



VIRGINIA BOARD OF EDUCATION

AGENDA ITEM

Agenda Item: C

Date: November 13, 2025

Title: **First and Final Review of Proposed Proficiency Implementation Plan**

Presenter: **Tiara Booker-Dwyer, Deputy Superintendent of Student Outcomes and School Quality**

Purpose of Presentation

Action required by state or federal law or regulation.

Executive Summary

Priority 1 of the Virginia Board of Education’s Comprehensive Plan is “*To set and help every learner meet high expectations.*” In alignment with this priority, the Board and the Virginia Department of Education (the Department) have taken a series of strategic actions to raise expectations and enhance supports to improve student outcomes, including postsecondary readiness. The urgency of this priority was enhanced by a 2017 decision to lower cut scores. An action that inflated the perception of proficiency and ultimately led to some of the worst learning losses in the country.

Actions in support of this and related Board priorities include the following:

Raising Expectations

- 2023 and 2024: Revised *Standards of Learning* (SOL) in mathematics and English that raised expectations for what students must know and be able to do, with an increased emphasis on higher order thinking and the integration of multiple skills.
- 2024 – 2025: Aligned SOL test items to the more rigorous mathematics and English standards to ensure assessments accurately measure student mastery.
- 2025: Approved new cut scores that reflect higher proficiency expectations and align with national benchmarks, ensuring that “proficient” reflects the skills and knowledge students need to experience success in college, career, and military pathways.

Existing and Enhanced Supports

- Organizational Structure: Realigned and added new offices, roles, and responsibilities to improve coherence, collaboration and efficiency, both with the field and across the

Department. For example, the Department is expanding the mathematics team and currently has positions posted to hire a [Mathematics Director](#), [Regional Mathematics Coordinator](#), and [2 Regional Mathematics Specialists](#).

- **Funding Priorities:** Directed resources to support the implementation of evidence-based practices. Leadership has also focused on empowering school and system leaders with more autonomy and flexibility to maximize every dollar for students. For example, the Department has released several grants ([Mathematics Acceleration Grant](#), [Mathematics Innovation Grant](#), and [Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grant](#)) to provide funding for professional learning, instructional resources, and staffing to improve student outcomes. Significant investments over the 2020-2022 biennium have been made in education, namely with additional At-Risk funding of \$1.35B, English Language Learner funding of \$329.5M, and Special Education Add-on funding of \$857.1M.
- **School Improvement and Effective Turnaround Strategies:** Coordinating efforts across the Department to align support and resources that improve student outcomes. The new Division of Student Outcomes and School Quality is designed to support the full continuum of school improvement, from teacher and administrator preparation to instruction, assessment, accountability, and continuous support. Furthermore, rather than requiring a team of twelve to be subject matter experts in all areas for school improvement, the Department is leveraging subject matter experts across the agency to partner with the Office of School Improvement to better support the needs of each school and community in need of support.
- **Supports for New Models of Learning:** The new Division of Innovation, Student Pathways and Opportunities is designed to provide school divisions with support to implement personalized, learner-centered models that empower students to demonstrate mastery in multiple ways including in elementary and middle schools. These flexible, outcome-based approaches-aligned with the 3E Readiness Framework equip students with real-world skills enhance understanding of the academic standards, and ensure a strong transition to college, careers, or military service. By embracing less timebound learning, divisions foster deeper engagement and drive excellence in preparing all students for success beyond high school.
- **Fully Implemented the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) and Supported the Use of High-quality Instructional Material (HQIM)**
 - Produced multiple guides on aligned HQIM, core curriculum, supplement, intervention resources, to provide a comprehensive suite of resources that divisions can select based on their specific needs.
 - Ensured 2024 SOL reflected the Science of Reading.
 - Implemented VAConnects to link early childhood and Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program (VKRP) data to Virginia Language & Literacy Screening System (VALLSS) so kindergarten-2nd grade educators have more information about students.
 - Overhauled PALS and shifted to VALLSS, which screens for literacy and language risk and now extends from pre-K to 8th grade.

