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Response to Virginia Department of Education Frequently Asked Questions on Annual Measureable Objectives released August 2012

In an attempt to defend its new Annual Measurable Objectives, the Virginia Dept. of Education today released a set of questions and answers. The document is available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/federal_programs/esea/flexibility/faq_amo.pdf. We liken this to putting **lipstick on a pig** and offer the following responses. As the saying goes, a pig with lipstick is still just a pig (no offense to pigs).

Does the Board of Education have lower expectations for some students based on race, ethnicity or other factors?



No. All students, regardless of race, ethnicity or family income must correctly answer the same number of items to earn a passing score on SOL tests in English, mathematics, science and history/social science. Likewise, all students must meet the same set of requirements to earn an Advanced Studies, Standard or other Board of Education-approved diploma.

RESPONSE: VDOE is correct that the VBOE doesn't set different number of items to earn a passing score on SOL tests by race, ethnicity or family income. Passing scores are part of academic achievement standards and unrelated to annual measureable objectives (AMOs). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (often referred to as No Child Left Behind) requires that both academic content standards (SOLs in Virginia) and academic achievement standards (how performance is determined) must be the same for all students. Additionally, VBOE doesn't set different requirements for diplomas based on race, ethnicity or family income.

However, by establishing **different AMOs** for students based on race, ethnicity, family income, English language proficiency and disability status, the VBOE is compromising these students' ability to achieve at the same level as their white, non-poor, English proficient, non-disabled peers, and thus, limiting their chances of scoring proficient on SOL tests and earning Advanced or Standard diplomas.

Does the Board of Education have lower expectations for some schools based on demographic characteristics?



No. The Board of Education's minimum expectations for learning and achievement are expressed by the requirements schools must meet to earn state accreditation.

These expectations for achievement, which are found in the Regulations Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia, do not vary depending on the demographic characteristics of the school.

The same achievement levels on SOL tests in English, mathematics, science and history/social science are required for a school to earn a rating of Fully Accredited regardless of the race or ethnicity of the children attending the school.

RESPONSE: The pass rate required to meet the threshold for state accreditation is quite low, enabling most schools in Virginia to meet or exceed it. The pass rate requirement applies only to the “all-student” rate, allowing high achieving students to mask the performance of low-achieving groups.

Expecting all schools to achieve the SOA pass rate (for all students only) is unrelated to the seriously low expectations reflected in VDOE’s new AMOs.

What is the purpose of the Annual Measurable Objectives?



The AMOs provide a means for identifying schools most in need of intervention to raise the achievement of low-performing students. Schools with student subgroups not meeting AMOs must develop and implement state-approved improvement plans to raise the achievement of these students.

The AMOs are based on actual subgroup SOL pass rates in reading and mathematics in Virginia’s lowest-performing schools. They provide these schools with yearly objectives that, if met, will result in students in these schools — within six years — halving the gaps that now separate them from their peers in the state’s highest-performing schools.

In addition, the state uses the AMOs to designate certain low-performing Title I schools as priority and focus schools. These schools must implement specific state-approved and state-monitored interventions to create dramatic improvements in student achievement.

- Priority schools must engage a state-approved turnaround partner to help implement a school-improvement model meeting state and federal requirements.
- Focus schools must employ a state-approved coach to help the division develop, implement and monitor intervention strategies to improve the performance of students at risk of not meeting achievement standards or dropping out of school.

While all schools must meet the AMOs, the objectives are not intended as minimum benchmarks for acceptable improvement for student subgroups in higher-performing schools.

RESPONSE: The AMOs, as required by ESEA, are used to measure the performance of all schools, divisions, and important student subgroups. By setting subgroup AMOs based on “actual subgroup SOL pass rates in reading and mathematics in Virginia’s lowest-performing schools” VBOE has set the bar for all Virginia students using the worst performing schools. The resulting AMOs do not result in a lessening of the achievement gap between Virginia’s white students and students belonging to historically underperforming groups, such as Black, Hispanic, poor, limited English and disabled.

While the identification of Priority and Focus schools is important to improving results for Virginia’s lowest performing schools, such schools will number just 108 of the state’s 1839 schools or 5.9%. To require merely a handful of Virginia’s low performing schools (Title I only) to implement interventions leaves thousands of Virginia’s low performing students to languish in the remaining 1731 schools.

Virginia’s Black students, which make up 25 percent of total public school enrollment, have an achievement gap of 23 points based on the Math Proficiency scores in 2011-2012 (68% of white students scored proficient vs. 45% of Black students. Comparable gaps exist for low income students—just 47% scored proficient. These students are not concentrated in 108 schools. Yet, according to VDOE, only those schools will need to address the achievement gap (“Schools with student subgroups not meeting AMOs must develop and implement state-approved improvement plans to raise the achievement of these students.”)

Virginia DOE states that “While all schools must meet the AMOs, the objectives are not intended as minimum benchmarks for acceptable improvement for student subgroups in higher-performing schools.” Virginia’s new AMOs are the only benchmarks provided to schools and divisions. If they are not intended as minimum proficiency rates for student subgroups, what are schools required

to use? It is these AMOs that will be used by all schools to report student proficiency in reading and math by student subgroup. **Setting unreasonably low AMOs for Virginia’s historically low achieving students will result in parents and communities being misled into thinking that schools are closing the achievement gap when they are not.**

Why are students divided into subgroups?



