



Don't gut SOLs now

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There is a kind of moral injustice in holding Virginia high school students accountable this year for meeting standards when the very schools that are supposed to enable them to meet those standards won't be held accountable until 2007.

Bad schools are still expected to produce good students. But only the students will be punished for failure.

Still, Del. Mitch Van Yahres' proposed solution went too far. The House Committee on Education apparently agreed. It bypassed his legislation indefinitely.

The legislation would have rendered Virginia's education-accountability reform essentially meaningless by removing any teeth from the Standards of Learning.

Now, some people would say that's a good thing. But if Virginia is to retreat from the SOLs, that choice should be fully debated and decided upon rather than enforced by default through legislation that appears to be much less radical.

For the first time in 2004, students will be required to pass the SOLs before being allowed to graduate. Schools are not required to be fully accredited until 2007.

Mr. Van Yahres, a Charlottesville Democrat, had introduced a bill ordering that the SOLs not be considered in awarding standard diplomas until all Virginia schools had achieved accreditation.

Mr. Van Yahres said he was not opposed to accountability but believed that all schools should be up to par before students were denied diplomas based on what they failed to learn at those schools.

Added Andrew Block, an attorney with the Legal Aid Justice Center in Charlottesville, even in 2007 schools that do not gain full accreditation will suffer no meaningful consequences.

In fact, the students themselves are the consequences - both educationally and politically. When students fail to receive diplomas because their schools were too flawed to adequately teach them, it is presumed that parents will put such pressure on schools and schools boards that change must occur. Ideally, this process will have begun at the earliest signs of trouble, not after students are told they can't graduate. Yet unfortunately, the schools most needing parental pressure are probably those where parents are least likely to be active.

It's a harsh standard - but it's the one we've been given.

To award diplomas to students who did not meet the SOLs would remove not only the consequences to students but the pressure on schools to reform.

Mr. Van Yahres' bill might have been fairer to students in the short term, but generally counterproductive by eliminating any urgent incentive for failing schools to improve. It also, SOL

supporters argue, would have been unfair to students in the long run - those who might have received diplomas without being able to meet basic standards and those who did meet all standards but whose diplomas would be devalued by the relaxing of the rules.

What's more, supporters say, any unfairness from this situation has already been addressed: The full SOL testing program will not be implemented until 2007.

When the SOLs were adopted, Virginia knew the task would be difficult. Now that the results of that decision are imminent, it will be useful to see what we have wrought.

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