- Developed Student Reading Plan for grades K-3 and is currently working on Reading Plans for grades 4-8.
- Provided extensive professional development for teachers, reading specialists and leaders including in-person Reading Institutes for K-8 teachers, nine Canvas Modules completed by 47,000 educators, principal training, office hours and on-campus support by literacy coaches.
- Funded Reading Specialists for grades K-8 with a support system funded by state (Literacy Coaches).
- Added a Reading Specialist Micro-Credential.
- Alignment and Strengthening of Supports for Students with Disabilities including:
 - *The Virginia Department of Education's Training and Technical Assistance Centers (TTACs):* A regional network of partners who are able to provide in-person professional development and support to address accountability and improvement goals for students with disabilities.
 - *Virginia Individualized Education Program (VAIEP):* VAIEP is Virginia's statewide Individualized Education Program (IEP) solution. Recent state investments in VAIEP have supported increased access for families through the parent portal, increased translation capability and additional tools for division and school staff in student progress monitoring.
 - *Expanded professional development:* The Department has produced and provided professional development to increase the capacity of administrators, general and special educators to implement the Virginia IEP and instructional practices to support specially designed instruction in inclusive settings for students with disabilities.
 - *Developed resources for families:* On-demand Critical Decision Points for families of children with disabilities provides information to assist parents with understanding what and when academic decisions for students need to be made. The Virginia Family's Guide to Special Education is designed for families that includes information on rights, and the school's responsibilities to meet students' needs. This guide includes a description of the special education process and what is required during each step of that process and important timelines.
 - *Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC):* PEATC is Virginia's federally mandated Parent Training and Information Center and has staff in each Superintendent's Region ready to provide free and confidential assistance to Virginia's families of students receiving special education services.
 - *Diploma pathways:* Credit accommodations provide alternatives for students with disabilities in earning the standard and verified credits required to graduate with a Standard Diploma.

Implementation of Increased Expectations

In September, the Board unanimously approved revised cut scores that increased expectations for demonstrating proficiency on SOL assessments. Raising expectations with proficiency cut scores is good for Virginia students:

- *Sets a high bar for success:* Raising cut scores ensures that “proficient” reflects the skills and knowledge students need to be ready for success in college, career ready, or in military pathways after high school.
- *Gives families and educators clearer insight:* Raising expectations provides a more accurate picture of where students are, helping parents and teachers better target support and celebrate progress.
- *Prepares students for future opportunities:* Higher expectations equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive after graduation, including the critical thinking and problem-solving skills to compete and succeed in the real world.
- *Drives excellence in public schools:* When expectations rise, schools excel by improving instruction, implementing effective practices, and leveraging supports, which leads to stronger outcomes for all student groups.

By raising cut scores, it also helps Virginia improve national standing as our state signals it is serious about excellence, increases the likelihood of improved performance on assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and makes our schools and students more competitive nationwide. Furthermore, it strengthens state competitiveness. Higher expectations lead to a stronger workforce pipeline, attracting businesses and ensuring our state can compete economically with other states and countries.

Increased expectations must be matched with increased support and a clear implementation strategy to help every student meet higher expectations.

The proposed implementation strategy outlined in this document reflects input from more than 5,600 Virginians through listening sessions, online surveys, public comments, and in-person meetings. The recommendation is to implement the new cut scores through a four-year phased-in model that begins with a preparation year and adds a temporary “approaching” performance level that is removed at the conclusion of the 2028-2029 school year.

Four-Year Phased-in Model

2025-2026 Additional Preparation Year

The preparation year, currently underway, is an essential step in ensuring that implementation of higher expectations is strategic, systemic, and sustainable. There will be no changes to the cut scores during the preparation year for fall 2025 assessments or spring 2026 assessments as recommended. This provides additional time to strengthen support for families, students, and educators in meeting higher expectations and to ensure broad awareness statewide of this new expectation.

The Department is revising parent, school, and division assessment reports for spring 2026 and beyond to clearly convey each student’s score, performance level, strengths, areas for growth, and aligned resources to support student progress in meeting higher expectations. The spring 2026 report will present student performance using both the current and revised cut scores to help parents understand the difference between existing expectations and the higher expectations that are better aligned with excellent postsecondary outcomes. Further, the reports will clearly define performance levels and provide actionable resources and information to support students in meeting higher expectations.

The preparation year minimizes the impact on middle and high school students by ensuring consistent performance expectations for all test takers, whether they take the SOL assessment in the fall 2025 or spring 2026. It also guarantees that high school students in the graduating class of 2026 who take an EOC mathematics or reading SOL assessment will be measured using current cut scores, protecting their graduation eligibility.

This phase also enables the Department to continue to support divisions and schools in reinforcing the necessary foundations for success using tools already available to them including:

- Providing guidance and time for teachers and families to revise student plans (IEP, 504, student reading plans, etc.) to align with higher expectations and the more rigorous 2023 mathematics and 2024 English standards.
- Delivering clear policy guidance on verified credits for graduation, eligibility for expedited retake of EOC assessments, and automatic enrollment of students in grades 5-8 in advance math courses while providing targeted technical assistance to safeguard these student opportunities.
- Developing and distributing instructional resources, including test item maps and performance level descriptors, with coaching support that enable teachers to align instruction to higher expectations.
- Communicating expectations to parents and providing support to schools with communication materials to share with their communities.
- Allowing time for school divisions to implement additional flexibilities that support students in meeting higher expectations through personalized, competency-based learning models allowed through Seat Time Flexibility, Extended Year options, and replicating best practices to take their 3E programming in high schools to the next level.
- Providing more school and regional professional development for acceleration strategies across the curriculum and for students at different points of grade level learning.

2026-2030 Implementation Phase

Beginning in the 2026-2027 school year, the revised cut scores will be phased in using a new temporary performance level of “approaching.” The temporary “approaching” performance level recognizes student growth towards new proficiency expectations and offers a clear, measurable view of how students are advancing over time. This promotes transparency on student and school progress and helps to target differentiated supports and acceleration strategies for students and schools more effectively.

If students have already demonstrated proficiency on a high school EOC examination or earned their verified credit(s), whether in middle school or in high school, prior to the implementation of the new cut scores statewide, they will not be required to retake the assessment or course.

During the phase-in process, students who are moving towards proficiency during the phase-in can earn a passing score and will not need to retake the assessment if scoring at the approaching level. The approaching performance level helps state leaders, educators, and families monitor

progress, identify where additional support is needed, celebrate success, and maintain momentum towards reaching proficiency.

- Year 1: 2026-2027
 - Introduce a temporary, new performance level of “approaching” which counts as passing for all reading and mathematics SOL assessments, including EOC assessments.
- Year 2: 2027-2028
 - Modest increase in the cut score needed to earn “approaching” which counts as passing on all reading and mathematics SOL assessments, including EOC.
- Year 3: 2028-2029
 - Last interim increase in score needed to earn “approaching” which counts as passing on all reading and mathematics SOL assessments, including EOC. The approaching performance level is eliminated at the end of the school year.
- Year 4: 2029-2030
 - Full implementation of revised cut scores.

At the end of the 2028-2029 school year, the temporary approaching performance level will be eliminated, having served its purpose to implement transparency and support during the transition to higher expectations.

Table 1 provides an example of the phased-in model with cut score for the grade 5 reading SOL assessment.

