

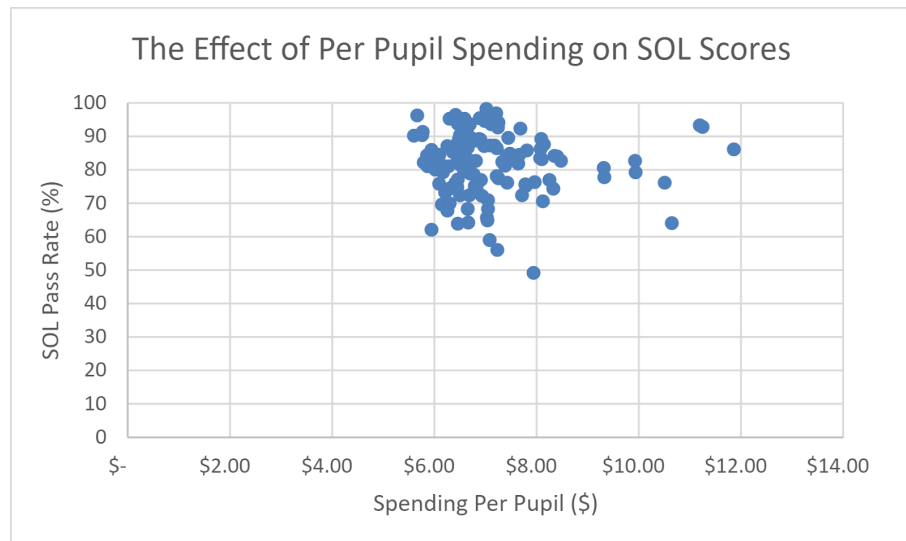
Dear Governor Northam,

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. We, Eliott Boon and Pradhyum Rajasekar, wish to advocate for Virginia's educational situation as students, but also represent the teachers in our school district. To understand the pros and cons of our education, we have conducted studies of our own and polled teachers through an anonymous, twelve-question questionnaire asking for teacher's opinions in our school. We received just below 40 responses. In addition to this, we have pulled data from the state and the resources available to us, and analyzed it. Although the information which we have collected is humble, we hope they will help guide future policies on education.

We would first like to demonstrate that money does not greatly improve education¹. The chart below compares Per Pupil Spending to SOL Pass Rates. As you can see, the more money you spend per student does not have a major impact on how many students pass their SOLs! Clearly, giving more money to schools does not increase SOL pass rates.

However, there is a force that we believe is much more effective than shoveling money at schools: culture. To elaborate, a child's parents heavily influence their SOL score. [We have found](#) that the richer the parents are, the higher the likelihood that the child will pass their SOLs. Although this seems obvious, this must be observed to bring about effective educational changes. We believe that the reason for this phenomenon is that parents with a higher income are able and more willing to allow (even to the point of forcing) their children to get a quality education, including attending extracurriculars and obtaining private tutoring. For relatively poorer parents, however, a quality education might be out of reach for their children due to high fees for extracurricular activities and academic help.

But it seems silly to talk about data when there is an obvious, pressing human side of this equation. If someone from outside the US came and looked at our schools, they would say, at best, that teachers are laboring in a sweatshop. **And that's not entirely wrong.** The overwhelming majority of teachers we polled say they chose their profession for the love of teaching and the connections it brings with students. Teachers are the keystone and essential building blocks of any functioning society, and it's wonderful that they love their profession. However, all of the teachers that we polled rated their pay as varying degrees of "bad" and most of them said there was too much work expected of them. Many feel that their work-life balance has taken a hit. On top of that, the salary of teachers is only half of the salary of the people whom they teach.



¹ Although our data speaks to this, we believe that this may be a very simplistic analysis.

Going on Amazon and compiling the prices of some of the cheapest, average, realistic-to-use school supplies, the average family spent \$170.25 on school supplies. A teacher could buy the school supply list four times over with what they spend on classroom supplies themselves, and more than 90% of teachers admit to paying for their supplies out of their own pockets. **Do we expect teachers to sacrifice their time, potential money, and personal life for a wage below the national average and little to no personal gain? Is this how we treat teachers in our country?**

To outsiders like ourselves, Virginia does not seem to have a great focus on education, judging from the fact that in 2018, Virginia's teachers' salaries were below the national average. Just across the Potomac, DC, a non-state with no control over its tax dollars, not to mention a measly thirty minutes drive from our school, pays its teachers nearly \$20,000 more per year than what we pay our teachers. In our poll, when asked about the quality of their pay, approximately half said it wasn't as good as it should be. Granted, we believe you do care about education; we believe that the G3 bill is a step in the right direction. However, we do not know what you have achieved for the core of our education: teachers.

