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State Superintendent Explores Assessment and Accreditation Flexibility for Virginia Schools; Requests US Department of Education to Consider Statewide Testing Waivers

RICHMOND — Superintendent of Public Instruction James Lane announced today that the Virginia Department of Education will seek maximum flexibility for schools and students to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, including relief from federal and state requirements related to testing.

“This is an unprecedented situation with schools closed statewide for two weeks and the very real possibility of a significantly longer shutdown,” Lane said. “VDOE has advised school divisions of the flexibility they already have to delay Standards of Learning testing, but it is clear that we now have to take additional steps to ensure that schools and students — especially seniors completing their graduation requirements — are not adversely impacted by circumstances beyond their control.”

The two-week statewide shut down of schools ordered last week by Governor Ralph Northam came as eighth graders and high school students were taking SOL writing tests. In response to the governor’s order, VDOE has already extended statewide testing windows for all SOL assessments in all subject areas; however, the department is planning for further flexibility.

“Given what we are now hearing about the potential duration of the coronavirus pandemic, we now have to seek further flexibility related to state testing. To do this, the commonwealth must have relief from the annual testing requirements under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act,” Lane said. “Last week, the U.S. Department of Education said it would consider issuing waivers for individual schools impacted by COVID-19. We are beyond that now, and ask our federal partners for a process to grant statewide relief so states and schools can focus on the health and wellbeing of students.”

ESSA requires annual testing in reading and mathematics in grades 3-8 and at least once in high school. The federal law also requires states to administer science tests at least once during elementary, middle and high school.

Virginia Board of Education President Daniel Gecker said the state board will review its school accreditation regulations, along with other state testing requirements, and identify what actions it can take to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on school accreditation ratings, especially in areas related to state assessments.

“These are extraordinary times and it would not be fair to our students, teachers, principals and other educators to have the accreditation ratings of their schools suffer next year because of the coronavirus pandemic,” Gecker said.

(more)

The state superintendent has also directed VDOE staff to review state laws and regulations related to state graduation requirements to determine what steps must be taken to ensure that seniors who would otherwise graduate this spring are not denied diplomas.

“I want students and parents to know that Governor Northam and I are committed to taking every step possible to minimize the impact of coronavirus on students and to ensure that our seniors are able to graduate,” Lane said. “This includes exploring exemptions from requirements unrelated to coursework for students due to graduate this spring.”

VDOE is encouraging school divisions to continue to monitor the [COVID-19 and Virginia Public Schools page](#) on the department website for updates.

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