



Dialogue on Race

CONCERNING THE GOVERNOR'S EDUCATION REPORT

OCTOBER 11, 2022

In May 2022, the Youngkin administration released a report, “Our Commitment to Virginians: High Expectations and Excellence for All Students.” And on August 27, 2022, led by its Education Issue Group, the Montgomery County Dialogue on Race convened over 150 local citizens to examine and critique this document. We met in smaller groups later to go into more detail about the issues raised in the August 27 meeting.

Although many of our community participants considered the document vague and needed operational statements, the titles of the principles in the Governor’s plan were clear. But some of the Governor's policies contradict some of the principles stated in the document.

For example, one principle specifies “freedom of inquiry.” Yet the Youngkin administration is banning award-winning books from schools and libraries. Another principle calls for zero tolerance for discrimination. Yet, the Governor is ordering discrimination against transgender and minority students and other citizens.

Another principle calls for greater participation of parents in the schools, something educators favor. However, without guidelines and resources, this could become problematic.

And then there is the call for more school choice(s), which leads to shifting sorely needed funds from the public education budget to private enterprises, something we strongly oppose.

Below are the Youngkin administration’s descriptions of their principles of education (in italics). Following each principle and description is the related community comment.

Principle: Freedom of Speech & Inquiry

Our institutions of learning will embody a commitment to free speech and the exploration of diverse ideas. Our democracy rests on the foundation that education must teach every generation how to think, not what to think.

- This principle is titled “freedom of speech and inquiry.” These are among the rights of students. The Supreme Court ruled in 1969 that students do not shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate. However, despite this statement and the Supreme Court's ruling, the Youngkin administration seeks to limit these student rights. The Governor's Executive Order Number One (2022) mandates the end of teaching or discussing so-called "divisive concepts." Addressing critical issues is a cornerstone of education.
- Freedom of inquiry, another hallmark of education, is taking a significant hit as many books are banned. These books include award-winning volumes, including books by Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison. Freedom of inquiry does not exist where books are being banned.

Principle: High Expectations

All students deserve to be held to high expectations aligned to the needs of the knowledge economy. We will prioritize resources for those students and communities furthest behind and teach comprehensive history.

- Saying that “All students deserve to be ... aligned to the needs of the knowledge economy” suggests that we should train students to fit into the economy. This is an unacceptable argument against mainstream education, which seeks to enable students to see the forest and the trees. Education provides the opportunity for acquiring knowledge and skills that allow people to develop their full potential and become successful members of society, not merely cogs in the machinery of the economy.

- We appreciate the interest in continuing to have high expectations for our students. These expectations currently include some attention to citizenship and giving students a voice in the life of their schools, their communities, and society at large.
- We think teaching comprehensive history is an admirable objective of education. However, that objective is being thwarted in Virginia by limiting what part of our history is taught. For example, we cannot teach history appropriately without addressing divisive concepts. The current efforts thwarting the teaching of Virginia history seem to be a return to a previous era in Virginia when the Byrd political machine limited the content of textbooks children used in the State. For example, educators could not teach the realities of slavery and racial segregation.

Principle: Empower Parents and Teachers

Parents are their child's first and most important teachers. They must be an integral player in our education systems. Next to parents, having a quality teacher is the greatest determinant of a child's success. Great teachers must be celebrated and rewarded.

- Parents are integral players in children's education, but their role in our education system is very different from that of educators. Because the roles of parents and teachers are different, things work best when they collaborate, each bringing their expertise to children's education. Of course, schools must create environments to facilitate that collaboration and avoid problems when a parent assumes too much of the teacher's role.
- In addition, schools need resources to assist some parents in their roles in parent-school relationships.

Principle: Zero-Tolerance for Discrimination

We will not allow the ascribing of traits or behavior based on race, gender, political beliefs, or religion. We will reinforce that every person has a right to reach his or her full potential. Education should provide them with the tools and knowledge to do so.

- This principle states that there should be “zero tolerance for discrimination.” However, The Youngkin administration violated this principle before the ink was dry. In September of 2022, through the Virginia Department of Education, the Governor proposed policies that restrict the rights of transgender students.

