



## A Question of Fairness:

### ***State Must Better Prepare Its Students***

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Charlottesville. In Virginia's House of Delegates, Republican Jim Dillard and Democrat Mitch Van Yahres have each introduced education bills for the General Assembly's consideration this session. Both should be enacted into law.

Dillard's bill would increase funding for programs designed to assist poor students who are at risk of failing the Standards of Learning (SOL) tests. Van Yahres' bill would temporarily prohibit the state from denying a diploma to any student who failed the SOL tests until all schools within the state are fully accredited.

While it might seem like these bills have little in common, both rest on the same, simple proposition: It is unfair to punish students when they have not been given an adequate opportunity to learn. Under the current testing regime in Virginia this is precisely what will happen unless these bills are enacted. Starting this spring, seniors who have not passed certain standardized SOL tests will be denied a high school diploma, despite the fact that many of them have not been provided a fair and adequate opportunity to learn the material on which they were tested.

People can surely debate whether it makes sense to require students to pass a series of standardized tests in order to receive a high school diploma. In the past, local school boards and individual teachers determined who could graduate, and one can question the wisdom of handing over this power to state bureaucrats. No one, however, can seriously question the idea that students should have an opportunity to learn the material on which their diplomas - and their futures - rest. If we are going to require all students to take certain tests to graduate, we should at least give them a fighting chance of passing.

THIS IS WHERE the proposed legislation comes in. Delegate Dillard, a Republican, has the courage to acknowledge a basic and tragic fact: Students from poor families are at greater risk of failing the SOLs than are students from more affluent families. Poor students come to school with greater educational needs, but they are usually provided fewer educational resources and a lower quality of education than are their more privileged peers. Dillard's bill would help make up for the Commonwealth's long-standing neglect of our most vulnerable students by helping to pay for demonstrably effective initiatives such as lowering class sizes and hiring better teachers.

Dillard's bill implicitly acknowledges that the Commonwealth is not doing enough to prepare all students to pass the SOLs. Van Yahres' bill makes this point explicitly and proposes that students should not be punished until all schools - and the Commonwealth - get their collective acts together. As things stand now, schools have until 2006 to reach full accreditation, which they will receive if 70 percent of all students are passing the SOLs. Putting to one side whether a 70-percent passage rate sets our sights too low - it effectively means that schools can receive the equivalent of a C-minus for their performance and still be accredited - it is perfectly clear that it makes no sense to hold students accountable before holding schools accountable. Yet this is precisely what will happen this spring if students are denied diplomas for failing to pass the SOL tests.

If we knew that passing the SOL tests was absolutely necessary to function in higher education or

in the workplace, it might make sense to deny diplomas immediately. But we have zero evidence that these tests are related to future success as a student or an employee. (Perhaps all members of the General Assembly ought to take the SOL tests, with the understanding that all those who fail will resign their seats.). While we know very little about the relevance of the SOLs, we know a great deal about the importance of a high school diploma. Mounds of social science data demonstrate that receiving a high school diploma is absolutely essential to economic security.

MOST OF THE seniors who have not passed the SOLs come from poor families. Many, if not most, have attended schools that are not fully accredited. The Commonwealth has already failed these children by not providing them an adequate opportunity to learn. Denying them a diploma would only punish them further by cutting off employment and higher education opportunities. This does not mean that all students should graduate, but simply that this decision should remain with teachers until we are confident that all students have had a fair opportunity to learn the material covered on the SOL tests.

The General Assembly should embrace the basic commitment to fairness contained in the bills introduced by Dillard and Van Yahres, and pass them both. In an era when "accountability" is all the rage, it is time for the General Assembly to hold itself accountable and fix the public schools before punishing the students who are forced to attend them.

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