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Eleven Virginia Schools Divisions To Participate In Commonwealth Scholars Program

By Patricia Hawke

The Commonwealth of Virginia and Governor Timothy M. Kaine have for some time been

encouraging Virginia Schools high school students to take more rigorous coursework. The Governor recently announced the pilot Commonwealth Scholars Program and promotional campaign to underscore this commitment to excellence in Virginia's youth.

Eleven divisions within the Virginia schools initially will participate in the new program. The required rigorous coursework goes beyond the minimum graduation requirements for a Standard Diploma, but falls below the college preparation coursework requirements for an Advanced Studies Diploma. Students who complete the core coursework under the Virginia schools program will be recognized as Commonwealth Scholars at graduation and eligible to receive a special diploma seal that recognizes their achievement. Instructional support will be provided to all students who participate.

A two-year, \$300,000 State Scholars Initiative grant from the U.S. Department of Education funds the Commonwealth Scholars Program. Virginia schools were one of eight states selected in a national competition to participate in the federal grant program.

The Virginia schools divisions were chosen based on their interest in the program and their ability to meet the requirements of the grant. The eleven Virginia schools' divisions are:

·Albemarle County ·Alexandria ·Bristol ·Carroll County ·Chesterfield County ·Henry County
·Lancaster County ·Nottoway County ·Richmond ·Roanoke County ·Scott County

The Virginia Career Education Foundation, a statewide business and education partnership, will lead the Virginia schools initiative. They will work with participating school divisions to develop partnerships with local businesses and to promote the program. Private sector volunteers will be trained to make presentations to the students, focusing on how the rigorous high school courses will improve their post-high school career opportunities.

The Commonwealth Scholars Program is based on a core course of study that includes:

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·Four years of English; ·Three years of mathematics — Algebra I and II, and geometry; ·Three years of science — biology, chemistry and physics; ·Three and half years of social studies — selected from United States and Virginia history, world history, geography, economics and financial literacy, United States and Virginia government; ·Two years of health and physical education; and ·Two years of language other than English.

Research has shown that there is a strong correlation between the academic rigor of high school coursework taken and postsecondary degree completion. One example is mathematics — 40 percent of students who took Algebra II in high school earned a bachelor's degree, as compared to only 23 percent of graduates who stopped taking high school mathematics at geometry.

Governor Kaine has confidence that the new Commonwealth Scholars Program will encourage many Virginia schools students to continue onto college after graduation. He has thrown down the gauntlet and issued a challenge to those Virginia schools students who are not on track for an Advanced

Studies Diploma. His hope is that they will reach higher and strive to move from competence to excellence.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school issues. For more on Virginia schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk-12.com/Virginia/index.html>

Virginia Schools Signs Agreement With SACS CASI For School Division Accreditations

By Patricia Hawke

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) was founded in 1895. It is a voluntary, nongovernmental agency with more than 13,000 accredited colleges, universities, secondary, middle and elementary schools. The Council on Accreditation and School Improvements (CASI) is a division of SACS and accredits pre–kindergarten, K–12 and vocational schools in 11 southern states, as well as several other countries.

In the spring of 2006, the Virginia schools signed an agreement with SACS CASI. Under this agreement, Virginia schools divisions will be encouraged to pursue accreditation with the Council. The agreement complements Virginia schools already rigorous accreditation standards and will build strong foundations for continued growth in learning and achievement within each school and each school division.

Only Virginia schools divisions may be accredited by SACS CASI. To qualify, all schools within a division also must be fully accredited under the Commonwealth's Standards of Learning accountability program. This encourages and rewards the use of best practices at all levels of the school division.

Eleven Virginia Schools Divisions To Participate In Commonwealth Scholars Program

Additionally, a joint steering committee will coordinate the:

- Division accrediting process, · Training and technical support, · Recognition for achieving accreditation, and · Will encourage all Virginia schools divisions to participate in the program.

Though the program is voluntary for the school divisions, the Virginia schools views the agreement as an incentive for its schools to accelerate their current efforts to improve instruction and increase scholastic achievement.

The SACS CASI accreditation process compares the Virginia schools' policies, practices and conditions with SACS CASI's standards. They look at several different best practice areas, such as governance, instruction, accountability, management, planning and sustained improvement.

Accredited Virginia schools demonstrate their commitment to best practices, quality instruction, and increased academic achievement. It is a way to implement a systematic approach to these goals at all levels within the school divisions.

An added benefit is to the state and local Virginia schools leaders, who share these promising best practices with other accredited schools across the nation.

At the time of this writing, both Hanover and Roanoke County school divisions have been accredited by SACS CASI. Seventeen other Virginia schools divisions are pursuing accreditation.

With encouragement from both SACS CASI and the Virginia schools, we should see many other school divisions with accreditation from the Council within the next few years.

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