In 2021, Governor Northam instituted policies for transgender students that intended to bring Virginia in line with court rulings and national policies. However, one year later, Governor Youngkin proposed reversing those protections and initiating possibly illegal policies. Please note that discrimination against transgender individuals is unlawful discrimination based on sex.

Governor Youngkin is sharply restricting transgender student rights, issuing guidelines that say trans students must access school facilities and activities, including restrooms and sports teams, that match their sex assigned at birth. The guidelines also make it difficult for students to change their names and pronouns at school and say teachers can refuse to use transgender students’ names and pronouns if doing so violates their beliefs.

Federal court decisions have upheld protections for transgender people. For example, a 2020 U.S. Supreme Court decision, written by Trump appointee Justice Neil M. Gorsuch, ruled that civil rights law barring sex discrimination covers transgender people.

Also, in 2020, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit ruled that Virginia's school's transgender bathroom ban was unconstitutional and discriminated against a transgender male student who was barred from using the boys' bathrooms in his high school. The U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal of that ruling.

- Before this principle was written, Governor Youngkin initiated a racial discrimination policy by abolishing Virginia's equity initiatives. It is widely accepted that racial inequities exist in Virginia and that previous statewide policies and practices were instrumental in creating some of these inequities—

policies like racial segregation, where, for example, African American taxpayers helped build institutions that their children could not attend. Through the years, increasing numbers of Virginia citizens recognized these facts and set about instituting remedies, some of which were policies to promote equity where we had inequality or inequity. To thwart these efforts is to push for the maintenance of inequities, which is racist.

Principle: Innovation

There is excellence in education in Virginia, but there are many children who have not had access to that excellence. We will create a culture of innovation that breaks the “one size first all” education model by increasing school choice (e.g., lab schools)

- Educators will welcome an emphasis on innovation that would aim to provide equitable education for each child, something they try to do with limited resources. However, the key word here is *choice*, which usually means choice outside public schools, using public education money for vouchers to pay tuition to private schools and for state funding of charter schools.
- Following are excerpts from a statement released in 2021 by the Dialogue on Race and five other organizations in Montgomery County, Virginia.

There are many problems with vouchers and charter schools. While parents have the right to choose where they send their children, scarce public funds should not be used to support the choice of private schools because—among other issues—these schools often do not abide by all Federal, State, and local civil rights laws.

For example, private schools can deny admission to some students based on their race, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs. However, students in public educational institutions are protected under federal programs such as Title VI and Title IX. Also, students with disabilities who require more expensive support services could be denied admission to these private schools.

It may be helpful for us to remember that a shameful part of Virginia's recent history involves using vouchers and tuition credits. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, seven states across the South, including Virginia, enacted voucher and tuition tax credit

plans to subsidize white families fleeing the integration of public schools. The result was devastating consequences for African American students.

Another reason we oppose these voucher and tax credit programs is that private schools do not have the same level of accountability and transparency as public schools. Private schools are not required to report how they spend funds. Tax dollars need to be accounted for.

Our local public school system needs additional resources and funding to improve our children's educational needs. However, reducing public funding by providing vouchers and tax credits to private schools may lead to many inequities in the educational system, an unacceptable result.

In summary, we should not provide state funds to schools that are not held to the same standards as public schools and do not provide transparency regarding the curricular content or students' achievement levels.

- And importantly, many voucher programs do not work as well as proclaimed. For example, the report "Keeping Informed about School Vouchers: A Review of Major Developments and Research," examines 27 studies of voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, Washington, D.C., and Florida. Authors Alexandra Usher and Nancy Kober write that the studies "have generally found no clear advantage in academic achievement for students attending private schools with vouchers."

Principle: Transparency & Accountability

Our education systems will be held accountable for preparing all learners for success in life. This requires an emphasis on evidence and transparency.

- Of course, our education systems should be held accountable for their tasks, and the objectives and goals should be transparent. However, we should be cautious about overusing test scores as the only factor in considering students' progress. This approach can lead to "teaching to the test," where the emphasis is placed on the actual test items. In this kind of teaching, teachers arrange activities around

the actual test or similar items. Instead, education experts prefer "curriculum teaching," directed at the curricular content (knowledge and skills) represented by test items. In curriculum teaching, students learn the test's assessment content.

- We believe that public schools are fundamental to our democracy. Consequently, we feel they should be transparent and accountable to their communities, and they should be fully funded.