

PUTTING EDUCATION TO THE TEST

By William Nicoson

The days when Virginia public schools were populated by shambling slackers and notorious know-nothings are becoming history.

Public education in high schools and grade schools has been revolutionized by a program begun in the Allen Administration and continued by Governor Gilmore. The purpose of the program is make both students and schools accountable for their performance.

The state board of education has adopted Standards of Learning exams (SOLs) for students in third, fifth and eighth grades and in high school. Beginning in 2004, high school students, in order to graduate, must pass end-of-course SOLs in reading, writing, math, science, social studies and one of five other electives. Even more radical, beginning with the 2006-07 academic year, public schools with less than a 70% passing rate will lose accreditation.

The results of the first SOLs taken last spring are not reassuring. State-wide, 60% of high school students failed Algebra I, 69% failed Algebra II and 70% failed U.S. History. Performances close to home are indicated in the following table of selected subjects and scores at County high schools as a whole, at 2 local schools and, for contrast, at Thomas Jefferson Science & Tech for exceptional students. The passing grades shown have been announced in general but may vary from those applied next month when grades for specific exams are announced. Any variation, however, isn't likely to alter the sobering message.

	Passing	Fairfax	Herndon	South	Jefferson
	Grade	Average	High	Lakes	S&T
Reading	57%	73%	68%	75%	90%
Writing	69%	79%	78%	77%	92%
Algebra II	62%	61%	55%	62%	89%
US History	66%	60%	57%	58%	86%

Teachers point out that in some courses the subject matter of the SOL administered in April included topics to be taught in May. The performance of some schools may also have been adversely affected by the number of students for which English was being learned as a second language. Better scheduling and allowances for language barriers may marginally improve future grade performance. But major improvement will be achieved only by upgrading the quality of instruction and, even more important, increasing students' motivation to learn from instruction.

The outstanding performance of Thomas Jefferson High could only have been achieved by students who understand their primary mission there is to learn and who care about that mission.

It may not be easy at other schools to turn slackers into scholars. Every public school will have nine years to achieve that goal for at least 70% of its students or face the humiliation of being closed down.

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