

Standardized Assessment and Special Education



From SOLs to VGLA, VSEP and VAAP Testing Options

by Patricia Macdonald

Author's Note: *The standardized assessments given in the Commonwealth of Virginia provide options for students who have disabilities to demonstrate what they have learned. This brief overview of testing options is intended to encourage parents to help their child's IEP team to choose the assessment that is appropriate for their child.*

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) established a policy in 1995 to begin a statewide standardized assessment program.¹ Giving the same end-of-course test has allowed the VDOE to compare the achievement of students across the Commonwealth of Virginia. The tests used for this assessment are called the Standards of Learning, and are frequently referred to by the acronym "SOL." The test is initially given at the end of the third grade and is given for math, English and a variety of subjects through high school. The testing is also in compliance with the federal No Child Left Behind Act that requires all students to be assessed for their reading and math skills annually in grades three through eight, and then again in high school.²

Special Education Accommodations & SOL Tests

All students enrolled in a public school in Virginia are assessed according to the policy established by the VDOE. This includes students who receive special education services. Parents who have children with disabilities may be anxious about their children being assessed, thinking that it will accentuate what their children do not know. It is important for parents to keep in mind that the school system tailors the curriculum based on the SOL assessments from kindergarten to the twelfth grade, giving the student many opportunities and ways to learn the material on which they are tested. The SOL assessments dictate the minimum of what students are to be taught.

Many students who receive special education services need accommodations, or adjustments to the way tests are given, to be able to demonstrate what they know. These accommodations are also used to help students with disabilities successfully take the SOL assessment tests. The content of the test is not changed, but the way in which it is taken is changed to give the student with the disability equal access to passing the SOL assessment. These accommodations must be ones that are needed throughout the school year in classroom instruction and with testing to help the student be able to demonstrate what he or she has learned. These accommodations do not give the student an advantage over his or her classmates. Examples of modifications can include individual testing, preferential seating away from distractions or reading of test items aloud. A complete list of accepted accommodations is published on the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) website under "Procedures for Participation of Students with Disabilities in Virginia's Accountability System." (Copies can be requested by calling the VDOE at 800-292-3820 or downloaded from the Division of Student Assessment and School Improvement page at www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Assessment/home.shtml. The list of accepted accommodations is on page 9).² It is important to note that members of the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, which includes the parents or guardians, discuss which accommodations

are needed based on what has been helpful in the previous school year and what they think will be beneficial in the upcoming school year. The IEP team also decides if the student will be working on Standards of Learning at grade level and how he or she will participate in the SOL test. All of this information is documented in writing in the IEP.

It must first be considered that all students who receive special education services participate in the SOL test either with or without accommodations.² Despite the allowed accommodations, some students who are in special education are not able to demonstrate what they have learned through a multiple choice test, which is the format in which all of the SOL assessments are administered with the exception of the writing test. This is a concern because verified credits, which are needed to work toward a high school diploma, are only earned once the SOL assessment for a high school course is passed.

VGLA & VSEP

If a student is working on Standards of Learning on grade level and is unable to demonstrate his knowledge in a multiple-choice test but can show how he has learned through means other than multiple-choice formats, the VDOE offers two assessments depending on the grade level. The Virginia Grade Level Alternative (VGLA) is for students in grades three through eight, and the Virginia Substitute Evaluation Program (VSEP) is for students who are enrolled in high school classes that qualify for a verified

credit that will be applied towards earning a high school diploma. Credit given for passing the VGLA or the VSEP is the same as for the SOL assessment.

A student participating in the VGLA is graded on a compilation of work done at school throughout the academic year. Only work that is done at school under the supervision of a teacher or other authorized school personnel is placed in the binder. No homework or work done at home is allowed. This Collection of Evidence (COE) addresses the student's understanding and skill with each SOL objective for the course.³ All work that is in the COE is labeled according to which SOL objective it fulfills. The COE is submitted for scoring in the spring.

The VSEP, like the VGLA, collects work done only at school under the supervision of a teacher or other authorized school personnel. For the VSEP, this collection of work is called a Course Work Compilation (CWC). There are several more steps involved with the VSEP. The local school system must first request permission from the VDOE for the student to participate in the VSEP for a par-

ticular high school course. This request addresses the reasons the student needs to take the VSEP and justifies its use. Once the permission is granted from the VDOE, the local school division must outline how the student will achieve each SOL objective for the course. Upon receiving approval from the VDOE, the school may start collecting the CWC for the VSEP.⁴ The CWC is submitted for scoring in the spring. A passing score results in the award of a verified credit for the course that is used towards the student's high school diploma.

VAAP

Some students do not work on Standards of Learning at grade level because of a significant intellectual disability. The academic curriculum that the students would follow is the Aligned Standards of Learning and the standardized assessment for a student learning this curriculum is called the Virginia Alternative Assessment Program (VAAP). This assessment also involves submitting a Collection of Evidence (COE) which must be completed by the student at school in the

presence of a teacher or paraprofessional. The Aligned Standards of Learning reflect academic standards that are reduced in complexity and depth.⁵ The COE for the VAAP is also submitted for scoring in the spring. The VAAP is given in grades three through eight, and then again in the eleventh grade.

Throughout a child's educational experience, it is important for parents to stay in close communication with their child's special education teachers and guidance counselors to keep abreast of changes in testing requirements and ways to help their child succeed in school. A summary of the assessments is given in the table below. ■

Pat McDonald is the Immediate Past President of the Down Syndrome Association of Roanoke (DSAR). She resides with her husband and three children in Salem, Va. Her 15-year-old daughter has Down syndrome. She may be reached through the DSAR at 540-772-6460 or by e-mail to info@dsar.org

At a Glance...

Assessment	Format of Assessment	Given in Grades	Verified Credit for High School Diploma
SOL	Multiple-choice	3 -8, high school courses	Yes
VGLA	Collection of Evidence	3 - 8	No
VSEP	Course Work Compilation	high school courses	Yes
VAAP	Collection of Evidence	3 through 8, 11	No

References

- 1 *Standards of Learning Currently in Effect for Virginia Public Schools*. Virginia Department of Education website. www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Superintendent/Sols/home.shtml
- 2 *Procedures for Participation of Students with Disabilities in Virginia's Accountability System, Including Test Accommodations and Participation Criteria, A Guide for Educators and Parents*, Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Education, April 2007*
- 3 *VGLA, Virginia Grade Level Alternative, Implementation Manual, 2007-2008*. Commonwealth of Virginia, Department of Education. 2007*
- 4 *VSEP, Virginia Substitute Evaluation Program, Implementation Manual, 2007-2008*. Commonwealth of Virginia, Department of Education. 2007*
- 5 *VAAP, Virginia Alternate Assessment Program, Implementation Manual, 2007-2008*. Commonwealth of Virginia, Department of Education. 2007*

* These documents can be downloaded from the Virginia Department of Education website under SOL Tests and Assessments, www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Assessment/home.shtml