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Results Of First SOL Class Awaited; Failure Rate Likely Lower Than Feared, Va. Educators Say; [FINAL Edition]

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Full Text (1394 words)

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School in the United States has been seven years of hard work for Jose Rodriguez.

When he and his family arrived in Manassas from El Salvador, his English was limited to "hello." His older brother, Nelson, faced with difficult classes in a new language, soon abandoned the effort.

But Jose, 18, stuck it out. Although until recently he held down a job -- sometimes until 2:30 a.m. -- cleaning out airplanes at Dulles International Airport, he is passing all his courses at Osbourn High School and hopes to graduate with his classmates in June.

Only one thing stands in his way: Virginia's Standards of Learning writing exam.

This year, for the first time, students must pass SOL tests to graduate. Rodriguez has failed the writing test twice, tripped up by sentence structure and where to put commas, he said. He took the test a third time in March and awaits the results.

"I'll be the first one in my family to graduate from high school," he said. "I want to have opportunities in this country."

With graduation a little more than a month away, a critical deadline is approaching not only for Rodriguez, but also for Virginia's standardized testing program. Teachers and parents, engaged in a six-year effort to overhaul curriculum and teaching methods to improve student scores, are waiting to see how this first class will fare.

Educators said it looks as though the number of seniors who won't graduate because of SOL tests will be lower than they once feared -- and low enough to avoid the kind of public uproar that has roiled Florida, California and other states as they have approached similar deadlines.

According to a partial survey of Virginia school districts last week -- before the results of March testing are in and before the school year's last tests are given this month -- 5.7 percent of the state's seniors were in danger of not graduating, either because of SOL tests or because they are failing their classes. About 4.8 percent failed to graduate last year and 5.7 percent in 2002, before SOL tests were required.

Many of those who have not cleared the hurdle are students for whom English is not their first language, school officials said. Others are special-education students who are struggling to pass regular tests or qualify for the alternative offered to them, a modified diploma that requires passing eighth-grade exams.

Students take SOL exams in the third, fifth and eighth grades and in high school; the subjects are English, history, math and science. To receive a diploma this year, high school seniors must pass both the reading and writing SOL tests and four other tests of their choosing, or four tests on a list of acceptable substitutes. Starting in 2007, their test credits will have to be spread across the curriculum. For now, the mix is up to students.

In Fairfax County, about 5.3 percent of seniors need to pass at least one more exam. With more test results due, this year's failure rate is likely to be less than last year's 4.6 percent, Acting Superintendent Brad Draeger said. "We think it's a good number," he said. "Even though we're focusing on the SOLs, every kid is getting tracked so intensively, it raises all boats."

In Alexandria, about 11.5 percent of seniors still need at least one exam, and one-third of them are immigrant students who are taking the two English tests for the first time this spring, T.C. Williams High School Principal John Porter said. Native English speakers usually take the tests at the end of the 11th grade.

In Prince William, officials said they have not counted the students who still need exams to graduate, but they said 399 of 3,849 seniors lacked the writing test and 391 had not passed the reading test at the start of March. They said the two groups largely overlap and predicted that no more than 235 seniors, or 6.1 percent of the class, will not graduate. Last year, 8.8 percent of seniors did not get a diploma.

Whatever the reaction to the graduation rate, Gov. Mark R. Warner (D) has said Virginia will stick with the Standards of Learning program. He declared that after years of preparation, "it's not fair to school systems or students to back off."

The difference between Virginia and other states, he argued, is Virginia's added flexibility and extensive help for struggling students, which have helped convince residents that the exams combine accountability and compassion.

The testing regimen has undergone several changes since its introduction in 1998. In 2000, the state Board of Education voted to allow students to substitute their scores on Advanced Placement, SAT or other exams for some SOL tests, and the list of alternatives now includes certification tests for such technical careers as cosmetology and auto mechanics.

In 2001, after complaints that history scores were significantly lower than those on other tests, the board lowered the number of correct answers needed to pass some of those tests. In 2002, the board decided that a school district can award credit to students who failed a history or science test twice but came close to passing, as long as they passed the corresponding course.

Students also can retake exams as often as needed, and Warner last year introduced a series of intensive courses to help students who are struggling with the reading and algebra exams. Warner said about 75 percent of students who take the classes pass the exams.

"We're not going to retreat from accountability," he said, "but we will walk the extra mile with our students."

The chance to retake tests made the difference for Kory Franklin, 18, a senior at Osbourn. Franklin said he passed the reading and writing tests last year on his first try but had to take his four other tests more than once. After a summer math class, extra help from his teachers and some nagging from his mother, Franklin passed the exams this year, he said. "It was pretty stressful," he said, "having to get all that help and review the material every day."

According to a survey released last month by Virginia Commonwealth University, 59 percent of Virginians think SOL results are an appropriate graduation requirement, and 75 percent agree or strongly agree that SOLs hold schools accountable for student achievement.

Critics of the test, however, said public outcry might still come when students exhaust their final chances to pass before their class's graduation.

Andy Block, legal director for the Charlottesville-based advocacy group Just Children, said he worries about how school districts outside wealthy Northern Virginia will fare. He argued that the many students who drop out before their senior year aren't reflected in the statistics on graduation rates.

"My expectation is that the story there is going to be a sad one," he said.

Others said that many of the alternatives and substitute tests hailed by state education leaders were put in place expressly to lessen the impact of SOL exams this year.

"I think it's an expedience issue," said Joyce Johnston, an educator for 31 years who teaches a test-preparation

class for Osbourn students with limited English skills. She said that the lack of exceptions to the reading and writing tests explains why so many of the seniors at risk of not graduating are limited English speakers.

Sumbal Khalil, 18, a senior at Herndon High School in Fairfax, immigrated to the United States four years ago from Pakistan. Khalil has received B's and A's, speaks four languages and wants to become a doctor.

She said she has hesitated to apply to a four-year college this year because she is just now taking the course that culminates in the SOL reading and writing tests, and she will not know her results until the school year ends. She expects to pass, but fears the test's potential for interfering with her plans.

"Oh my God, I'll die if I don't [pass]," she said.

State Superintendent Jo Lynne DeMary said schools do students no favors if they let the students leave before they can read and write proficiently in English. She said some students simply need more than four years to graduate, and students can continue to retake exams, including over the summer.

"We're not preparing these kids to get a diploma," she said. "We're preparing them to be successful in life."

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