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# Dynamics of No Child Left Behind Policy Impacting Reading Education Practices in Kindergarten in the United States of America

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The Commonwealth of Virginia is used as a representative case to illustrate the implication of federal policy on reading education practices in kindergarten in the United States of America. While Virginia follows the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy, it allows local school districts to create innovative instructional and assessment practices that can match the needs of each child. Teachers in Virginia experience a wide range of emergent reading skills in kindergarten inclusive classrooms filled with children of diverse backgrounds and abilities. However, highly qualified teachers try to meet the state Standards of Learning through working side-by-side with children. These kindergarten teachers use student-supportive practices to help them successfully progress from emergent to conventional reading, often with the support of parents and reading specialists. Topics addressed are the implication of the NCLB on reading education policy in Virginia, the Virginia Standards of Learning, practices of teaching reading, and assessment of kindergarten students' reading ability.

Key words : No Child Left Behind (NCLB), education policies, reading education, literacy education, early childhood education

## Introduction

The United States of America is actively involved in initiating educational policies and proposing educational programs at the federal, state, and local level to raise students' reading scores. Legislators and stakeholders believe that reading ability is essential to a

child's academic success. Studies have shown that a child's reading level by the end of third grade is a more accurate predictor of school success than any other variable - including family income, educational attainment of parents, ethnic or cultural identity, or home language (Carter, 1984; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; McLoyd, 1998). Several studies reveal that the early childhood years are the most critical for literacy development (Hoffman, 2010; Slegers, 1996; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008 & Schickedanz, 1998; Teale, Paciga & Hoffman, 2007). Successful development of literacy skills during Kindergarten, therefore, is an accurate and useful predictor of success in the remaining years of primary education and thereafter.

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As new leaders are elected, new reading initiatives and policies are enacted, representing significant efforts at the federal level to improve literacy proficiency of children. When a new reading education policy is passed, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) is required to coordinate with state agencies and local school districts to effectively implement the new guidelines. Although the federal government initiates various reading policies, it tries to avoid prescribing national standards and instructional activities as this infringes on the autonomy of state and local education agencies. While the federal government leads the reforms of problematic policies, states are encouraged to proceed with their own plans and strategies. Generally, states have been flexible in their response to unique local situations because mandating uniform programs on a national level cannot provide the differentiated instruction needed to meet the needs of individual children with varying abilities. Since each of the fifty states has different reading policies, their instructional practices and assessment are also varied. This paper will focus on one selected state, Virginia, in order to assist readers in gaining an understanding of the dynamics among federal, state, and local reading education policies and practices. It describes the implication of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) on reading education policy in Virginia, the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL), effective practices of teaching reading, and assessment of Kindergarten students' reading ability.

This study highlights how a school district in Virginia implements reading standards in relation to the federal and state mandated standards, and provides a reference point for other kindergarten programs across the nation from which they can reassess and reflect on their reading programs under the NCLB and state guidelines. The study also provides ways in which NCLB offers support to promote and improve reading programs in early education in our schools. This study brings attention to how Virginia places an emphasis on achievement by all groups of students, particularly those who are historically low-achieving,

such as English Language Learners, socio-economically disadvantaged and special needs students. NCLB has caused states and districts to make dramatic changes in their educational systems. On one hand, NCLB presents an opportunity for schools to increase emphasis on high-quality early education initiatives, which has potential long-term benefits for all children. However, on the other, implementation of NCLB also presents a number of challenges that impact early literacy and reading programs. The lack of comparability in state standards and current practices for monitoring achievement gaps has raised concerns among researchers and policy-analysts (Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002; Linn, 2003). A growing body of research supports implementation of reading interventions for kindergarten students; however, relatively few studies have been conducted in real school settings (Cavanaugh et al., 2004). Therefore, there is limited study that examines a kindergarten reading program under the NCLB guidelines. This study helps to fill the gap in literature by providing an overview of one such reading program within a district in Virginia under the NCLB and state guidelines.

