



Delegate wants changes to SOLs

Seniors should be exempt if schools are unaccredited, says Van Yahres

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Charlottesville Delegate Mitchell Van Yahres, D-57th District, knows he is in for a fight to allow high school seniors to graduate this June without passing Standards of Learning tests if they attend schools not fully accredited.

This year SOL graduation requirements take effect for seniors who entered ninth grade in 1999. Seniors must pass SOLs in six areas including two verified units of credit in reading and writing.

A statewide survey last summer found 11 percent of the state's 77,000 high school seniors hadn't done that with a year to go. One of four Virginia high schools do not meet state accreditation because they did not get high enough passage rates on SOL tests for all students.

"It's going to be an uphill fight for it," Van Yahres said Tuesday in his Richmond office. "The way I feel about it is the schools cannot meet the standards, why should you expect the students to meet the standards?"

The Democrat's stance is contrary to Democratic Gov. Mark R. Warner, who has said he will not backtrack.

Warner established Project Graduation that beefed up remediation and retesting efforts with summer academies in Southside Virginia and a pilot online tutorial last fall that will be taken statewide, said state department of education spokesman Charles Pyle.

Pyle said that estimate of 8,703 "at-risk" seniors is six months old and does not take into account retesting last summer and fall.

Van Yahres' stand is as much about funding as it is about standards. Proponents of his bill say it's only fair when Virginia has not fully funded its share of public education.

"It is the ultimate in unfairness that we would punish children by denying them a diploma, when the adults have not taken the time to fix their schools or the system that funds them," said Andy Block, legal director for the JustChildren advocacy program of the central Virginia Legal Aid Justice Center.

Block said the best predictor of a school's SOL passage rate is its number of low-income students. Yet while that at-risk population is accounted for in the state funding formula it does not direct additional money to the children, he said.

House Education Committee Chairman James H. Dillard, R-41st District, has been rebuffed by the legislature the last several years in his attempts to dramatically increase school funding. His latest attempt is a \$200 million plan to send localities \$1,000 per student per low-income child.

Van Yahres' bill goes before Dillard's committee Monday.

"The other side is obviously you don't want to be perceived as backing off from the standards that we're set," Dillard said. "The vast majority of the General Assembly supports what we've been doing with the SOLs and where we're trying to go. But as I said, a case can be made that you shouldn't penalize a student when the school itself has failed."

This story can be found at: http://www.justice4all.org/files/news/Articles/2004-01-20_Potomac_News_-_Delegate_Wants_Changes_to_SOLs.htm

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