



For Immediate Release: December 6, 2012

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Virginia 4th- & 8th-Grade Students near Top in First-Ever National Vocabulary Rankings

Rankings Based on Data from 2011 National Reading Tests

A US Department of Education analysis of results from the 2011 national reading tests shows that Virginia students have larger vocabularies and stronger passage-comprehension skills than their peers nationwide. The rankings in the first-of-its-kind report are based on vocabulary scores of fourth and eighth graders on the 2011 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in reading.

Virginia fourth-grade students had stronger vocabulary and comprehension skills than students nationwide, and fourth graders in only one state — Massachusetts — performed at a statistically higher level.

Virginia’s eighth graders also outscored their nationwide peers, and eighth-grade students in only three states — Massachusetts, Connecticut and Montana — demonstrated statistically stronger vocabulary and comprehension skills.

“I congratulate Virginia’s reading teachers — and teachers in all subjects who strive to expand their students’ vocabularies — for making such a difference in the lives of their students,” Governor Bob McDonnell said. “Reading skills are critical. That is why I worked with the General Assembly this year to increase funding for early reading intervention services for young readers who need extra help and to require schools to partner with parents in developing plans to help these students before they are promoted to the fourth grade.”

Grade 4 Average Scale Scores					
	All Students	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
Virginia	225	237	205	203	228
Nation	217	228	200	200	230

Grade 8 Average Scale Scores					
	All Students	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
Virginia	268	276	254	253	275
Nation	263	274	246	247	271

Superintendent of Public Instruction Patricia I. Wright said the new look at student performance on the 2011 national reading tests provides further proof of the quality and rigor of Virginia’s English Standards of Learning (SOL). Wright said the revised reading standards and SOL tests schools are implementing this year place increased emphasis on vocabulary and comprehension.

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“Larger vocabularies make for stronger readers and the new English standards require students to expand their vocabularies as they advance from grade to grade,” Wright said. “The standards also stress the role of context, sentence structure and connotation in unlocking meaning as well as students’ knowledge of prefixes, suffixes and Greek and Latin roots.”

Vocabulary questions on the NAEP reading tests assess how well students are able to use words to understand the passages they read. The questions measure whether readers know a word well enough to use it to comprehend the sentence or paragraph in which it appears.

For example, one grade-8 vocabulary item references a short story about a small-town druggist who concocted a refreshing dessert of mint syrup, shaved ice and vanilla ice cream. After reading the passage, 73 percent of Virginia eighth graders were able to select the correct meaning of “concocted,” compared with 65 percent of public school students nationwide.

“While the performance of Virginia students compares favorably to that of students in other states, the disparities between subgroups underscore the importance of the Board of Education’s policies and initiatives aimed at narrowing, and ultimately closing, achievement gaps,” Board of Education President David M. Foster said.

The national reading tests are taken every two years by samples of students selected as representative of the nation as a whole and of the states and other participating jurisdictions. The next round of NAEP reading testing is scheduled for January-March 2013. A representative sample of Virginia fourth and eighth graders will also take the national mathematics tests at that time.

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