

April 16, 2014

Dear Colleague,

After months of considerable deliberation with teachers, curriculum leaders, department heads, as well as elementary, middle, and high school principals, I'm ready to announce our plan for the realignment of Social Studies courses in grades 4-10. I want to reiterate that this process has given me considerable pride to say that I'm a Social Studies teacher in Rockingham County. Despite the number of personal stakes involved, everyone has been exceedingly professional throughout this process. Regardless of our individual positions, it is clearly evident that our discussion has been guided by a commitment to what's best for our students. I certainly would have preferred to make this decision sooner, but I believe that we were compelled to consider the SOL reform bill (HB930) in order to make the most informed decision for the long term. Despite the future gains of our realignment plan, I do recognize that there will be transitions that will have to occur in the short term. None of us take that fact lightly, but I would not be willing to make this decision if there were not a clear consensus from Social Studies leadership to move forward. I greatly appreciate everyone's work, and I rest well knowing that students will be better served by this decision.

As you may or may not know, Rockingham County students can currently earn a high school credit in middle school by taking World Geography in the 8th grade. While this course offering enables students to get a head start on high school, it also has the negative effect of collectively shifting Civics, U.S. History (Part II), and U.S. History (Part I), down a level to 7th, 6th, and 5th grades (respectively). I agree with many Civics teachers that their curriculum is more appropriately suited for the 8th grade. I also agree with many 5th grade teachers that the U.S. History (Part I) curriculum is too extensive for elementary school. These concerns are reinforced by the fact that a significant majority of Virginia school divisions teach Civics in 8th, U.S. History (Part II) in 7th, and U.S. History (Part I) in 6th.

Our original plan called for the creation of a North American Regional Geography course in 5th grade in order to prepare students for the full U.S. History (Part I) class that would be moved to 6th grade. However, I think the passage of the SOL reform bill forces us to consider the ramifications of this legislation. My initial reaction to the elimination of the SOL test was to leave U.S. History (Part I) in 5th grade. However, I was surprised to discover that many 5th grade teachers still feel that the curriculum is far too extensive, regardless of the SOL test. After considerable reflection, I've come to the same conclusion that U.S. History (Part I) is more appropriately suited for middle school. However, that is a particularly uncomfortable realization when I think about all the fantastic 5th grade history teachers across the county. This is further complicated by the fact that 6th grade will now teach U.S. History (Part I) without an SOL test. Therefore, I think there's less need to put a prep course of North American Geography in 5th grade because 6th grade will certainly have adequate time to cover the full scope of the U.S. History (Part I) curriculum (including the

emphasis on Geography). As you know, the middle school structure will ensure more time for this class because it is fully departmentalized with block scheduling. With that in mind, I think it would be most beneficial to divide the Virginia Studies curriculum between 4th and 5th grades rather than divide the U.S. History (Part I) curriculum between 5th and 6th grades.

Regardless of grade level, all history teachers struggle with the demands of content-heavy curricula that are overburdened with “facts.” We all know what good instruction is, but we also recognize that certain “facts” are demanded by the SOL test. We certainly structure our lessons around the “essential knowledge” of the SOL, but we add considerable contextual information in order to ensure a greater depth of understanding. However, we all know that there’s never enough time to make all the “facts” seem relevant. Several 4th and 5th grade teachers are frustrated by the fact that time constraints and excessive content have forced them to set aside several valuable projects and activities. This exasperation led one 5th grade teacher to comment that she just wants “to make history fun again” - another longed for the freedom to make “students really love learning” again. I certainly don’t mean to suggest that this isn’t happening in classrooms, but I think we all agree that excessive content information can make this unnecessarily difficult in the history classroom. Therefore, I think a Virginia Studies split between 4th and 5th will enable both grade levels to add greater depth to their instruction. However, I also recognize that this will initially create more work for both grade levels. Despite this short-term transition, I also believe that this will empower 4th as well as 5th grade teachers with much greater curricular freedom in the long-term. This structure will also create a much more natural grade-to-grade sequence in the curriculum by using Virginia history (grades 4 & 5) and U.S. History (grades 6 & 7) to prepare students to learn about the corresponding levels of government that will be addressed in 8th grade Civics.

