

March 17, 2009

Mr. SCOTT of Virginia: Madam Speaker, I rise today to introduce the "Every Student Counts Act," legislation that will prioritize graduation of all of our Nation's high school students. My friend, Senator *Tom Harkin*, the Senator from Iowa, is also introducing this legislation in the Senate.

Madam Speaker, as you know in 2001, The No Child Left Behind Act passed with broad bipartisan support. The purpose of No Child Left Behind was to ensure that every student in America would receive a quality education. However, over the past eight years, NCLB has not lived up to its promises. Certain aspects of the law are difficult to implement and are not bringing about the results we thought it would. One of the major shortcomings of NCLB is its failure to hold schools accountable for dropouts. Although we believed we addressed this issue in the original NCLB legislation, this portion of the law has not been implemented as we had hoped. Instead, under current law, the only meaningful accountability standard for high schools is students' scores on standardized tests, with virtually no concern given to how many students graduate or drop out of school. Unfortunately, this myopic accountability standard has created an incentive for high schools to push out students who are struggling academically, so that their test scores are not counted in the assessments. Furthermore, the current accountability system also has allowed States to report graduation rates inconsistently and in misleading ways. Finally, NCLB does not require the disaggregation of graduation rates by subgroup, leading to incomplete data on how our schools are doing with one subgroup compared to others.

What is clear is the fact that the current high school accountability system is failing both our students and our Nation. Each year, about 1.23 million secondary school students, approximately one-third of all secondary school students, fail to graduate with their peers. In addition, nearly 2,000 secondary schools--roughly 12 percent of all secondary schools in the United States--produce about half of the Nation's secondary school dropouts. In these schools, the number of seniors is routinely 60 percent or less than the number of freshmen three years earlier. And almost half of the Nation's African-American students and nearly 40 percent of Latino students attend these so called "dropout factories," while only 11 percent of white students do.

In Virginia last year, nearly 30,000 students did not graduate from high school with their peers. But the numbers are worse for minorities--only about 50 percent of African American students and 60 percent of Hispanic students graduate on time with a regular diploma, compared to 75

percent of whites.

These numbers are just the tip of the iceberg. Research shows that the lifetime earnings difference between a high school dropout and a high school graduate is about \$260,000. This loss in potential earnings of a dropout can cause serious hardships throughout their lifetime. We cannot sit back and allow this problem to escalate, or our inaction will create a generation of lower and stagnant earnings and a poorer quality of life. We must reverse this trend and hold schools accountable for graduation rates and dropouts, so all students are graduating with a high school diploma and improving their outcomes in life.

Additionally, reducing dropouts improves America's position in both the global economy and workforce. Attaining a high school diploma is the first step in becoming a member of the educated workforce. Having unprepared workers sets us back considerably, diminishing our role as a global leader in the economy. The major competitive advantage America has in the global economy is an educated workforce. Yet, with an estimated 3.5 million Americans ages 16 to 25 who do not have a high school diploma and are not enrolled in school, we are slowly losing this advantage. Because of the need for well-educated workers to keep our country competitive, we can't allow--or afford--our Nation's high school students to dropout and not reach their full potential.

Until recently, federal policy did not place nearly enough importance on graduating the Nation's high school students. The regulations released by the Department of Education in October 2008 did much to correct the lack of attention to graduation rates in the federal accountability system: they require a uniform graduation rate calculation and improvement in graduation rates over time. Though these regulations are a laudable step in the right direction, they do not go far enough in setting consistent, high graduation rate goals and aggressive, attainable graduation rate growth targets. Without clear guidance and meaningful accountability, most secondary schools can continue to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress, AYP, by making negligible annual improvement in graduation rates and can do so with a consistent, or even growing, graduation gap.

The Every Student Counts Act will bring meaningful accountability to America's high schools by requiring a consistent and accurate calculation of graduation rates across all fifty states to ensure comparability and transparency. The legislation builds on the National Governors Association's Graduation Rate Compact, which was signed by all 50 of the Nation's governors in 2005. Under the Every Student Counts Act, graduation rates and test scores are treated equally in AYP determinations. Moreover, the Every Student Counts Act would require high schools to have aggressive, attainable and uniform annual growth requirements as part of AYP.

This will ensure consistent increases to graduation rates for all students by meeting annual, research-based benchmarks with the long-term goal of reaching a 90 percent graduation rate. The bill would also require the disaggregation of graduation data by subgroup to make certain that schools are held accountable for increasing the graduation rate for all of our students and require that school improvement activities focus on closing any achievement gaps.

Recognizing that some small numbers of students take longer than four years to graduate, the bill will give credit to schools, school districts and states for graduating these students while maintaining the primacy of graduating the great preponderance of all students in four years. The Every Student Counts Act will provide incentives for schools, districts and states to create programs to serve students who have already dropped out and are over-age or under credited. Some credit has to be given to those who get a GED and also those who take more than one or two years and maybe even three years longer than others to graduate. If no credit is given, the school system has no incentive to continue these important programs.

In order to truly ensure that all children have access to a quality education, it is imperative that we take steps to immediately end America's dropout crisis. We must ensure not only that graduation rates increase, but that earning a high school diploma is a meaningful accomplishment. We must use the indicators of student achievement and graduation to know which high schools are doing their job. Those who are must be recognized and supported. Those that are not must be rehabilitated with targeted interventions, whole school reform, or replacement strategies to ensure the standard of accountability with graduation rates and standardized tests are met.

Making sure accountability with graduation rates and standardized testing are met, Virginia's education leaders and the Virginia State Board of Education recently became the first state to give equal consideration to dropout rates and standardized tests when judging AYP. The new standard in Virginia will take effect with the start of the 2011-2012 school years. It also sets an 85 percent graduation rate, well above the dreadful benchmark of 61 percent set for Virginia under the No Child Left Behind Act.

It is my hope that with the Every Student Counts Act, we can make greater strides nationally toward graduating more of America's students and preparing them to succeed in college, the workplace and in life. So, I ask my colleagues to join me in passing this bill and seeing to it that it is quickly enacted into law to ensure, at a minimum, every child becomes a high school graduate.