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Calls for study of Va.'s 'lost children'

State plans research as sources say fewer high schoolers graduate

BY DAVID RESS

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Tuesday, June 15, 2004

Virginia needs to figure out why so many students who start Grade 9 don't make it through high school, a nonprofit legal aid center said yesterday.

The JustChildren program of Virginia's Legal Aid Justice Center said more than 28,000 students who enrolled as high school freshmen in 2000 are not receiving diplomas this spring.

"These are lost children," said Debra Grant, a Virginia Beach resident who is on the steering committee of the center's education-fairness campaign.

Grant called for a state Department of Education investigation of what happened to those children, and why they did not graduate.

"Our fear is that it is getting worse, and our fear is that it is getting worse because of SOLs," said Andrew K. Block, JustChildren's legal director. SOL is the acronym for the state's Standards of Learning testing and school accreditation program. This year marks the first time high school seniors must pass SOL tests to graduate.

Charles Pyle, spokesman for the state education department, said agency officials were already planning a detailed study of the class of 2004 and the impact of the SOL requirement.

JustChildren based its call for an investigation on state projections that 69,774 students would graduate this year. That is 29 percent fewer than the number of children who entered high school in 2000.

A Times-Dispatch analysis of statistics on high school graduation and enrollment shows the comparable figure for last year was 21 percent and ranged between 22 percent and 25 percent during the previous four years.

Pyle said actual data on graduates suggest the state projection that alarmed JustChildren will end up understating the number of students receiving diplomas.

While not all school districts have reported graduate numbers yet, he said numbers from those that have show they graduated more students than projected.

Henrico County, for instance, had told state officials 189 students were at risk of not graduating, but the county later reported that only 105 seniors did not graduate.

Richmond reported that 183 students at risk of not graduating but reported that only 87 did not

graduate.

Relatively small numbers of students did not graduate solely because they did not pass SOL tests, Pyle said, reporting the total for Henrico at 30.

In Newport News, that number was 23. Figures for many other school districts, including Richmond and Chesterfield County, have not yet been filed with the state.

Pyle said the state does not believe the percentage of students not completing high school is rising.

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