In our polls, many teachers said they were also concerned with the work-life balance, or the amount of time they were spending on work. When asked to rate their work-life balance, more than half of them reported it as some degree of bad. When asked what they would like us to address in these letters, a common response was how they felt they were overworked. When asked what some of the biggest hassles of teaching were, three quarters said that there was simply too much work.

To return to an earlier topic, many teachers have said that the SOLs place undue stress on themselves. Teachers have lots of criticism for the SOLs:

- "SOLs are not needed. Hire great teachers and let them do their job. Stop micro-managing and forcing teachers to "teach to the test".
- "Getting rid of SOL's - biased all over from the examples used to how a creative mind might read and analyze them compared to someone who is dry...[also,] they lean one direction. Until they're willing to put all cultures in all in those tests - flush them."
- "Better equity for students! Things like state standardized testing do not improve student outcomes, do not accurately reflect student learning/achievement, and are unfair to a significant percentage of the student population."
- "Getting rid of standardized tests like SOLs. Encouraging more project-based learning and exploratory learning rather than fact memorization."

Indeed, as students, we too agree with the removal of standardized tests and the addition of project-based learning. Standardized tests, especially those like the SOL, which assess the school based on the students' scores, push the burden of learning not onto the student, but the teacher. As you can see, this makes no sense at all.

Our school system is heavily flawed.

Now comes the time where we offer our solutions. We don't know much about *how* these ideas are implemented, but we can provide ideas.

First and foremost, we need to pay the educational staff more per year. They are qualified professionals and the basis of every stable, organized society. Second, we need to fund more extracurricular activities to help

build the sort of culture that fosters learning and that has children excited to attend school. Third, we need to address race and other societal issues in our classes and tests by highlighting the achievements that African Americans or members of other races have done.

Finally, and most importantly, **we need to shorten the school day**. Don't dismiss that as our student side talking. Nearly all other developed countries do that. The reason? **There are two parts of a teacher's job: teaching, and grading**. Right now, our teachers don't have enough time or are damaging their personal life to grade their students' work by the deadlines put in place by the school. Without grading, the education that the students receive is sub-par because the teacher is not able to give appropriate feedback to the students.

We have written this letter at no particular time; change should have happened years ago, but it hasn't happened. It is no small secret that education in the US is not what it can be. Perhaps we should change that fate. Perhaps we should treat our children with a better education. Perhaps we should treat our teachers as the professionals they are.

But we should start by recognizing that education and educators are the keystone of a good society.

In the hope of change,

Pradhyum Rajasekar and Elliott Boon

Dear Karl Frisch,

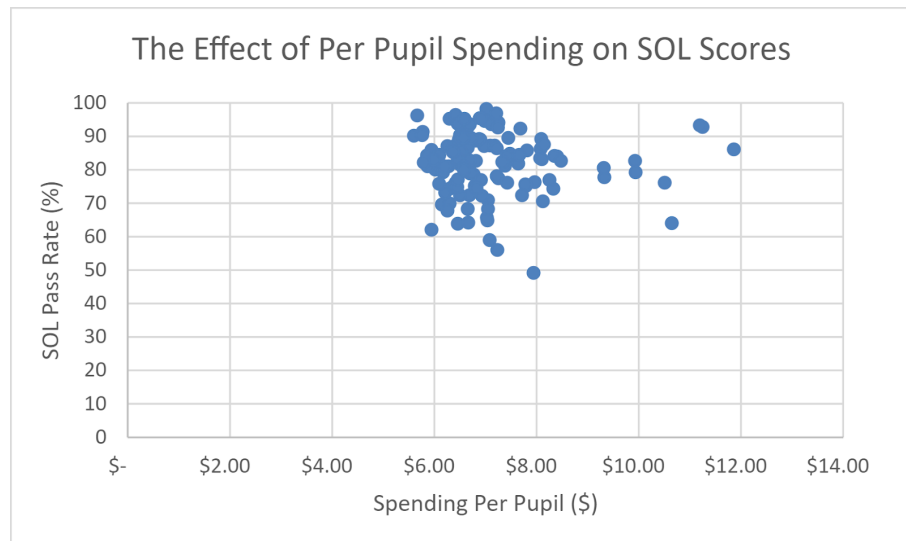
Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. We, Eliott Boon and Pradhyum Rajasekar, wish to advocate for Virginia's educational situation as students, but also represent the teachers in our area. To understand the pros and cons of our education, we have conducted studies of our own and polled teachers through an anonymous, twelve-question questionnaire asking for teacher's opinions in our school. We received 36 responses. In addition to this, we have pulled data from the state and analyzed it. Although the information which we have collected is humble, we hope they help guide future policies on education.

