
ATTENTION TO SOLS APPEARS TO BE WIDENING THE GRADUATION GAP; [City Edition]

Andrew Block. **Richmond Times - Dispatch**. Richmond, Va.: Jun 8, 2005. pg. A.13

Abstract (Document Summary)

As graduation day for the Class of 2005 approaches, it's a good time to think about the Class of 2004, the first class that had to pass Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOLs) exams in order to earn a standard diploma. A recent report on this class from the Virginia Department of Education suggests that there may be many fewer students at graduation day this spring than there were when these seniors were freshmen.

The report concludes that almost 27 percent of students starting as freshmen in 2000-01 failed to earn a diploma in the expected four years. Most of these students either dropped out or were retained (a strong predictor of future dropouts). While graduation rates for white students held steady, those for African-American students dropped by 5 percent. For Hispanic students, the numbers plummeted by an alarming 11 percent. Only three of five African-American students earned a diploma in four years.

CLAIMS ABOUT higher passage rates on SOLs -- and the highly misleading 2-percent dropout rate published by the state -- have eclipsed the fact that we are losing lots of students. SOL scores are rising, but so are the numbers of poor and minority students who fail to graduate on time. Because Virginia holds schools accountable for test scores but not for graduation rates, improvement in the former may be due to a drop in the latter. As we saw in Texas and New York, local educators, under pressure from both state and federal testing requirements, have strong incentives to increase passage rates, even if it means letting students on the margin slip away.

Full Text (838 words)

Copyright Richmond Newspapers, Incorporated Jun 8, 2005

As graduation day for the Class of 2005 approaches, it's a good time to think about the Class of 2004, the first class that had to pass Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOLs) exams in order to earn a standard diploma. A recent report on this class from the Virginia Department of Education suggests that there may be many fewer students at graduation day this spring than there were when these seniors were freshmen.

The report concludes that almost 27 percent of students starting as freshmen in 2000-01 failed to earn a diploma in the expected four years. Most of these students either dropped out or were retained (a strong predictor of future dropouts). While graduation rates for white students held steady, those for African-American students dropped by 5 percent. For Hispanic students, the numbers plummeted by an alarming 11 percent. Only three of five African-American students earned a diploma in four years.

Even these numbers, however, mask the truly terrifying graduation rates in those divisions with the highest concentrations of low-income and minority students. In Norfolk, the graduation rate was 39 percent. In Portsmouth, 48 percent. In Richmond, 52 percent.

CLAIMS ABOUT higher passage rates on SOLs -- and the highly misleading 2-percent dropout rate published by the state -- have eclipsed the fact that we are losing lots of students. SOL scores are rising, but so are the numbers of poor and minority students who fail to graduate on time. Because Virginia holds schools accountable for test scores but not for graduation rates, improvement in the former may be due to a drop in the latter. As we saw in Texas and New York, local educators, under pressure from both state and federal testing requirements, have strong incentives to increase passage rates, even if it means letting students on the margin slip away.

We ought to reverse these incentives and raise graduation rates - - not only because it is the right thing to do, but because doing so will increase state revenues, improve our national defense, and help address Virginia's gang problems.

More young people with diplomas means higher wages and a healthier economy. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, Virginia could increase its earnings by \$84 million by halving the number of students who fail to earn diplomas. More high school graduates also means more students eligible to serve in our armed forces. Given the military's well-publicized recruiting difficulties, increasing the number of eligible young people ought to be an urgent national and state priority.

Finally, while gangs in Northern Virginia such as MS-13 have been receiving significant public attention, little focus has been given to schools struggling with high dropout rates for Latino students. Given that education and employment are the best forms of prevention, addressing the statewide 11-percent drop in graduation rates for Latino students demands the

immediate resources and support now mostly reserved for increased law enforcement.

THE WIDENING graduation gap is a solvable problem, but only if we tackle it head-on. First, our leaders should not fear bad news. We must take a hard look at which students aren't making it to graduation day, why not, and which schools they attend.

Second, we need to target resources toward schools with the lowest graduation rates and institute programs with demonstrable effectiveness. For example, a recent study by Peter Tuerk, a doctoral student at the University of Virginia, drew a very strong connection between the percentage of highly qualified teachers in a school and success on the SOLs. Teachers matter -- and getting the best to the students who need them the most will make a real dent in student attrition.

Third, we need to think about how we spend money. Virginia devotes only 3.3 percent of its total taxable resources to education -- less than 41 other states. Moreover, in 2003 the state spent approximately \$16 per middle- and high-school student on dropout prevention, while spending \$79,000 per young person incarcerated in juvenile prison.

Finally, policy-makers ought to hold local educators responsible not just for SOL pass rates, but for the numbers of students who successfully finish school on time. The first should never be allowed to come at the expense of the second.

The Texas Miracle on high-stakes testing proved too good to be true. It's early, but Virginia's SOLs appear to be taking a toll on our low-income and minority students. Standards-based reform can be a positive force, raising the educational floor in many of our public schools. But unless we fully understand the impact of the standards, and until we provide the programs and teachers necessary to give all students a meaningful chance to graduate, the promise of high standards will go unfulfilled.

Voters in Virginia should demand that our candidates for Governor come up with strong and viable solutions to this growing graduation crisis. Adding graduation benchmarks to school accreditation requirements would be a good start.

[Illustration]
DRAWING

Credit: Andrew K. Block, Jr., is legal director of the Legal Aid Justice Center's JustChildren Program.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Dateline: *CHARLOTTESVILLE.*

Section: *Editorial*

Text Word Count 838

Document URL: