**Virginia academics rank 17th in the nation**

In its 2004 edition of the Report Card on American Education, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) ranked Virginia student academic achievement 17th in the nation. Accounting for 100 measures of educational resources and achievement, ALEC reports that increased spending on education is not enough to improve student achievement around the country. Lori Drummer, ALEC's director of the Education Task Force, notes, “While we’re beginning to witness some varied increases in measures of student achievement, America’s public education system has continually failed to substantially raise pupil performance despite dramatic hikes in education spending.”

Virginia has seen a decrease of 28.7 percent in pupil-to-teacher ratios over the past 20 years. The only state to see its ratios decrease by more was New York at a 28.8 percent decline. Overall, U.S. student achievement was disappointingly low, with 73 percent of public school eighth graders who took the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress mathematics exam scoring below the “proficiency” level and 32 percent scoring below the “basic” level.

The report card supports the growing realization that spending more money on education is not enough to improve student achievement. “We cannot simply spend our way to better grades but must make sure that we are making the right kinds of investments in our schools to promote high student achievement,” says ALEC Executive Director Duane Parde. “We must continue to find and focus on practices that will increase accountability, discipline, and standards for not only children, but for teachers as well.”

**Virginians increasingly optimistic about quality of life**

The 13th annual Quality of Life in Virginia survey, conducted by the Virginia Tech Center for Survey Research, indicates that Virginians remain highly satisfied with their quality of life and are increasingly optimistic about the condition of Virginia's economy. The 2004 results reveal a marked positive change from last year in citizens' perceptions regarding the state and the national economies.

According to the survey, seven in 10 Virginians believe that the national economy is improving, while 73 percent agree that the state economy is improving. Sixty-two percent believe Virginia is an “excellent” or "good" place to find a job, and 68 percent of residents in the urban crescent (Northern Virginia, Richmond, and Hampton Roads) are even more optimistic about the availability of jobs in the commonwealth.

Survey participants rate education as the most favorable aspect of the commonwealth. Eighty-six percent rate college or university education and 81 percent rate K-12 education as “excellent” or “good.” In regard to quality of life, 88 percent believe that Virginia is an “excellent” or “good” place to live, with 77 percent believing that Virginia is an “excellent” or “good” vacation spot. Seventy-eight percent feel that the quality of medical care in the commonwealth is also “excellent” or “good.”

Concern about state highways and roads is on the rise, however. Forty-seven percent said “not enough” was spent on highway and road improvements in Virginia. Within the urban crescent, 51 percent of respondents want more spent on roads and highways.
Census Bureau reveals trends of salary differences

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, African-American and Asian female college graduates have a higher annual income than white women. On average, in 2003, African-American women made $41,100, Asian women made $43,700, and white women made $37,800.

The bureau gave no reasons for the differences between the races, but economists and sociologists have offered a variety of explanations, including the increased likelihood that minority women work a second job or work more than 40 hours a week and the tendency of African-American women to take less time off from work when they give birth. It was also suggested that African-American women choose to enter higher paying fields.

These figures do not mean all African-American women are financially stable. Census estimates indicate that 39 percent of families headed by a single African-American woman are in poverty, compared with 21 percent of families headed by a white woman.

Survey reveals employees value time over money

According to a Salary.com survey of approximately 4,600 employees, 39 percent would prefer more time off to spend with their families instead of a $5,000 raise. Today, the average American works 160 hours more each year than a generation ago, leading to burnout as well as a reassessment of values and priorities. The combination of the new century and Sept. 11 seems to have made time spent with family increasingly more important, and people are entering the workforce with the desire to work for self-fulfillment instead of money. “Workers are saying they need a break from the stresses caused by increasing hours, reduced staff, and the push for more productivity,” says Tim Driver, senior vice president of consumer products at Salary.com. “It’s also possible that following several years of layoffs and cost-cutting, an increasing number of workers are less inclined to believe that placing work above personal concerns will pay off in career advancement and pay.”

Virginia tops the nation in Government Performance Project

The Government Performance Project (GPP) gave Virginia straight A’s in four management categories: money, people, information, and infrastructure.

The results were based on a 300-plus question survey, as well as interviews with legislative staff members, representatives of civic organizations, academics, fiscal analysts, and government officials. Websites, budgets, capital plans, and workforce plans were also analyzed. The assessment concentrated on results and achievements instead of programs.

“Virginia is a national leader in strategic planning and performance measurement,” according to the GPP report. “Virginia’s capacity to conduct procurement electronically and through the Internet is among the most highly developed of any state.”

The GPP has issued three report cards since its inception in 1998. This is the first time any state has received straight A’s.