### **Implication of NCLB Act on Reading Education Policy in Virginia**

The federal NCLB Act signed into law in 2002 regulates education policies. NCLB requires states to develop state appropriate academic standards in English (Reading), Math, Science and Social Studies. States must develop an assessment tool to measure achievement in those standards, and provide parents with the results of those assessments. The report of the results of these assessments should not be complex so that it can be easily understood as it is a comprehensive summation of the student's work. Additionally, states are to provide monies to assist school divisions with parental or family involvement programs. Students in all school divisions must be as-

essed in English, Science, Math and History in Grades 3-12. NCLB also requires states to develop standards that outline requirements for the student with limited English proficiency (LEP) to reach an explicit level of language proficiency. Moreover, students with LEP and disabilities should not be excluded from the NCLB's learning standards and assessments. Rather, should a student require an alternative assessment, this modification is to be written into the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). In these instances, school divisions must provide the specified mediation (USDOE, 2011). Examples of specific interventions are assistive technology, enlarged print test version, having a test read aloud, or a modified test that requires that the student be evaluated on a portfolio.

There are three cornerstones on which the structure of NCLB rests. The first are the standards of learning themselves. These standards are the content that every student must know and be able to demonstrate through standardized assessment. The second is a succession of incentives in the form of funding to school divisions to be used in a variety of ways. These incentives can take the form of new technology, updated curriculum resources, parent involvement initiatives, afterschool remediation, teacher remuneration, or as basic as food and beverage provisions for schools with afterschool programs. The third cornerstone is teacher efficacy, the very core of teacher education (Murnane, 2007, p. 164). These three cornerstones of NCLB contain specific directives to the states and their school divisions to ensure that all students reach standardized proficiency levels by 2014 (USDOE, 2011).

In working toward the 2014 proficiency deadline, when a school identifies students who fail to pass the grade level benchmark, they must receive additional remediation. This benchmark needs to be met regardless of ethnicity, specified demographic subgroups, limited English proficiency, or other identified disability factors. Student competency is demonstrated

via standardized testing through which Adequate Yearly Progress is closely monitored. Since the introduction of the NCLB, all states have adopted standards of learning to measure student achievement, which impacts federal funding at the state, school district, and individual school (USDOE, 2011).

In order to meet the directives of NCLB, the VDOE (2010) sets its own Standards of Learning for each subject and grade. The VDOE also provides Curriculum Guides to help teachers understand the essential skills and strategies that they are expected to teach. School districts establish specific learning objectives for every grade level. Demonstrated achievement of these learning objectives is a basis for evaluation of student performance. As a result, school districts are permitted to plan their own lessons, adopt teaching materials, and design assessments to meet the standards. For example, a school district located in southeastern Virginia holds that the Superintendent is encouraged to initiate research into courses of study and other means by which the division might enhance the educational program for the students (Chesapeake School Board Policy, 2010, section 6-13). The school district encourages the creation of experimental and innovative programs to increase student achievement. Assessment of students' educational needs is the basis for such programs. While each school is at liberty to set instructional objectives, plan lessons, implement best practices, and informally assess student progress, school districts ought to test students annually in grades 3-8, and at least once in grades 9-12. This is required to monitor student achievement and ensure Adequate Yearly Progress, as well as offer alternative teaching strategies to meet the individual needs of all learners. Federal guidelines mandate that all students identified as having literacy deficiencies, must be offered remediation. This remediation is offered either during or after school, and continues until the student reaches or surpasses the literacy benchmarks (PALS, 2011).

