

# *Richmond Times-Dispatch*

## Virginia Should Ensure Students Track Toward Success

Sunday, Jun 01, 2008 - 12:05 AM

By ANGELA CIOLFI  
TIMES-DISPATCH COLUMNIST

CHARLOTTESVILLE

In March, the Times-Dispatch reported that students in the Petersburg public schools were being offered a "second chance," as the system tracked approximately 180 students who were not on schedule to graduate toward earning a General Equivalency Diploma (GED). Yet while Petersburg's efforts to curb a troubling dropout rate may be pragmatic, they also raise the question: Are we aiming too low for our high school students?

In 2005, driven by reports that wildly misleading graduation rates published by most states were obscuring a national dropout crisis, the National Governor's Association, chaired by our very own then Gov. Mark Warner, adopted a uniform, four-year graduation rate formula. The NGA formula counts only high school diploma earners as graduates. Yet in Virginia, students can earn one of seven different credentials: five different types of diploma, a GED, or a Certificate of Program Completion (for students who do not qualify for a diploma but complete a program specified by the local school board).

It goes without saying that any credential is better than no credential, but there is a reason the NGA does not recognize non-diploma credentials and only two of Virginia's diplomas are recognized by the federal government under No Child Left Behind. Simply put, some credentials leave students stranded with fewer options.

For example, none of the four major branches of the U.S. military accepts a Certificate of Program Completion from an individual looking to enlist. Only two branches, the Army and the Marines, will even consider individuals with Modified Standard or Special Diplomas, which are available to qualified students with disabilities. Even the GED often does not prove to be truly equivalent in the military: GED holders are not eligible for Army recruiting bonuses that can reach up to \$40,000, and some branches permit only 10 percent of enlistees to be GED holders. The reason has national security implications: High school diploma earners stay in longer.

The military is not alone in snubbing alternative credentials. At some community colleges, students holding Certificates of Program Completion are ineligible to receive financial aid unless they pass additional tests. GED holders often enroll in two or four-year institutions, but less than 10 percent ever receive degrees.

More than a decade ago, regular high school graduates earned 18 percent more than their peers with GEDs -- the gap probably is wider now. Even a Standard Diploma is not guaranteed to open doors. Last year, Gov. Kaine's P-16 Council found that, without additional coursework, simply holding a Standard Diploma will not qualify one for admission to most public or private four-year institutions in the state.

Encouraging likely dropouts to pursue a GED makes a certain amount of sense: A 17-year-old who has spent three or four years languishing in the ninth grade with only a handful of credits to show for it is unlikely to ever earn a diploma. And getting a GED is no sure thing; students who work hard to earn one deserve our respect.

But going forward, how do we encourage schools to intervene earlier before the only options available are credentials of last resort? Given what is at stake for our students -- diminished opportunities to attend colleges and universities, barriers to enlisting in the military, and substantial decreases in earning potential -- we must ensure that our high schools are encouraged to track these students toward success from day one.

From preschool to senior year, the ultimate measure of our schools should be how well they produce college or career-ready adults. Lamentably, the current system for accrediting high schools pays no attention to graduation rates. A high school could graduate fewer than 60 percent of its students and still be fully accredited.

The Virginia Board of Education has proposed including a high school completion index to address this bizarre and injurious result, but the draft regulations would do nothing to prevent the tragedy happening in Petersburg and elsewhere of tracking students we have hopelessly failed toward last-resort options. For example, under the proposed regulations, a school can become fully accredited by awarding 80 GEDs and only 20 diplomas to a graduating class of 100. Sixty diplomas and 34 Certificates of Program Completion would also do the trick.

The draft regulations are on their way to the governor's desk. Commendably, Gov. Kaine has talked about moving from competence to excellence in public education. But the current proposal falls well short of competence. The governor should return the draft regulations to the board with a recommendation that rewards schools handsomely for Standard and Advanced Diplomas and places a substantially discounted value on alternative credentials that reflects the diminished opportunities these credentials afford to students.

Angela A. Ciolfi is a staff attorney with the JustChildren Program of the Legal Aid Justice Center.