Virginia tops list in obesity increase

A phone survey conducted by the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System has determined that Virginia, with 23.7 percent of its residents qualifying as obese, tops all other states in the growth of obesity. Obesity is measured by factoring height against weight; obesity is indicated by a body-mass index greater than 30.

The Virginia Department of Health and Gov. Mark R. Warner are working to identify the reasons behind the increased obesity rate. Six regional and two statewide meetings were held in May to discuss the rising obesity rate and possible solutions.

Last year, Gov. Warner launched a “Healthy Virginians” program that encourages state employees to find 15 minutes every day to exercise. The program is expected to reduce health-care costs by helping address obesity, hypertension, and other preventable diseases.

While the commonwealth has the highest percentage growth in obesity rates, it does not have the highest percentage of obese adults in the U.S. Twenty-seven-and-a-half percent of the West Virginia population is considered obese, making it the heaviest state in the nation.

Virginia universities anticipate advanced computer network

Virginia’s major doctoral universities have announced the creation of VORTEX, a broadband optical-fiber network that will connect state universities to national and international research networks. Created by the Mid-Atlantic Terascale Partnership, a regional consortium that includes the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, George Mason University, Old Dominion University, Virginia Commonwealth University, and the College of William & Mary, the VORTEX network will provide researchers with more capacity and control than the Internet.

As part of this project, Verizon Virginia is assembling the network and will make it available for business applications. The commonwealth is working with Verizon and other providers to build a statewide Wave Division Multiplexing-based system that will support research and economic development interests.
The costs for the entire project will be split between the participating institutions and the state government, as well as private investments. “VORTEX will provide Virginia’s academic researchers with new cyber infrastructure tools and will enable access to the fastest networks in the country,” says Gov. Mark R. Warner. “These tools are essential if our schools are to compete for major science and engineering projects.” The network is scheduled for completion in July.

Community college tuition increase stays below national average
In March, the State Board of Community Colleges voted to increase Virginia community college tuition by 6.7 percent. Tuition for in-state students will rise from $63.70 per credit hour to $68, and full course load (30 credit hours per year) will increase from $2,006 to $2,135 annually. Once the new rates go into effect, tuition at Virginia’s community colleges will have increased by 83 percent since 2002.

While costs continue to rise, two-year college tuition in Virginia remains $300 below the national average. The latest tuition increase follows the financial plan that Virginia’s community colleges implemented last year. “This is a manageable increase that will help us continue to develop more economic opportunity for all Virginians,” says Glenn DuBois, chancellor of the Virginia Community College system. The increase enables the colleges to supplement faculty salaries and financial aid budgets.

Budget crisis has negative effects on public employees
The 2004 AFT Public Employees Compensation Survey reveals that states have decreased the number of public employees in important safety positions and that those remaining face stagnant salaries. “This survey shows that states are still struggling to rebound from the nation’s economic slump,” says Steve Porter, director of the AFT Public Employees Division. “In a short-sighted effort to manage budget deficits, state agencies across the country are sacrificing experienced staff to layoffs, attrition, and early retirement pension buyout options. These stopgap measures can have disastrous effects.”

According to the survey, state salary increases dropped sharply from 3.63 percent in 2002-03 to 0.45 percent in 2003-04. The national salary increase is 3 percent for 2003-04, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Reviewing such job elements as salary range, number of employees, collective bargaining status, pay plan type, and average base salary, the survey also reported that public employees with union representation earn more because of their collective bargaining rights. The average weighted mean salary for public employees in collective bargaining states is almost 20 percent higher.

Wastewater discharge limits bring relief to bay
The Virginia State Water Control Board has endorsed a $1.1 billion proposal to set nutrient discharge limits for wastewater treatment plants in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. The proposal requires the 100 largest wastewater treatment plants to install technology that will reduce nitrogen concentrations in discharges up to 8 milligrams per liter of water. It also sets annual limits on the total amount of nitrogen and phosphorus that can be discharged from all major facilities.

Controlling wastewater discharges plays a vital role in the state’s attempts to meet nutrient and sediment goals. The commonwealth’s plan mirrors Maryland’s efforts to preserve the bay. Plants near their annual nutrient discharge limit will be asked to upgrade in order to stay within their predetermined annual total, while plants with excess capacity will be allowed to delay upgrades. The proposed plan will modernize wastewater treatment plants and help Virginia achieve a third of its nutrient reductions.

Lauded by some environmentalists as overdue modernization, the project does have potential negative implications. According to Christopher Pomeroy, an attorney representing sewage systems in 50 localities, Virginia residents could start seeing higher sewer bills as the plants begin to pay for improvements. Putting a limit on how much nitrogen a plant can produce may also force localities to send new sewer customers to other localities, initiating a “sewage sprawl.” “I don’t know if it will slow growth,” admits Pomeroy. “It will certainly shape it. It could shape it with negative environmental consequences.”