### The Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL)

Prior to the enactment of the NCLB, Virginia implemented its own learning standards in 1995 to ensure that students are prepared to enter the work force and become knowledgeable citizens after 12 years of public education. Virginia’s SOL (Standards of Learning) is the curriculum for each grade level from Kindergarten through grade Twelve, which provides learning outcomes in each subject area. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE, 2010) provides teachers with sample lesson plans for differentiated instruction, intervention plans, assessment tools, and strategies to improve students’ reading ability. Teacher accountability for teaching the standards is measured through the administration of the first Reading SOL test given in grade Three (Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011). Although SOL test is not given until grade Three, teachers should use the SOL as instructional groundwork beginning in Kindergarten. The appendix of this paper includes a sample Kindergarten SOL used for reading instruction to improve oral language, reading, and writing ability (Virginia Board

of Education, 2003). When using SOL, teachers need to be aware that well defined standards alone, cannot guarantee student success without highly qualified teachers who possess the appropriate instructional skills, appreciate diverse students, and believe in the abilities and talents of every student.

One major dilemma facing local school districts is that the state standards of learning and the assessment designed to evaluate student knowledge of those standards may not match the needs of a local school. Some school districts, therefore, augment the standards by designing their own in order to reach beyond the state minimums. For example, in a school district in southeastern Virginia, teachers are encouraged to be innovative and exceed the state standards through the implementation of best practices. These teachers in grades 3-12 evaluate students with reading tests that are city-created and administered three times a year, along with classroom and school-based assessments. In grades K-3, in addition to the teachers’ use of classroom assessments, the state administers the statewide progress monitoring and provides remediation based on student performance on PALS

Table 1  
Comparison of Selected Standards of Kindergarten Reading

STRAND	Standards of Learning (SOL) for Virginia	Common Core State Standards (CCSS)
Oral Language	SOL K.2a-g: Use a variety of words to describe the actions of characters and people in real and make believe settings in response to stories or class activities	Reading Standards: Literature K-9 With prompting and support, compare and contrast the experiences and adventures of characters in familiar stories
Reading	SOL K.7b: Identify long and short sounds with common spellings for the five major vowels	Reading Standards: Foundational Skills K-3b Associate the long and short sounds with common spellings (graphemes) for the five major vowels
Writing	SOL K.12a-d: Use writing, dictation, and drawing to compose informative and or explanatory texts that introduce a topic (what they are writing about), state an opinion or some facts and provide some information (e.g., <i>My favorite book is...</i> )	Writing Standard K-1 Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose opinion pieces in which they tell a reader the topic or the name of the book they are writing about and state an opinion or preferences about the topic or the book (e.g., <i>My favorite book is...</i> )

(Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening).

As Virginia complies with the NCLB federal policy, it is not currently planning to adopt the Common Core of State Standards (CCSS) initiative, a set of well-developed, content-rich standard curriculum for English (Reading) and Math. While the CCSS were not developed by the federal government, but rather a consortium of states, they are highly promoted by the U.S. Department of Education (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2011). Although 43 states in the United States have adopted the CCSS, educators in Virginia hold that its SOLs exceed those standards in academic quality (Sampson, 2010, p. A1). Marshall (2011), agreeing with Sampson, criticized the federal

government’s ever increasing role in standardizing curriculum: “The constitution does not provide for a federal role in education, and public schools have traditionally been under the jurisdiction of local authorities.” Table 1, below displays three selected standards from both Virginia’s SOL and CCSS, which are very similar in objective, skills, and process.

### Effective Practices of Teaching Reading

The reading education goals in Kindergarten in Virginia are to teach all students to read fluently and comprehend various fiction and non-fiction texts. In

