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Va. Standardized Testing Questioned

Advocacy Group Requests Study of Tests' Impact on Dropout Rates

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RICHMOND, Va. -- A child-advocacy group on Monday asked the state to study the impact of high-stakes testing on the number of students who have dropped out of high school before earning their diplomas.

JustChildren wants the state to look into how many of the students have left school and don't plan to get an equivalency diploma since Standards of Learning were introduced. It also wants to know how many of those students are low-income or minority students, among other issues.

More than 98,000 high school freshmen were enrolled in the fall of 2001-01. This spring there were about 74,000 seniors, according to state figures, and about 5.4 percent won't graduate with their class.

"It's an alarming situation," said Andrew Block, JustChildren's legal director. "While people are talking about the success of SOLs, no one has talked about school attrition."

This year, Virginia high school seniors must pass state SOLs to graduate. It's the first time since SOL testing started in 1998 that students need to pass exams in reading and writing and four other subjects that they choose to get their diplomas.

State education officials and Gov. Mark Warner have touted initiatives such as Project Graduation, regional academies that have helped test-takers pass their English and math tests.

Parents who oppose the requirement that seniors pass SOL exams to earn a diploma said the measure punishes students for schools' failure to adequately educate them.

"We're asking them to perform before we're asking the schools to perform," Stonewall Odom, father of six children in Petersburg public schools, said at a news conference. He is a member of the Kids Now! campaign, an education-reform group affiliated with the JustChildren advocacy group.

"We are proud of the children who have made it through, but there are so many children who don't make it to their senior year," said Debra Grant, a mother of three from Virginia Beach.

Charlottesville-based Just Children is a division of the Legal Aid Justice Center of Virginia, which represents the legal, educational and social interests of children, especially those from low-income families.

"People are concerned about this and there are certain aspects of the SOLs that don't get discussed

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much," Block said. "Today is hopefully the beginning of a longer discussion about the more troubling sides about the SOLs."

Though it's unclear that the SOLs are linked in any way to the attrition rate, JustChildren wanted to draw attention to the fact that more than 20,000 students who entered high school four years ago are no longer in the public school system.

Charles Pyle, a spokesman for the state Department of Education, said Virginia has been planning to do a thorough study on the class of 2004 and the impact of the new SOL requirements, "something the department has intended to do all along."

"But at this point we are not able to do the simple arithmetic and be able to tell how many students dropped out, moved to another state, left the public high schools and enrolled in parochial or private high schools," Pyle said.

As part of reporting requirements under the No Child Left Behind act, the state hopes to have a system in place to track all students by July 2006, Pyle said.

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