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VDOE Analysis of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation Report: The State of State Standards — and the Common Core — in 2010

The scope of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation's review of Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) did not include the curriculum frameworks for English or mathematics. In Virginia, the curriculum frameworks define the content required to be taught and the content that is subject to testing at each grade level. A complete review of the commonwealth's standards *must* embrace the standards *and* the frameworks. From the introduction to the 2009 Mathematics SOL:

The Mathematics Standards of Learning Curriculum Framework is a companion document to the Mathematics Standards of Learning that amplifies the Mathematics Standards of Learning and defines the content knowledge, skills, and understandings that are measured by the Standards of Learning assessments.

The process that produced the 2009 Mathematics SOL included a focus on creating revised standards that were clear, concise and measureable. This included moving detail found in the 2001 Mathematics SOL into the 2009 curriculum framework.

In releasing *The State of State Standards — and the Common Core — in 2010*, the Fordham Foundation acknowledged that it did not review curriculum frameworks, even those that define mandatory content. In 2003, Fordham acknowledged that its review of the US History SOL — which awarded Virginia a "B" — should have included the corresponding curriculum framework. Fordham's 2006 review of Virginia's World History SOL included both the SOL *and* the corresponding curriculum framework.

Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) instructional and assessment staff, after comparing the Common Core with the English SOL and Mathematics SOL and the corresponding curriculum frameworks, determined that the gaps between the two sets of standards are not as significant as suggested — especially in mathematics — by the Fordham study.

Key Mathematics Points

The Fordham report describes Virginia's mathematics standards as "mediocre" and "clearly inferior" to the Common Core — primarily because of alleged inadequacies in the coverage of elementary arithmetic. The report states that "automaticity with the basic number facts is not required."

The 2009 Mathematics SOL does require that elementary school students develop a command of number facts. The introduction to the SOL states that while "the use of technology must be an integral part of teaching, learning, and assessment ... the use of technology shall not be regarded as a substitute for a student's understanding of quantitative concepts and relationships or for proficiency in basic computations."

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In addition, the curriculum framework addresses the development in grades K-3 of “proficiency with basic addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and related facts,” and the subsequent development and use of “strategies and algorithms to solve problems.”

The 2009 curriculum framework also states that “computation and estimation in grades 4 and 5 should focus on developing fluency in multiplication and division with whole numbers and should begin to extend students’ understanding of these operations to work with decimals.”

Fluency (automaticity) also is addressed in the 2009 curriculum framework in grades 2-4 with these required essential understandings and essential knowledge and skills:

- Develop fluency in recalling facts for addition and subtraction. (Grade 2)
- Develop fluency with number combinations for multiplication and division. (Grade 3)
- Students will be fluent in the basic addition facts through the tens table and the corresponding subtraction facts. (Grade 3)
- Recall and state the multiplication and division facts through the twelves table. (Grade 3)
- Recall and write the multiplication and division facts through the twelves table. (Grade 3)
- Students will be fluent in the basic multiplication facts through the twelves table and the corresponding division facts as they become proficient in multiplying larger numbers. (Grade 4)

SOL mathematics tests in grades 4-7 include sections on computation in which the use of calculators is prohibited. This is an example of how another component of Virginia’s established statewide system of support and accountability reinforces the standards.

The Fordham report gives Virginia generally high marks for high school-level mathematics standards — particularly in the presentation of STEM content — but does question the use of graphing calculators.

Virginia’s mathematics standards are unapologetic in including appropriate technologies such as the graphing calculator that help build conceptual knowledge, facilitate efficiency in higher-level problem solving, assist in the verification of algebraic solutions and engage students in the mathematical learning process. The use of graphing calculator technology has been widely accepted as an effective practice in mathematics education. The use of graphing calculators is expected on the SAT examination.

Key English Points

Virginia’s 2010 English SOL received a “B+” from the Fordham Foundation even without consideration of the 2002 curriculum framework (the 2010 document is under development). The Fordham report states that the Common Core and 2010 English SOL are “too close to call” in “clarity and specificity” and “content and rigor” to rate one set above the other.

The Fordham report faults Virginia’s English standards for not including samples of acceptable student writing. While the SOL and curriculum framework do not include writing samples, specific Virginia writing exemplars are available to teachers, parents and students online as part of the commonwealth’s SOL-based system of support and accountability.

Other issues of clarity and specificity and alleged content weaknesses identified in the Fordham report are addressed in the 2002 English SOL Curriculum Framework and will be covered in the 2010 document that will be presented to the Board of Education later this year.

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Conclusion

Reviews of the 2009 Mathematics SOL and 2010 English SOL by the College Board and Achieve — which included the curriculum frameworks — found that Virginia's reading and mathematics standards meet national benchmarks for content essential to college and career readiness.

The Board of Education, in a statement approved on June 24, said that “whatever adjustments might be warranted to ensure alignment of the SOL with the Common Core State Standards can be made within the process through which the Board of Education exercises its constitutional authority to establish standards for the commonwealth's public schools.”

The Fordham report acknowledges that “standards are the foundation upon which almost everything else rests — or should rest.” *At present, there are no resources, materials or assessments aligned with the Common Core.*

The Standards of Learning are the foundation for all the progress Virginia's schools have made during the last 15 years. It is not an exaggeration to say that nearly everything done in the schools and in the commonwealth's teacher preparation programs is connected in some way to the SOL.

Abandoning the SOL for the Common Core through word-for-word adoption would leave classroom teachers with a set of broad learning objectives but without aligned materials — such as the curriculum frameworks, scope and sequence guides and other SOL-based resources now available — to flesh out the standards and show how the required content can be taught during the course of a year or semester. Virginia educators know from experience how critical these supporting materials are to making standards-based reform work in the classroom.

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