

School work: not done yet

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When government officials talk about Virginia's educational success, they often point to the fact that 92 percent of Virginia's schools are "fully" accredited under the Commonwealth's Standards of Learning system. While this number is certainly commendable, it should not fool us into believing that the mission of educating all of our students is fully accomplished. In Charlottesville, and other localities around the state, there is still much work to be done.

Specifically, in the area of high school graduation, "full" accreditation is often a meaningless stamp of approval. Nowhere is this truer than in those communities with high concentrations of poverty. For example, in Norfolk, Richmond and Portsmouth, where all the high schools are fully accredited, fewer than half of the students who start high school end up with regular diplomas four years later. In Norfolk and Portsmouth, fewer than half are even still in the building.

How could this be? As with many things, it all has to do with how you do the math. In Virginia, full accreditation is based on a certain percentage (70 percent or more) of students who take the SOL exams actually passing the exams. If low-performing students do not take the tests, then the denominator in the equation shrinks and gaining full accreditation

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becomes more likely. Under the current system, in other words, high schools like those in Norfolk are rewarded for losing track (getting rid?) of low-performing students, while schools like Charlottesville High School, which holds on to more students, get punished. We clearly need to reverse these incentives.

But how? First, for high schools we should base full accreditation on something more than pass rates on the SOLs. Just as the State, by requiring minimum passage rates for full accreditation, has succeeded in getting public schools to focus on students passing SOL exams, so it could get local school systems to focus on

producing more graduates by requiring that certain graduation targets be met.

Second, we should focus existing resources, and consider devoting more, to those interventions that are effective at keeping children in school and on the right path. Effective preschool, smaller classes, ninth-grade academies and, of course, highly qualified teachers in every class room, all can make a real difference in giving every student the opportunity to be successful.

Third, school systems ought to revisit their discipline policies, and come up with meaningful alternatives to long-term suspensions and expulsions for students who, all too often, are already struggling in school. More school, rather than less, would be a good place to start.

Finally, on a local level we should strive to have the best alternative education programs in the Commonwealth, programs that provide more than the half-day of education currently offered, programs that help students grow and help fully prepare them for transition back to regular school. In the City, we might even bother to provide transportation.

To their credit, the school boards for both Charlottesville and Albemarle County have made raising graduation rates a high priority. While this is a good start, they need to make good on these promises. Last year, only 68 percent of those who had started at Charlottesville High School four years earlier actually finished school, and only 58 percent received a high school diploma. A disproportionately high number of those students not completing high school were African-American. While the problems are on a smaller scale, there are similar issues in Albemarle County.

There is a reason that not many high-school graduates sit in our jails and prisons, a reason that those without high school diplomas earn substantially less, and contribute less, to our local and state economy. Education—and getting a diploma—matter. Keeping all children in school, and giving them the necessary skills and tools to be successful, must not only be an educational concern, it should be among the highest priorities of our community and our Commonwealth. When all of our children succeed, we all reap the benefits. When they fail, we suffer, too. ☺

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