Table 1: Phased-In Model, Grade 5 Reading SOL Test Example

School Year	Below Basic	Basic	Approaching	Proficient	Advanced
2025-2026 Preparation Year: No changes to cut scores or performance levels	0-324	325-399	Not Applicable	400 - 499	500 - 600
2026 - 2027	0-401	402-413	414-445	446-509	510-600
2027 - 2028	0-401	402-423	424-445	446-509	510-600
2028 - 2029	0-401	402-433	434-445	446-509	510-600
Fully Implemented 2029 - 2030	0-401	402-445	Phased Out	446-509	510-600

Stakeholder Engagement

The phased-in recommendation reflects extensive input from parents, teachers, principals, assistant principals, superintendents, school board members, community members, students, and

other stakeholders. From August 12 to September 11, 2025, Department staff attended regional superintendent meetings and Virginia Association of School Superintendents' executive team meeting to discuss the proposed cut scores, listen to their concerns about the potential impact on their divisions and families, and begin to discuss potential solutions. From September 29 through November 6, 2025, the Department hosted listening sessions, collected feedback through online surveys, and reviewed public comments submitted to the State Board of Education to gather input on the cut score implementation plan and suggestions for support to help students meet the higher expectations. Since September 29, **more than 5,600 Virginians provided input:**

- Approximately 1,455 participants representing parents, school board members, superintendents, principals, teachers, and central office staff from all 8 Superintendents Regions participated in listening sessions,
- Nearly 3,888 Virginians submitted feedback via an online form, and
- 293 public comments were submitted to the Board of Education.

Listening session and online survey information was posted on the [Raising Expectations in Virginia K-12 Education](#) webpage.

Feedback supported the phased-in model, addition of an “approaching” performance level, and protections for current high school students. Summarized below is the ***most frequently expressed feedback from stakeholders*** regarding the cut score implementation plan and the support needed for successful implementation:

Common Feedback on the Cut Score Implementation Plan

- Adding an approaching performance level to recognize students' progress toward proficiency.
- Implementing a five-year phased-in model with the 2025-2026 school year serving as a preparation year.
- Reducing the full implementation timeline to less than four years.
- Ensuring the implementation plan appropriately considered seniors, and high school students in general.

Common Feedback on Requested Support

- Targeted guidance, resources, and training to support specific student groups (students with disabilities, English learners, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds) to meet higher expectation.
- Funding to support teacher recruitment and retention, along with professional development to improve instructional practice.
- Reliable and valid formative assessments aligned to SOL expectations to guide instruction throughout the year.
- High-quality, aligned curriculum and instructional materials that reflect the rigor of revised standards, SOL test items, and cut scores.

- Clear, concise, and timely communication from the Department directly to schools and families regarding cut score implementation and associated supports.
- Resources to help families support learning at home.
- Strategies and resources to address teacher capacity as there is concern that higher cut scores may increase pressures on educators who are already managing significant workloads.
- Guidance on verified credits, retake ranges, automatic enrollment in advanced mathematics, student reading plan requirements, etc.

In September 2025, the Department assessment and accountability team participated in a Technical Advisory Council (TAC) meeting. TAC members consist of national experts in large-scale assessments and psychometricians that provide guidance to inform assessment decisions. TAC members expressed concern that phase-in approaches have historically failed, as policymakers lose track of why cut scores were raised and the impetus to increase cut scores every year fades away. They recommend making the phase-in as short as possible. TAC members also supported the decision to hold the graduating class of 2026 to the current cut score proficiency expectation of 400. TAC members recommended to start implementation of new cut scores at the beginning of the 2026-2027 school year. This would allow all students to be held to the same standard for accountability in a full school year.

Clear, transparent communication to parents and school divisions will accompany the phase-in approach through revised student assessment reports beginning in the spring of 2026 explaining what the approaching performance level means and recommended actions and resources to support students in achieving proficiency.

Action Requested

First and final review. Action for the Board to approve the Superintendent’s recommendation on the implementation plan as presented is requested at this meeting.

It is important to note that additional policy implementation discussions will occur at the December 11, 2025, Work Session with the Board reviewing locally awarded verified credit score ranges.

Superintendent’s Recommendation

The Superintendent of Public Instruction recommends that the Virginia Board of Education approve the following:

- 1) A four-year phased-in model, with a temporary approaching performance level that is removed at the conclusion of the 2028-2029 school year. The 2025-2026 school year will be a preparation year, and the proficient cut score will remain at 400. At the start of the 2026-2027 school year, new cut scores will be implemented alongside the temporary approaching performance level. The temporary approaching performance level shall count as passing on all reading and mathematics SOL assessments, which include EOC assessments, until the full implementation year.