We would first like to demonstrate that money does not greatly improve education². The chart below compares Per Pupil Spending to SOL Pass Rates. As you can see, the more money you spend per student does not have a major impact on SOL pass rates! Giving more money to schools does not increase SOL pass rates.

However, there is a force that we believe is much more effective than shoveling money at schools: culture. To elaborate, a child's parents influence their SOL score. [We have found](#) that the richer the parents are, the higher the likelihood that the child will pass the SOL. Although this seems obvious, this must be observed to bring about effective educational changes.

We believe that the reason for this phenomenon is that parents with a higher income are able and more willing to allow (even to the point of forcing) their children to get a quality education, including attending extracurriculars and obtaining tutoring. For relatively poorer parents, however, a quality education might be out of reach for their children due to high fees for extracurricular activities and academic help.

But it seems silly to talk about data when there is an obvious, pressing human side of this equation. If someone from outside the US came and looked at our schools, they would say, at best, that teachers are laboring in a sweatshop. **And that's not entirely wrong.** The overwhelming majority of teachers we polled say they chose their profession for the love of teaching and the connections it brings with students. Teachers are the keystone and essential building blocks of any society, and it's wonderful that they love teaching. But all of the teachers that we polled rated their pay as varying degrees of "bad" and most of them said there was too much work expected of them. Some feel that their work-life balance has taken a hit. On top of that, the salary of teachers is only half of the salary of the people whom they teach. Going on Amazon and compiling the prices of some of the cheapest, average, realistic-to-use school supplies, the average family spent \$170.25 on school supplies. A teacher could buy the school supply list four times over with what they spend on classroom supplies



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themselves, and more than 90% of teachers do spend their own money on school supplies. **Do we expect teachers to sacrifice their time, potential money, and personal life for a wage below the national average and little to no personal gain? Is this how we treat teachers in our country?**

To outsiders like ourselves, Virginia does not seem to have a great focus on education, judging from the fact that in 2018, Virginia's teachers' salaries were below the national average. Just across the Potomac, DC, a non-state with no control over its tax dollars, not to mention a measly thirty minutes drive from Fairfax County, pays its teachers nearly \$20,000 more per year than what we pay our teachers. In our poll, when asked about the quality of their pay, approximately half said it wasn't as good as it should be. Granted, we know that Virginia does care about education; we believe that the Governor's G3 bill is a step in the right direction. However, we do not know what the Virginian governing body has achieved for the core of our education: teachers.

In our polls, many teachers said they were also concerned with the work-life balance, or the amount of time they were spending on work. When asked to rate their work-life balance, more than half of them reported it as some degree of bad. When asked what they would like us to address in these letters, a common response was how they felt they were overworked. When asked what some of the biggest hassles of teaching were, three quarters said that there was too much work.

Besides, many teachers have said that the SOLs place undue stress on themselves. In general, educators have a lot of criticism for these tests:

- "SOLs are not needed. Hire great teachers and let them do their job. Stop micro-managing and forcing teachers to "teach to the test".
- "Getting rid of SOL's - biased all over from the examples used to how a creative mind might read and analyze them compared to someone who is dry...[also,] they lean one direction. Until they're willing to put all cultures in all in those tests - flush them."
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- "Getting rid of standardized tests like SOLs. Encouraging more project-based learning and exploratory learning rather than fact memorization."

Indeed, as students, we too agree with the removal of standardized tests and the addition of project-based learning. Standardized tests, especially those like the SOL, which assess the school based on the students' scores, push the burden of learning not onto the student, but the teacher. As you can see, this makes no sense at all.

Our school system is broken. Completely.

Now comes the time where we offer our solutions. We don't know much about *how* these ideas are implemented, but we can provide ideas.

First and foremost, we need to pay teachers more. They are qualified professionals and the basis of a stable, organized society. Second, we need to fund more extracurricular activities to help build the sort of culture that fosters learning and that has children excited to attend school. Third, we need to address race and other societal issues in our classes and tests by highlighting the achievements that African Americans or members of other races have done.

Finally, and most importantly, **we need to shorten the school day**. Don't dismiss that as our student side talking. Nearly all other developed countries do that. The reason? **There are two parts of a teacher's job: teaching, and grading**. Right now, our teachers don't have enough time or are damaging their personal life, to grade their students' work. Without grading, the education that the students receive is sub-par because the teacher is not able to give good feedback to the students.

We have written this letter at no particular time; change should have happened years ago, but it hasn't happened. It is no small secret that education in the US is not what it can be. Perhaps we should change that fate. Perhaps we should treat our children with a better education. Perhaps we should treat our teachers as the professionals they are.

But we should start by recognizing that education is the keystone of a good society.

In the hope of change,

Pradhyum Rajasekar and Elliott Boon