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# An Open Letter to Governor-Elect McAuliffe

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## Improving Education in Virginia

## An open letter to Gov.-elect McAuliffe

BY THOMAS SHIELDS,  
GENEVIEVE SIEGEL-HAWLEY  
AND THAD WILLIAMSON

Almost every governor elected in recent memory has recognized how critical education is to the economic and social welfare of our commonwealth. Each has come into office ready to put his personal stamp on Virginia's educational system. However, we believe the time has come for our state's chief executive to realize that our current system is no longer functioning in an equitable manner, particularly for children who are at or below the poverty line.

We have created a system of education that is a Dickensian tale of two worlds — one that allows students from affluent schools to have enriching experiences and opportunities for critical thinking, collaboration and creativity in safe and inviting facilities, and another that forces children in high-poverty schools to confront curricula narrowly focused on benchmark testing and "drill and kill" instructional methods in schools that are broken, outdated and staffed with deeply underappreciated teachers.

We offer a challenge to you — our governor-in-waiting — to fundamentally change our state's system of education to assist and value those children who live in poverty, as well as the many more at risk of falling into poverty. While previous administrations, such as that of Gov. Tim Kaine, have tackled socio-economic inequality and poverty in general, we believe it is time to focus directly on the educational needs of high-risk children.

We do not need more tests, hard-nosed accountability and "no excuses" thinking that allows adults to treat poor children as objects in a game of accreditation, proficiency and annual measurable objectives. Labeling high-poverty schools with a failing grade and increasing standardization and testing to improve that grade simply promotes more rote knowledge and narrowing of the curriculum without offering students a real path to post-secondary education and better life and career opportunities.

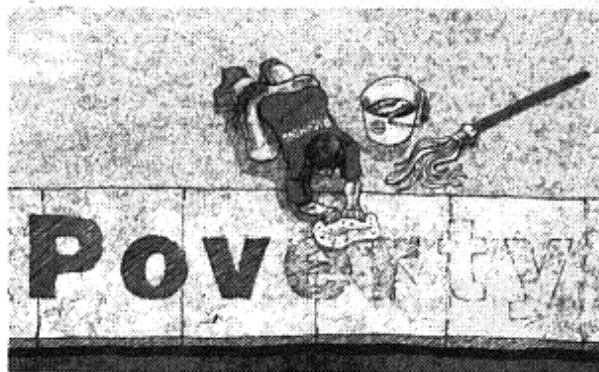
And because child poverty rates are increasing dramatically, these punitive policies will impact more children now than ever before.

Our state government needs to realize that children who live in poverty face emotional and social challenges far different from the experiences of a child in a stable, higher-income family. Children in poverty are under acute and chronic stress, which impacts their ability to learn in the short term and has damaging effects on the body and brain in the long term. Cognitive functions associated with language, working memory and spatial and visual cognition are also impacted. A child in poverty often experiences more absences from school, more inattention, reduced creativity and memory, difficulty with motivation and social-behavioral issues.

Such effects are simply magnified when schools serve overwhelmingly high proportions of poor students. We have known for many decades that the overall socio-economic makeup of a school can have a greater impact on a child's achievement than that same child's own socio-economic background. Across the state, high-poverty schools also tend to be defined by stark patterns of racial and ethnic isolation. Double segregation by race/ethnicity and class is a central reason why to this day, nearly 60 years after Brown v. Board, separate still remains unequal.

As the newly elected governor, you have the opportunity to set a different course for education in Virginia.

We believe one of your first acts should be to establish a state-level Commission on Equal Educational Opportunity. It could be modeled after the national Equity and Excellence Commission, which produced a groundbreaking report last winter titled "For Each And Every Child: A Strategy for Equity and Excellence." That commission and the ensuing report presented findings and recommendations aimed at creating more equitable educational policies. Similarly, our proposed commission in Virginia would be tasked with reviewing policies at the state level that exacerbate disparities and would put forth solutions that address opportunity and equity gaps in our education system.



## Poverty in Richmond

This is one in a series of columns discussing various aspects of the Mayor's Anti-Poverty Commission report and, subsequently, the Maggie L. Walker Initiative for Expanding Opportunity and Fighting Poverty. Link to the series through the Opinion page at [TimesDispatch.com](http://TimesDispatch.com).

erbate disparities and would put forth solutions that address opportunity and equity gaps in our education system.

This commission could have a multipronged approach with a focus on developing a policy agenda in such key areas as:

- Bolstering the state's investment in early childhood education;
- Providing wrap-around services to students and their families, particularly mothers, that address their needs in a holistic manner;
- Understanding the integral role of health services for the at-risk child in the education process;
- Working with nonprofits, places of worship and other

entities to engage parents in facilitating the cognitive and emotional growth of a child;

- Probing the nature of standards and high-stakes testing, particularly as it relates to the teaching and learning of children who are at-risk and in high need;
- Meeting the language needs of children in a manner that recognizes second languages as a crucial asset to their educational development;
- Understanding that high-quality instruction can help alleviate the effects of poverty and exploring how can we attract, train and retain superior teachers in high-poverty schools;
- Examining our state's

school finance system with an eye to how resources are distributed to schools with high levels of poverty;

- Stimulating regional collaboration around educational issues through the provision of meaningful state-level incentives;

- Providing guidance to school districts related to the creation of student assignment policies that foster racially and economically diverse schools;

- Ensuring that basic civil rights protections like free transportation, inclusive outreach and non-competitive admissions policies are embedded in the design of rapidly growing school-choice programs; and, finally

- Appointing officials to your administration, the State Board of Education and the Superintendent of Public Instruction who are willing to confront issues of poverty, equity and diversity in our schools.

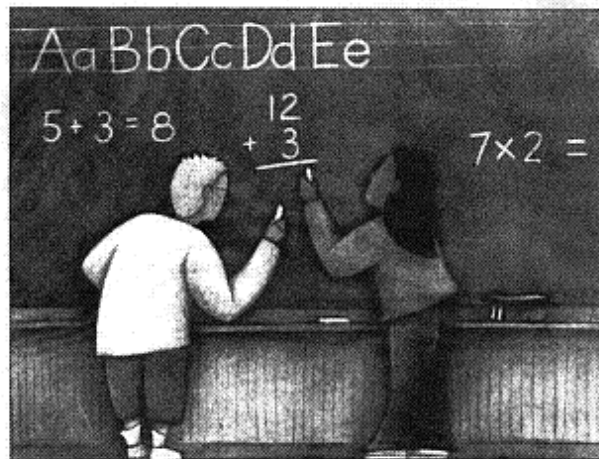
As we pursue such policies, it is critical to recognize that schools cannot reduce inequality and provide a path to the middle class on their own. Parallel efforts to promote social mobility are needed in other sectors, including housing, employment and transportation. But when it comes to education, we think that you, Gov.-elect McAuliffe, should focus on policies that promote equity, access and inclusion for all children. If we engage our minds and hearts on these issues, Virginia might begin to break the link between a child's ZIP code and his or her subsequent life chances. The bottom line: Every student needs to have the same equality of opportunity for the future success of our commonwealth.

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Drs. Shields and Williamson were members of the Mayor's Anti-Poverty Commission.



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