

March 20, 2023

Mr. Daniel A. Gecker
President
Virginia Board of Education
P.O. Box 2120
Richmond, VA 23218

The Honorable Aimee Rogstad Guidera
Virginia Secretary of Education
Acting Superintendent of Public Instruction
Virginia Department of Education
P.O. Box 2120
Richmond, VA 23218

Dear President Gecker and Secretary Guidera,

The Fairfax County School Board and Superintendent Dr. Michelle C. Reid submit this letter of significant concern regarding the proposed 2023 History and Social Science Standards of Learning and request that the Virginia Board of Education (VBOE) direct the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to amend the January draft with suggestions provided by content experts and professionals in the field and in accordance with the process described in the Virginia Code.

Virginia Code § 22.1-253.13:1. states that the “*Standards of Learning in all subject areas shall be subject to regular review and revision to maintain rigor and to reflect a balance between content knowledge and the application of knowledge in preparation for eventual employment and lifelong learning.*”

On February 2, 2023, the VBOE accepted the [January 6, 2023 draft standards](#) for first review. Unfortunately, the said draft does *not* meet the specific requirements stated in *Virginia Code § 22.1-253.13:1* as it does not “maintain rigor” or “reflect a balance between content knowledge and application of knowledge.” Moreover, the development of the January draft clearly circumvented the established standards review process and produced a document replete with historical and developmental errors and concerns and is lacking an inclusive telling of history with the full breadth of perspectives and experiences. The guiding principles of the proposed January standards focus on ideology rather than disciplinary skills of history and social science content. The draft standards de-emphasize conceptual understanding and critical thinking skills in favor of rote memorization and low-level thinking. The additional content requirements are unrealistic for social studies teachers to be able to cover, especially at the elementary school level.

During Superintendent Balow's tenure, two drafts of history/social science standards (HSS) were developed in isolation—without transparency and without the professional collaboration needed for the development of such important work. The absence of partnership with subject-matter experts and educators across the Commonwealth was as evident in the January draft as it was in the November 2022 version. It is clear that a consensus among professionals in the field who understand the importance of prioritizing thinking, historical accuracy, diverse perspectives, and developmental appropriateness is lacking in the current draft standards.

In total, the January draft includes **10** standards/sub standards which have been added to Kindergarten, **21** standards/sub standards which have been added to 2nd grade, **11** standards/sub standards which have been added to 4th grade Virginia Studies, **35** standards/sub standards which have been added to World Geography, **12** standards/sub standards which have been added to World History I, **10** standards/sub standards which have been added to World History II, **19** standards/sub standards which have been added to VA/U.S. History, **7** standards/sub standards have been added to VA/U.S. Government.

Numerous subject matter experts in history and social sciences (including the Virginia Social Studies Leaders Consortium, the *Virginia Association for the Supervision and Curriculum Development*, *American Historical Association*, *Virginia Council for the Social Studies*, *National Council for the Social Studies*, and *Virginia Geographic Alliance*) have provided a [comprehensive analysis](#) of the flaws and concerns in the January draft standards. Therefore, we suggest that the VBOE review and consider the thoughtful analysis of these professional experts. Below is a selection of our school division's significant concerns regarding the January 6th draft of HSS standards:

The Standards Process

The process from August to November, and then through January, has left our district with ongoing concerns and uncertainties. The violation of the established process previously approved by VBOE has not been repaired, and the January draft continues the same lack of transparency and breach of public trust as the November draft standards. The January draft shows clear signs of isolationist development and a deficit of adequate input from subject-matter experts across Virginia. In the January 6 news release, then Superintendent Balow claimed that the January draft involved "input from more than 200 reviewers." We are left to question how many and who of those 200 were engaged between November 17, 2022, and January 6, 2023? We call for a restoration of the established process previously overseen by the History and Social Science office at the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE). We urge VBOE to elevate and incorporate the following concerns and suggestions into the work of the current standards.

