

*A Brief History of the
Virginia Middle and High School Principals Conference & Exposition*

The precise circumstances under which Governor Harry F. Byrd, Sr. established the Virginia Middle and High School Principals Conference & Exposition in 1927 remain a matter of historical uncertainty—whether by executive order, formal directive, or the “friendly persuasion” for which he was widely known. What is certain, however, is the enduring legacy of this distinguished gathering. For 98 years, the conference—jointly supported by the Virginia Department of Education and the Virginia Association of Secondary School Principals, and in more recent years, the Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership—has stood as a cornerstone in the advancement of secondary education across the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Under Governor Byrd’s leadership, the conference established a lasting professional expectation: that state and local leaders would convene annually with Virginia’s middle level and high school principals to reflect upon their roles and responsibilities and to engage in thoughtful dialogue on the cultivation and support of effective school leadership. This commitment to collaboration and continuous improvement has remained central to the conference’s mission across generations.

During its first eleven years, the conference was held in December. In 1938, Governor George C. Peery—himself a former high school principal in Tazewell, Virginia—played a pivotal role in transitioning the conference to June. This change, both practical and symbolic, has endured, with the conference continuing to be held in June to this day.

The Virginia Department of Education administered the conference until 1992, when State Superintendent of Public Instruction Joseph A. Spagnolo, Jr., determined that the direct administration of professional conferences was not aligned with the core functions of a state education agency. Recognizing the strength and capacity of Virginia’s professional associations and institutions of higher education, he invited the Virginia Association of Secondary School Principals to assume responsibility for the conference’s administration, with the continued sponsorship and partnership of the department. This transition was undertaken with the understanding that the state superintendent and departmental staff would remain actively engaged through a dedicated, day-long professional session—now known as the DOE Colloquium.

Today, the conference endures as a testament to the Commonwealth’s longstanding commitment to educational leadership, professional excellence, and the collective advancement of its secondary schools.



This June, we will mark the ninety-eighth year of our enduring “annual review” dedicated to the advancement and support of school leadership. (The conference was not held in 2020 due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.) For nearly a century, this distinguished gathering has not only reflected evolving policies, instructional priorities, and systems of accountability, but has also challenged participants to think both creatively and collectively about building a more sustainable future for schools and those who lead them.

The ninety-eighth convening will continue this tradition, offering an opportunity to reflect upon and pay tribute to the significance of the inaugural state conference on public school leadership, held in Richmond, Virginia in 1927. That first assembly brought together middle level and high school leaders from across the Commonwealth, establishing a framework through which educational leaders could respond to the rapid expansion of public education and the complex challenges facing principals, local communities, and the state.

From that initial gathering emerged a legacy of strong and sustained leadership that has evolved over the decades. This legacy has contributed to the development of an inclusive system of learning that serves all students, fosters excellence in classroom instruction, promotes continuous school improvement, and encourages active engagement in professional organizations and leadership activities.

During this ninety-eighth conference, participants will engage in the exchange of ideas and innovations designed to build upon the foundational framework established in Richmond. Together, they will envision new possibilities and chart a course forward for the field of educational leadership—one that will guide and strengthen the profession in the decade ahead and beyond.