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Study says 1 in 4 teens don't graduate on time in Va.

The Virginian-Pilot
Jun 20, 2006

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By DEIRDRE FERNANDES

The Virginian-Pilot

Schools held graduation ceremonies all last week, but according to a new national report, one out of four Virginia high school students don't make it that far in the traditional time frame.

In 2002-03, the most recent year that national data were available, Virginia's graduation rate was 75 percent, a national study released today by the trade publication Education Week reports.

Black males are at highest risk, with only 58 percent of them getting their diplomas within four years.

Nationwide, the statistics are worse, with 70 percent of students graduating within four years and 44 percent of black males finishing high school in that time frame, the report found.

"Our research paints a much starker picture of the challenges we face in high school graduation," said researcher Christopher B. Swanson. Swanson, who is an expert on the No Child Left Behind law, oversaw the Diplomas Count report. Swanson calculated the

graduation rate by looking at how many students advance from one grade to the next during their four years of high school until they get their diplomas.

Virginia and local officials challenge the findings, although they acknowledge that high school graduation rates must improve.

Swanson's formula doesn't account for the large number of ninth-graders who are held back, said Charles Pyle, spokesman for the Virginia Department of Education.

"It's a flaw in their formula," Pyle said.

The best way to calculate how many students finish high school in four years is to follow students from ninth grade on, Pyle said. The state started tracking high school freshmen two years ago and will have more accurate data in 2008, Pyle said.

In the meantime, the state itself reports two different graduation rates using competing formulas. In 2002-03, the state told the federal government that 82 percent of students graduated on time but reported on its own Web site that 78 percent finished. The federal formula only counts standard and advanced studies diplomas, and not GEDs or diplomas and certificates that the state gives to some special-education students, Pyle said.



"There are a lot of formulas out there that calculate graduation rates and regardless of where you end up, 78 percent, 82 percent, 75 percent, that's not good enough," Pyle said.

Virginia has toughened its graduation criteria by requiring students to pass six standardized tests to get a diploma, which could mean that more students are held back and eventually drop out, Pyle said. Yet the state is trying to address that problem by offering on line tutoring

in algebra and reading, along with year-round courses for all at-risk high school students, he said.

"Inevitably, there's going to be tension between graduation rates and higher standards," Pyle said. "But if you can address a student's academic deficiencies, he is less likely to drop out."

In Norfolk, where the report calculates the graduation rate at between 50 to 60 percent in 2002-03, high schools are targeting freshmen for extra counseling and tutoring. The division also will be offering a similar program to sixth-graders, said Vincent Rhodes, spokesman for Norfolk Public Schools.

"This is not a new phenomenon for us, it's something we take very seriously," Rhodes said. "A few years from now when they're looking at this year's data, we'll be vindicated."

According to the report, Portsmouth's graduation rate was in the same range as Norfolk. The graduation rate in Virginia Beach and Suffolk was between 60 to 70 percent. In Chesapeake, between 70 and 80 percent of students finished high school on time.

While none of the graduation reports coming out are an exact reflection of how many high school students earn diplomas, they do indicate that the country is facing a problem, said Marcus Winters, a senior research associate with the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think-tank, who also has studied graduation rates.

Several reports, including Winters', have shown that the national graduation rate is about 70 percent.

"I think most reasonable people would agree that the number is too low," Winters said. "The graduation problem is actually severe. And it's a coin flip for minority students whether they graduate."

The study results are available at www.edweek.org/dc06.

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