- 2) Students retaking an SOL assessment must meet the passing score in effect at the time of their original test. For example, if the passing score at the time of the initial test was 400, then students retaking the exam will need to earn a 400 to pass the assessment.
- 3) Students that have already demonstrated proficiency on a high school EOC assessments or earned verified credit(s), whether in middle school or in high school, will not be required to retake the assessment or course.
- 4) Release revised student assessment reports in spring 2026 for parents and school divisions that clearly communicate new proficiency levels and available supports to help students achieve higher expectations.

Previous Review or Action

Date: [September 14, 2022](#)

Action: [Annual Pass Rates for Virginia's State Assessments Presentation](#)

Date: [November 16, 2022](#)

Action: [Overview of Virginia's National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\) Results](#)

Date: [August 28, 2024](#)

Action: [Presentation of Standard Setting Process for Standards of Learning Assessments](#)

Date: [October 23, 2024](#)

Action: [Update on Assessment RFI Findings](#)

Date: [February 26, 2025](#)

Action: [Standard Setting - Definition of Proficiency in Scoring Assessments](#)

Date: [March 26, 2025](#)

Action: [Standard Setting TAC and VDOE Update](#)

Date: [May 21, 2025](#)

Action: [Standard Setting Committee Update](#)

Date: [June 18, 2025](#)

Action: [Written Report on Proficiency Standard Setting Process Progress](#)

Date: [August 27, 2025](#)

Action: [Defining Proficiency: State Assessment Cut Score Recommendations](#)

Date: [August 28, 2025](#)

Action: [First Review of Proposed 2025-2026 Proficiency Cut Scores](#)

Date: [September 24, 2025](#)

Action: [Proficiency Recap & Critical Decisions](#)

Date: [September 25, 2025](#)

Action: [Final Review of Proposed 2025-2026 Proficiency Cut Scores](#)

Date: [October 22, 2025](#)

Action: [Technical Advisory Council \(TAC\) Reap](#)

Date: [October 22, 2025](#)

Action: [Roadshow Recap: Proficiency Implementation Plan Decision Points](#)

Background Information and Statutory Authority

House Bill 585 (HB 585) charged the Secretary of Education and the Virginia Superintendent of Public Instruction to “convene and consult a work group consisting of representatives of the Virginia Department of Education and other appropriate stakeholders to revise the Virginia Standards of Learning summative assessments of proficiency that require students to demonstrate that they possess the skills, knowledge, and content necessary for success and to develop a plan for implementation of such revised assessments.”

In March of 2023, the Secretary of Education and the Virginia Department of Education convened the work group comprised of teachers, Board of Education members, leaders, parents, and state level experts to review the current assessment system, analyze national reports on leading innovative state assessments, participate in discussions with national and state assessment leaders in innovative assessment design, and compare Virginia’s rigor of standards and annual assessment framework to high performing states. The work group convened over the course of five months with the outcome resulting in a [final report](#) with recommendations to improve standards, assessment, and reporting. In November 2025, the Department shared a [report](#) detailing progress made to date on recommended actions.

Historically, Virginia used a modified Angoff Method for standard setting. Panelists would estimate the probability that a proficient student would answer items correctly or determine if a proficient student was likely to respond correctly (yes/no). This is [widely used](#) and well-researched, but it can be difficult for participants in the standard setting process to make judgments about item difficulty and individual items can have an outsized influence.

