

## **SOL Tests: County thrives, city declines**

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Last week, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) released Standards of Learning (SOL) test pass rates for the 2018-2019 school year, with the local school systems showing mixed results.

Since 1998, Virginia students have taken SOL tests to examine the minimum expectations for what students should know at the end of each grade or course in English, mathematics, science, history/social science and other subjects.

Students in grades three through 12 take 2-4 SOL tests per year, depending on their grade level.

The state recently changed their rates to include a growth measure, in which schools can achieve accreditation by how well students are working towards proficiency, not just on the passing or failing of SOL tests.

While Pittsylvania County Schools saw some decreases in their pass rate percentages from the previous years, the division as a whole is still above the state average in every subject, which is a goal for them according to division superintendent Dr. Mark Jones.

"It speaks highly of the staff, students, and families of the school division," Mark Jones said.

For the past three years, pass rate percentages for the county schools have been almost consistently in 80-percent pass rates.

Even though the division saw minor decreases in other areas, their math scores as a division increased by 5-percent from 2017-2018 to 2018-2019. Gretna Middle School was able to bring their math rates up more than 20 percent, from 56-percent to 77, during that time.

Mark Jones contributes the success to work the system has been doing since SOL tests were introduced. In 2000, the schools started "unpacking" the curriculum of the SOL tests. They set pacing guides for the teachers to know when and how much time to spend on teaching a certain topic, and then made "maps," which are anecdotal notes the teacher makes throughout the year about how the teaching of the subject went.

At the end of each year, the pacing guides are adjusted based on the teachers' maps.

"Every year, it's cyclical," Mark Jones said. "We look at the curriculum, then we pace, then we map it. Our staff works extremely hard on doing this every year."

After a few years, they looked at where to place benchmark assessments within those pacing guides.

Mark Jones said they also look at research on instructional practices, such as cooperative learning and reciprocal teaching, to see what is effective.

To improve upon certain areas, staff looks at specific data and sees what can be improved. They look at student performance by question, analyzing which topics need to be given more attention.

"It's a lot of tedious work, but it makes a difference," Mark Jones said.

In addition, Mark Jones said they find divisions that are successful in what Pittsylvania County is trying to achieve and takes note of their practices, and he encourages the same within the system from school to school.

"We have a monthly principals meeting and instructional meeting where we share all of this information and sit down and talk about it," Mark Jones said. "It focuses on the data and the outcomes."

Going forward, Mark Jones wants the entire division to have its rates at 90-percent, which some schools already have in certain subjects.

At Danville Public Schools (DPS), faculty and staff are celebrating their areas of growth, while taking note of their need for improvement. Their pass rates fell below the state average in every subject.

"We own our success and our failure," Dr. Stan Jones, superintendent of DPS, said. "I'm pleased where we've had areas of growth, but we've got more work to do as a system."

Those successes include significant increases in mathematics pass rates at Woodberry Hills and G. L. H. Johnson Elementary Schools. Both schools became K-3 schools last year, which cut down the student/teacher ratio 15:1.

However, while those schools were able to be areas of growth for the city, Woodrow Wilson Intermediate School for fourth and fifth graders did not share the same fate in its first year open, with the pass scores barely fairing above 30-percent.

Stan Jones admits that last year, the school division focused on opening the school rather than creating a school culture and climate, but now, that is taken care of, with instructional coaches as teachers and an assistant principal added.

“We’re in a reset mode,” Stan Jones said. “...I think we’ve got a few things to really try to enhance the climate and culture in the school, and if you’re there, you feel it. There’s a different level of student engagement.”

Since a peak in 2009-2011, where the division’s pass rates were above 75-percent in each subject level, their pass rates have been on a steady decline, and Jones attributes this to the severe impact the recession had on DPS’ resources.

“The recession had an impact on not just DPS but all public schools because we severely cut resources,” Stan Jones said.

Jones said it is a fact that the state isn’t funding schools like it was prior to the recession in 2008, and the system is still recovering from loss of resources.

However, since he came to the division in 2015, Jones has been committed to building up a staff of fully licensed and certified teachers, which was achieved last year thanks to budget support from the city, and building relationships and partnerships, such as their work with Smart Beginnings on professional development and behavioral health in schools.

In the past year, the school system has taken several measures to intensify their teaching efforts and support the principals in their roles.

In addition to more professional development days, the division has restructured the instruction department and created Chief Academic Officers for the elementary and middle school levels as well as a Coordinator of Balanced Literacy position that was created with title funds.

The Coordinator of Balanced Literacy will be there to support teachers who need additional resources to help and intensify reading instruction in grades K-5 throughout the division.

The system is also enhancing their special education services by adding staffing, and they are focusing on student interventions when they struggle.

Jones said that it is not negotiable that the school system sees better results in the future, and he will be meeting with the Virginia State Superintendent of Public Instruction to discuss where DPS is as a system and how they might solicit the state’s support, which could lead to more resources.

“Transforming the quality of instruction is extremely difficult, doesn’t typically happen quickly and requires resources,” Stan Jones said. “We need three things from the public. First of all, do they trust us? Secondly, will they appropriate resources? And thirdly, how much patience do they have? I can assure you [that] no one is more impatient than I am, but I understand how difficult the work is.”