19 area schools get SOL waivers; Henrico didn't apply

By Zachary Reid

Two months after Henrico County schools Superintendent Patrick Russo and four of his Virginia peers asked for flexibility in administering Standards of Learning assessments, the state has announced 54 SOL waivers for high-achieving schools.

Though state Superintendent of Public Instruction Patricia I. Wright's plan to grant the waivers was prompted by Russo's request, Russo and several of his fellow superintendents did not apply for waivers.

"During recent months, several superintendents have complained to the state board that — because of annual accreditation — they are requiring even high-achieving students to spend too much time focused on preparing for the tests," Wright said in a statement Monday. "While I reject the idea that accountability is a barrier to rich, in-depth instruction for all students, I wanted to remind school divisions of the flexibility that already exists in the accreditation standards for innovation and advanced teaching and learning."

Russo and his peers in Albemarle, Fairfax and Roanoke counties and the city of Virginia Beach appeared before a state board committee in May to ask if they could administer tests for elementary and middle school students at different points in the school and, if necessary, offer retests.

Wright balked at that plan. But then a month later, she encouraged superintendents statewide to take advantage of a never-before-used 2006 policy from the Virginia Board of Education. Under it, chosen schools don't have to report their scores for three years, but they still have to administer the tests. The schools are guaranteed accreditation during...
the three-year waiver period.

Henrico was one of six school systems the state singled out in its announcement of not accepting Wright's invitation to apply. Three of the other four systems that joined Henrico in May were also on the list of those who didn't apply.

After Monday's announcement, Russo said Henrico and the others wanted flexibility in when and how tests are administered, not a holiday from having to report results.

The goal, he said, was to alter the system to give students "the help they need to master a subject."

He said the high school approach of being able to take and, if necessary, retake tests should apply to middle schools, too, because it focused on learning, not one-time assessment.

"We can already do that in high school," he said. "It would seem fair to apply that (to other levels)."

Instead, Wright invoked the 2006 policy and invited superintendents who had schools that qualified to apply for the waiver. On Monday, she released a list of 54 such schools.

The schools, including nine in Chesterfield County, six in Hanover County and four in the city of Richmond, qualified because they had SOL pass rates of at least 95 percent in all four content areas for the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years.

In Chesterfield, schools spokesman Tim Bullis said the window would allow the county to do what it has been doing anyway: taking what works in the best-performing schools and trying to implement it elsewhere in the county.

School officials in Hanover and Richmond could not be reached Monday.

In an op-ed piece in published July 10 in the Commentary section of the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Wright said the SOL tests were never meant to be diagnostic.

"Their purpose from the beginning has been to determine whether students can meet a minimum grade-level standard after a year of instruction," she wrote.

She did admit that test-preparation was "crowding out real teaching and learning in some schools" but said that there was a difference from what the state required and what school systems added on to prepare students for the annual assessments.

"I question whether testing earlier would allow for adequate time for most students to cover in depth even the minimum prescribed content at each grade level," she said.
Russo said he had refined his request, focusing solely on middle schools now, and that he would keep pushing the issue.

He and several other superintendents will be back before the state Board of Education on Wednesday to try again.

"We'll be there," he said, "(and we're) going to make our plea."

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