

Graduation study lacking

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The state education department says a new graduation study wasn't meant to answer broad questions such as whether the Standards of Learning are causing students to drop out.

But that avoids a question that needs to be answered.

It also seems like a bait-and-switch to the many concerned Virginians who expected the report to provide substantially more clues than it in fact delivers.

When suggesting that SOLs might be scaring students into leaving school, critics were told by those in and out of government to wait until the planned study could facilitate a better evaluation.

Now the study discovered to be insufficient for that purpose - and, moreover, that the department never planned for a more comprehensive review.

"That doesn't mean that those broader issues aren't of concern," said spokesman Charles Pyle. "They certainly are."

Nearly 27 percent of students who entered high school in 2000-01 failed to graduate in 2004, the study found. That's 26,000 young people.

Last year was the first in which students had to pass SOLs to obtain a standard diploma, and so was the first year that might begin to provide an accurate assessment of the standards' effects.

The graduation rate fell about 3 percent from the previous year - but over a longer time frame that does not appear to be statistically significant: The rate was similar in 2001 and 2002.

However, the one-year decline was mostly due to fewer blacks and Hispanics earning standard diplomas. Sixty-one percent of African-Americans earned such diplomas, down from 66 percent. The rate for Hispanics fell even more dramatically, to 67 percent from 78 percent.

Although one year does not a trend make, this may suggest that SOLs are burdening minority students more than their white peers and that schools have failed to provide the help they need to keep up.

In lieu of a standard diploma, students may earn an advanced diploma by passing an even higher number of SOL tests, or they may earn a modified or a special diploma, geared toward students with disabilities. Since these latter options were first offered in 2000-01, the percentage of students earning them has increased from one-tenth of 1 percent to 2 percent.

The study says the statistics show that the modified diploma encourages more disabled students to finish high school instead of dropping out.

But it also acknowledged, without tracing reasons for the statistical changes, that the increase in modified diplomas might be the result of more students failing to try for a standard diploma.

And that might be because the SOLs have discouraged them from trying.

Students can continue to work on a standard diploma until age 21. Before we can make more substantive conclusions, it is important to track over time how many students eventually get a regular diploma.

But the report does little to guide us toward substantive conclusions in the meantime. We can read between the lines of the statistics and come up with all sorts of deductions.

We need better research than this disappointing report provides.

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