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New Profile of a Virginia High School Graduate: A Research Brief

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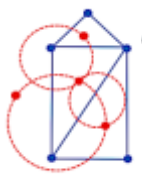
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a research brief



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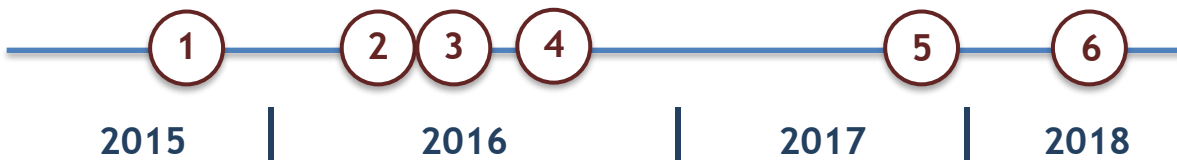
NEW PROFILE of a VIRGINIA HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE

a research brief by David Naff, M.A.
Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium
December 9, 2016

Guided by recommendations from the Standards of Learning Innovation Committee - a group of educators, policymakers, and community members charged by the Virginia Secretary of Education with furthering PK-12 education in the Commonwealth - the Virginia General Assembly has recently passed legislation through House Bill 895 and Senate Bill 336 directing the Board of Education to redefine the “Profile of a Virginia Graduate.”¹ The legislation indicates that beginning with the freshman class of 2018, students receiving a diploma in the state of Virginia must adhere to new graduation standards that include life skills that could potentially enhance the academic, civic, and social/emotional competencies of those entering postsecondary education and the workforce. Ultimately, the purpose of the legislation is to ensure that Virginia high school graduates leave high school “life ready.”¹ According to State Senator John C. Miller, “*The vision ... is that both college-bound and career-bound students will be much better-prepared to enter the workforce or to be successful in college.*”² However, in order to get students to that point it is necessary to know more about what resources will be required as well as what the intended and unintended consequences are of changing graduation standards. The purpose of this research brief is to provide background on the origins of the reform, summarize the rationale for the revised state high school graduation requirements, outline the timeline for implementation of the new standards, and explore the current research relevant to this policy initiative.

How has this conversation progressed?

The development of the new Profile of a Virginia Graduate has progressed along the following timeline.



- 1** **10.2015 Standards of Learning Innovation Committee report:** On October 29, 2015 the Standards of Learning Innovation Committee - charged by the Virginia Secretary of Education with examining issues of instruction, assessment, and accountability - issued a report to the Virginia Board of Education offering recommendations for the future direction of learning and assessment in the Commonwealth.³ The committee comprised 40 members including state delegates, school board members, superintendents, principals, PK-12 educators, postsecondary

educators, parents of Virginia PK-12 students, and other educational leaders in the state. Among their [recommendations](#) for advancing education in Virginia was a redesign of the state's high school graduation standards, which included five suggestions:

1. Identify specific skills and knowledge that students should attain in high school to meet the profile determined through meetings with relevant stakeholders.
2. Adjust high school graduation requirements to match the new expectations outlined in the profile with multiple pathways towards college and career readiness.
3. Revise current Standards of Learning so that there are “a smaller number of more meaningful standards” that reflect the needs of today’s students.
4. Identify types and timings of assessments that support these new expectations.
5. Offer support to school districts during the transition to the new standards, including modeling curricula, instructional strategies, and lesson plans.

In the development of the new graduation standards, the SOL Committee urged the Board to give particular attention to the five “Cs”: **critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication, and citizenship**. In 2002, the [National Education Association \(NEA\)](#) developed a “Framework for 21st Century Learning” that outlined 18 life skills necessary to participate in a global society.⁴ After receiving feedback from various stakeholders, this list narrowed to four skills deemed particularly relevant to PK-12 education: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. The SOL committee appears to have adopted these skills as part of their recommendations to the state Board of Education while adding “citizenship” as a fifth skill necessary for success in an evolving Virginia economy.³

2 **04.2016 House Bill 895/Senate Bill 336 passed and approved:** Based on these recommendations from the committee, the General Assembly developed and passed **House Bill 895** and **Senate Bill 336** with broad bipartisan support in both houses⁵, which were signed by Governor McAuliffe in the spring of 2016.

3 **07-08.2016 Statewide public hearings:** Since the passing of this legislation last April, the State Board of Education has held public hearings across Virginia to gain input from stakeholders in education and business. Feedback from these public hearings indicates a general support for the idea that Virginia high school students graduate not just with content knowledge but also essential life skills.

4 **10-11.2016 Proposed revisions to Standards of Accreditation submitted to executive branch review:** This fall, proposed revisions are pending review by the executive branch. These revisions will outline the specific requirements anticipated for the updated profile of a Virginia high school graduate.

5 **12.2017 Final revisions completed:** Clear standards regarding the updated Profile of a Virginia Graduate are scheduled to be completed by December of 2017.



09.2018 New graduation requirements applicable to Class of 2022:

The transition to these new diploma standards has already begun, although there is much yet to be determined about specific requirements or the processes and resources necessary to meet them.

Considering the broad details associated with these pending changes to graduation requirements in Virginia and the rapid trajectory in which they are set to be implemented, there are some pertinent questions. These include implications for equity, processes for assessing “life skills,” and considerations of the resources required to implement these new standards. The following sections explore these questions and propose additional ones that can further understanding of the new profile of a Virginia high school graduate for educators tasked with guiding students toward college and career readiness.

What are the implications for equity?

