

Testimony of  
Secretary Laura W. Fornash  
Commonwealth of Virginia  
before the  
U.S. House Committee on Education and Workforce  
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Chairman Kline, members of the committee. I am Laura Fornash, Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Virginia. In my Secretariat, I assist Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell in the development and implementation of the state's education and workforce policy and oversee Virginia's 16 public universities, the Virginia Community College System, five higher education and research centers, the Virginia Department of Education, and the state-supported museums. Thank you for the opportunity to join you today to talk about the education reform efforts that the Commonwealth has taken under the leadership of Governor Bob McDonnell.

Since taking office in January of 2010, the Governor has made education and education reform a top priority of his administration, with a laser focus on college and career readiness. We are raising standards, focusing on literacy, strengthening our high school diploma requirements, and ensuring access to dual enrollment classes through the local community colleges which leads to credentials that transfer to our public and private four year institutions.

Beginning in March of 2010, the Governor issued an executive order establishing the Governor's Commission on Higher Education Reform, Innovation and Investment. This commission, comprised of business, education and community leaders from across the Commonwealth, helped to develop a strategic vision and recommendations that turned into the Virginia Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2011 or the "Top Jobs for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" higher education legislation. This landmark reform legislation provides a road map to ensure the college dream is affordable and accessible for Virginians. Our bold statutory goal of 100,000 new degrees over the next 15 years, with a focus on STEM-H degrees, is supported by more than \$350 million over the last three years that was proposed by Governor McDonnell and endorsed by the Virginia General Assembly. Additionally, we are using a points based performance

funding model to incentivize our institutions in a variety of areas including increased associate's and bachelor's degree production especially for underrepresented populations, increased growth of STEM-H degrees and accelerated time-to-degree programs. The model was developed by policy makers, the business community and leadership from our higher education institutions to provide financial incentives for outcomes-primarily increased graduates. Our institutions are rising to the challenge of these goals and our reforms are working. Over the past two years we've added over 3,800 slots for undergraduate in-state students, and last year we recorded the lowest average yearly tuition increase of 4% at our public college and universities in over a decade. In Virginia, we believe that more diplomas mean a stronger economy and more jobs and we are implementing policies to strengthen this connection.

States rely on the federal government to assist with higher education access through various federal financial aid programs. You have made some reforms but more must be done to maximize these federal dollars and ensure those who enter our higher education institutions exit with employable credentials. As the federal government continues to reform its' financial aid programs, I encourage you to review the recently released report, "The American Dream 2.0: How Financial Aid Can Help Improve College Access, Affordability, and Completion" supported by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It provides three key recommendations to help ensure these dollars provide student success and completion:

- Make aid simpler and more transparent;
- Spur innovations in higher education that can lower costs and meet the needs of today's students; and
- Ask institutions, states, and students to share responsibility for producing more graduates without compromising access and affordability.

We have also been working collaboratively with our K-12, higher education and workforce partners to develop and implement the Virginia Longitudinal Data System. The system allows for integrated student-teacher reporting that matches individual teachers to students and provides certain teachers with estimates of student growth and will soon be also able to link teachers to their preparation programs and student outcomes.

This past October, Virginia become one of only a handful of states to release wage outcomes data on college graduates, down to the level of individual major and institution. By August 2013, the Commonwealth will include within these reports associated statistics on education debt, also down to the level of major and institution. For the first time, students and families will be able to use specific information about the full costs, associated debt, and early career wages to make informed choices about postsecondary education. We've also used this data to create a workforce report card to benchmark program outcomes and eventually evaluate program effectiveness.

We also believe that in order to get a good job and good college education, our youth must be prepared for our highly-skilled, highly-technical workforce and the rigor of postsecondary education coursework. Three areas of focus for us in K-12 education reform include expanding educational opportunity, ensuring excellence in the classroom and increasing innovation and accountability. Through legislative and budget proposals, we have increased the percentage of K-12 funding going into the classroom from 62% to 64%. We have focused on ensuring students can read before being promoted to the fourth grade, funded incentives for STEM teachers to keep them in the classroom and removed mandates to give local school divisions greater flexibility. Even with these initiatives, we continue to look for ways to ensure excellence in the classroom and opportunity for our students.

Great teachers in great schools make great students and citizens. A great teacher makes all the difference in the life of a young person. We are working to recruit, incentivize, retain and reward excellent teachers and treat them like the professionals that they are. This year, the governor introduced The Educator Fairness Act that will streamline the bureaucratic grievance procedure to benefit teachers, principals, ultimately students. This legislation extends the probationary period for new teachers to between three to five years, and requires a satisfactory performance rating as demonstrated through a new performance evaluation system, which includes student academic progress as a significant component, to keep a continuing contract. Last week this proposal passed the floor of the House of Delegates with a bi-partisan vote and unanimously passed from the Senate Education and Health committee.

Further, we want to incentivize our very best teachers to excel in the classroom. The governor proposed \$15 million for school districts to reward well-performing educators by establishing the Strategic Compensation Grant Fund. This strategic compensation plan, based on a model developed by a local Virginia school system, will be implemented through local guidelines that best fit each school division's unique characteristics and mission. We want to reward the teachers who mentor others, work in hard-to-staff schools and subjects, and show significant academic progress with their students. This will allow for additional compensation for many of our great teachers who go above and beyond every day.

In the Commonwealth, we equip low performing schools with turnaround specialists and additional resources from the state and private sector. If our schools haven't improved that's unacceptable. Therefore, the governor has proposed a bold initiative to establish a statewide Opportunity Educational Institution to provide a high quality education alternative for children attending any chronically underperforming public elementary or secondary school. The Opportunity Educational Institution will create a new statewide school division to turnaround our failing schools. If a school is consistently failing, the Opportunity Educational Institution will step in to manage it. If the school has failed for three years, the Institution can take it over and provide a brand new approach to a broken system. This model is proven nationally. Louisiana and Tennessee have created Recovery and Achievement districts, and their results are positive. For the very small subset of schools that are failing Virginia's students, we have no other option.

Other school choice initiatives that we have focused on in the Commonwealth include the development of College Partnership Laboratory School, Virtual School Programs and Public Charter Schools. During the McDonnell administration, the governor has introduced several pieces of legislation to strengthen our charter school law and encourage local community leaders and charter management organizations to look to the Commonwealth for growth. Currently, Virginia only has 4 public charter schools. We will continue to look for ways to expand high-quality public charter schools to provide families with options for their children.

In the absence of Congressional reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), Virginia has joined a number of states and responded to Secretary

Duncan's offer to grant flexibility in implementing certain provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. While Virginia appreciates the flexibility afforded states by the Secretary, granting temporary waivers of prescriptive NCLB requirements is no substitute for a comprehensive update of the law. We believe Congress, not the U.S. Department of Education, should make those important decisions that affect every state and all public school students.

As the mother of three young children, Carter, Grace and Wynn, I know the importance of a good education. We must continue to raise the bar and end failure. We must continue to bring more innovation, accountability and choices to our public education system. Excellent education demands having the courage to try new approaches and the Commonwealth is working to implement bold initiatives to ensure a high-quality education for all students. An educated workforce helps the Commonwealth attract and retain job-creating businesses. With these bold initiatives we will not only strengthen our education system, but also strengthen and grow our economy and help our citizens find the good-paying and rewarding jobs they need and deserve.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and I am happy to take any questions.

Laura W. Fornash

Secretary of Education

Commonwealth of Virginia