Increased number of standards and sub standards

The January draft includes an increased number of standards and sub standards required to be taught in a given school year which is not only unrealistic but will also require rote memorization for the sake of content coverage. This will undoubtedly result in a lack of high-quality instruction, meaningful application of new learning, and deeper understanding of concepts. The standards merely drive new content without clarity as to how it is to be used. To achieve a more reasonable balance of "content knowledge and the application of content knowledge" as mandated in *Virginia Code § 22.1-253.13:1*, the standards should integrate content knowledge with historical thinking skills. The 2015 version (currently in use) contains **737** total standards

and sub standards. The January 6th draft contains **869** total standards and sub standards - an increase of 132 additional standards and sub standards.

- **SOL K.1 f.** focuses on “contributing one’s time and talents to help others in their homes, schools, and communities through jobs” and therefore limits the contributions of citizenship to people who have jobs with a seeming exception to those who volunteer in schools and communities.
- 24 people are listed in **SOL 2.10** for 2nd graders to learn about. This is in addition to the 8 people listed in **SOL 2.7**, creating a total of 32 people for 7–8-year-olds to learn about with no instructional time added to support teachers.
- **SOL 2.4** requires students to locate “on a map the birthplaces of the eight Virginians elected to President of the United States and their homes as historical landmarks.” This is an example of superfluous content that drives students to the lowest levels of cognitive retention.
- **SOL VS.12** requires that 4th graders memorize all 8 Presidents of Virginia “and their spouses” and is yet another example of superfluous content pushing students to the lower levels of cognitive thinking.
- **VUS1 7a.** requires students to assess the development of and changes in domestic policies due to Supreme Court decisions and acts of Congress, including but not limited to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the *Federal Highway Act of 1956*, the *American Indian Movement (AIM)*, the *Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act*, *Equal Pay Act*, *Americans with Disabilities Act*, *Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972*, *Marriage Equality Act*, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, *Gideon v. Wainwright*, *Miranda v. Arizona*, and *Roe v. Wade* leading to *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*. While these examples have importance in understanding Supreme Court decision-making, the stipulation that they should be able to assess each one individually requires an inordinate amount of class time and distracts from the overarching learning outcome. Additionally, the focus on the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* case seems to stress a conclusion without acknowledging the ideological viewpoint among legal scholars.

Depth of Learning

- The excessive amount of required content that cannot be reasonably taught in a given school year is likely to lead to an increased focus on rote memorization at the expense of deeper learning, understanding, and skill development. The amount of content knowledge is unrealistic, unsustainable, and presents standards that *teach students what to think, not how to think*.
- The January draft standards delete the inquiry questions that are embedded within both the original August draft standards and the December Collaborative standards (i.e., How do responsible citizens contribute to their communities?). This removal seems inexplicable given that inquiry is at the root of deeper learning and the actual “application of content knowledge” as mandated by Virginia code. We are wary of discarding so many of the good elements in the proposed August standards in a rush to make hasty changes based on input from politically motivated organizations.
- The January draft downplays the collaboration between geography and history and the importance that scale of analysis plays in social studies education. Since 2008, Virginia’s standards have expected students to learn and understand “how the United States and the student’s home community are affected by conditions and events in distant places.” This expectation is critical for promoting and creating a geo-literate citizenry.

Developmentally misaligned content

Sections of the content existing in the January draft, for some grades, are beyond the general developmental readiness of students in the grades in which they appear. This is very concerning. A few of these examples include:

- **SOL 2.4b** requires 2nd graders to learn about “the state motto and the image on the Virginia state flag and its meaning.” This requires young students to learn the Latin phrase “Sic Semper Tyrannis” and that it translates to “thus be it always to tyrants.” The intricate knowledge this standard requires is far beyond that of a normative second grader.
- **SOL 2.4b** also requires 2nd graders to then interpret the state seal on the Virginia flag that features a nude depiction of the female figure of “Virtue” standing on top of a murdered king. This is far too complex for students to understand in terms of needed context and background knowledge and presents an additional challenge of exposing 7 and 8-year-old children to depictions of nudity, political violence, and assassination. This standard is more appropriately placed in the secondary level.
- **SOL 2.9b** requires 2nd graders to learn about the War of 1812—a complex conflict involving expansion, international trade, and maritime rights.
- **SOL 2.9** also requires students to understand the Louisiana Purchase which is complicated for a 7 or 8-year-old child.
- **SOL 2.10** requires 2nd graders to learn about Dr. Chien-Shiung Wu, who would be more appropriately placed in the higher grades as she was a physicist working on the Manhattan Project and the atomic bomb. This same standard confusingly lumps persons into headings with two categories (i.e., Scholars and Inventors, Explorers and Adventurers, and Reformers and Champions) with no guidance of which category is appropriate. It is unclear if Jackie Robinson should be taught as a Reformer or Champion or both. The additional ambiguity of interpreting such a poorly crafted standard for student-facing learning presents an unnecessary addition to the current workload of teachers.
- **SOL VS.10** requires 4th graders to learn about the role of Virginians such as Anna McFadden, Richard E. Byrd, PFC Jacklyn Lucas, Lt. General Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller, and George Marshall and their roles in American history. This standard is not only misaligned in content but also disconnected from the structure of the previous standards, as students do not study the First or the Second World Wars in 4th Grade Virginia Studies. As such, this standard adds another layer of content for students to memorize that is disconnected from meaningful application and inquiry and hinders the student’s ability to develop critical thinking skills.
- **SOL VS.11a** requires 4th graders to memorize facts about the complex Supreme Court case of *Green v. New Kent County* that dealt with “freedom of choice” plans that served to *circumvent* desegregation in public schools following the decision in *Brown II*. This significant case is far too detailed and complex for 4th graders, and it is more suitable for college-level courses in history and law or at least postponed being included in Virginia/United States history in high school.

Mistakes, Bias, and Omissions

In addition to developmentally inappropriate content, the January draft standards document contains several mistakes and omissions, undermining its credibility as a set of professional standards of learning. Some addition of new content is void of diverse perspectives and consequently promotes bias. For example:

- **SOL K.2, SOL 1.2, and SOL 2.3 Indigenous Peoples' Day**, which was proclaimed a state holiday in 2019, has been replaced with Columbus Day.
- Also, in grades K-2, **Christmas**, a predominantly Christian holiday has been added, without the inclusion of other religious holidays that are practiced by the diverse people of our Commonwealth.
- **SOL 2.7** does not recognize Virginian George Mason, who wrote the Va. Bill of Rights which was later incorporated into the Constitution.
- The 4th grade standards only identify white, male leaders during the Revolutionary War. James Armistead Lafayette, the African American spy for the Colonial Army who was featured by name in the 2015 SOLs and the December "Collaborative Standards" has been removed.
- **SOL VS.7f** requires students to identify and explain the leadership roles of Virginians during the Civil War (Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, Robert E. Lee, William Harvey Carney, Winfield Scott, and Powhatan Beaty are named specifically). Oddly, Gov. Francis Harrison Pierpont and other key Virginian Union leaders have been omitted. This standard also omits key Virginian women like Elizabeth Van Lew.
- Virginia Studies should include notable Virginia women of the 20th century such as Katherine Johnson and Mary Jackson.
- The establishment of the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP) is incorrectly lumped into **SOL USII.2g** about Reconstruction during the 1870s (the NAACP was actually founded more than a generation later in 1909).
- The terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 are incorrectly placed within **SOL USII.7** about the Cold War yet, the Cold War ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and has nothing to do with 9/11.
- In **SOL USII.7b**, the standard incorrectly states that *the Marshall Plan* also helped rebuild postwar Japan (this economic recovery program was designed and implemented in Western Europe and had no impact on postwar Japan).
- **WHII d.** Removes "evaluation" as a process of engaging sources for accuracy, credibility, bias, and propaganda. This is of particular importance for our students, in light of the multiple pieces of information that are available for review. The cognition term "contextualizing" replaces evaluation and limits the scope of our students' higher-order thinking.
- The **WHI.8** standard does not cover one of the most notable three west African empires—Songhai (only mentioning Mali and Ghana) and includes awkward wording which aligns enslaved people with objects like gold, salt, and food which dehumanizes those from the African continent, and minimizes the accomplishments of African nations.
- **SOL WHI.13** is lacking in overall historical precision and does not include important actors such as women or people of color.
- WHI and WHII standards should address slavery around the world more comprehensively beyond the Roman Empire, Meso-American civilizations, and the Transatlantic Slave trade. Also, the first mentions of slavery occur in elementary school and are limited to the African Continent and the context of the Civil War rather than the global context of slavery occurring elsewhere (a context which isn't provided until Grade 9 World History). These lessons occur in the formative years when biases may be formed.
- The WHII standards focus primarily on Europe, with only three of twelve standards being related to history outside of Europe. As this course is a World History course and not a Western Civilization course, this is unacceptable.

