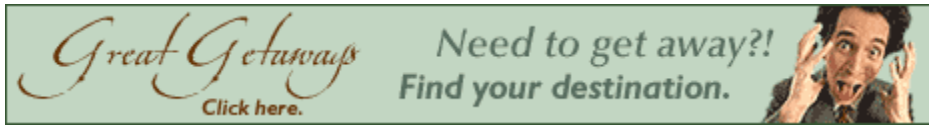


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Evaluating SOLs: Take a Candid Look At Graduation Rates

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Charlottesville. The evidence is still coming in, but it appears the SOLs have been neither the success nor the failure that their proponents, or opponents, claim. Until we are honest, however, about the actual impact of this testing regime, true education reform in the Commonwealth will remain a popular political expression, not an academic reality.

Earlier this fall, for example, the Warner administration, which refused to "blink" in the face of fears of huge declines in graduation rates, boasted that the graduation rate for the Class of 2004 held steady and - even better - ushered in a "culture of achievement" heralded by record-breaking numbers of students earning advanced-studies diplomas. The rising number of schools now fully accredited (84 percent of schools, compared with 78 percent last year) offered further evidence of the success of the SOLs.

However, a close look at the graduation numbers reveals that the critics' worst fears did not come true, but that the claims of tremendous success are not true, either. SOL skeptics should concede that the sky did not fall last June. And the administration should similarly concede that the picture is not as rosy as its press accounts portray.

For example, the government has claimed that the 2004 graduation rate was not significantly affected by the heightened graduation requirements. The statistic cited by the administration, however, includes only those members of the Class of 2004 who made it to their senior year. It is more commonly accepted - and indeed required by No Child Left Behind - to calculate graduation rates as a percentage of ninth-grade enrollment. In these terms the numbers dropped from 76.1 percent in 2003, to 73.5 percent in 2004. Put another way, more than one in four freshmen in the Class of 2004 (or approximately 26,000 students) failed to make it to graduation day.

SECOND, THE percentage of total graduates who received either a standard or advanced diploma in 2004 actually dropped from 96.7 percent in 2003 to 94.4 percent in 2004. In real numbers, more than 2,000 fewer students received either a standard or advanced-studies diploma. A corresponding increase in special (up by one-third) and modified standard diplomas (up by 256 percent) suggests that students who might have earned a standard diploma in prior years received one of those less-valuable certificates instead.

Finally, although advanced-studies diplomas slightly outnumbered standard diplomas this year, it is because so many fewer standard diplomas were awarded; in fact, 81 fewer students received advanced-studies diplomas in 2004 than in 2003. What's more, the average SAT score for Virginia students this year came in two points behind the national average - just as in 2003.

In other words, many questions remain - and we do our students no service by not asking them. We need to know why we have so many missing children. While the Commonwealth has hired Virginia Commonwealth University researchers to study graduation results, this examination must

be a rigorous one, and not merely another attempt to whitewash any negative fallout from the SOLs.

VIRGINIANS ALSO need to understand why there was a decline in the number of regular and advanced-studies diplomas. In 2003, JLARC concluded that the biggest predictor of student achievement on the SOLs is the number of children living in poverty in the school district. The Education Trust recently found that Virginia has the third-largest funding gap between its highest and lowest poverty districts in the nation, and state data show that many of Virginia's poorest districts still have schools that fail to meet full accreditation.

What has happened to graduation rates in those locales, and what would it actually cost to get all students in all locales to stay in school and secure real diplomas?

Once the questions are asked and answered, it is time to focus on solutions. The education funding increases of the past General Assembly session were a step in the right direction, but they did not do enough to target funds at the schools and students who need extra resources the most. Governor Mark Warner, in a May 11 speech for the National Governors Association, called for programs to inspire the best teachers to work in those urban and rural school systems that need the most support. In the upcoming General Assembly session will he take up this and other initiatives aimed at giving every Virginia student a real chance to achieve the high standards he has worked so hard to protect? If so, he and the members of the General Assembly who work with him will have a public education legacy of which they truly can be proud.

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