

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Testing, Testing

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Virginia's Standards of Learning for history and social science set national standards. The process leading to their adoption and implementation sparked contentious debate. Officials successfully managed the situation. The SOLs have become part of the fabric of education in Virginia.

One purpose of the SOLs is to ensure that certain subject matter is taught. History occasionally falls victim to so-called hobby teaching, in which even the best of teachers stress their favorite topics at the expense of others. Thus, in a course on the Civil War and its aftermath, a devotee of Robert E. Lee might spend inordinate time on the campaigns of the Army of Northern Virginia, while slighting turning points in Tennessee and along the Mississippi. The practice is not nefarious; it just reflects human nature. The SOLs rose in part because of concerns that American students simply were not learning enough about the history and culture not only of their own country but of the world. Citizenship depends on shared knowledge.

An item in last Saturday's Week's End selection noted that our initial reaction to proposals to eliminate the third-grade history/social science test was one of distress. During the past week we read numerous documents relating to the issue and have held numerous conversations on the matter. We have studied the tests themselves (we think we could pass them, we proudly report -- thank heaven and Mrs. O'Connor). We heard from all sides. Every exchange was informative and agreeable. We thank everyone who contacted us, as well as those who answered our calls.

Virginia's students take tests -- perhaps too many of them. Although we have supported the SOLs from the beginning and although we remain fans of pop quizzes and other devices to keep youngsters on their toes, we increasingly wonder whether testing has gone too far. Surely opportunities exist for scaling back the number of exams.

The core SOL exams are not the place to start.

The third-grade test is not onerous. Questions do not ask about the Hayes-Tilden election, for instance, or about disputations in the Balkans. Test-takers do not need to explain Marx's theory of surplus value or Milton Friedman's thinking regarding monetarism. The exam probes the basics that introduce youngsters to the study of history and the social sciences (including civics, economics, and geography). These subjects are easy to neglect in the early grades. The test establishes history/social science as an integral part of the K-3 curriculum -- which stresses concepts that will persist and be built upon until high

school graduation. The concepts will stretch well beyond, to tell the truth, for civic learning occurs throughout a person's lifetime. Although students will be tested in history/social science at higher grades, we believe it is important to keep a K-3 focus on the disciplines as well. A stress on history/social science also enhances reading skills.

A statement by the Virginia Consortium of Social Studies Specialists and College Educators in support of the third-grade test says:

"By removing the third-grade assessment, the basic educational foundation of history and social science will disappear as more instructional time is devoted to those areas which are tested. This is a major concern. The value of history and social sciences as part of the four core areas of study in grades K-12 has always been recognized by the commonwealth. It is essential that we continue to stress the importance of history, economics, civics, and geography. History and social sciences are at the heart of preparing students for responsible citizenship."

A statement by the Virginia Council of Economic Education, which also supports the third-grade test, says:

"Students need to understand that they are human resources and that when they learn something new, they are investing in themselves. Education is an investment in oneself; dropping out of school is a sure route to poverty. Understanding this provides an incentive to learn. Middle school is too late to introduce this concept to students. At this point, too many students are already in trouble -- both in the habits and attitudes they have formed, and in the knowledge and skills they've acquired."

Keep the test.