



## **SOLs may pose dropout problem**

**posted:** June 24, 2004

### **The Virginia Standards of Learning tests are in question for their role in high school graduations**

by **Lauren Rutherford**

Collegiate Times Staff Writer

The Virginia Standards of Learning have been stirring up questions since the first tests were given in 1998 and the debate of their existence is continuing, with some believing that high school dropout rates are growing due to these tests.

In the early 1990's, the Virginia Department of Education received complaints from higher learning institutions and employers that Virginia high school graduates were not prepared for life after high school. VDOE reacted with what is currently known as the SOLs.

The SOLs describe Virginia's expectations for student learning and achievement by testing basic reading and writing skills, said Charles Pyle, director of communication for VDOE.

JustChildren, a grassroots organization out of Charlottesville, Va., brought the question of whether SOLs are causing students to quit school to the public's attention.

JustChildren held a press conference on June 14 and called on the Virginia government to study the impact of SOLs and students staying in school, said Andy Block, the legal director for JustChildren.

However, Pyle said before this conference was held, the VDOE superintendent, Jo Lynne DeMary, had already begun to form a non-VDOE committee to begin an in-depth study of all aspects of the graduating class of 2004. The study will be headed by Dr. William Boshier, the dean and executive director of the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute at Virginia Commonwealth University, Pyle said.

JustChildren bases its fears on student attrition numbers. They compare how many students began their freshman year in 2000 and how many graduated in 2004. In Montgomery County, the class of 2004 lost about 22 percent of its students since 2000. Statewide, the attrition rates show that about 98,000 students began 9th grade in Virginia four years ago, and about 70,000 students graduated this June.

"We don't know if SOLs are the cause for this extremely high difference in numbers, but we suspect they play a role since the attrition rates have gone up since the SOLs began," Block said.

However, VDOE views the situation differently. “It’s rash to say that SOLs are causing students to drop out of school,” said Pyle, “For one thing, nobody knows what happened to that 30 percent that didn’t graduate at a Virginia public school. Some students may have moved away or started attending a private school.”

Another figure JustChildren is using to promote their view is the 6 percent of students who VDOE predicted would not graduate this year because of failing one or more SOL tests. JustChildren argues that this percentage only encompasses the students who attended all four years of high school, and leaves out those who previously dropped out because of the tests, Block said.

Pyle, however, says the figure was only a projection, and the real numbers are coming in daily from all school districts. “Each day we get more and more numbers from the schools, and it looks like the original estimates were too high. As of now, only about 5.5 percent of those who did not graduate were withheld diplomas because of SOL tests,” Pyle said.

JustChildren also believes the SOLs are somewhat unfair because of the differences in resources for the different school districts in Virginia. “It’s important to have educational standards, but they should be fair to all students, not just those attending schools that have a lot of money and resources,” Block said.

Because of these differences, JustChildren suggests that the SOLs be suspended for the time being in schools that are not accredited. Once the schools earn their accreditation, said Block, the children can learn better and the SOLs will be more effective overall.

VDOE, however, believes this is unproductive. “The SOLs are aimed at making sure that graduates are prepared after high school. We can’t afford to wait until all schools are accredited. The students need this knowledge now,” Pyle said.

Along with this, VDOE is promoting Project Graduation, an effort to work with upcoming and current seniors who are having difficulties with SOL tests. “Virginia is different from other states with graduation requirements because we offer several outreach programs to get students ready for these tests,” said Pyle.

For now, the SOLs will continue to be a part of the Virginia public school system as an effort to provide high school graduates with what Virginia believes is the basic knowledge needed to succeed after high school.