- **SOL WHII.8a** asks students to identify “major events and leaders of the war, including but not limited to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Georges Clemenceau, John J. Pershing, Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm II, and Woodrow Wilson.” This is written in a way that suggests all of those leaders were assassinated.
- **SOL WHII.10d** incorrectly spells Václav Havel's name as “Vaclev Havel.”
- Virginia and United States History (Grade 11) begins with the Age of European Exploration. This is misleading for students who should learn that Indigenous peoples of North America had 10,000 years of history prior to European settlement and colonization.
- The Virginia and United States standards have omitted the 1902 VA Constitution which laid new fundamental changes in Commonwealth law, shaped Virginia politics, and remained in effect until July 1, 1971.
- The Virginia and United States standards fail to include a mention of the groundbreaking Loving v. Virginia case which challenged the Racial Integrity Act which the United States Supreme Court ruled as having denied Virginians a “fundamental freedom” to marry.
- All previous standards dealing with the history of labor unions, strikes, and changes in working conditions have been entirely deleted despite being featured prominently in the 2015 and 2008 versions of the SOLs, as well as the December “Collaborative Standards.”
- The term “fascism” has been entirely removed from the standards. This term is essential to any understanding of the Second World War.
- Racism remains unmentioned explicitly in any of the standards. How can students understand the history of Virginia, the United States, and the world as well as current divisions and challenges in society without even mentioning one of the greater hindrances of national unity? How can teachers feel confident to “facilitate open and balanced discussions on difficult topics, including discrimination and racism, and present learning opportunities without personal or political bias” (according to the proposed Guiding Principles) if the standards do not provide an on-ramp for such discussion? There should be a clear definition of racism, especially within the context of Virginia history. Without such context, students may be forbidden to discuss historical conflict in an atmosphere that provides the freedom to engage and analyze historical facts without censorship.
- The January draft omits the *5 themes of Geography*. These themes have been essential tools for helping educators since 1984 in order to help avoid outdated traditions of teaching geography through rote memorization. These themes (*location, place, human-environment interaction, movement, and region*) are included in the 2008 and 2015 SOLs, August 2022 draft, and December “Collaborative Standards.” It is not unreasonable to question their removal.

Course Sequence

The January draft also proposes changes in course sequence and required courses which may be developmentally mistargeted for elementary and middle school. The implications of the new course sequence are not completely clear. The “strongly recommended” course sequence in the proposed VDOE standards includes World Geography at Grade 8. In Fairfax County Public Schools, we currently teach Civics & Economics in Grade 8, and we do not include World Geography in our course sequence. If World Geography becomes a required course, FCPS would need to accommodate the new course by eliminating our FCPS-specific curriculum on ancient global cultures in Grade 5 and shifting our existing course sequence down into

elementary school. It is possible that this proposed change could impact staffing as teachers would have to change teaching assignments, grade levels, and perhaps receive new certifications. In addition, the altered sequence of courses could negatively affect students who are already in the midst of our current course sequence. There is also a concern about the sufficient amount of basal resources currently available to support such a proposed new course sequence, placing a potentially substantial fiscal burden on many school divisions.

We believe we share an expectation of excellence in social studies education for the students of Virginia. To provide the standards of learning that our students deserve, we urge the Board to reconvene experts in social studies education, to listen to the voices of practitioners, and to significantly revise the proposed standards to foster depth of learning and the development of history and social science skills.

Sincerely,



Michelle C. Reid, Ed.D.
Division Superintendent
Fairfax County Public Schools



Rachna Sizemore Heizer, J.D.
School Board Chair on behalf of
The Fairfax County School Board

MCR/RSH/mm

cc: Dr. Tammy Mann
Vice President, Virginia Board of Education

Mrs. Grace Turner, M. Ed.
Member, Virginia Board of Education

Dr. Pamela Davis-Vaught
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