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Thrown for a Loss by the SOLs

Gar-Field Senior Passed Courses, Failed Exit Tests

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As Michael Copeland's classmates at Gar-Field Senior High School paraded in front of their beaming parents, waving new diplomas, he was home in front of the television, eating pizza and watching movies.

Like the 577 graduates, Copeland passed all his classes. Unlike them, he failed Virginia's Standards of Learning reading and writing exams, new graduation requirements this year.

Copeland, 18, a standout football player, took the reading test eight times, three in the last week of school alone. He delivered the news to his mother, Maria Copeland, the day before graduation, calling from an empty school hallway so his classmates would not see his tears. He said he couldn't bear to attend the ceremony.

"I've been going for four years. I was successful in class," he said. "Everybody will walk. I'm sitting beside my teachers and my friends [and not walking]? It's embarrassing."

Copeland is one of 32 Prince William County seniors, less than 1 percent of the class, who were prevented from graduating only by the SOLs -- a terrible disappointment for a student whose teachers said he worked hard to stay in school. Some educators said he is proof that the SOLs are doing their job, identifying students who need a better grasp of the basics before receiving a high school diploma.

"If a student takes the test and fails it several times, there's clearly some issue that needs to be addressed," said Charles Pyle, spokesman for the Virginia Department of Education, speaking of students statewide. "Can they write at a minimum level? Do they have basic reading skills? That's what this is about."

Others questioned whether Copeland lacks necessary skills or is simply a poor test-taker. They wondered whether students like Copeland would abandon the effort in frustration and face employers without the benefit of a diploma they would have earned in years past.


"Given what he's been able to accomplish, I don't think it's fair or right to say we'd be helping him by not giving him a diploma," said Andy Block, a testing critic and legal director of Just Children, a Charlottesville-based advocacy group. "There will be other challenges for him, but at least he'd be free to have the opportunity to face them."

What he faces now is a summer of tutoring to pass the two crucial SOL tests, raise his 490 SAT score and renew his application to Virginia State University, where he wants to play football. The coach there


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said he's interested in Copeland, who needs an SAT score of about 770 to get in and 820 to be eligible for the team.

Other Northern Virginia school districts are still tallying the number of students who will not graduate on time because of their test results. Officials have said they expect the percentage who will not graduate on time to be much lower in this first year of the requirements than they feared when the tests were introduced in 1998. In Maryland, the Class of 2009 will be the first to graduate with a testing requirement.

Many of the students who fail the SOLs will be immigrants who will have to learn more English before retaking the tests. Some will be like Michael Copeland, who struggled but survived in his first three years of high school and buckled down increasingly as graduation neared, but sometimes passed up opportunities for help.

Staying in school and out of trouble has been an accomplishment in itself, Copeland said. His parents separated when he was in the fifth grade, and his mother worked three and four jobs to support him and his four brothers and sisters. Like 28 percent of Gar-Field's students, Copeland receives a reduced-price lunch, reserved for students from low-income families.

In middle school, Copeland was classified as learning disabled and took special education classes until seventh grade, when his test scores rose and disqualified him. "Just, boom, he was out of them," said Maria Copeland of the special education classes. She said she believes her son might have done better if he had continued to receive the one-on-one attention.

As a high school freshman, Copeland acknowledged he sometimes concentrated more on football than school. Copeland, a running back, said he is happiest on the field. His right arm is tattooed with a football topped by a crown. "Always on top of the game," the motto reads.

"The ball snaps, and everything is quiet," he said. "You just hear yourself breathing in your heart. There's grabbing and screaming, but for me, it's quiet. A pin could drop."

His mother pushed him to pay attention to his classes. She dropped by the school often to talk to his teachers, and Copeland's guidance counselor said they've been in touch for years.

"My mom is on me so much that I feel like I'm getting gray hair, and I'm only 18," he said.

She wasn't the only one. A football coach worked with him each day in the team office to help him prepare for the biology SOL exam. He passed it, along with three other electives -- the required number for graduation in addition to the reading and writing tests.

Gradually, Copeland's grades improved. This year, he said, he spent extra time almost every day with teachers, getting intensive help in one subject or another. His grade-point average for all four years is 2.236 -- a little better than a C average -- and this year he got two Bs.

"He is really concerned about his work. He'll stay after class if he has to," said social studies teacher Chevelli Smith, who said she placed Copeland in the top 5 percent of her students in terms of effort. "He realizes that he has problems with certain things, maybe with reading comprehension, but he does not mind asking questions."

But there were many missed opportunities. Guidance counselor Jason Supon said Copeland was absent

last year when his classmates first took the SOL reading exam and absent again on the makeup day. Despite reminders, he did not attend classes offered over the summer and again in the fall and the spring to help students with the test.

"I think Michael made great strides in terms of his work ethic," said Jim Poythress, the head football coach at Gar-Field throughout Copeland's time there. Poythress is now head coach at Lake Braddock Secondary School. "There was a gradual trend toward becoming better in those areas. But he was pretty far behind when he started."

Copeland's mother said that he found it hard to keep track of almost daily tutoring sessions and that he was bound to miss some. And she said that school officials did not offer her son a free online tutorial designed by state educators, part of series of programs touted by Gov. Mark R. Warner (D). State officials said only one of the county's seven high schools enrolled students in the program. Of the 193 Virginia students who took the tutorial this spring, 149 passed the exams.

"Why didn't they implement this program? How come they didn't make everyone take this?" she asked.

Prince William officials said they informed each school about the tutorial and other remedial programs. Gar-Field Principal Roger Dallek said he doesn't remember receiving the information and praised the school's tutoring efforts.

Joyce O. Jones, director of guidance at Gar-Field, said Copeland is "one of many" students who get passing grades by working hard in class but whose academic weaknesses are pinpointed by the SOLs. She said the tests, which are given beginning in elementary school, increasingly are uncovering problems early, before they become a barrier to graduation.

Supon, the guidance counselor, said he believes that Copeland deserved to receive a diploma with his classmates but that he will need more than just reading remediation before he can tackle college level work. "He's got a good brain, but he's going to need some help with [college]. Junior college might be good, where he could get remediation courses," he said.

After Maria Copeland called state officials with her complaints this month, her son is taking the online tutorial under the supervision of Virginia's head of secondary English programs. In addition, he has enrolled in summer school at Gar-Field. He has pledged to stick with it.

"I gotta do what I gotta do," he said. "I'm not going to give up."

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