

BOB WISE TIMES-DISPATCH COLUMNIST

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WASHINGTON Last month, high school students across the commonwealth received their high school diplomas. For the graduating students and their families, graduation day is a very exciting time and an important accomplishment deserving much praise. It's also an important day for the nation's economy because each high school graduate represents, on average, \$260,000 in additional earnings over the course of his or her lifetime compared to a high school dropout.

Unfortunately, more than 1 million students fail to graduate on time with a regular diploma every year, resulting in fewer opportunities for success for those individuals and a tremendous financial impact on the nation's economy. Our organization, the Alliance for Excellent Education, has estimated that the dropouts from the Class of 2008 will cost the nation \$319 billion in lost earnings over the course of their lifetimes.

For Virginia alone, the nearly 29,200 students who did not graduate from high school in 2008 represent nearly \$7.6 billion in lost lifetime earnings. And unlike high school graduates, dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, involved in illegal activity -- and to be tax consumers rather than taxpayers. Even worse, the full impact of high school dropouts was unknown until recently because states failed to accurately report the number of students who drop out.

THE GOOD news is that many states have started to develop data systems that can track when each student enters and exits high school and whether he or she earns a diploma. These comprehensive data systems provide the information necessary to calculate accurate graduation rates in many states, including Virginia, which recently announced that 82 percent of the students who entered high school in 2004 graduated in 2008.

However, states still do not specify to what extent schools, districts, and states are expected to improve their graduation rates. Nor are states required to set a high graduation rate goal for schools to meet. In addition, some states chose to calculate their graduation rates differently, which makes it difficult to know which states do a good job of graduating their students, much less compare schools in Richmond to Rochester and Raleigh.

That is why the Alliance for Excellent Education commends U.S. Rep. Bobby Scott (D-Va.) for introducing the Every Student Counts Act (ESCA) earlier this year. This federal legislation would make graduation rate calculations uniform and accurate by requiring all states to calculate their graduation rates in the same manner, allowing for more consistency and transparency. With greater consistency and transparency, state and local governments can target resources to those schools and districts with the most need.

ESCA would also work to boost graduation rates by requiring every state eventually to achieve at least a 90 percent graduation rate for all of its students. This is an especially important provision because graduation rates for minority and low-income students are typically much lower than rates for white students. According to a recent report from Education Week, only 51 percent of the nation's African-American students, 55 percent of Latino students, and 50 percent of Native American students graduate on time, compared to 76 percent of white students.

IN VIRGINIA, the gap in graduation rates between white and minority students is not as wide, but it is still significant. According to numbers from the Virginia Department of Education, white students have an 86 percent graduation rate, compared to 74 percent for African-Americans, 71.5 percent for Hispanics, and 75.5 percent for American Indians.

When I was a high school student in the 1960s, a high school dropout could earn a decent wage to support a family working in West Virginia's coal mines, steel mills, or chemical plants. How times have changed. With today's global economy requiring more than high school education for most jobs, the United States requires the contributions of every student.

ESCA would also end a practice in which states focus more on test scores than graduation rates. Under current federal law, test scores are used to determine how well a school or district educates its students, but graduation rates are not. That's like measuring a runner after each lap of a race, but completely ignoring which runners actually cross the finish line. Scott's bill would ensure that test scores and graduation rates are weighted equally so that schools have balanced incentives for graduating their students as well as raising their test scores, instead of doing one at the expense of the other.

I applaud Virginia for providing its students, parents, and citizens with accurate counts of exactly

how many students earn a diploma. Congressional passage of ESCA will help states move from simply reporting graduation rates to raising them and ensuring that more students graduate from high school prepared to succeed in today's global economy. I thank Rep. Scott for introducing the bill and I strongly encourage Congress to make it the law of the land.

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