

[Apartments](#)[AutoPilot](#)[CareerConnection](#)[Classified](#)[RealEstate](#)[Shopping](#)[Yellow P](#)

Group calls for study on dropout frequency and SOL tests' effects

By CHRISTINA NUCKOLS, The Virginian-Pilot

© June 15, 2004

Last updated: 12:12 AM

RICHMOND — Too many students drop out of Virginia high schools without graduating, and a statewide advocacy group for low-income families is demanding an investigation.

Leaders of the Kids Now! Campaign: Virginians for Educational Fairness said Monday that they believe the state's Standards of Learning tests are causing more students to leave school. At the same time, they acknowledged that the tests are drawing attention to unacceptably high drop out rates that have been ignored in past years.

Kids Now! members offered statistics Monday indicating that more than 28,000 students who enrolled as high school freshmen four years ago are not graduating this spring. The group asked the state's Department of Education to examine the problem and come up with solutions.

The SOLs are coming under increasing criticism because this year's high school seniors are the first class required to pass at least six of the tests to graduate. As of mid-May, 5.8 percent of seniors statewide, or 3,984 students, had failed to meet the new requirements. The number in South Hampton Roads could be as high as 450.

Several activists participating in Monday's news conference predicted that some of those students will challenge the tests in court.

Kids Now! is an offshoot of the Legal Aid Justice Center, a Charlottesville-based organization that offers legal services to indigent families and immigrant workers.

Debra Grant, a Kids Now! member from Virginia Beach, said the tests should not be a requirement for graduation until all schools in Virginia are accredited.

Seventy-eight percent of Virginia schools have been accredited by the state. "It's not bad to have high hopes for our students," said Grant, a mother of three who has one child still in school. "It's bad when they are not given the tools to meet these standards. ... They have been robbed of their hopes."

Andrew K. Block Jr., legal director for the Justice Center, said state statistics suggest that the SOLs could be causing drop out rates to rise but that further investigation is needed.

The freshman class for the 2000-01 school year numbered 98,371, according to statistics from the Virginia Department of Education, but only 69,774 seniors are expected to receive diplomas this spring. That represents a dropout rate of 29 percent.

Block noted that the drop off between the freshman class of 1999-2000 and the graduating class of 2003 was 24 percent. Those students were not required to pass the SOLs to graduate.

Charles Pyle, a spokesman for the Department of Education, said those numbers are misleading. He said schools have no way to track how many of those missing students moved to other states, transferred to private schools or switched to a home -schooling program .

Pyle said the SOLs are not expected to have a significant effect on the percentage of high school seniors receiving diplomas this year. He said a majority of seniors not graduating on time failed to complete all of their

classwork.

In Suffolk, for example, 104 seniors are not expected to graduate, but only seven are being held back solely because they did not pass the six necessary SOL tests.

State education officials said they planned to perform an analysis of this year's seniors and their performance on the SOLs to determine what types of remediation are most effective. Students struggling to pass the tests this year received one-on-one instruction and had access to computer tutorials to help them prepare for re testing.

Pyle said calls to delay the SOL requirements for another year are unfair to students.

"This is about reading and writing," he said.

"It's about making sure when a student graduates from high school, he or she has those basic skills. The students need those skills now, not at some indefinite point in the future when all schools are accredited."

In recent years, states and the federal government have placed an emphasis on high-stakes testing and accountability standards.

Gary Orfield, a professor of education and social policy at Harvard and author of a report on dropouts, said he believes that trend has peaked and a backlash is beginning. He said growing criticism of the federal No Child Left Behind standards is likely to spark opposition to similar state-imposed requirements.

Orfield said broad-based testing is valuable, especially in states like Virginia that rely heavily on local property taxes to fund education, because it highlights disparities among individual schools. However, he said those tests should not be punitive.

"I would say, don't ever flunk a child on the basis of one test," he said.

Reach Christina Nuckols at 804-697-1562 or christina.nuckols@pilotonline.com.

© 2004 HamptonRoads.com/PilotOnline.com