Table 2  
*Student Supportive Teaching in Kindergarten*

Teaching Objective	Student Practice	Virginia SOL
Word Family/ Rhyme Patterns	Sort words by letter/sound relationships or spelling features in a word study notebook	Oral Language K.4: The student will identify, say, segment, and blend various units of speech sounds.
Alphabet and Phonics Study	Write the letter of the week in their journal, i.e. “V” is for Volcano.	Oral Language K.4: The student will identify, say, segment, and blend various units of speech sounds.
Writing	“Share the Pen” interactive writing	Writing K.11: The student will print in manuscript. Writing K.12: The student will write to communicate ideas for a variety of purposes.
Questioning Strategies	Students answer how and why questions from a short passage	Oral Language K.3e: The student will build oral communication skills. The student will participate in group and partner discussions about various texts and topics. Oral Language K.3h: The student will begin to ask how and why questions.
Sequencing of Stories and Comprehension	Students will illustrate a story when given the cue letters, “B,” “M,” and “E,” (Beginning, Middle and End).	Reading K.9f: The student will demonstrate comprehension of fictional texts and retell familiar stories, using beginning, middle, and end.
Oral Language and Writing through Poetry	Students maintain a poetry journal and illustrate the events, setting, or characters of the poem. Students practice the poem with peers and the teacher.	Writing K.12e: The student will write to communicate ideas for a variety of purposes and draw pictures and/or use letters and phonetically spelled words to write about experiences.
Content Reading	Students assemble a plant from pre-drawn plant parts and write words or sentences about the plant.	Science K. 7 Plants and Life Processes Plants and animals change as they grow. Plants need food, water, and gases in order to live. Plants have the ability to bear fruit and produce flowers. They may look like their parent plant.

order to meet these goals, the VDOE mandates that Kindergarten students have two hours and fifteen minutes of uninterrupted instructional time in language and literacy activities. These blocked hours are used for Reading Aloud or Shared Reading (20 min.), Interactive or Shared Writing (20 min.), Letter/Word study (10 min.), Guided or Independent Reading (60 min.), and Writing Workshop (25 min.). The literacy block helps children learn essential literacy skills - Concept of Word and Print, Phonological Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, Reading Comprehension, and Oral Language (Ford, & Opitz, 2008; Glasswell, Glasswell, & Ford, 2010; Miller, & Almon, 2009; Stone, 2009; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; National Institute for Literacy, 2003; Welsch, 2008; Schirmer, & Schaffer 2010).

During the literacy block, teachers create student-supportive teaching (e.g., coaching, modeling, and scaffolding), guided practice, and opportunity for application instead of teacher-directed practices. They limit lecturing because excessive amounts of "telling," especially where coaching students to come up with their own responses is possible, may rob children of the opportunity to take responsibility for their own skills and strategies (Taylor et al., 2002). Similarly, Miller and Almon (2009) stated that effective teachers know how to adjust the practices and assessments to help each child become a skilled reader and meet the learning standards. For example, during reading aloud to students, effective teachers not only embrace interactive conversation but also modify the complexity of questions (Miller, 2010, p. 25). As such, effective teachers incorporate practices that appreciate the individual learning style and ability by engaging learners in differentiated and meaningful instruction. This task is especially daunting, as teachers attempt to fill the academic achievement gaps, yet, many perform effective practices that include implicit and explicit lessons, integrated content reading lessons, and a balance among whole group, small group, and independent activities (Pearson et al., 2007; Tay-

lor et al., 2002). Several examples of student supportive teaching practices are explored in the Table 2. The table shows how the sample student practices meet the SOL in Virginia. These activities are practiced during the reading block and integrated throughout the day in content area lessons which help all children acquire literacy skills, meet the Kindergarten learning standards, and progress to the next grade.

### **Assessment of Kindergarten Student's Reading Ability**

As long as a school complies with federal regulations, it is the school districts' discretion to adjust their assessments to match the wide range of emergent reading skills in Kindergarten classrooms. Early years are the most important to concentrate on with respect to benchmark testing, as progress and success at this stage of a child's education is a critical predictor of future academic success. Therefore, administering reading assessments, which identify substandard students while they are still in Kindergarten and provide instructional intervention to improve their reading skills can have an extremely positive effect on their future academic performance and being successful later in life.