Virginia reports SOL pass rates and other achievement data for student subgroups to ensure that the instructional needs of students who historically have had difficulty meeting state standards are not hidden by high overall achievement in a school or division.

In addition, federal education law requires states to hold schools and divisions accountable for closing achievement gaps between historically low-performing student subgroups and higher-achieving students. States carry out the law by reporting disaggregated test results and establishing goals for each subgroup.

Under Virginia’s flexibility waiver, separate AMOs have been set for previously reported student subgroups and for new Proficiency Gap Groups comprising students who historically have had difficulty meeting the commonwealth’s achievement standards:

- Proficiency Gap Group 1 – Students with disabilities, limited-English proficient (LEP) students and economically disadvantaged students, regardless of race and ethnicity
- Proficiency Gap Group 2 – African-American students, not of Hispanic origin, including those also counted in Proficiency Gap Group 1
- Proficiency Gap Group 3 – Hispanic students, of one or more races, including those also counted in Proficiency Gap Group 1

RESPONSE: You got this one right, Virginia. The last iteration of ESEA (known as No Child Left Behind) established the requirement to report proficiency (and participation) by student subgroups in order to close the achievement gap.

However, VDOE’s ESEA waiver has provided an opportunity to set different AMOs for different subgroups, resulting in lower expectations for low achieving students.

While states must report disaggregated test results, the purpose of ESEA is “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments.”

Virginia’s new Proficiency Gap Groups – also established under its ESEA waiver, certainly are comprised of students who historically under perform on state assessments. Yet the AMOs established for these new Proficiency Gap Groups do not close the achievement gap. See the table at the end for details.

Virginia receives more than \$245 million from the US Dept. of Education to supplement the education of low income students. Meanwhile, Virginia’s AMOs expect no closing of the achievement gap for those same students.

Why are the AMOs for reading higher than the AMOs for math?



The AMOs for mathematics are based on the performance of students on the new mathematics SOL tests. These challenging new tests were first taken by students in 2011-2012. Pass rates on the new mathematics SOL tests were much lower than those on the old tests, and as a result, the AMOs in mathematics are lower than those for reading.

Because results from new and more rigorous SOL reading tests won’t be available until after students take these tests during the 2012-2013 school year, the Board of Education based the current reading AMOs on test results from 2010-2011. Once results from the new, more challenging reading tests are available, the board will establish new AMOs for reading.

RESPONSE: Got it! Virginia is using the **first administration** of a new assessment based on new, more rigorous SOLs. Given the existing achievement gap, an argument could be made that those students furthest behind had the greatest chance of doing poorly on the first administration of a test based on new, more rigorous SOLs. Then, using those depressed scores, Virginia establishes new AMOs for the next five years.

We can't wait to see the AMOs formulated using the first administration of the reading assessments! It's safe to assume that they will result in the same dismal outlook for Virginia's low performing students as the Math AMOs.

Why are the AMOs for some student subgroups lower than those for other subgroups?



The AMOs vary from subgroup to subgroup because the students in different subgroups performed at different levels on the 2011-2012 mathematics SOL tests and the 2010-2011 SOL reading tests.

The Board of Education used the actual pass rates of students in the lowest-achieving schools as starting points in setting annual reading and mathematics objectives for each subgroup. Each annual measurable objective provides a goal for improvement for students in these schools based on the current performance of students in the subgroup.

While all schools must meet these annual objectives for raising achievement, the AMOs are designed for the specific purpose of improving learning and outcomes for students in Virginia's lowest-performing schools.

RESPONSE: Stop, Virginia, you're killing us with the lipstick! We've addressed most of this in previous responses. Suffice it to say, Virginia has abandoned any real commitment to closing the achievement gap. See the table below for the proof.

Virginia Mathematics Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs)							
Assessment Year	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	Change in % of students required to be proficient between 2012-2017
> All Students	61	64	66	68	70	73	+12
Proficiency Gap Group 1	47	49	52	54	56	58	+11
↳ Achievement Gap	-14	-15	-14	-14	-14	-15	Change = +1
Proficiency Gap Group 2 (Black Students)	45	48	50	52	54	57	+12
↳ Achievement Gap	-16	-16	-16	-16	-16	-16	Change = 0
Proficiency Gap Group 3 (Hispanic Students)	52	55	57	60	62	65	+13
↳ Achievement Gap	-9	-9	-9	-8	-8	-8	Change = -1
Students with Disabilities	33	36	39	42	45	49	+16
↳ Achievement Gap	-28	-28	-27	-26	-25	-24	Change = -4
ELL Students	39	42	45	48	51	54	+15
↳ Achievement Gap	-22	-22	-21	-20	-19	-19	Change = -3
Economically Disadvantaged Students	47	50	52	54	56	59	+12
↳ Achievement Gap	-14	-14	-14	-14	-14	-14	Change = 0
Asian Students	82	83	85	86	88	89	+7
↳ Achievement Gap	0	0	0	0	0	0	N/A
White Students	68	70	72	74	76	78	+10
↳ Achievement Gap	0	0	0	0	0	0	N/A

NOTES: Proficiency Gap Group 1 combines students who have disabilities, are English Language Learners, or are Economically Disadvantaged
Achievement Gap is the difference between the individual student group and "all students"