

## *Individual Educational Standards*

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(This article appeared in the July 2, 2003 edition of the *Reston Connection*, Reston, VA)

At a time when we have become accustomed to expect the maximum amount of customization in the products and services we purchase, public schools have adopted an industrial model in which all are expected to meet identical standards. Regardless of IQ or other measures of abilities, students must pass six Standards of Learning (SOL) tests in order to graduate in 2004.

Public schools must have standards and be held accountable for ensuring that students meet the standards. The impossibility faced by those writing the standards and those designing the tests under the current system is to find a level at which bright students do not find the entire exercise to be ridiculous, and challenged students do not fail in great enough numbers to be politically unpalatable. The chasm among students in abilities in public schools is simply too great to bridge.

A Northern Virginia student was quoted in *The Washington Post* (June 15, 2003) as saying that "the SOL's are based on a simplistic, paint-by-number view of learning. Any decent student should be able to handle them easily." Another student called them "pointless, because they were pitched at such a low level you could pass them on general knowledge and common sense." Their teacher who authored the article in which the students were quoted wrote that "a common test for all students, as egalitarian as it may sound, cannot challenge the better students without wiping out the weaker ones."

The brighter students are unchallenged by the SOL tests, and at the same time estimates are that as many as ten percent of next year's graduating seniors will not receive a diploma because of failing one or more SOL tests. Some of those failing will have limited knowledge of their new language, English; others will be like the slow students we remember from our own school experiences. Governor Warner has implemented Project Graduation pilot programs to help students likely to fail, but the pilots will serve a very limited number of students. As the program expands the number of students being helped to cram for the tests can be expanded.

The fallout from a great number of failures is unknown. Certainly the earliest proponents of the SOL's will see the test scores as evidence that public schools are failing. These are the same people who have been advocating for tax credits and vouchers for private schools. Incidentally, students graduating from private schools do not have to pass the SOL's.

There is a better way; that is to adopt the mass customization approach as now being used in business and industry. One size does not fit all. Standards should be set by parents, school administrators, and teachers in collaboration for each student based on his or her talents and abilities. These standards should stretch the students to become all that they can be. The idea is not a new one; it has been implemented in Special Education programs for years. It is called the Individual Education Plan (IEP). It needs to be extended to all students as individual educational standards. The use of technology in the implementation of such a plan would make it feasible when the burden of paperwork on teachers in the past would have made it impossible.

Under individual educational standards, all students would be stretched to their individual limits. Schools would be held to meaningful accountability standards.