



State builds new framework to help students make more agile leaps beyond K-12.

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Virginia Rethinks High School in Its Profile of a Graduate

Over the past 15 months, the Virginia Board of Education has been redesigning its public school students' high school educational experience to better prepare them to participate in the global economy. To lay the groundwork for this redesign, we developed the Profile of a Graduate. This profile in turn grew out of a broader review of Virginia's school accreditation standards, where the state's accountability system is set forth.

The standards-based reform of the mid-1990s was a critical first step that raised the level of academic achievement among Virginia students. But over the past few years, the Virginia board came to understand that many of its schools had become so laser focused on the state assessment of student performance against the content standards—known in Virginia as the Standards of Learning (SOL)—that they had failed to ensure that students could apply the content knowledge and had developed the skills needed to succeed in the workforce.

Based on current estimates, about 500,000 jobs will be created in Virginia by 2021, many in scientific, technical, or healthcare fields. Even those jobs may

be supplanted by others that will dominate the economy for the graduate of 2029—today's kindergartner. Some of the jobs for which they will be competing do not exist today. And yet students now graduating are not prepared to meet even today's need, according to colleges and businesses within the Commonwealth. Some require remedial work in English and math upon entering college. And businesses indicate that some newly hired students lack the requisite ability to communicate well, solve problems, or navigate a team environment.

In the midst of economic and workplace change, some things have changed about high school. Certainly, the technology is different from when I attended high school in the early 1970s. However, subjects and course credits have barely changed at all. Consequently, the board sought to expand its view of high school to encompass more development of skills and abilities.

For the board, the journey to redesign high school education in Virginia would begin with study of what others have done to change the high school experience, both in and outside the state. We then listened to the suggestions of many

partners and educated ourselves and other decision makers about what needs to be done. The result was a proposal that we believe fits Virginia's needs.

The Journey Begins

In late 2014, the Virginia state board began considering a comprehensive revision of its Regulations Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia, part of which concerned high school graduation requirements. The board decided it first needed to determine what skills a graduate should acquire during their K-12 experience and to capture those ideas in a Profile of a Graduate. We wanted the profile to articulate the knowledge, skills, competencies, and experiences students should attain to make them “life-ready,” whether a graduate begins college, work, or military service.

Many Virginians were interested in the board's work: local school boards, administrators and teachers, school support staff, parents, students, community members, businesses, two-year and four-year colleges, education associations, the governor, the secretary of education, members of the legislature, and the SOL Innovation Committee, which the legislature created.

Some of these groups were engaged in their own activities on the topic during 2015–16, and their work informed ours. For example, the SOL Innovation Committee recommended in October 2015 that the state board (1) develop a Profile of a Virginia Graduate, including critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication, and citizenship; (2) identify the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the profile expectations; (3) adjust high school graduation requirements; (4) update the SOL to reflect the skills identified in the profile; and (5) identify the types and timing of assessments that align with the profile.

The Profile of a Virginia Graduate was included as part of the governor's proposed legislation in 2016, which two members of the committee who also sat in the Virginia General Assembly carried to the floor. The enacted legislation (1) removed existing statutory language specifying types of diplomas and credits (thereby giving the board greater flexibility in revising its regulations); (2) required that the Profile of a Graduate identify the knowledge and skills that students

should attain; (3) required the board to consult with stakeholders; (4) required that the profile encompass critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication, and citizenship; (5) gave the board latitude in the development of core skill sets in the early years of high school and establishment of multiple paths toward college and career readiness in the later years, including opportunities for internships, externships, and credentialing; (6) identified a timeline for Board of Education action, with a mandate that the changes apply to incoming freshmen after July 1, 2018.

This timeline kicked off an aggressive schedule of state board information gathering and stakeholder engagement, with the assistance of Virginia Department of Education staff (see table 1). Because the work would be included in the board's Standards of Accreditation, its Accountability Committee was tapped as the best vehicle for doing the work. To deal with the time constraint, the committee adopted a two-fold plan to engage stakeholders: Some groups made presentations and engaged in direct discussion with the committee, and other groups met in stakeholder roundtables with the board president or vice president, the chairman of the Accountability Committee and the state superintendent, and appropriate department staff. Summaries of these roundtables were provided to all board members.

Education groups were asked to respond to these questions: What is your ability to prepare students in light of the board's discussion around the Profile of a Graduate? What is already being done that aligns with it? What supports need to be put in place to make implementation successful? Are the dispositions the board is considering the right ones? What are we missing?

