

2020-2021 VASS Legislative Platform

Over the past year, schools within the Commonwealth of Virginia have experienced unprecedented challenges to the goal of educating students. This included maintaining student and staff safety while experiencing significant funding reductions from both the state and local governments. During this time, VASS has been and remains committed to seeking positive changes in public education and fostering what is best for students and staff in the Commonwealth of Virginia. There are certain fundamental principles that are required for the success of all proposed changes. These include the full funding of all mandates passed by the General Assembly and required by the Virginia Board of Education. Also, local school boards should have primary authority in the implementation of these mandates and how resources from State Government are utilized at the local level. In addition to these two basic requirements, school divisions are facing some critical needs and issues.

- **Equity of Opportunity for All Virginia Learners:** The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the inherent inequities both within student groups and school divisions in providing educational services to children in the Commonwealth. To address these difficulties:
 - The Support Staff Cap, implemented during the Great Recession, disproportionately limits local capacity to serve students with special needs, at-risk students, English learners, etc. Positions such as mental health specialists, instructional assistants, and other classroom supports are a cost-effective way to put caring adults in the lives of our most needy students, but the Support Staff Cap arbitrarily excludes the actual cost of educating challenged populations. VASS recommends removing the cap, in phases over the biennium, if necessary.
 - SOQ staffing requirements by the State Board and contained in the revised SOA's must be accompanied by appropriate state funding in addition to staffing flexibility if qualified applicants cannot be found to fill these added positions. Removal of the SOQ Support CAP will be critical toward this effort.
 - Unfunded Mandates: The last several sessions of the General Assembly, have featured many new training requirements imposed on school divisions (i.e. – seclusion and restraint of students and school safety training). New training requirements have a local cost and should be accompanied by state funds to assist at the local level to implement these new state requirements.
 - Positions identified in the Standards of Quality should be funded by function (i.e. - curriculum development and support, instructional technology, individual school leadership, student support and counseling needs) rather than individual position title.
 - The General Assembly should authorize and fund an independent adequacy study to determine the appropriate level of resources needed for school divisions to meet state accountability requirements. The study should examine particular challenges for schools, such as the effect of concentrations of poverty, as well as accelerated growth and declining enrollments, and identify the funding required to meet the Standards of Learning, Standards of Accreditation, and Standards of Quality.

- **State Budget:** As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, school divisions have experienced unprecedented funding issues in providing educational services to students.
 - The 2020-2022 formula based rebenchmarking should be maintained without any negative changes for the biennium.
 - The 2019-2020 March 31 ADM should be established as a floor for Basic Aid and school divisions held harmless for any changes.
 - The \$118 million in projected sales tax funding reductions to local school divisions should be funded by the Virginia General Assembly.
 - Funding is needed to assist schools moving from in-person to virtual instruction and vice versa.
 - The Pandemic crisis has changed forever the means of virtually instructing students. It has also demonstrated in stark reality the inequities that exist in some parts of the Commonwealth. It is essential that additional state funds for broadband/internet access be provided.
 - State funding for renovation of school facilities is required to better manage critical learning needs and changing student populations.
 - The amount and flexibility of Lottery funding needs to be increased for both at-risk and per-pupil accounts.

- **The Shortage of Qualified Teachers:** The Pandemic crisis has magnified the teacher shortage issue both in terms of the number of staff and the need to provide greater flexibility in terms of what teachers can and cannot teach. If the teacher shortage crisis is to be successfully addressed:
 - A long-range plan is needed to raise teacher salaries commensurate with Virginia's National income ranking of 12th (JLARC). Virginia's Average Teacher Salary of \$55,212 is ranked 32nd in the Nation; if moved to a National ranking of 12th, average salary would be \$66,552 (NEA).
 - Removal of the SOQ Support CAP will be critical toward this effort.

- **Student/Staff Social and Emotional Needs:** The General Assembly and the State Board have identified the importance of providing added social and emotional supports for students in reducing student discipline problems, school violence and the stress students face in a changing world. The importance of providing for these needs has only been strengthened by the Pandemic Crisis.
 - The General Assembly should provide school divisions with additional funding needed to implement proven methods of preventing and addressing misbehaviors that lead to suspension and expulsion (i.e., VTSS, Restorative Justice, Regional Programs, Virtual Services, and community-based/wrap-around services).
 - The General Assembly should provide school divisions with additional funding for local and regional alternative education programs to ensure that alternative education programs are available for elementary and secondary students in every school division.

- Added state funding is needed to increase counseling and behavioral assistance to students in school. Funding provided in the current state budget will not meet the new school counselor ratios passed by the General Assembly during the 2020 Session, nor will it enable school divisions to meet the requirement that 80% of counselor time be spent in delivering direct services to students. Flexibility is needed in who can provide these services.
 - Funding SOQ positions by function instead of by title/ licensure will be critical toward this effort.
 - Added funding needs to be provided for support services to staff in dealing with the new responsibilities caused by the COVID-19 crisis.
- **Dual Enrollment and the Virginia Community College System:** Dual enrollment has become an integral and critical part of education at the secondary level.
 - Based upon individualized local considerations, school divisions and Community Colleges must have flexibility in setting and negotiating tuition costs for those courses delivered on-site at the local high school.
 - School divisions need greater flexibility in assigning staff to teach dual enrollment courses at the local high school.
- **Modernizing the Assessment System to Strengthen Virginia's Standards of Learning:** Recently the State Board of Education began a review of the Standards of Accreditation. Both the role and type assessments administered to students will be examined by the Board.
 - Required SOL assessments need to be reduced to the minimum required under ESSA. Should the USDOE waive assessments required under ESSA during the Pandemic, the State Board should eliminate SOL assessments for the 2020-2021 school year.
 - Given the changes in school schedules experienced this year and the impact of increased reliance on virtual learning, rethinking is needed as to what constitutes a "school day" and what defines an absence.
 - Methodologies that recognize student growth in lieu of seat time and attendance-related requirements for accreditation should be defined and used.
 - The indicators should be tied more closely to the Profiles of a Virginia Graduate. If the SOL assessment does not accomplish this, then a different kind of indicator should be considered. This could include inputs as well as outcomes.
 - Student growth should be incorporated as a primary means of assessing student performance for accreditation, using tools that inform instruction and that are designed to measure growth, rather than using Standards of Learning tests as proxies for growth.