

## Unexpected lessons: Teachers make preparing for SOLs fun

More and more teachers are using fun activities to help their students prepare for the state SOL tests, which begin soon in most New River Valley schools.

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Matt Gentry | The Roanoke Times

Christiansburg High School science teacher Bill Fletcher (center) conducts research with his ecology class students on the banks of Crab Creek. Students were looking at aquatic insects they had just harvested to determine the health of the stream. The field trip gets students thinking about other subjects they might be testing in later, Fletcher says.



Matt Gentry | The Roanoke Times

Students dance to the music of Rockin' the Standards in the Belle Heth Elementary School auditorium. Fourth-grade teacher Heather Rowland organized the concert from the California-based group. She said students in her class listen to the songs to remember lessons in a fun way.

They're coming.

Those three letters that students and parents have heard that so much of the state's educational system rides on: SOL.

In the coming weeks, most students in the New River Valley will start taking the state's Standards of Learning exams. Radford's Belle Heth Elementary School, for example, begins testing Monday.

A few schools already have completed them.

The Virginia Department of Education gives school divisions three times in the spring -- April 13 to May 8, May 4 to May 29 and May 18 to June 12 -- to complete the SOLs. The tests are designed to assess students' knowledge in comparison with state requirements for each grade level. Most school systems opt for the last period.

"I guess they want that last little bit" of preparation, said Julie Vanidestine, principal of Falling Branch Elementary School in Christiansburg.

Often, that means pulling students who have struggled on preliminary tests into small groups to practice last-minute math and reading skills or giving them test-taking tactics. Other times, it means hosting parties, plastering banners of support on the walls or holding programs to psychologically prepare children as young as 8 for the high-stakes exams.

And that's fine, educators say.

After years of balking at the idea of "teaching to the tests" and being worried that creativity is missing from the classroom, teachers today have resigned themselves to teaching standards that will later be reflected in test scores.

"This is the way that it is. This is it," said David Sable, Radford City Schools director of testing and school

psychologist.

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"We are where we are in education," he said.

Sable said the stress of the exams still takes a toll on everyone involved. In the weeks before SOLs are administered, he said he tries to remind teachers and administrators to ease their own worries or they will have an effect on students' minds and scores.

Why wouldn't they? The battery of end-of-year tests mean a lot to local education.

The SOLs can determine everything from whether a student progresses to the next grade level to a school system's level of state accreditation. They also dictate whether a school meets federal benchmarks under No Child Left Behind legislation, which equates to dollars lost if scores reflect poorly.

The tests began in 1998 as a replacement for the Literacy Passport tests. The idea was to align exams with more stringent state guidelines to find out what students learn in class. Since 1998, the stakes have risen, thanks in part to federal legislation. By 2004, student graduation hinged on some subject-test results. By 2007, a pass rate of 70 percent was required for a school to be accredited by the state.

To meet federal guidelines, called Adequate Yearly Progress, states must progressively raise the bar for proficiency. This year, that means students must pass 81 percent in reading and 79 percent in math.

At times, the pressure has forced teachers to focus their priorities on the tests, making certain every classroom task relates to the exams. Some use test-style daily SOL quizzes and all are required to list the

standard to which lessons apply.

That once drew teachers' ire. Today, some of the stigma may have lifted.

"Whether you like it or not, you're in a school that teaches the SOLs," said Janey Hazleton, a technology resource teacher who oversees the computer lab at Belle Heth. She said she regularly sees students visit the lab for remediation because they're having problems with test concepts. Students will take part in specialized lessons related to the subject they can't grasp or take additional SOL-style exams for practice.

"Why would you do anything else? Why reinvent it?" she asked.

Earlier this month, students at her school attended a rock concert filled with songs about math and English. They spent an hour bopping to tunes with hooks like, "synonym, antonym, homonym!" and to guitar riffs coupled with multiplication tables and geometry terms such as "acute triangles."

Fourth-grade teacher Heather Rowland organized the concert from California-based Rockin' the Standards.

She said students in her class listen to the songs to remember lessons in a fun way.

It's a strategy of fun, hands-on learning that students grasp the most, teachers say. Their goal as instructors is to incorporate that with SOL topics. The method, often called jigsaw teaching, is designed to insert instruction where students least expect it.

Sometimes it can showcase "that personal flair of the teachers," that Sable said often is missing from SOL-targeted instruction filled with drills and preliminary tests.



Matt Gentry | The Roanoke Times

Ben Jacobs (right) of Rockin' the Standards performs and sings 'Quadrilateral Dance' for pupils in the Belle Heth Elementary School auditorium in Radford

Other times, the hands-on projects can lend themselves to multiple SOL subjects.

Christiansburg High School science teacher Bill Fletcher takes students to Crab Creek to test water quality. He said he chooses the end of April because of the warmer weather, not because it's close to test time. But the field trip does get students thinking about other subjects they might be testing in later, he said.

Make no mistake: Classrooms still are filled with SOL drills, test-taking tips and reminders that information will be on the exams. It's just shifted over the decade.

"I think now we're past the 'everything better look like the test or we won't pass,'" Vanidestine said.

Some of the reduced stress in Montgomery County schools comes from another group of quarterly tests called benchmarks, which assess how well students are grasping SOL content. Vanidestine calls it a "temperature check."

But she said she had to remind students they still needed to perform their best on those exams, too, so school staff can get an idea of who might need further help.

"There's always pressure because you want your school to do very well. ... But it's helpful to have these quarterly checks so there's not just this end of the year 'Gee, I hope we did well.'" Vanidestine said.