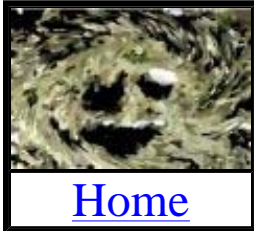


April 2005

Education Matters: Minority Graduation Rates Fall



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"Nearly 27 percent of Virginia students who started public high school in 2000-01 didn't graduate in 2004, according to a study conducted for the State Department of Education.

That means about 26,000 students didn't get their diplomas last spring, and it's likely that "the vast majority of them were held back or dropped out of high school," according to the report by the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Last year's overall four-year graduation rate fell about 3 percent from 2003--mostly attributable to a decrease in black and Hispanic graduation rates--but was similar to rates in 2001 and 2002.

Graduation rates for white students remained constant at 77 percent from 2003 to 2004, but the rate for black students fell 5 percentage points to 61 percent; for Hispanic students it fell 12 percent to 67 percent.

"I expect that everyone will be alarmed and disheartened to learn that the graduation gap seems to be widening in Virginia between white students and children of color," said Andrew Block, legal director of [JustChildren](#), an advocacy program of the Legal Aid Justice Center in Charlottesville.

The study also said that for the class of 2004, about 10 percent of the original freshman class in 2000-01--or 10,114 students--dropped out of school before the start of their senior year, a lower dropout rate than the previous year.

The study examined the class of 2004 because last year was the first in which students were required to pass state Standards of Learning tests to graduate with a standard or advanced diploma. The study was based on state Department of Education data and surveys from 125 of the state's 134 school divisions.

To earn a standard diploma, students have to pass two English tests and tests in any other four subjects--for a total of six verified units of credit. Nine verified units of credit are required for an advanced studies diploma.

The vast majority of students who graduated from high

school earned either an advanced or a standard diploma in 2004, but an increased number opted for the modified standard diploma or special diploma, both' geared toward students with disabilities.

Since modified diplomas were initially offered in 200001, the percentage of students earning them has increased from one-tenth of one percent (37 students) to 2 percent (1,437 students). Among black students, the percentage earning modified and special diplomas has risen from 4 percent to 10 percent over the four years.

In a cover letter to Gov. Mark R. Warner that accompanied the report, Superintendent of Public Instruction Jo Lynne DeMary said the report failed to show that more students with disabilities finished high school in 2003-04 than the previous year, suggesting that the modified diploma "provided an incentive for students with disabilities to complete their high school education."

She also noted that students with a modified diploma can continue pursuing a regular diploma until they turn 21.

The study didn't determine causes for the change in percentages of students receiving those types of diplomas, but said without elaboration that the requirement to pass SOL tests to earn a regular diploma "could very well be a significant factor for some students."

Block said the Department of Education missed a vital opportunity to truly examine whether SOLs lowered graduation rates for black and Hispanic students, and why minority freshmen have a hard time making it to senior year.

"It didn't ask about the relationship" between high-stakes testing and graduation rates, Block said. "It leaves the rest of us guessing."

Education department spokesman Charles Pyle said the analysis wasn't meant to be a broad study of graduation or dropout rates. "That doesn't mean that those broader issues aren't of concern--they certainly are," he said." (*Associated Press, The Daily Progress, April 16, 2005*)

Comments? Questions? Write me at george@loper.org.