Thus, individual schools may informally administer additional assessments not mandated by the state or district. For example, when the administration and teachers believe that developmental spelling programs best support reading instruction they may give a school based spelling test. In Virginia, Kindergarten teachers use the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) to determine a child's fundamental literacy knowledge, and to identify a struggling reader. If a student is identified as in need of remediation, the state mandates 150 minutes of weekly remediation until the student meets the required benchmarks. Kindergarten teachers also record student academic progress by maintaining Reading Levels, Observation Survey notes, writing samples and literacy interven-

tions or remediation efforts in a student's classroom portfolio. Teachers also maintain a Kingore Observation Inventory (KOI) profile on each student from Kindergarten through grade Two. The KOI is a portfolio assessment tool used to aid in early identification of gifted and talented children. It is a collection of original work samples, such as, illustrations, language experience dictations, journals, learning logs, and video clips of reading profiling student ability in language, analytical thinking, motivation, perspective, sense of humor, sensitivity, and accelerated learning (Kingore, 2001).

In addition, teachers maintain student performance data on the Kindergarten Student Literacy Data (KSLD) form, and submit it to the school's Reading Specialist at the end of school year. The form includes four components: (1) PALS scores from Fall semester, Mid-Year, and Spring; (2) Observation Survey consisting of Letter Identification, Word Test, Concepts About Print, Writing, Vocabulary, and Hearing Sounds in Words (dictation); (3) Reading Levels; and (4) Documentation of literacy intervention or remediation. While teachers use the information gathered in the KSLD form to justify and adjust instruction, reading specialists use it as a source for their planning guide, professional development, mentoring, and curriculum resources. Based on the student literacy data, the evidence is comprehensively analyzed by the teacher, principal, Reading Specialist, and parents as they contemplate a child's possible retention in Kindergarten.

The federal policy also mandates the Annual Yearly Progress of both special needs and ESL students. In complying with the NCLB, Virginia ensures differentiated instruction and assessment for special needs students. Kindergarten students who are considered to have learning disabilities participate to varying degrees in regular classrooms depending on the severity of their disabilities. These learning disabilities may include, but are not limited to Intellectually Disabled, Developmentally Delayed, or other health impaired (IDEA, 2004). Unlike special needs students,

ESL students participate in regular Kindergarten classrooms where no intervention is provided for their first language because they receive optimum benefit with full English immersion. It is believed that their language deficits, if there are any, will be met through the Virginia's Kindergarten SOLs. ESL students thus are identified; however, they are not remediated at the Kindergarten level in Virginia (VDOE, 2010).

### Closing Remarks

The focus of this study is on the implication of the NCLB guidelines on reading education policy in Virginia which impacts the policies and practices at the kindergarten level. It is an important and beneficial examination of the dynamics between the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and an individual state's Standards of Learning, based to a large extent on information gathered from a school district in southeastern Virginia. Virginia is a representative case to illustrate the implication of federal policy on reading education in Kindergarten in the United States of America. Although this paper focuses on reading education policies and practices in Virginia, the findings may be useful to all school systems around the world. Readers, however, need to be cautious that each school district, state, and nation is unique. Also, policy, curriculum, instructional objectives and activities, and evaluation procedures should be tailored to their specific needs.

This study suggests new directions for further research and long-term studies focusing on comparison and contrast of reading programs at the Kindergarten level in all states within the context of the NCLB guidelines. Future studies should include in-depth examination of the NCLB policy's influence on reading education curriculum, instruction, and assessments at the state and district levels. Also, it is recommended that all states need to conduct studies on the extent to which standards from across states are

aligned, and their success in meeting and exceeding the NCLB guidelines. In addition, when examining the impact of NCLB on student achievement, researchers should consider the important variables of teaching approaches, content subjects, teacher credentials, and student demographics. As the United States is newly exposed to the latest federal policies, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) Reauthorization Act of 2011-2012, also known as NCLB Part II, all stakeholders need to strive to understand how each child is unique and learns differently, and be attentive to the unique characteristics of each child. In this way, they can actively take responsibility for improving the reading skills of the nation's children.

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## Appendix

### Kindergarten SOLs: Oral Language, Reading, and Writing

#### *Kindergarten standards of learning: oral language*

Engage students in oral activities is critical to the development of language and effective communication. Practice of phonemic skills is accomplished through curriculum planning that includes listening to and articulating songs, poems, stories, and rhymes. Kindergartners are actively engaged in speaking vocabularies through classroom participation, performance and conversation (The Virginia Board of Education, 2003, p.1)

The Virginia Board of Education (2003) outlines the standards for oral language as follows:

K.1 The student will demonstrate growth in the use of oral language.

