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2013 English & Science SOLs Start New Achievement Trend Line

The Standards of Learning (SOL) tests most students are taking this year in reading, writing and science are based exclusively on revised content standards approved by the Board of Education in 2010. These revised standards are more rigorous than their predecessors and are critical to the commonwealth’s effort to promote college and career readiness.

The new SOL tests also include technology-enhanced items that require students to demonstrate critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as content knowledge. These innovative questions and problems make up between 10-15 percent of the items on the new assessments.

In addition, students for the first time took both the short essay and multiple-choice sections of the SOL writing tests online.

What do preliminary SOL test administration results indicate?

Most of the 3.1 million SOL tests administered annually are taken by students in April, May and June, with final results reported by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) in August.

Preliminary results — for reading and science tests taken during late fall and winter by high school students and writing tests taken in March and April — suggest that schools and school divisions will see drops in pass rates.

The following table compares the pass rates of *first-time* test takers on high school reading and science end-of-course tests taken in December, January, February and March with the performance of comparable test takers during 2011-2012. The pass rates displayed do not include the results of retakes. It also should be noted that students tested during fall and winter are not necessarily representative of students tested during the course of the entire year.

Test	First-Time Test Takers Fall-Winter	
	2012-2013	2011-2012
Reading	76%	83%
Earth Science	76%	87%
Biology	72%	86%
Chemistry	80%	92%

Preliminary statewide results on the grade-5, grade-8 and high school writing tests also show declines in pass rates.

Test	2012-2013*	2011-2012
Grade-5 Writing	70%	87%
Grade-8 Writing	70%	88%
High School Writing	86%	93%
*Preliminary results		

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The declines in reading, writing and science are not as dramatic as those seen in mathematics when new, more rigorous tests in that content area were introduced in 2011-2012.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Patricia I. Wright predicts that pass rates will improve as teachers and students become better acquainted with the new standards and assessments.

“Temporary declines in scores and pass rates on state tests are inevitable whenever academic standards are raised,” Wright said. “The lower scores and pass rates are a sign that the state is expecting more of students so they will be better prepared for college or the work force, not that students are learning less. Just as Virginia students and schools began a new trend line last year in mathematics, this year marks new beginnings in reading, writing and science.”

Will the new English and Science SOL tests impact students?

Students are allowed multiple retakes of SOL tests they must pass to earn verified credits toward graduation and may qualify for expedited retakes based on their score and other factors. Most seniors enter their final year of high school having already passed the tests they need to earn a diploma. Students also are assessed on the content they learned. So, a senior who passed his Chemistry course in 2011-2012, but has yet to pass the corresponding SOL test, would be retested on a form of the old end-of-course Chemistry assessment.

Will the new SOL tests impact school and division accountability ratings?

Three-year averaging — as allowed under Virginia’s accountability program — will mitigate the impact of the new tests on federal ratings under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and state accreditation ratings for the 2013-2014 school year.

Virginia’s accountability system also recognizes successful remediation programs that help students achieve minimum proficiency standards in reading and mathematics. If a student fails a high school reading or mathematics test and successfully retests during the same school year, the result of the first test is not included in the school’s accountability calculations. A school also is credited for state accreditation purposes for successful remediation when a student passes a reading or mathematics test after failing the assessment for the previous grade level.

The Code of Virginia allows the Board of Education to adopt special provisions related to the use of any SOL test or tests in the calculation of accreditation ratings for any period during which the standards or assessments in the content area are being revised and phased in. But the Board of Education must approve and provide notice to local school boards of any special provisions before the statewide administration of the tests.

How has VDOE helped schools prepare for the new reading, writing and science SOLs?

Since 2010, VDOE has provided the following tools, resources and learning opportunities for teachers, instructional leaders and students:

- January 2010 — Revised English SOL and Science SOL posted on VDOE website.
- February 2010 — VDOE notifies school divisions that the 2012-2013 reading, writing and science SOL tests will be based on the newly revised standards.
- July & October 2010 — VDOE conducts 2010 Science SOL training sessions and institutes for teachers and instructional leaders.
- November 2010 — Revised English and Science SOL curriculum frameworks posted on the VDOE website immediately after approval by the Board of Education. Draft versions of the documents were posted prior to board approval.
- March 2011 — Crosswalk documents highlighting changes in the English standards posted on VDOE website.

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- September 2011 — Crosswalk documents highlighting changes in the science standards posted on VDOE website.
- September 2011 — VDOE notifies school divisions of the availability of an online writing practice tool and other resources — including blueprints for the new reading and writing tests — to help teachers and students prepare for the new assessments.
- December 2011 — VDOE notifies school divisions of availability of additional instructional resources related to the new writing standards, including sample lesson plans, teaching strategies, SOL progression charts, graphic organizers and links to vetted outside resources.
- January 2012 — VDOE conducts online training sessions on the new online writing tests. A recording of one of the sessions is posted on the VDOE website for school divisions unable to participate in one of the two “live” sessions.
- March 2012 — VDOE notifies school divisions of the availability of online reading, writing and science practice SOL test items.
- March 2012 — All students taking the grade-5, grade-8 and end-of-course writing tests participate in a statewide field test of the new online writing assessments.
- July-August 2012 — VDOE conducts teacher training sessions across the state on the 2010 Science SOL and 2010 English SOL.
- August 2012 — VDOE notifies school divisions of the availability of sample lesson plans aligned with the 2010 English and science standards.
- Fall 2012 — Additional end-of-course reading and science SOL practice items are made available to school divisions.
- November 2012 — For the first time since the beginning of SOL testing in 1998, all prompts for the grade-5, grade-8 and high school writing tests are posted on the VDOE website *prior to testing*.
- December 2012 — VDOE provides additional technical assistance documents related to new K-3 science standards.
- February 2013 — Student papers demonstrating the scoring rubrics of the new grade-5, grade-8 and high school writing tests are posted on the VDOE website. Also posted are annotated papers demonstrating how teachers can work with students to improve their writing and writing scores.
- March 2013 — VDOE notifies school divisions of the availability of additional reading and science online SOL practice items and of narrated videos demonstrating technology-enhanced reading and science items.

In addition, VDOE has continued to develop and provide resources to support instruction and assessment of the content of the 2009 Mathematics SOL.

- May 2012 — VDOE provides K-5 mathematics vocabulary cards to school divisions as an additional classroom resource.
- August 2012 — VDOE notifies school divisions that K-5 mathematics tests may be administered over two days.
- October 2012 — VDOE conducts eight teacher institutes to support the implementation of the 2009 Mathematics SOL.
- November 2012 — VDOE provides analysis of 2011-2012 mathematics results with suggested practice items.
- November 2012 — VDOE provides strategies for minimizing testing times and improving performance on the new Mathematics SOL tests.
- December 2012 — VDOE provides mathematics vocabulary cards for grades 6-8.
- February 2013 — VDOE provides additional analysis of 2011-2012 mathematics results with suggested practice items.
- February 2013 — VDOE provides Algebra Readiness Diagnostic Test at no cost.
- March 2013 — VDOE makes additional mathematics SOL practice test items available.