

July 5, 2017

The Honorable Dr. Dietra Trent, Secretary of Education
Holly Coy, Deputy Secretary of Education
Virginia Department of Education
101 North 14th Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

**Re: Implementing the Virginia Board of Education SOQ Amendments in
the 2018-2020 Biennial Budget**

Dear Dr. Trent and Ms. Coy:

We write to urge the Department of Education to include sufficient funds in its budget request for the 2018-20 biennium to fully implement the Virginia Board of Education's (Board) amendments to the Standards of Quality (SOQ) adopted and recommended in October 2016.

As you know, nearly 40 percent of Virginia public school students are economically disadvantaged, and the Commonwealth's current level of support for these students is clearly inadequate to enable them to achieve Virginia's academic standards. Under our state constitution, education is a fundamental right guaranteed to every child in the Commonwealth. Implementation of the Board's SOQ revisions would provide resources essential to ensure that our most disadvantaged students have a meaningful opportunity to succeed in school.

The Board unanimously approved revisions to the SOQ last fall. The amendments, listed below, are expressly intended to establish baseline support and staffing standards for critical positions in Virginia public schools, which include principals, assistant principals, school counselors, psychologists, social workers, school nurses, and support staff.

The Board's 2016 SOQ Amendments require:

- One full-time assistant principal for every 400 students in grades K-12;
- One full-time principal in every elementary school;
- One school counselor for every 250 students in grades K-12;
- One full-time school psychologist for every 1,000 students;
- One full-time social worker for every 1,000 students; and
- One full-time school nurse for every 550 students.

The SOQ amendments also eliminate the methodology established in the Appropriation Act that artificially caps the number of state-funded support positions.

These amendments directly address the lack of state staffing standards for resources essential to provide a high quality educational program that meets the SOQ. In addition, research shows that in response to funding cuts, schools across the Commonwealth have substantially reduced these essential resources. *See Demonstrated Harm*, April 2017, The Commonwealth Institute.

In amending the SOQ, the Board has recognized that these positions provide important services and supports to economically disadvantaged students, who cannot leave health and mental health needs, trauma experiences, and social and economic challenges at the schoolhouse door when they arrive in the morning. The Board's action also recognizes that providing adequate support staff in our schools not only serves complex student needs, but also allows teachers and principals to give full attention to the core mission of classroom instruction and providing remedial interventions for struggling students.

In approving the SOQ amendments, the Board acted pursuant to its authority to “determine[] and prescribe[]” the standards of quality that govern Virginia public schools under Article VIII, § 2 of the Constitution of Virginia. Having fulfilled its constitutional authority, the Board transmitted the SOQ, as amended, to the Governor and General Assembly in its 2016 *Annual Report on the Conditions and Needs of Public Schools in Virginia*. By law, the Department is required to “take into consideration the Board’s proposed standards of quality” in preparing and making its estimates to the Governor for the 2018-2020 State budget. *See Va. Code §§ 22.1-18.01(B) and 2.2-1504.*

It is now incumbent upon the Department to consider each of the Board-approved SOQ amendments in its budget request to the Governor. We request the Department to include funding for the baseline support staff standards in its biennium budget estimate, as adopted by the Board in the amended SOQ. In addition, we request the Department’s budget estimate not propose continuation of any arbitrary cap on support positions for the next biennium. If the Department must prioritize items in its proposed budget, we note that the most critical action for addressing the poverty crisis in Virginia’s schools is to lift the cap on support positions, an arbitrary recession-era cut that shortchanges Virginia’s students.

We greatly appreciate your dedication to public education in the Commonwealth.

Legal Aid Justice Center
The Commonwealth Institute
Virginia Association of School
Superintendents
Virginia Education Association
Virginia First Cities Coalition

Virginia IOTA State Organization,
The Delta Kappa Gamma Society
International
Virginia PTA
Virginia Retired Teachers Association
Voices for Virginia’s Children