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## On SOLs, a Norfolk school logs near-perfect pass rates

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Fifth grade teacher, Alberta Gaddy has students in her math class use beepers to register answers at Willoughby Elementary School in Norfolk. (John H. Sheally II | The Virginian-Pilot)

### Keeping score

Of 1,837 Virginia schools where students took SOLs last spring, about 12 percent achieved a 100 percent pass rate in at least one subject.

### 5 perfect scores

Norfolk's Willoughby Elementary was alone in the achievement

### 4 perfect scores

Seven schools had four 100s, including Virginia Beach's Old Donation Center

### 3 perfect scores

19 schools had three 100s, including Virginia Beach's Kemps Landing Magnet

### 2 perfect scores

50 schools had two 100s, including Oakwood Elementary, Ocean View Elementary and Poplar Halls Elementary in Norfolk; Churchland Elementary in Portsmouth

### 1 perfect score

136 schools had one 100, including Camelot Elementary in Chesapeake; the School of International Studies at Meadowbrook and Taylor Elementary in Norfolk; Simonsdale Elementary in Portsmouth; Kingst on Elementary, North Landing Elementary, Pembroke Elementary, Red Mill Elementary, and Strawbridge Elementary in Virginia Beach.

Source: Virginia Department of Education

Database: School accreditation and pass rates in Hampton Roads

By Amy Jeter  
The Virginian-Pilot  
© October 13, 2008

### NORFOLK

Angela Schaeffer became nervous after her Willoughby Elementary students took practice Standards of Learning tests early last spring.

It wasn't that they did poorly. It was that they did so well.

"We were getting 100 percent (pass rates) in every class," said Schaeffer, who was the school's math specialist. "I was scared the tests were too easy."

But when Willoughby's third-, fourth- and fifth-graders took the official exams a month later, the results came back nearly the same: 260 out of 262 SOL test papers received passing scores.

That meant that Willoughby had 100 percent pass rates in five accreditation benchmarks, more than any of the other 1,836 schools in the state where standardized tests were taken, as reported by the Virginia Department of Education. In the sixth benchmark, the school got a 98 percent pass rate.

Pass rates on SOL tests determine whether Virginia schools meet various government goals for student learning. This year, schools were required to achieve pass rates between 50 percent and 77 percent for state and federal standards, depending on the grade level and the subject.

"I knew our students could do it," said Kristine Timerson, Willoughby's PTA president. "I was excited."

One of Norfolk's smallest elementary schools, Willoughby served about 280 students in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade last year. Just 72 of the school's students were required to take the SOL exams in the spring: third-graders took tests in four subjects, fourth-graders were tested in two subjects, and fifth-graders in five subjects.

With such a small number of test-takers, "many people ... would say they should have passed," Principal Sharon Phillips said. "We agree."

Willoughby, a squat, brown 1960s-era building, anchors the northern end of Ocean View, blocks

away from the Chesapeake Bay to the east and Willoughby Bay to the west.

Most of Willoughby's students are military children, and about 53 percent qualify for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program.

Once a month, students are permitted to make jewelry, play on a Nintendo Wii or do other activities for one hour during Club Day. Parents love the small class sizes – an average of 16 to 18 students last

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year. The principal occasionally grills hot dogs for staff members in the school's courtyard.

Teachers motivate themselves with a cheer borrowed from West Virginia's Marshall University: "We are Willoughby!" They arrive early and stay late to work with students. They call parents twice a week, and they assign homework on Fridays and review packets for extra credit over holidays.

"All the teachers, they don't know just their class," said Tina Evans, the PTA first vice president, "they know all the kids."

The school's SOL pass rates have been climbing since 2002, when fewer than 65 percent of Willoughby students passed the state's

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standardized tests in English and math, and fewer than half scored well on the history exams.

Phillips arrived as principal in 2006, ready to make adjustments that would yield more results.

She combined the two fourth-grade classes so a new teacher could work side-by-side with a more experienced teacher and to lighten their planning load. She encouraged dividing small classes into even smaller groups to give students more attention. In 2007, Phillips replaced three of six teachers in SOL testing grades after vacancies from promotions and job changes. She wanted to bring in people whose educational decisions she trusted most.

"We said to all the teachers, 'Look at where your kids start and where they need to go,'" Phillips said.

Evans was impressed with the thoroughness of her son's third-grade teacher, Patricia Lewis, who worked with individual students until they mastered lessons. "She made sure every kid was clear on that subject," Evans said.

New technology also helped. Last year, Willoughby received projectors, cameras, and a remote system that electronically polls students and displays their answers. Administrators also installed a SMART Board – an interactive electronic panel linked to a laptop computer – in every classroom.

"It means they can bring the Internet into lessons better," said Tracie Kunkel, a fourth-grade teacher. "It brings sound. It brings sight."

The students worked so hard last year that the school held its first Beach Fun Day in June as a reward. Students, teachers and parents played games and grilled hamburgers.

When asked about learning, students used their teachers' words such as "reading strategies" and "hands-on activities." They praised the new technology that gives them a break from writing during class.





"The teachers helped me out in every subject," Kiatre Pattum, 10, said. "They would give me directions clearly."

Sean Molina, 10, a fifth-grader who scored a perfect 600 on the fourth-grade reading test, called the exam "challenging, not hard" and said he wasn't surprised at his classmates' success.

"I knew that everybody would at least try their best and not get left back," he said.

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**ITS WHAT YOU DONT HEAR...**

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Submitted by [martinc87002](#) on Tue, 10/14/2008 at 8:03 am.

What this article fails to tell you is that the teachers at these schools ONLY teach what is exactly on these test. They dont go above and beyond like most schools. Well atleast its a nice PR stunt considering the state of the NPS school system. Makes this school sound like paradise compared to the rotting, disgusting other schools.

**WHAT?**

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Submitted by [ij17163](#) on Mon, 10/13/2008 at 12:39 pm.

Did I see only 50 to 77 percent? Boy what expectations!!

**SOL**

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Submitted by [ngray](#) on Mon, 10/13/2008 at 11:38 am.

Wouldn't it be great if the over crowding at the rest of Norfolk's Elem. schools could be spread around to afford ALL of Norfolk's children the same opportunity for such small class sizes and

spread the successes that come with such a more manageable class size for the teacher?

**SOL**

Submitted by [macwilk](#) on Mon, 10/13/2008 at 9:16 am.

Yea, NPS allowed a school to keep its attendance zones the same, and thus kept small class room populations. Great experiment - it worked. Small classes really work! Take a lesson, require class sizes of 20 or less and you will see the results. It is worth the investment! Way to go Willoughby ES.

**NORFOLK SCHOOLS**

Submitted by [lawrenceb82104](#) on Mon, 10/13/2008 at 8:54 am.

Congratulations, you finally found something good to write about Norfolk Public Schools. There is not much to brag about.

**100% SOL SCORES**

Submitted by [Michele S.](#) on Mon, 10/13/2008 at 5:14 am.

Congratulations to the students, faculty and staff at Willoughby. Decades of research has shown time and again that smaller class sizes make a tremendous impact on student achievement. However, the costs of reducing class sizes are huge.

Unfortunately for this school - and for most of the schools in the box to the left of the article - the requirement for Adequate Yearly Progress will probably not be met next year. If a school earns 100% on an SOL test then scores 99% the following year, measurable progress is not shown. Even if 100% is earned again, no gain is evident so AYP will not be met.

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