Governor Mark Warner's
Education for a Lifetime
September 2, 2003

Over the past few days, children all across Virginia have gone back to school. If they are like my kids, they've returned with a combination of joy, fear, excitement, dread, and what seems like hundreds of dollars worth of new school supplies.

They are being greeted by some of the more than 80,000 dedicated teachers who work in the Commonwealth.

Thousands of other young people have returned to our outstanding colleges, universities, and community colleges.

Whether they are going back to grade school or to graduate school, our students are returning at a time of great promise and challenge. And the evidence is all around us.

We know without a doubt, for example, that in our modern economy, educational achievement is probably the single greatest predictor of prosperity, a more stable family life, and good citizenship.

With a good education, every child has a passport to economic opportunity. The public schools of this nation made the American dream possible for me, and for millions of other people just like me.

We know that good schools create new opportunities for children who are too often caught in the grip of poverty and despair. It is the great "equalizer" that renews the promise of our democracy.

We know that investments made in preschool can significantly increase performance in the early grades and beyond.

We know that higher education can improve the quality of our life in ways almost too numerous to mention. Young people who earn an associates degree will earn $8,000 per year more on average than if they had only a high school diploma.

That figure goes up to $13,000 for bachelor's degrees and $28,000 for master's degrees.
We know that research conducted in Virginia's universities holds the promise of curing diseases,
creating new technological breakthroughs, and spurring economic growth throughout the
Commonwealth.

As Virginia's students go back to school this year, we can celebrate the strong advances they
have made. SAT math and verbal scores rose significantly last year.

More and more of our students are passing the SOLs. And the most recent report of the National
Assessment of Educational Progress shows significant improvements by Virginia students.

And by almost any measure, Virginia's institutions of higher education continue to be some of
the best in the nation.

Now against this promising backdrop are enormous challenges. Some of them are as old as
public education itself.

They center on what value we place on our schools; how to adapt to change; how best to raise
student achievement; and what to do with failing schools and overburdened teachers.

In more specific terms, we continue to grapple with the reality that too many children come to
school unprepared to learn - whether through poor nutrition or inadequate support at home.

We know that despite all of the best efforts of Virginia's teachers and principals, one in four of
our third graders still doesn't pass the SOL reading test. Nearly one in three eighth graders are
failing his or her reading tests.

More than 26 percent of the children who enter the ninth grade never earn a diploma. This school
year will mark the first year in which our high school seniors will have to earn enough verified
credits through the SOLs to earn a standard high school diploma. And without help, thousands
may not.

There remains an unacceptable gap in the achievement of white students and minorities, which
should be a concern to all Virginians.

And while we must focus on those at risk, we must be equally determined to bring out the best
from our brightest students - to make sure that school is a vibrant and stimulating environment.

We also face the challenge of recruiting and retaining enough teachers to fill Virginia's
classrooms. During the next decade 33,000 teachers become eligible to retire. That is
approximately 40 percent of all Virginia's teachers.

To give you some perspective, we're expecting 32,000 new students to enter the public education
system in the next two years alone. We are already experiencing an unacceptable number of
vacancies and teachers teaching subjects outside their own area of expertise.
On our college campuses, too many talented professors have left our system because we can't compete with other institutions in pay and resources. Many of our students have had to delay graduation because classes they needed were not available.

Because of Virginia's budget crisis, tuition at all of our institutions of higher education has gone up. They are still a bargain nationally, but it will cost Virginians about $1,000 more this year to attend college.

And even though Virginians passed a $900 million bond referendum last year for capital projects at our colleges and universities, the system is still not fully equipped to handle the influx of new students we expect over the next decade - a number we thought to be 38,000, and only in the last few months re-estimated at 61,000 new students.

If these young adults don't get the chance to earn a college degree, their earning power will be severely reduced.

Now policy-makers have long spoken of the problems facing our schools, and the results have plainly been mixed. Twenty years ago, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published an important report entitled "A Nation at Risk."

Well, twenty years later, while progress has been made, we are still at risk. And the urgency of eliminating that risk is greater than it has ever been before.

