

# Executive Summary



## Fulfilling the Charge in Executive Order 4: A Summary of the Commonwealth Listening Tour

On January 17, 2026, her first day in office, Governor Abigail Spanberger set a new course for the future of Virginia's students by issuing Executive Order Four (EO4), which mandated a strengthening of the Commonwealth's public education system. As part of the EO4 charge, the Secretary of Education and the Superintendent of Public Instruction embarked on the Commonwealth Listening Tour, an initiative which aimed to gather feedback directly from the heartbeat of our schools—students, educators, families and the communities that surround them. This summary captures the narrative of that journey, documenting the perspectives of diverse community members on the successes that anchor our system and the critical opportunities for growth.

### A Journey Across the Commonwealth



The Commonwealth Listening Tour included events and sessions in all eight superintendent regions to ensure every community had a voice. The Listening Tour launched with Governor Spanberger in Hampton. Secretary of Education, Dr. Jeffery O. Smith, and State Superintendent, Jenna Conway, then continued holding discussions with students, education partners and community members for over 50 hours. Each regional stop included structured

opportunities for engagement—student roundtables, small stakeholder discussions with teachers, school leaders, parents and community members, school site visits, and large public listening sessions—all designed to capture a wide variety of perspectives. In total, the Listening Tour provided a platform for more than 2,200 participants to provide direct feedback to state leaders.

### Key Themes

*Gratitude for the Opportunity to Share:* Participants appreciated being able to share local successes and advocate for solutions directly with state leaders.

*Pride in Educators and Leaders:* Participants shared overwhelming appreciation for and pride in educators and principals that go above and beyond to meet student needs.

*Candor about Challenges:* Respondents were candid about challenges facing their schools and communities, and constructive in sharing ideas about potential solutions.

### Voices of Success: What is Working

From Roanoke to Hampton, there was a shared sense of progress related to:

- **Literacy Gains:** The implementation of the Virginia Literacy Act emerged as a major success, with evidence-based phonics and structured literacy driving tangible reading gains for our youngest learners.
- **Workforce Readiness:** There is pride and excitement around the expansion and effectiveness of high-impact career and technical education (CTE) pathways and credentialing, and various high school Academy Models.
- **Reduced Distractions from Cell Phones:** Teachers and students consistently reported that recent cell phone restrictions have been a "game changer," successfully reducing distractions and creating more engaged classrooms.

## COMMONWEALTH LISTENING TOUR BY THE NUMBERS

2,282

Individuals  
Provided Feedback

113

Students Participated in  
Student Roundtables

562

Individuals Participated in  
Stakeholder Roundtables

422

Individuals Participated in  
Public Evening Listening Sessions

967

Survey Responses  
Captured

218

Individuals Participated in  
Virtual Sessions

53

Hours of  
Listening Sessions Hosted

74

VDOE Staff  
Volunteered

- **Strong School Level Leadership:** Participants shared that schools with consistent, supportive principals experience stronger staff morale and improved learning environments.
- **Targeted Academic Supports:** Small group instruction and high-dosage tutoring are helping students make progress.

### Facing the Challenges: Opportunities for Growth

While successes were celebrated, participants were equally candid about the challenges and areas for improvement:

- **Initiative Fatigue:** Stakeholders noted the difficulty in effectively implementing numerous changes to state policy, standards, assessment, and accountability in a few short years.
- **Assessment Concerns:** Students and educators alike reported concerns regarding the role, redundancy and volume of testing, which they described as fostering "teaching to the test" culture rather than content mastery.
- **Use of Educational Technology:** There is a growing consensus among parents and educators on high usage of digital platforms, prompting some to call for a return to traditional "pencil and paper" instructional materials.
- **Educator and Leader Pipelines:** Divisions continue to struggle with teacher and leader recruitment and retention from pre-Kindergarten through grade twelve. They also identified a continued need for competitive compensation, simplified licensure requirements, and mentor supports.
- **Behavioral and Mental Health Supports:** Many educators and families emphasized that academic success is impossible without urgent needs for better access to behavioral and mental health supports for students.

### Our Commitment to Action

Based on feedback from the Commonwealth Listening Tour, the Department will:

- **Continue to elevate the voices of local educators and leaders** to strengthen implementation of the Virginia Literacy Act and expand supports for math instruction;
- **Incorporate feedback in proposals to refine Virginia’s accountability system, the School Performance and Support Framework (SPSF),** in partnership with the Board of Education;
- **Support the educator workforce** by exploring opportunities for flexible licensure pathways and addressing recruitment and retention barriers;
- **Partner with divisions to provide wraparound student supports** for access to mental health, behavioral, and wraparound services; and
- **Strengthen partnerships with divisions.**



Together, these actions reflect the coordinated and deliberate approach that the VDOE will take to address stakeholder feedback and strengthen statewide coherence for divisions. The Department and the Office of the Secretary of Education are committed to transparency, collaboration, and accountability as we work with our education partners, families, teachers, communities, and divisions across the Commonwealth to improve outcomes for all students.

# COMMONWEALTH LISTENING TOUR

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## STOPS & VISITS

### Region 1

Colonial Heights High  
Powhatan High

### Region 2

Bethel High  
Kecoughtan High  
Yorktown Elementary

### Region 3

Gloucester High  
Chancellor Elementary

### Region 4

Alexandria City High  
Jefferson-Houston PreK-8 IB

### Region 5

Carysbrook Elementary  
Central Elementary

### Region 6

G.W. Carver Elementary  
Roanoke County CTE Center  
Northside High  
Blacksburg High

### Region 7

EO Career Commons Hub  
SWVA Higher Education Center  
HEALS at Emory & Henry  
Oak Point Elementary School

### Region 8

Cumberland Middle School  
Nottaway High School

### Virtual Sessions

Principals  
Teachers  
Parents  
Business/Community  
Virginia Education Association  
Student Advisory Council

### Other Visits

NOVA Parent Roundtable  
NOVA Early Childhood Roundtable  
Region 4 Superintendents  
Region 7 Superintendents  
Region 7 Math Leaders  
UVA K-12 Advisory Council  
SPED Directors  
VDOE Staff