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News Release

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VSBA Celebrates Student Voices Through Sixth Annual Student Essay Contest

Winner and Honorable Mentions Recognized for Outstanding Essays on Public Education

Charlottesville, VA – The Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA) proudly announced Sophie Poletsky, a rising senior at Manor High School in Portsmouth City Public Schools, as the winner of the 2026 VSBA Student Essay Contest. The announcement was made during a special presentation this afternoon during the 2026 VSBA Conference on Education.

This year's theme, "Rooted in Public Education," sparked a compelling response from students across the Commonwealth. Sophie's essay stood out for its clarity, passion, and perspective, earning her first-place recognition and a \$1,000 award generously sponsored by Haney Phinyowattanachip PLLC. In addition to her written work, Sophie's recorded speech demonstrated remarkable poise and conviction.

When asked what inspired her to write this essay, Poletsky stated, "What inspired me to write my essay is my endless passion towards education. I have always been drawn to writing and learning, and hearing about this content inspired me to push myself to win this accomplishment."

To view Sophie's winning essay presentation, please visit: <https://youtu.be/o8kxTE998Qk>

VSBA Executive Director Gina Patterson spoke to the importance of the student essay contest, saying, "The Student Essay Contest gives students an opportunity to share their experiences, perspectives, and hopes for the future of public education. This year's winner and honorable mentions demonstrated exceptional thoughtfulness and creativity, and their essays serve as a powerful reminder of the impact public education has on students across the Commonwealth."

As part of her recognition, Sophie was invited to present her speech in person at the Conference on Education. Her moving delivery resonated deeply with school board members, superintendents, and division leaders from across Virginia, leaving a lasting impression on the audience.

In addition to recognizing the contest winner, VSBA also honored two students with Honorable Mention distinctions for their outstanding submissions.

Gleb Kasyan, a rising sophomore at Washington Liberty High School in Arlington County Public Schools, was recognized for his thoughtful reflection on the role public education has played in his life.

View Gleb's essay presentation here: <https://youtu.be/Vvk-BMdeDeQ>

"I was inspired by having an opportunity to look back to the beginning where my journey began," stated Kasyan. "Arriving in Virginia from a foreign country without knowing English was terrifying, but the public school system caught me and supported me (and still does). I wanted to



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write to show the School Board that their decisions have a real, human impact on students just like me every single day.”

Evelyn Mullins, a rising senior at John Handley High School in Winchester City Public Schools, also received an Honorable Mention for her essay.

View Evelyn’s essay presentation here: <https://youtu.be/7mK9Gmuz0rQ>

“I was inspired to write the essay on the topic, ‘Rooted in Public Education,’ because of the adversity I have faced in public education and the personal benefit I received from public education,” stated Mullins.

The Annual VSBA Student Essay Contest encourages students to reflect on the impact of public education in their lives and communities while providing an opportunity to share their voices with education leaders across the Commonwealth. VSBA congratulates Sophie Poletsky and this year’s Honorable Mention recipients on their exceptional achievements.

About the Virginia School Boards Association

The Virginia School Boards Association, a voluntary, nonpartisan organization of Virginia school boards, promotes excellence in public education through advocacy, training, and services. The Association offers conferences, information, training, and counseling designed to meet the needs of the Commonwealth’s educational leaders.

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