Bringing the Profile to Life

The Profile of a Graduate depicted in figure 1 shows four overlapping areas for student learning and achievement that are essential for the life-ready student: 1) content knowledge based on statewide standards and its application; 2) workplace skills and behaviors that promote productivity, relationship building, and problem solving; 3) understanding of the opportunities within civic organizations for community engagement and civic responsibility; and 4) participation in career exploration, planning,

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Table 1. Input Offered by Stakeholder Groups

Stakeholder Group	Input
English language learner coordinators	These learners experience particular challenges in earning a high school diploma.
Governor's STEM academies	These academies expand options for acquiring literacy in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and other critical skills, knowledge, and credentials that will prepare students for high-demand, high-wage, and high-skill careers in Virginia.
Military recruiters	Representatives from the Army, Navy, Coast Guard, and Air Force seek students who are scholars, athletes, and leaders. They also look for resiliency, grit, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and citizenship.
Parents	Parents sought effective communications to help them understand changes in diploma options and career pathways.
Students	Two students shared the personal significance of year-long senior projects.
High school innovation planning grantees	Grantees highlighted potential barriers to innovation and where flexibility from state requirements is needed.
Community college and four-year institutions	Characteristics affecting admissions include students' college readiness, persistence, self-regulation of their own learning, mastery of academic content; ability to think critically, analyze, and think independently; having an open mind; an ability to contribute as a member of a group; an ability to navigate differences of opinion in a positive and respectful manner; and a desire to achieve goals while serving others. Factors affecting student success include the ability to transition from high school to college, navigate a new environment, build relationships, participate in deep learning, take risks, cope with uncertainty, show resilience in the face of failure and obstacles, display a passion for learning, and take control and manage his or her life.

and preparation. Foundational skills in each area are critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication, and citizenship.

Yet developing the profile was only the beginning of the board's work. At our May 2016 retreat, we gave staff at the Department of Education the direction necessary to draft language for revising the Standards of Accreditation, to include the Profile of a Graduate. Board members asked staff to craft more parent-friendly language to describe the profile.

Department staff also prepared 10 decision briefs outlining decisions the board needed to make to operationalize the profile and making recommendations for the board to consider.

1. Categorize Diploma Expectations as “Standard Credits,” “Verified Competencies,” or “Requirements.” The brief recommended adding a “requirements” category to the current “standard credits” and “verified competencies” to describe the new diploma expectations. After receiving clarification and

Stakeholder Group	Input
Business leaders	These leaders sought graduates who display professionalism, ethics, punctuality, hard work, appropriate behavior and dress, communication skill, resiliency, curiosity, adaptability, an interest in life-long learning, database skills, problem-solving, personal and business financial literacy, ability to follow directions and get along with others, business writing, critical thinking, public speaking, and the ability to work in teams.
Board's Advisory Committee for Career and Technical Education	Desirable skills include an interest in life-long learning, technical competency, ability to write, ethics, and teamwork.
SOL Innovation Committee	Provided feedback on the Profile of a Graduate, urging a concurrent look at innovation drivers: standards and instruction, assessment, accountability, and professional excellence.
Virginia School Board Association's Task Force on Workforce Readiness	Summarized career and technical education in Virginia Public Schools Survey.
Education constituencies	Board introduced draft Profile of a Graduate.
Division superintendents	Board introduced the draft Profile of a Graduate and diploma strawman proposal.
School counselors	Because an increasing amount of their time is devoted to social-emotional/mental health and noncounseling duties (bus/lunch duty, testing), there was agreement that counselor ratios would need to be lowered if they are to address the skills sought in the profile.
Elementary and secondary school principals	Educators are already moving to more problem-based and experiential learning, but there is also fear, given the ingrained pressure to perform on SOL tests. They agree with the direction the profile takes but posed logistical questions and concerns, especially for school divisions with fewer resources.
Teachers	Teachers questioned the day to day impact on the classroom, the fit with instructional and assessment protocols, the time for implementation, and whether the Virginia Diploma was flexible enough to meet all students' needs.

feedback on what falls into each category, the board endorsed the proposal.

2. Merge the Standard Diploma and the Advanced Studies Diploma into one Virginia Diploma. The Standard Diploma requires 22 standard units of credit and 6 verified credits, whereas the Advanced Studies Diploma requires 26 standard units of credit and 9 verified credits. The Virginia Diploma would require 25 standard credits and 5 verified competencies. This would represent a

significant change, increasing required credits for many students. Board members sought further development, consideration, feedback from parents, and additional data on efficacy before making a decision on the proposal.

3. Reduce Number of Verified Credits Needed to Earn a Diploma. Verified credit refers to credit awarded for a course in which a student earns a standard unit of credit and achieves a passing score on a corresponding end-of-course SOL test or an additional

Figure 1. Profile of a Virginia Graduate

In Virginia, the Life Ready Individual:			
Content Knowledge	Workplace Skills	Community Engagement & Civic Responsibility	Career Exploration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses the knowledge and skills described in the Standards of Learning for core instruction areas (English, math, science, and history/social studies), the arts, personal wellness, languages, and Career Technical education programs. • Demonstrates the knowledge and skills necessary to transition to and achieve in a global society and be prepared for life beyond high school graduation. • Explores multiple subject areas that reflect personal interests and abilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates productive work ethic, professionalism, and personal responsibility. • Communicates effectively in a variety of ways, and to a variety of audiences, to interact with individuals and within groups. • Demonstrates workplace skills, including collaboration, communication, creative thinking, critical thinking, problem solving, and responsible citizenship. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes connections and is involved in the community through civic opportunities. • Demonstrates integrity, maintains personal health and wellness, and shows respect for others. • Shows respect for diversity of individuals, groups, and cultures in words and actions. • Understands and demonstrates citizenship by participating in community and government decision-making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands knowledge, skills, and abilities sought by employers for career opportunities. • Aligns knowledge, skills, and abilities with personal interests to identify career opportunities. • Sets goals and has knowledge of a variety of pathways, course work, and/or requirements to achieve goals. • Develops skills to align to current workplace needs, and that adapt to evolving job opportunities. • Applies skills and knowledge by participating in workplace experiences.
Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking, Collaboration, Communication, and Citizenship			