As someone who made a living in the high technology sector, I can tell you that the pace of technological change is nothing short of staggering. To succeed in this economy, today's workers will need skills that were unheard of a generation ago.

This kind of rapidly changing economy demands a workforce that is smart, well-trained and adaptable. That's what I hear almost daily from corporate executives who are trying to decide whether to bring jobs to Virginia, or one of our competitor states.

We must make available to our people lifelong learning that starts in pre-school and is available throughout their working life.

The pace of change in the global economy would be reason enough to reform and strengthen our commitment to education in Virginia. But there are reasons why the urgency of this challenge is greater than ever.

As a businessman, I know that successful companies use lean times not only to streamline their operations, but they also continue to invest in their most important assets.

In Virginia, our greatest asset is our people. To realize their enormous potential, and to meet the challenges confronting our schools, we're going to insist on a series of smart reforms for our system of public education - just like we've done in other areas of state government. It will focus on Education for a Lifetime. These reforms will recognize the urgency of a new and more competitive economy.
They will reflect the fact that education can no longer be seen as a series of discreet and independent stages. Our reforms will be measurable and grounded in the idea of accountability.

And most importantly, they offer our people greater opportunities for success.

We will match our zeal for reform with a renewed challenge to parents and whole communities to take greater responsibility for the education of our children, to display the kind of commitment we've seen with our PASS Partners.

Our first step is to commit to the people of this Commonwealth that we will put our budget on a path to full funding of a first class system of education.

I am announcing today that my budget for the next biennium will include full funding for the Board of Education's projection for the Standards of Quality, which is now estimated to be $525 million of new funds. And we will begin the process of funding the SOQ revisions proposed by the State Board.

Our commitment to the overdue revisions of the Standards of Quality will eventually mean more reading specialists for kids who are having problems, better prepared teachers, enhanced school safety, and better use of technology in the classroom. It will mean that our children will get a better education.

I am grateful to the members of the Board of Education - including the majority who were selected by my predecessor - for recommending these changes.

Our budget will also put our nationally-acclaimed colleges and universities on a path to meeting the financial needs of our system of higher education.

Now doing this will not be easy. Last year, members of the General Assembly from both houses and both parties joined me as we renewed our commitment to public education in Virginia. In doing so, we became one of only a handful of states to increase educational funding at a time of such fiscal stress.

This year the challenge will be even greater, and I'll need all members - Democrats and Republicans - to stand united in meeting our obligations to fully fund the SOQ.

Our next step in this effort to build an Education for a Lifetime is to launch a series of smart reforms in how we educate our people and prepare them for the jobs of the future. And again, we must insist that the results be measurable.

To this end, our most significant change will be to overhaul how we prepare high school seniors for life after graduation.

Too many seniors spend their last year in school just marking time. It is a far too common story. Once the senior gets his or her acceptance letter from college, interest in school often disappears.
For those students not going to college, a high school diploma is simply not enough.

"Senior Year Plus" will require something new of our students. For the students heading straight to work, we will ask rising seniors to commit to obtain not only a diploma, but also the skills and credentials needed for a high paying job.

In return, we will help them pursue this course of study even beyond graduation from high school.

For the college bound students, "Senior Year Plus" means we'll give them the chance to earn a semester's worth of college credit during their senior year.

We'll utilize our four-year colleges, community colleges, distance learning and traditional advanced placement programs to earn these credits.

Earning these credits won't be easy. But if they do, students can get a big jump on college and save thousands of dollars in tuition costs. That's a good deal for Virginia families and it will create new opportunities for our people.

And just to be clear, for students who are in danger of failing to graduate because of the SOL requirements, we will continue to build on Project Graduation, which has offered successful remedial help to students in preparing for - and passing - the SOLs.

Our second reform is grounded in the simple idea of efficiency. You know, every year we spend $9 billion in state, federal and local money for elementary and secondary education in Virginia. That's about $1,300 from every man, woman, and child in the Commonwealth. Most of that money is well spent.

