

## ***One Size Fits All SOLs***

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As many as one in ten or more seniors will not graduate from public high schools in Virginia next year. Not because they will not have enough course credits, or good enough grades. They will be denied diplomas because they did not get a passing score on one or more state prescribed Standards of Learning (SOL) tests. 2004 is the year when the ultimate hammer is dropped for school improvement; diplomas will be withheld from students who do not reach a designated mark. The number of students denied a diploma in Fairfax County could exceed a thousand!

Virginia has been an aggressive national leader in the standards approach in which all students regardless of ability have to meet the same educational objectives. Testing to measure the achievement of students is referred to as high-stakes because school accreditation and high school graduation are dependent upon the outcome. At a time when the business-industrial world has turned to customization of products to meet individual preferences and needs, public education has turned to the manufacturing model where all students are expected to meet exactly the same standards in widget-like fashion.

In the marketplace the range of choices in color, size, special features, and accommodations in products has never been greater. Businessmen and marketers recognize that the one-size-fits-all approach simply will not work. We are individuals as customers, and we demand that our differences be reflected in the products and services we buy. We want what is right for us.

We recognize growing up in or rearing a family of more than one child that these differences among us exist from birth. Children start to walk and to talk at different ages; they have different interests. Some are athletic; some are scholarly; some are musically inclined. We celebrate the uniqueness of each individual child.

In the standards movement in public education there is a belief that on a particular testing date every child should be able to perform on a standardized test beyond a particular score level that has been set essentially through a political process. When such a score or bar has been set, the brightest of children pass over it easily. For some the struggle to pass may prove impossible. And it will not be that these students will not have talents and abilities; their talents and abilities will not be measured on the standardized test.

The SOL program is an overly simplistic approach to school achievement and accountability. Rather than requiring every child to be educated to the maximum extent of his or her abilities, the SOL's let all students get by on the same standard and simply deny recognition to those not meeting that standard regardless of their individual gifts. The SOL's reflect a major shift in approach to universal public education that requires our close scrutiny.

Future columns will explore other aspects of the SOL's. Share your experiences and thoughts with me at [kenplum@aol.com](mailto:kenplum@aol.com).