test approved by the Board of Education. The proposal would reduce secondary school verified credits to four: one each in math, English, science, and history and social science, with the possibility of flexibility for locally awarded verified credits, following guidelines provided by the Board of Education. Board members endorsed the proposal.

4. Require Expanded Career Exposure, Exploration, and Planning. Currently, all schools are required to develop a personal Academic and Career Plan (ACP) for each seventh-grade student. The proposal includes more specific language related to career exposure, exploration, and planning. As a component of the enhanced policy, the board would require that all students take a career investigation course in middle school. Board members endorsed the proposal, contingent upon resources being made available.

5. Incorporate Applied Knowledge and Skills Credential. The credential may be earned by demonstrated competency in each of the “5 Cs”—critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and citizenship—and within other domains established by the board. Some board members asked how attainment of these skills would be measured and how they would be aligned with workforce credentials. As with the merged diploma proposal, board members said this proposal needed further development, consideration, and feedback before they could adopt it.

6. Add Internship/Externship Options. This proposal encourages but does not require work-based learning experiences related to students’ career goals or interests. Board members endorsed the proposal.

7. Require Capstone Project. All high school students would pursue independent research

on a question of their choice, engaging their analytical skills and developing a final product that reflects their findings. Board members supported the concept as a component of applied knowledge and experiential learning.

8. Develop Career-Specific Courses/Competencies within Traditional Credit Areas. The board took no action on this proposal.

9. Increase Mathematics Requirements. This proposal would require students to take a course involving mathematical thinking and problem solving in each year of high school and gain at least three mathematics credits. Board members noted the proposal needs further development, consideration, and feedback.

10. Consider Alternate Science Options for the Proposed Virginia Diploma. The board was asked to consider two proposals to meet the science diploma requirement: 1) a sequence of 70 clock-hour (one semester) or segmented treatments of earth science, biology, chemistry, and physics, which can be aggregated for up to two science credits; and 2) a three-credit sequence of integrated, problem-based, applied science courses (140 clock hours each or an alternate credit-bearing designation that adheres to board guidelines to waive 140 hours) that use concepts and laboratory skills and practices from the foundational science areas. Board members asked for a clearer explanation of the proposal, relayed questions from stakeholders, and inquired why coding, technology, and engineering were not included. While it expressed interest in further exploration of alternative approaches for science standard credits, the board did not act on this proposal.

Over the course of the summer of 2016, the board held further public hearings and stakeholder roundtables in Manassas, Williamsburg, Abingdon, and Lynchburg to gather feedback on the critical needs of public schools, the proposed Profile of a Graduate and the redesign of high school, changes to the state's accountability system, and board recommendations amending the Standards of Quality.

What's Next

Over 15 months, Virginia's board made a concerted effort to engage constituencies and

educate ourselves about the implications of the changes we were planning. Through the fall of 2016, the board reviewed proposed amendments to the Standards of Accreditation, focusing largely on amendments to put into effect the Profile of a Graduate and the redesign of high school. Board members continued to question proposals in order to better understand the implications for school divisions, asked for additional information, and made concrete suggestions. The proposed regulations came back before the board in January, were adopted, and are now subject to the requirements in the Virginia Administrative Process Act. Following executive branch review, they will be published, and a public comment period will follow. At the end of that comment period, the board can make additional changes based on public comment. Once those regulations become final, the board will begin to provide the guidance, communication, and supports necessary to implement the new requirements.

The board is following a compressed timeline imposed in the 2016 legislation and has felt those time constraints keenly. It is my hope that the comment period will allow for the necessary feedback. Certainly, engagement was extremely helpful to the board as it developed the proposal.

Through the Profile of a Graduate, the Virginia board seeks to ensure that every child who graduates from a public school in Virginia has the knowledge, skills, and attributes and is ready to succeed in life—whether in the military, the world of work, or postsecondary education. The changes that we proposed envision that every student would begin in elementary school to be exposed to different careers. In middle school, each student would take a career investigation course and begin to understand how their individual interests can inform their career choices. The middle school student would create an academic and career plan that would be used to develop a course of study for high school. In high school, students would have opportunities to participate in work-based learning experiences.

This intentional focus on the acquisition of skills and attributes, as well as the more student tailored course of study in high school, is intended to ensure that every student who graduates from a public high school in Virginia has been prepared for what comes next. ■

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