All decisions made in public education must attend to considerations of equity as its mission is to offer the same opportunities to all students, regardless of background. A 2014 study by Plunk, Tate, Bierut, & Gruzca analyzed Census data from the 1980s and 1990s and explored how exposure to increased course graduation requirements (CGR) in math and science was related to various outcomes in a sample of nearly 3,000,000 students.⁶ The authors found that increases in graduation standards were associated with higher rates of school dropout and a decrease in the likelihood of starting college directly after high school for Black males and Hispanic males and females. However, Hispanic males who did start college directly after high school were more likely to earn a degree than those not exposed to higher CGR. These results capture the potential positive and negative outcomes of increasing graduation requirements for different demographic groups and suggest that efforts to do so should be accompanied by careful monitoring of the intended and unintended consequences. While the pending changes in Virginia may not necessarily include an increase in rigor, research on the potential consequences of shifting graduation standards offers a reminder of the importance of considering how such decisions impact different groups of students.

One of the recommendations of the SOL Committee was to offer multiple graduation pathways. Having different avenues to graduation can be beneficial when they allow students to develop in-depth career-related skills and mastery of academic content.⁷ This is consistent with the proposed goals of Virginia lawmakers in the adjustment of graduation standards, as State Superintendent Steven Staples reflected, “*We are not taking content knowledge out, but we are allowing students to engage in content knowledge in a more flexible way so there is room for them to learn workplace skills, community and civic engagement, and career planning.*”¹

However, there are some potential concerns that arise from the provision of different graduation pathways, as the practice of tracking students along different standards can potentially be debilitating to the motivation of traditionally underperforming students. Even in racially and socioeconomically diverse schools, which have shown to be more

supportive of academic success than schools of concentrated poverty,⁸ tracking students into different academic levels can lead to students segregating themselves into courses that may be below their true academic abilities in order to stay with their social group or because their expectations for success have been compromised.⁹ It seems that different pathways to graduation can be beneficial if done so in a way that does not segregate students by ability level, and often by extension demographics like race and SES, within a school.

What are the processes for assessing “life skills?”

A key component of the adjusted profile of a Virginia graduate includes the push for students to build the necessary “life skills” to be successful in college and career, including critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication, and citizenship. The SOL committee included these skills because they deemed them as necessary to be successful in an evolving Virginia economy that requires more than academic achievement outcomes from a high school diploma.³ Educational research has increasingly looked at skills beyond content knowledge, known as “soft skills,” “non-cognitive skills,” “21st century skills,” or “social/emotional skills,” with growing recognition that these are critical components of understanding student motivation and academic performance.¹⁰

A 2014 research report by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) explored how different states define standards for measuring social and emotional learning (SEL) at the preschool through high school levels.¹¹ They found that states that were able to effectively incorporate this element into their assessment of students were those who had clear definitions of what constructs they wanted to empirically measure, focused on establishing a positive school climate, worked to make instruction culturally-sensitive, and offered professional development to staff on how to enhance these skills in students and how to make sense of assessment results. At the time of the report, only three states had adopted comprehensive SEL standards, with Illinois being the first to do so in 2004 followed by Kansas and Pennsylvania in 2012. Still, these standards were often incorporated into other core competencies to the point of lacking clarity in specific benchmarks by grade level. CASEL recommended that more states adopt SEL standards with clear benchmarks separate from academic expectations, and that they extend beyond the PK-5 grades where SEL tends to be more of a priority.

What resources will be needed?

A clear concern associated with shifting requirements for graduation is the fiscal and staffing resources that it will require. Based on the available evidence, including a review of other states who have undergone similar adjustments, the financial impact is somewhat unclear. [Washington](#) passed legislation in 2006 for redefining the profile of high school graduates in their state, which included 24 college and career readiness requirements.¹² However, implementation of these requirements stalled due to cost and the state moved forward with adjustments to graduation requirements for the class of 2016 and beyond, but only included those that did not require any additional funding. Similarly, in

[Maryland](#) in 2013 the state adopted the College and Career Readiness and Completion Act requiring four math credits for all graduates and requiring districts to pay for dual enrollment tuition for students.¹³ The proposal indicated that there would be no fiscal impact for the annual state education budget. An update to graduation requirements in [Connecticut](#) in 2015 came with anticipated costs of \$14-\$21 million statewide, although there were some requirements, like community service hours, that did not come with any anticipated cost.¹⁴ Future research in this area could look at individual state budgets who have adopted new graduation requirements to see how those requirements align with the proposed changes in Virginia and what their accompanying costs were.

Discussion and Persisting Questions

With the new definition of a profile of a Virginia graduate pending, the general timeline for implementation is fairly clear and the need to gain a better understanding of what these changes will mean for schools in the metropolitan Richmond area is imminent. It will be important to help districts be as prepared as possible to accommodate the new standards ahead of their implementation with the freshman class of 2018. Thus far we know some of the existing research and effects in other states implementing similar changes in graduation requirements. Still, some key questions persist:

1. What are some of the considerations for equity, including intended and unintended consequences of changes in graduation standards?
2. How can Virginia schools systematically assess “life skills” in students, including measurement, anticipated growth, and provision of interventions when students do not meet these standards?
3. What resources/staffing changes will be needed to implement these changes? If there is an internship requirement, who will be in charge of coordination?
4. Will there be adjustments to Virginia Standards of Learning that accompany the updated graduation profile?
5. What implications might exist for the elementary and middle school levels?
6. What have been the implications of similar reforms in other states?
7. What are the implications for student outcomes like postsecondary educational attainment and career success?

Gaining clarity in these areas could help school divisions better prepare for these pending changes to the profile of a Virginia high school graduate.

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