

Fewer Students Finishing High School?

Despite falling numbers, Fairfax maintains one of nation's top graduation rates.

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A 20-year veteran of Fairfax County Public Schools, teacher Carolyn Marsh has seen some very motivated students.

As a counselor at Fairfax and Langley high schools, she ran across many teenagers striving to get into top colleges, piling co-curricular activities on top of their hefty academic schedule.

But many of the Marsh's nontraditional students at Woodson Adult High School could go toe-to-toe in terms of motivation with those at Langley and Fairfax, she said last week. The adult high school allows older students who did not earn a high school diploma to finish up their credits on a more flexible, part-time schedule.

"Our students are here because they want to be. They are adults and many of them have full-time work and families. They are highly motivated to finish," said Marsh.

These students, typically between 19 and 25 years old, have had to navigate the working world without a high school diploma and they know the value of getting to graduation.

"Some of these students could have easily finished high school and when they were on their own for a year or two they realized how difficult it was to get a job without a diploma," said Marsh.

The reality of grim job prospects may have brought some students back to Fairfax County Public Schools but it hasn't prevented others from leaving in larger numbers.

Even with one of the highest graduation rates among large school districts in the country, Fairfax County has seen a decline in the number of students finishing high school in recent years, according to a new study released in June.

"Diplomas Count 2007: Ready for What? Preparing Students for College, Careers and Life After High School," by Editorial Projects in Education provides an estimated graduation rate for the country's 50 largest school districts and is part of a four-year project on high school graduation and related issues. It is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Out of the 50 largest school districts, Fairfax County Public Schools ranked the fifth highest with a graduation rate of 80.4 percent in 2004. But the school district also sustained an eight-point drop in the percentage of students finishing high school from 1995 to 2004, according to the report.

Despite the drop, Fairfax County's graduation rate is still much higher than that of Virginia or the nation. In 2004, Fairfax County had 80.4 percent graduation rate compared to Virginia's 73.1 percent and the national rate of 69.9 percent.

But the gap between the county, the commonwealth and the nation is closing. Fairfax County's seven



Photo by Robbie Hammer/The Connection
Students celebrate graduation at South County Secondary School in June.



point gap with Virginia and 11-point gap with the country in 2004 pales in comparison to 1995 figures when Fairfax led Virginia by 17 points and the nation by 23 points, according to the study.

At least two different figures have been released as Fairfax's graduation rate over the past year. Under No Child Left Behind, Virginia has reported a different set of graduation rates, which were higher, using a different formula than the one used by Editorial Projects in Education.

School Board members, some of whom were not familiar with Editorial Projects in Education study, said they found the varying sets of data frustrating and had a difficult time trusting one set of information over another.

Many said they planned to focus more attention on the graduation rate when Virginia starts using hard data in 2008 to track students and produces a more accurate rate.

Even though Fairfax County's graduation rate is one of the highest recorded in the study, School Board members said they felt there was room for improvement.

"I mean our graduation rate is pretty high. Could we do better? Always," said School Board member Tessie Wilson (Braddock).

A high school diploma and at least some college has become almost a necessity for earning a decent wage in the United States, according to the analysis done as part of the study.

Nine out of 10 people earning a mid-level income — approximately \$35,000 per year — have a high school diploma or more advanced degree, according to the report.

Increasingly, those who don't graduate high school tend to be concentrated in the bottom quarter of the nation's pay scale, where people earn on average \$12,000 per year, the report states.

Students tend to drop out of school for four broad reasons: a "life event" such as a pregnancy; they see no reason to go to school anymore; a school pushes a student out because the student is seen as a "problem," or they are unable to do the work, according to experts.

Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University's Center for the Social Organization of Schools adds that students living in poverty are particularly at risk and that graduation rates are especially low in schools where there is a high concentration of poor students, he said.

"The general truth is that poverty is highly correlated with graduation rates," said Balfanz.

Fairfax County has seen a slight increase in recent years of the number of students who qualify for free and reduced lunches.

During the 1997-1998 school year, 18.64 percent of students received free or reduced lunches. During the 2006-2007 school year, 19.99 percent of students received free and reduced lunches, according to figures published on the Fairfax County Public Schools Web site.

The school system has seen other changes including increases in immigrant and minority populations, particularly in the Hispanic and Asian communities.

Both nationwide and statewide, some minority groups are less likely to graduate from high school than their white peers, according to the study.

In Virginia, where the overall graduation rate was 73.1 percent in 2004, Hispanic students graduated at a

57.1 percent rate and Black students graduate at a 61 percent rate during the same year. Asian students were the exception among ethnic groups and outperformed white students, with an 83 percent graduation rate to a 78 percent graduation rate.

Editorial Projects in Education did not provide an ethnic break down of graduation rates for Fairfax County but the school district's own statistics show that it struggles with minority student high school drop outs.

During the 2003-2004 school year, Fairfax County reported that approximately 9.3 percent of Hispanic students and four percent of Black students dropped out of high school. This compared to only 1.8 percent of Asian students and 1.1 percent of white students in the same year.

Immigrants are especially at risk of dropping out or leaving school early, said Laura Slover, director of content and policy at Achieve Inc., a Washington D.C. non-profit that studied how to use student data to help identify potential drop outs at an earlier age.

It is particularly hard for individual schools and school systems to reach immigrants at risk of dropping out of because it is more difficult to communicate with those students, she said.

"For kids who don't speak the language, there are extra barriers. It is a challenge for teachers and building administrators to meet their needs," she said.

School Board member Steve Hunt is particularly concerned about Fairfax County's Hispanic students after seeing some "rough numbers" on their drop out rate, he said.

"That is a community we haven't been servicing very well. Their decline in the high school years is significant," said Hunt. "Something that we should be addressing is why we lose so many of these kids."

High school drop outs are likely to leave school right before a high-stakes test, either because they know they cannot pass the test or because the school system forces them to leave before they fail it, said experts.

In 2004, nearly half of the students who left Fairfax County high schools departed in grade 11, when students are expected to take most of their Standards of Learning tests. Fairfax County high school students must pass all of their Standard of Learning assessments across different subjects in order to receive a high school diploma.

"I know that the ability to pass the SOL test is a factor whether some students drop out," said Jane Cruz, coordinator of the adult high school completion programs in Fairfax County Public Schools. Cruz oversees all the programs — including Woodson Adult High School, the external diploma program and General Education Development (GED) test and preparation classes.

There are some rumors that many students leave school rather than fail a Standards of Learning assessment but the school system has not presented any analysis or data on the subject, said Michelle Menapace, president of the Fairfax County Council of PTAs.

"If you don't pass one SOL, you don't even get a diploma. Dropping out and getting a job would be very appealing," said Menapace.

COLLECTING good data about students is extremely important for combating lower graduation rates. It can determine why and when students leave school, Slover said.

Studies indicate, for example, that if a student misses several days of school at the beginning of the school year, they are at high-risk for dropping out. If school system's monitored attendance data, they might be able to intervene before some students leave the system, said Slover.

Meaningful interaction in larger and more intimidating high schools can also frequently stave off drop outs, according to Slover.

"It is important that every kid has some adult they can talk to during the day. There should be meaningful adult interaction and personalized individual attention," said Slover.