In February 2025, the Board was briefed on the three common standard setting methods and best practices. This year, the Board of Education chose another common standard setting method, Item-Descriptor (ID) Matching (ID Matching). This method “matches” actual test items to a

performance level (below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced) based on the extent to which the knowledge and skills required to respond correctly are in the corresponding performance level. ID Matching is also widely used and researched, and panelist ‘matching’ tasks are very clear and connected to academic content. This transition was fully supported by Virginia’s Technical Advisory Council (TAC) as this is a well-researched practice for establishing cut scores. The rationale includes the following:

1. It meets all the quality characteristics previously reviewed;
2. This method more prominently centers the content represented on the assessment and Virginia’s performance expectations;
3. The panelists’ task is very clear and straightforward to implement; and
4. ID Matching is growing rapidly in use among state assessment programs, as is the supporting research base.

This method also positioned the Department to meet required professional standards including federal peer review. A member of the TAC served as an independent observer and concluded in his report, “.... there was strong evidence of procedural validity throughout the standard setting, and in my opinion, the VDOE can be confident in the defensibility of the resulting cut scores.”

Standard Setting Stakeholder Engagement

On April 17, 2025, the Department included newsletter articles regarding the opportunity to apply for standard setting committees for reading and mathematics standards of learning, with one message for [educators](#) and one for [community members](#). Agency staff shared about the application and opportunity to serve on standard setting committees by notifying educators, including the full Teacher of the Year and instructional leader agency listservs, and educator associations such as the Virginia Association of School Superintendents, Virginia Association of Secondary School Principals, Virginia Association of Elementary School Principals, and Virginia Education Association with requests to share out with members; business and industry associations as well as participating work group members such CTE trade associations and advisors; all 2- and 4-year public higher education institutions as well as State Council of Higher Education Virginia and Virginia Community College System leadership; parent organizations; school board associations; and Virginia Secretariats, such as Education, Veterans’ Affairs, Labor, and Commerce & Trade to relay to their constituents and agencies. Another set of articles about the opportunity to apply and serve on standard setting committees was shared with the field in the April 25, 2025 newsletter, again with one notice to [educators](#) and one for [community members](#).

In June 2025, there were 230 Virginia subject matter experts, including teachers, higher education representatives, parents, and business leaders from all 8 Superintendent Regions participated in the standard setting process to determine cut scores for mathematics and reading

SOL assessments. Educators and community members completed online applications. There were three key qualifications for Standard Setting Committee Members: 1) Knowledge of subject matter; 2) Familiarity with student populations such as English Learners, students with disabilities, or economically disadvantaged students; and 3) Understanding of consequences of cut scores. Higher priority was given to public school educators with more teaching experience and represented roughly 73% of the total committee membership. In Math, committee members with experience with students with disabilities was 66%, English Learners was 72%, and economically disadvantaged students was 85%. In Reading, committee members with experience with students with disabilities was 87%, English Learners was 79%, and economically disadvantaged students was 92%. Attachment 1 shares the comprehensive Standards Setting Report.

Implementation and Communication

Upon Board approval, Department staff will share additional information about the implementation plan for the new cut scores and related supports. The following actions will take place:

- Engage families through focus groups to inform revisions to student assessment reports for release in spring 2026.
- Develop communication resources to help divisions and school leaders explain the cut score implementation plan.
- Finalize test-specific resources, such as expectations such as item maps, Performance Level Descriptors, and sample test items, to support preparing students to meet higher expectations.
- Expand content-specific supports for teachers, such a
 - [Just in Time Mathematics Quick Checks](#), formative assessments aligned to standards that help teachers identify learning and plan to fill potential gaps.
 - [Virtual Learning Series](#), self-paced modules to support effective English and literacy instruction.
 - Mathematics and English Language Arts Walkthrough tools that help division guide purposeful lesson planning, ensure instructional alignment, and use walkthrough data to inform future instruction.
- Provide data-informed professional learning to strengthen teaching in learning, including implementing data cycles, concepts and connections vertical articulation, and developing formulas to strengthen student understanding in mathematics.
- Collaborate with division leaders to align messaging and prepare families and educators for next steps in the implementation of new cut scores.

The Board will receive an update on the status of supports in January 2026.

Impact on Fiscal and Human Resources

Costs associated with the implementation of new proficiency cut scores for grades 3-8 and End-of-course SOL reading and mathematics tests will be covered by existing funds.