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Virginia Schools Earn Flexibility Extension

The U.S. Department of Education (USED) today approved a four-year extension of Virginia's Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) flexibility waiver. The waiver — originally approved in 2012 — grants the commonwealth's public schools relief from No Child Left Behind-era sanctions and requirements through the end of the 2018-2019 school year.

Virginia is one of five states whose waivers were extended today through an expedited process announced last November. Without the waiver, most Virginia schools — including some of the state's highest-performing — would now be labeled as failing for not meeting the outdated law's goal of 100-percent proficiency for all students by 2014.

"The waiver has allowed our divisions and schools to focus federal funds and other resources on smart interventions that are producing positive results for students," Superintendent of Public Instruction Steven R. Staples said. "This extension will allow schools, divisions and the state to plan for the next four years with clear and achievable goals for further narrowing achievement gaps and improving instruction in under-performing schools."

Under the flexibility waiver, state interventions are focused on Title I schools struggling to meet state standards in reading and mathematics. The lowest-performing five percent are designated as Priority schools and another 10 percent are identified as Focus schools based on the performance of student subgroups. In approving the four-year extension, USED cited the following improvements in student and school performance:

- All student subgroups in Virginia met or exceeded statewide progress targets for reading in 2014. Eight of the state's nine subgroups met or exceeded annual objectives for increased achievement in mathematics.
- Seven — or 19 percent — of 37 Title I priority schools and 49 — or 67 percent — of 73 focus schools exited improvement status in 2014 as a result of implementing needs-based interventions targeted at increasing the achievement of under-performing groups of students.

"I hope Congress will note Virginia's success as it works toward approving a long-overdue reauthorization of ESEA," Staples said. "Virginia is demonstrating that states can make progress in narrowing achievement gaps and improving student outcomes without the overly prescriptive federal oversight that characterized the No Child Left Behind era."

In approving the extension, USED agreed to a change in how the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) measures and reports student growth. Beginning in 2015-2016, VDOE will move from a relative growth measure to a measure that compares a student's performance to his or her own past level of achievement.

Staples said Virginia will seek expanded flexibility through additional waiver amendments if Congress is unable to agree on reauthorization.

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