- a) Listen to a variety of literary forms, including stories and poems.
- b) Participate in choral speaking and recite short poems, rhymes, songs, and stories with repeated patterns.
- c) Participate in creative dramatics.
- d) Begin to discriminate between spoken sentences, words, and syllables.
- e) Recognize rhyming words.
- f) Generate rhyming words in a rhyming pattern.

K.2 The student will use listening and speaking vocabularies.

- a) Use number words.
- b) Use words to describe/name people, places, and things.
- c) Use words to describe location, size, color, and shape.
- d) Use words to describe actions.
- e) Ask about words not understood.
- f) Follow one-step and two-step directions.
- g) Begin to ask how and why questions.

K.3 The student will build oral communication skills.

- a) Begin to follow implicit rules for conversation, including taking turns and staying on topic.
- b) Express ideas and needs in complete sentences.
- c) Begin to use voice level, phrasing, and intonation appropriate for language situation.
- d) Listen and speak in informal conversations with peers and adults.
- e) Begin to initiate conversations.
- f) Participate in discussions about books and specific topics.

K.4 The student will hear, say, and manipulate phonemes of spoken language.

- a) Identify orally words that rhyme.
- b) Identify words orally according to shared beginning or ending sounds.
- c) Blend sounds orally to make words or syllables.
- d) Divide one-syllable words into sounds (phonemes).
- e) Divide words into syllables.

#### *Kindergarten standards of learning: reading*

The kindergarten student is to be immersed in a print-rich environment where through direct instruction, individual and small group activities, they discover and read books and other reading material. Students will learn the concept of print, basic phonetic principles, reading comprehension, letter identification skills, and understand that letters represent sounds. Students will demonstrate comprehension and connection to text through retelling, music, art, and writing. (Virginia Board of Education, 2003, p.8).

The Virginia Board of Education (2003) outlines the standards for reading as follows:

K.5 The student will understand how print is organized and read.

- a) Hold print materials in the correct position.
- b) Identify the front cover, back cover, and title page of a book.

c) Follow words from left to right and from top to bottom on a printed page.

d) Match voice with print: syllables, words, and phrases.

K.6 The student will demonstrate an understanding that print makes sense.

a) Explain that printed materials provide information.

b) Identify common signs and logos.

c) Read ten high-frequency words.

d) Read and explain own writing and drawings.

K.7 The student will develop an understanding of basic phonetic principles.

a) Identify and name the uppercase and lowercase letters of the alphabet.

b) Match consonant and short vowel sounds to appropriate letters.

c) Identify beginning consonant sounds in single-syllable words.

K.8 The student will demonstrate comprehension of fiction and nonfiction.

a) Use pictures to make predictions about content.

b) Retell familiar stories, using beginning, middle, and end.

c) Discuss characters, setting, and events.

d) Use story language in discussions and retellings.

e) Identify what an author does and what an illustrator does.

f) Identify the topics of nonfiction selections.

### ***Kindergarten standards of learning: writing***

The kindergarten student will gain an awareness of the connection between oral and written language through drawings, scribbles, letter strings, letter approximations, and dictation to adults. All students are expected to be able to print the uppercase and lowercase letters of the alphabet as well as their first and last names. (Virginia Board of Education, 2003, p.13).

The Virginia Board of Education (2003) outlines the standards for writing as follows:

K.9 The student will print the uppercase and low case letters of the alphabet independently.

K.10 The student will print his/her first and last names.

K.11 The student will write to communicate ideas.

a) Draw pictures and/or use letters and phonetically spelled words to write about experiences, stories, people, objects, or events.

b) Write left to right and top to bottom.

K.12 The student will explore the uses of available technology for reading and writing.