The obvious drawback is that 5th grade will have the Virginia Studies SOL test. Therefore, 4th grade teachers will need to take a slightly larger portion of the curriculum in order to provide 5th grade teachers with adequate time to review for the SOL test in the Spring. There will also need to be a meaningful “local test” that is developed annually in order to assess student learning of the 4th grade portion of the curriculum. This will not only enable 4th grade teachers to cumulatively assess student learning, but it will also provide 5th grade teachers with valuable data as they prepare to teach the second half of the course the following year. This realignment process will begin this coming Fall as 4th grade will focus on 60% of the existing Virginia Studies curriculum. Since RCPS students will complete the Virginia Studies curriculum next year, no RCPS students will take the Virginia Studies SOL test. Starting in the Fall of 2015, 5th grade will teach the remaining portion of the Virginia Studies curriculum and they’ll prepare students for the SOL test in the Spring of 2016. Given that 5th grade will be undergoing the most change, 2014-15 will be a transitional year in order to prepare for 2015-2016. Therefore, 5th grade teachers are encouraged to address the regions of North America along with related history and geography. The remaining time should be utilized to gradually introduce some lessons and activities that address the post-Revolutionary War curriculum of Virginia Studies (SOL .7a – SOL .10c). However, the exact details of the split are still tentative at this point. In the near future, I will be forming a committee of 4th and 5th grade teachers in order to develop an implementation

plan for this curricular arrangement. This committee will also examine additional content and resources that will augment both portions of this curriculum. For example, a few principals and teachers have expressed interest in the addition of local Shenandoah Valley history and the communities that surround their respective school. For instance, Elkton and the establishment of Shenandoah National Park, Dayton and General Sheridan's campaign to burn the Valley during the Civil War, Broadway and the assassination of Elder John Kline by Confederate partisans, etc.

I'm excited about this transition, and I'm confident that our students will be better served by these changes. While I firmly believe that this places students in a better position to be successful, I also recognize that it asks some of our colleagues to make difficult adjustments to new content areas. It is incumbent upon all of us to provide support to these colleagues as they face these challenges. It's not only important that we share valuable instructional materials that will ease their transition, but we also need to provide professional encouragement and moral support as well. Please refer to the table below for a visual layout of the year-to-year realignment plan.

With esteem,

Beau

Social Studies Realignment (Grades 4-10)

**No Civics or
VA Studies SOL*

**Full Implementation*

<i>School Year:</i>	<i>Current Year</i>	<i>2014-15</i>	<i>2015-16</i>	<i>2016-17</i>	<i>2017-18</i>
4 th Grade	Virginia Studies	<u>Virginia Studies (Part I)</u>	<u>Virginia Studies (Part I)</u>	<u>Virginia Studies (Part I)</u>	<u>Virginia Studies (Part I)</u>
5 th Grade	U.S. History (Part I)	U.S. History (Transition Year)	<u>Virginia Studies (Part II)</u>	<u>Virginia Studies (Part II)</u>	<u>Virginia Studies (Part II)</u>
6 th Grade	U.S. History (Part II)	U.S. History (Part II)	<u>U.S. History (Part I)</u>	<u>U.S. History (Part I)</u>	<u>U.S. History (Part I)</u>
7 th Grade	Civics	7 th Grade Social Studies	7 th Grade Social Studies	<u>U.S. History (Part II)</u>	<u>U.S. History (Part II)</u>
8 th Grade	World Studies <u>OR</u> World Geography	World Studies <u>OR</u> World Geography	<u>Civics</u>	<u>Civics</u>	<u>Civics</u>
High School					
9 th Grade	World History I <u>OR</u> World History II	World History I <u>OR</u> World History II	World History I <u>OR</u> World History II	<u>World Geography</u>	<u>World Geography</u>
10 th Grade					<u>World History II</u>
11 th Grade	U.S. History	U.S. History	U.S. History	U.S. History	U.S. History
12 th Grade	U.S. Government	U.S. Government	U.S. Government	U.S. Government	U.S. Government

