I became deeply involved in implementing standards-based accountability in Virginia, I had no preordained agenda to fulfill other than to make Virginia’s reform agenda, the Standards of Learning (better known as the S-O-Ls), work not only in theory but also in practice.

Although I was a citizen appointee (and a full-time partner in a law firm), this job became my primary occupation. It consumed my days and nights. There wasn’t a wedding reception or other seemingly innocuous social event when someone eager to share an opinion about public education didn’t corner me. For my employer (and fortunately for me), my salary became the practical equivalent of a charitable donation to public service.

Before my appointment, I was ignorant of the extent to which policymakers rely on the power of assumptions. I’ve since learned that the higher the level at which decisions regarding education policy are made, the more likely that little-examined assumptions drive those decisions. For example, at one meeting a board member wanted to change Virginia’s school-accreditation regulations to deny local school districts the right to petition the state board to increase the number of credits the districts required for high-school graduation. Had the measure passed, local school districts would never be allowed to raise academic standards by increasing course requirements.

I wondered what could be motivating this proposal. During a recess, the member confided that the measure’s real goal was to “stop schools from using block scheduling.” Students with block schedules typically have more credits at the end of four years than those with traditional schedules. Thus, unless required to earn more credits, they could graduate much earlier. Regardless of the pros and cons of the real goal, it took some pretty grand assumptions to think that everyone in the system would respond to this change by dropping all block scheduling in their schools. This is what happens when policymakers who are several steps removed from the classroom try to force the system to change without regard for the unintended consequences of their decisions.

Too often, policymakers get so trapped in the rhetoric of “principles” that they lose the flexibility to manage the assumptions driving their decisions. It becomes easy to operate within the parameters of the rhetoric and leave the details to someone else.

About midway through my term as board president, when I was knee-deep in implementing Virginia’s SOL program, I sat on a panel with an education official from another state who also supported standards-based accountability. However, we had different messages for the audience. He talked tough about not retreating from accountability and leaving no child behind. My key points were seeking reasonableness in reform policies, paying attention to details, and fine-tuning problems. While he came across strong, I appeared soft. The audience clapped loudly for him, softly for me. He was probably just a more engaging speaker, but there was another difference as well: his state had not implemented any type of testing program with consequences for students and schools. He was possessed of both ignorance and confidence. I can only hope that Twain was right.

Mark Twain once said, “To succeed in life, you need two things: ignorance and confidence.” Despite the irony, Twain may have been on to something when it comes to standards-based education reform. Ignorance and confidence were about all I had going for me when I was elected to serve as president of the Virginia Board of Education. The day my colleagues on the board selected me president was my first meeting as a newly appointed board member.

The politics of my selection is a story for another day. I mention it only to make the point that when