



# 2026 Student Essay Contest Guide

## Rooted in Public Education



**Deadline: May 4, 2026**

**\$1,000 Award**

*Participation in VSBA initiatives and observances is optional. School boards in Virginia have the discretion on whether to participate locally. Any related materials from the Association are shared as suggested ideas for implementation for any member board that may choose to do so.*

# 2026 VSBA Student Essay Contest

## **PURPOSE**

This contest is designed to give high school students in Virginia an opportunity to express creative ideas and concepts, conduct research, think critically, practice public speaking skills, and subsequently receive recognition. It also presents a golden opportunity for our Conference on Education attendees to witness firsthand the remarkable caliber of students from across the Commonwealth, providing a vibrant showcase of excellence in education.

## **RULES & GUIDELINES – Please print and distribute as needed**

The Virginia School Boards Association is holding a personal essay/speaking contest where the first-place winner will present their essay before an audience of more than 200 school board members and administrators at the 2026 VSBA Conference on Education held July 16 at the Wyndham Virginia Beach Oceanfront Hotel in Virginia Beach.

This is the sixth year the Virginia School Boards Association will hold this contest. We hope that this contest will bring out the very best in students' writing and speaking efforts and allow our attendees to witness examples of bright, thoughtful, and accomplished students from around the Commonwealth.

Specific Rules and Guidelines begin on the next page.

## **TOPIC**

**Rooted in Public Education** – Public education shapes who we become. In an essay, describe how your public school experience has helped shape your identity, your goals, or your sense of belonging. How are you “rooted” in public education, and how has it helped you grow?

## **ENTERING THE CONTEST & REGISTRATION DEADLINE**

This contest is open until 4:00 p.m. on Monday, May 4, 2026, to all 2025-2026 school year high school (grades 9 - 12) students enrolled in school divisions that are current members of the Virginia School Boards Association. The application process must be completed in its entirety **online no later than 4:00 p.m. Monday, May 4, 2026. Receipt of applications will be time-stamped by VSBA.**

To be part of the contest, student applicants must submit a complete application containing ALL the following items by the date shown above:

- An application form found at this link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/StudentEssay26>
- A 600-750 word personal essay
- A video of the essay presented as a speech
- A completed and signed Parental Release Form (see page 6 of this document)

## **HOW TO SUBMIT YOUR ESSAY AND VIDEO TO VSBA**

ALL the required materials listed in the section above must be submitted through [the online submission form](#) no later than [4:00 p.m. on Monday, May 4, 2026](#). The video portion of the application must be submitted through a YouTube, Google Drive, or Dropbox link through [the online submission form](#). Remember that partial submissions will not be considered for participation in the contest, so please ensure all four items are included with your online submission.

**When submitting your video link, it is important that the privacy settings of the video be set to public. If the video is not a publicly viewable link by the May 4 deadline, the submission will be disqualified.**

# 2026 VSBA Student Essay Contest

## RECOGNITION

The contest offers the following incentives:

The first-place winner will receive a **\$1,000 award**, sponsored by Haney Phinyowattanachip, PLLC, and a certificate to be presented at the **2026 VSBA Conference on Education**, held on **July 16, 2026**.

Attendance at this conference is **required** and the winner will present their essay as a speech and receive recognition. The location of the 2026 VSBA Conference on Education is:

**Wyndham Virginia Beach Oceanfront**  
**5700 Atlantic Ave**  
**Virginia Beach, VA 23451**

*\* The first-place winner will also be recognized on the VSBA website and in an issue of the VSBA newsletter.*

## RULES AND GUIDELINES

- All entrants must be classified as a high school student (grades 9-12) during the 2025-2026 school year.
- The school where they are enrolled must be a public high school in Virginia in a division that is a current member of the Virginia School Boards Association.
- By entering the contest, the student agrees to present their essay/speech at the VSBA Conference on Education if chosen as the first-place winner. This is required to receive the award.
- Although this is meant to be a personal, rather than an academic essay, attention should be given to content, organization, style, and correctness.
- Essays/presentations must be original. However, consultation with teachers or other resources is encouraged. Plagiarism is not acceptable.
- Credit must clearly be given to any source where borrowed material is directly used or quoted.
- Essays should be approximately 600-750 words in length (**appropriate for 4-5 minutes of speaking**) and on the topic: ***Rooted in Public Education***.
- A video of the presentation in its entirety must be submitted with this application.
- Presentations should be memorized, but students may use 3x5 note cards as references during their presentations. **Presentations may not be read in entirety from a manuscript or notes.**
- Presentations must be **four to five minutes** in duration and videos must be made for public view so that judges are able to view them.

## JUDGING

The winner will be selected by a panel of judges chosen by the Virginia School Boards Association. Criteria for judging the essays and the presentations include quality of the written essay both in form and content and student delivery qualities as demonstrated in the video. Accuracy of facts; demonstrated mastery of the topic, effective communication of concepts, thoughts, ideas, proper use of voice and articulation, and originality are all important. A sample of the judging worksheet can be found on the next page. **The decisions of the judges are final.**

# Virginia School Boards Association Contest Judging

Student: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

Division: \_\_\_\_\_

Essay/Speech Title: \_\_\_\_\_

## CRITERIA

## NOTES

Essay Qualities (\_\_\_\_\_ /30 points):

- No plagiarism in evidence
- Well-organized information
- Accuracy of material
- Informative
- Resources credited appropriately

Speech Presentation (Video) (\_\_\_\_\_ /35 points):

- Captures the attention of the audience
- Organizes ideas (presents a specific point of view)
- Introduces and uses research effectively
- Interprets and understands the subject
- Uses resources and references appropriately

Student Delivery Qualities (\_\_\_\_\_ 35 points):

- Shows poise and confidence and passion
- Speaks fluently and with clarity
- Uses satisfactory pronunciation
- Has control of fillers (“ums” “you knows” “likes”)
- Effectively uses voice quality and volume
- Delivery is smooth and natural
- Uses body movements appropriately (gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, posture)

Observed Time Limit      Yes    No

Time Used: \_\_\_\_\_

Total Points Awarded: \_\_\_\_\_ / 100 points Judge's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

*Sponsored by:*



## 2026 VSBA CONFERENCE ON EDUCATION STUDENT ESSAY/SPEAKING CONTEST

### Parent/Legal Guardian Media Recording Release for Students

I, \_\_\_\_\_, Parent/Legal Guardian of \_\_\_\_\_, (student's name), hereby grant permission to the Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA) to use the above-named student's video, photo, and likeness for promotional purposes by VSBA in all manners, including, but not limited to: news releases, photographs, video, audio, website, and other electronic or printed published media. I agree that these videos, photos, and/or voice recordings may be used for a variety of purposes without further notifying me or the student. I understand VSBA shall not use any of the student's personally identifying information, except for the student's full name, the school that he/she attends, and the student's grade, without first obtaining my express permission. VSBA has my permission for this use until I submit a written revocation of my permission to the VSBA Office at 200 Hansen Road, Suite 2, Charlottesville, VA 22911, [communications@vsba.org](mailto:communications@vsba.org), or by calling 800-446-8722. I understand the VSBA does not have control over a third party who retrieves my student's information published by the VSBA and uses it without my permission. I agree to hold the VSBA harmless for such misuse of my student's information.

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Parent/Legal Guardian Printed Name

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Parent/Legal Guardian Signature

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Date



# VSBA

## Virginia School Boards Association

Leadership • Advocacy • Support

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