



February 16, 2024

Dear Secretary Guidera, Asst Secretary Gullickson and Dr. Coons:

We appreciate the opportunity to provide input into the first draft of the Virginia Department of Education's 2024 English SOLs. First, we want to commend VDOE for emphasizing additional and earlier writing in the curriculum and research-driven composition. Additionally, the explicit inclusion of the Science of Reading (phonics) for reading instruction is greatly appreciated, along with the emphasis on grammar and vocabulary. These are all excellent, and much needed, changes.

In speaking with our parent and teacher members, Arlington Parents for Education would like to provide the following additional suggestions:

- Emphasize more lengthy composition in 7th grade, and across a variety of subjects.
- Specifically address vocabulary building by drilling, vocabulary lists, and other methods of demonstrating accurate understanding of content- and grade-specific vocabulary words.
- We are happy to see the introduction of research into the curriculum. However, we would appreciate if it could be integrated explicitly into the composition aspect of the curriculum, so students are taught to do research-driven writing rather than learning it as a separate concept.
- Parents and teachers alike feel that Arlington County relies too heavily on screens and EdTech (Lexia and Dreambox, primarily) for ELA instruction in ES classrooms. There is little evidence to support the efficacy of these programs, yet they are in widespread use. We would greatly appreciate guidance that emphasizes the importance of minimizing the use of EdTech and devices in ES classrooms due to the lack of evidence regarding their efficacy.
- Here in Arlington County, 6th graders were mandated to take a year of 'reading'. This consisted of two full classes per week where the students spent the majority of the class reading their own book quietly. We theorize that this stems from Lucy Calkins' theory of developing a love of reading by just being around books; this theory has obviously been debunked by an abundance of evidence. Given the immense importance of grammar, vocabulary and writing in 6th grade, we would appreciate the addition of any language that dissuades school systems from devoting entire class periods to students reading alone, with no instruction taking place. We would welcome guidance that indicates something to the effect of "students should be encouraged/required to spend time outside the classroom reading; any in-class reading that occurs should be with the intent of immediate classroom discussion/synthesizing of passages and/or writing composition activities which require students to demonstrate understanding and help them build composition skills."

We appreciate your consideration of our input. Thank you again for producing such a comprehensive, evidence-driven and thoughtful SOL revision.

Best,

Alison Babb, Sheila Kelly, Sheila Leonard, Amy Rzepka and Katie Sunderland
Board Members, Arlington Parents for Education