But if there is one thing I learned in business, it's that large enterprises can always improve and become more efficient. In public schools, every dollar saved is a dollar that can be reinvested right back into the classroom.

To advance this goal, we will deploy auditors and management specialists from the state's Department of Planning and Budget to help school systems realize greater efficiencies and to identify good practices that can be shared with other school divisions.

It's an approach that Texas pioneered several years ago with great success. As a second step to further accountability, we will also launch a statewide performance review to give parents, policymakers, and all taxpayers a clear picture of how their schools are performing.

We're going to show the taxpayers that public education will do its part to achieve savings, accountability and efficiency.

Our third major reform addresses the crucial issue of teacher shortages. While we must improve our teacher recruitment efforts, an even greater challenge lies in retaining good teachers, too
many of whom leave the profession during the first five years of service. Apart from parents, good teachers have more to do with academic success than any other factor, including class size.

To address this challenge, we'll launch a new mentoring program for teachers that includes incentives and clear standards and is grounded in accountability.

This program will provide new teachers with a meaningful support mechanism during their first year, which is when so many promising young teachers leave.

We'll also train and deploy "Turn Around Specialists" to go into and improve the most troubled schools. This concept has worked in private business. It is based on the idea of accountability, and we can measure the results.

Now there are other parts to our Education for a Lifetime program that we will be highlighting in the coming weeks. We will propose to raise standards for child care providers in Virginia, and to build on the great work done by Secretary Jane Woods to enroll more children in Virginia's health insurance program for kids.

We'll highlight continued reforms in our workforce development programs. And we'll begin building the consensus for our goal of increasing research and development spending to $1 billion by the year 2010.

Higher education in Virginia can and must remain the envy of other states, but it will not without renewed commitment. At the same time, we'll be asking more of our institutions. We'll ask them to teach even more of our people in order to fuel economic growth and a better quality of life in Virginia.

At its core, our Education for a Lifetime initiative will challenge old and established ways of doing business. But as I have said over and over again, if we are going to move Virginia forward in this time of fiscal stress and rapid technological change, we must be smarter than our competitors. And everyday, we must insist on accountability, and we must be able to measure our results.

In closing, let me tell you about two things that happened to me this summer. In very different ways, they speak volumes about the urgency of our work today.

The first thing occurred several weeks ago in Southside. The day after the Pillowtex plant closed, I went down to the union hall in Fieldale to visit with the workers.

At the meeting that day were hundreds of workers who had lost their jobs. Now I am glad that government will able to offer some help to them, but unfortunately, I didn't have any jobs to give away that day.

I was struck then, and I'm struck now by two things: First, how important it is for our workers to obtain the kind of education that makes tough transitions easier. For workers - particularly those in traditional industries, Education for a Lifetime is absolutely crucial.
And secondly, I wondered about how many times that scene will repeat itself, not only in Virginia but around the nation if we don't get smarter, and more aggressive in our approach to education.

The other story was more hopeful. I went down to Brunswick County to one of the summer academies we started with our Project Graduation. There, I met students like Reggie Johnson, who spoke a moment ago. These students had struggled to meet the new requirements for getting a diploma, but they were determined to succeed.

They were working hard when it would have been just as easy to quit. They were committed. And for very little money, we started this program that brought them hope and opportunity, and gave them chance to earn a diploma. To see the look on their faces when they actually passed the test reminded me of why I wanted this job in the first place.

What I took away from these very different events is that we can set high standards and still fulfill the rhetorical promise of "no child left behind" - even in tight budget times.

But to succeed, we need to take a fresh look at what we do in education and recognize that the world has changed.

No, we can't prevent all of the Pillowtexes of the world from closing, but we might be able to prevent some and lure a next generation employer to a hard hit community.

With the kind of smart reforms that are embodied in our Education for a Lifetime Initiative, and with the strong support of parents and whole communities, we can make Virginia a more prosperous state, with better jobs and a better quality of life for our people.

We can build a Commonwealth of Opportunity.

---

*Virginia Tech*

*Posted: September 2, 2003*

*Educational Policy Institute*  
*of Virginia Tech*