

Lost Kids

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Recently the JustChildren program, an arm of Virginia's Legal Aid Justice Center, called for an investigation into the Commonwealth's graduation rates. This year more than 28,000 students who should be graduating will not be - a stunning 29 percent fewer than the number who enrolled in high school four years ago. JustChildren calls them "lost children," and believes the problem might be getting worse because of the Standards of Learning requirements.

It is probably too soon to say the numbers are getting worse - final graduation figures are not in. But it probably is not too soon to say more than one cause is at work. Families move around, especially in urban areas, and the transience can affect on-time graduation rates - or disrupt schooling altogether. Dropouts owing to simple dysfunction also play a role.

And, to be fair, the SOLs might as well. They put pressure on schools to improve performance, as they are intended to. But schools can raise averages in numerous ways, and one way is to turn a blind eye if some low performers stop showing up. Still, most educators are too conscientious and devoted to their mission for that. The likeliest answer is "(d), all of the above."

Whatever the reason, a "lost children" rate of 29 percent (or the more typical 22 percent to 25 percent) is far too high. Digging deeper into the question seems not only warranted but urgent. When it comes to losing kids, the state hasn't a moment to lose.