will participate in project-based learning units and performance-driven assessments created by our five school divisions and designed to increase the depth of their knowledge of Virginia's SOLs and expand their development of 21st century skills. Divisions that are granted the requested waivers will develop rich performance-based assessments that will evaluate higher levels of learning, such as integrating, interpreting and reflecting. These assessments could be used by VDOE to leverage our position as a leader in national assessment.

SCHOOL DIVISION: Albemarle County Public Schools, Fairfax County Public Schools, Henrico County Public Schools, Roanoke County Public Schools, and Virginia Beach Public Schools

TITLE OF PROGRAM/ACTIVITY: Request for Waivers Related to the Standards of Learning (SOL) Assessments and Testing Schedules

IF THE PROPOSED PROGRAM IS EXPERIMENTAL OR INNOVATIVE, EXPLAIN HOW THIS IS SO AND PROVIDE A PROGRAM DESCRIPTION, INCLUDING:

1) THE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PROGRAM;
2) DESCRIPTION AND DURATION OF THE PROGRAM;
3) ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES;
4) NUMBER OF STUDENTS AFFECTED;
5) EVALUATION PROCEDURES; AND
6) MECHANISMS FOR MEASURING GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND STUDENT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT THAT WILL BE EXPECTED AS A RESULT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAM/ACTIVITY.

DOES THE EXPERIMENTAL OR INNOVATIVE PROGRAM REQUIRE THE PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS TO OPEN PRIOR TO LABOR DAY?

☐ YES [X] NO.

IF YES, EXPLAIN WHY THE SCHOOLS ARE REQUIRED TO OPEN PRIOR TO LABOR DAY.

Not Applicable

IF THE PROGRAM IS EXPERIMENTAL, INCLUDE INFORMATION THAT EXPLAINS WHY THERE IS REASON TO EXPECT THAT THE PROGRAM WILL BE SUCCESSFUL.

SCHOOL DIVISION: Albemarle County Public Schools, Fairfax County Public Schools, Henrico County Public Schools, Roanoke County Public Schools, and Virginia Beach Public Schools

TITLE OF PROGRAM/ACTIVITY: Request for Waivers Related to the Standards of Learning (SOL) Assessments and Testing Schedules

DESCRIBE THE ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES OF THE WAIVER.

- Meaningful conversations with middle school students in which students are engaged in discussions related to their learning goals and plans and in the development of personal learning plans focused on growth toward standards and future success.
- Higher SOL pass rates at the middle school level in reading and mathematics.
- An increase in the number of quality performance- and project-based learning units available at the middle school level for students who demonstrate that they are advanced in their learning.
- An increase in the number of quality performance- and project-based learning units focused on remediation for students who need additional time and remediation to accomplish their goals.

DESCRIBE THE PROCESS THAT WILL BE USED TO EVALUATE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE WAIVER.

- Focus groups will be held with middle school Directors of Student Services, counselors, a select group of middle school reading and mathematics teachers, and a select group of middle school students before the introduction of the requested changes to the testing schedules (testing in January and the introduction of expedited retakes following the spring administration) and after the first year of implementation. The purpose of the focus groups will be to gather qualitative data concerning perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards testing in January and retakes as they are related to their conversations about SOL tests, learning plans, and growth toward standards.
- SOL pass rates at the middle school level in reading and mathematics will be studied across years.
- Performance- and project-based learning units developed at the middle school level for students who demonstrate that they are advanced in their learning will be reviewed and piloted to determine their quality and applicability.
- Performance- and project-based learning units developed for students who need additional time and remediation to accomplish their goals will be reviewed and piloted to determine their quality and applicability.

Questions should be directed to the Division of Policy and Communications at (804) 225-2092, or by e-mail to policydata@doe.virginia.gov. This application and supporting documentation must be sent to:

Division of Policy and Communications
Department of Education
P. O. Box 2120
Richmond, VA 23218-2120