

## Virginia's 'together and unequal' school standards

By Andrew Rotherham, Published: August 24

For years, Virginia tried to sidestep various provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind education law. No Child's accountability requirements are awkward because they threaten to shine a bright light on the highly uneven performance of Virginia's schools and the state's significant achievement gaps. So when [Education Secretary Arne Duncan allowed](#) states to set new performance targets earlier this year, Virginia, [along with many other states](#), jumped at the chance. Unfortunately, rather than taking the opportunity to focus more on underserved students, the state took the stunning step of adopting dramatically different school performance targets based on race, ethnicity and income.

President George W. Bush famously talked of "the soft bigotry of low expectations" in education, meaning the subtle ways educators and policymakers shortchange some students by expecting less of them. Virginia's new policy is anything but subtle. For example, [under the new rules](#), schools are expected to have 78 percent of white students and 89 percent of Asian students passing Virginia's Standards of Learning math tests but just 57 percent of black students, 65 percent of Hispanic students and 59 percent of low-income students. The goals for special-education students are even lower, at 49 percent. Worse, those targets are for 2017. The intermediate targets are even less ambitious — 36 percent for special-education students this year, for instance. Goals for reading will be set later.

Because Congress is years behind schedule in updating the No Child law, some provisions are showing their age and revisions to the accountability rules are long overdue. Virginia's new policy, however, is a step backward, not an improvement. It sends a debilitating message to students, parents and educators because there is no way around the fact that the commonwealth is codifying different expectations for various groups of students. Virginia students of all races and incomes go to school together, but "together and unequal" is the message of the new policy. Assuming that not even six in 10 poor or black students will pass the state's math test in 2017 reinforces negative beliefs about what should be expected from these students. [Virginia's chapter of the NAACP](#) and the [Legislative Black Caucus](#) have already spoken out against the new policy.

There are better ways to design an accountability system. For starters, Virginia could set common targets that assume minority and poor students can pass state tests at the same rates as others and at the same time provide substantially more support to these students and their schools.

It's important to remember that these accountability rules do not create high stakes for students. They are designed to create performance metrics and requirements for improving schools. The new performance targets do anticipate some closing of the achievement for students groups that now lag behind. Yet little in recent history, state policy or the waiver plan approved by Duncan inspires confidence that Virginia will redouble its efforts on behalf of struggling students.

[State officials argue](#) that because these performance targets are not the same as what Virginia uses for school accreditation, this is not really a “together but unequal” policy. Unfortunately, relying on the accreditation system inadvertently reveals the extent of Virginia’s problem. For schools to be fully accredited, they need only pass a fixed percentage of students, usually 70 percent, and there is no disaggregation or accountability by race, income or any socioeconomic group at all.

This approach masks substantial achievement gaps in many schools. It’s also why 96 percent of all Virginia schools are fully accredited at the same time that only 18 percent of black eighth-graders, 18 percent of low-income eighth-graders and 27 percent of Hispanic eighth-graders are proficient in math in the [benchmark National Assessment of Educational Progress](#).

For years, a small band of school reformers in Virginia has tried to point out how the state overlooks too many students, but the flawed accreditation system has made it a quixotic effort; it’s hard to argue with the appearance of 96 percent success.

Now, left to their own devices, school officials have created an accountability system that makes different expectations for different groups of students the official policy. Virginia is not the only state using the flexibility the Obama administration is offering to weaken accountability for at-risk groups of students. Regardless, Virginians can and must do better.

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