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Deasy Points to Successes, Previews Schools' Hurdles

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The superintendent of Prince George's County began his first state of the schools address last night on the starkest of notes -- with a reminder to the assembled parents, politicians, principals and staff that 34 of the county's students have died this calendar year.

Many died of sickness and accidents, [John E. Deasy](#) said. But not all.

"Far, far too many youths died in circumstances of violence," Deasy said in the speech, the first of its kind in [Prince George's](#). "If we do not witness graduation, we might very well witness incarceration."

Deasy's downbeat opening remark contrasted with his otherwise positive appeal to the public to support his agenda of educational change. He said the past year has been "an amazing picture of success" and asked for continued support in the face of a looming state budget shortfall and competition for talented teachers.

The speech, given at the request of the Board of Education, sought to summarize almost a year and a half of work Deasy has done since taking over the struggling 131,000-student system in May 2006. Deasy said that the system has improved academic achievement among students, provided more teacher training and increased parental involvement.

But at times, statistics were overshadowed by students who told their stories in the auditorium of Henry A. Wise Jr. High School in [Upper Marlboro](#).

Maria Aguilar, a senior at [High Point High School](#), told of her rough transition to the United States as an immigrant from [El Salvador](#). After difficulties learning English and making friends, she gradually adapted and is taking four Advanced Placement courses.

"I realized that what I thought was torture was in reality an opportunity that my mother was not going to let me lose," she said.

Antoine Tate, a senior at Crossland High School, earned two standing ovations as he described his experience in College Summit, a college-preparation program that Deasy put in place.

"Life, lately, has been giving me so much, and I don't know how to cope with it," he said. "I will not be added to someone's statistics list."

Deasy mentioned several recent successes that he said he hopes will create "thousands of Antoines."

Last school year, 5,300 students took Advanced Placement exams, exceeding the previous year's total by more than 1,000. And about 5,000 students took the SAT, 500 more than two years ago. More students are passing state tests mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind law, allowing 11 elementary schools and seven high schools to work their way off a watch list of academically troubled schools. More youngsters are able to enter pre-kindergarten classes, and more teachers are earning professional qualifications.

Deasy praised teachers and noted that they had received two consecutive 5 percent salary increases.

But he reminded the audience that the days of strong budgets could be coming to an end. The state faces a budget shortfall of \$1.7 billion, which he said is bound to affect funding for education. He has said that next year's budget could shrink by \$60 million from last year's \$1.67 billion.

"In a tightening and uncertain economy, we will also face the challenge of financial uncertainty," Deasy said. "And we will

need to do what is necessary to maintain and support the many new initiatives that are designed to accelerate student achievement."

The state's budget crisis could make it harder for Prince George's to address the hurdles that remain. The Prince George's system is still undergoing "corrective action" ordered by the state because of its performance on [Maryland](#) tests. More than 2,000 high school students still need to pass one or more state-mandated tests required to graduate. Although more students are taking AP exams, the average score on the tests dropped slightly, and the average remains below passing.

The audience of about 1,000 people, including principals, teachers, parents and students, appeared to react positively to the speech, laughing at jokes and heartily applauding the superintendent and others who spoke.

"I think it was all great," said Isiah Smith, a parent with a daughter at Isaac J. Gourdine Middle School. Smith said he was particularly interested in Deasy's description of increased AP offerings and the middle school-level International Baccalaureate program.

Octavia Hicks-Braye, a parent with three children in the school system, said that she was pleased with the students' speeches but that had wanted more detail from the superintendent. "I wanted to see how we were doing compared to other counties in the state," she said.

David Merkowitz, executive director of the Prince George's Business-Education Alliance, said Deasy was wise to prepare the public for the coming state budget cuts.

"It was a very good presentation," he said. "There are really challenges around maintaining momentum. The budget issue is a big one."

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