



MARYLAND COALITION FOR
Excellent Schools

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Oral Testimony of the Maryland Coalition for Excellent Schools (MCES)
Before the
Maryland State Board of Education
Public Hearings on the High School Assessment Program

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Members of the Board, I am David Merkowitz, Executive Director of the Prince George's Business-Education Alliance, and I am testifying today on behalf of the Maryland Coalition for Excellent Schools (MCES), a group of 15 organizations devoted to educational opportunity and excellence for every student in Maryland's public schools. I will summarize our written testimony, which has been submitted.

Let me say up front that MCES does not oppose the HSAs. We believe they have an important role to play in promoting accountability and spurring program and instructional improvements. We support high academic standards for all students, and our members have been at the forefront of efforts to secure adequate and equitable funding for public schools to attain them. But our concern about the drastic and disproportionate impact of imposing the HSAs as a stand-alone requirement for graduation in 2009 led the General Assembly to direct the Board to conduct these hearings.

Yet even as we prepared our testimony, the ground shifted. At your last meeting, Dr. Grasmick proposed a truly substantial change from current policy regarding the HSAs. The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation may be helpful, but at this point we have no idea how it will really work or when it will be implemented.

In addition, current policy requires alternative and comparable HSAs to be available for different groups of students, but neither has been fully developed or implemented. Thus, less than 12 months before the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year, prospective seniors, their parents, teachers, and school administrators have no idea what ultimately will be required for graduation in 2009, what options will be available, or whether the requirements for some groups of students will be delayed. Nor has any provision been made to offer school systems additional resources to meet these unfunded mandates.

Much remains to be done before students are denied diplomas based on their HSA scores.

American Association of University Women
American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland
Arts Education in Maryland Schools Alliance
Eastern Shore of Maryland Education Consortium
League of Women Voters of Maryland
Maryland Association of Boards of Education
Maryland Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
Maryland Association of Elementary School Principals

Maryland Association of Secondary School Principals
Maryland Education Coalition
Maryland Parent Teacher Association
Maryland Retired School Personnel Association
Maryland State Teachers Association
Prince George's Business-Education Alliance
Public School Superintendents Association of Maryland

- First, we know that African-American and Hispanic students, students from low-income families, and students with disabilities, across all systems, will be affected disproportionately by the HSAs. The Board needs to engage in a genuine dialogue with teachers, parents, students, and elected officials about the impact of barring thousands of Maryland students from receiving a high school diploma, and work with those constituencies to devise a comprehensive plan to address the needs of these young people – beyond meeting cut scores on four tests.
- Second, MSDE continues to assume that 10,000 of the 65,000 students projected to be seniors in 2009 will leave the public education system prior to graduation – a number likely to grow if students who fail the HSAs several times decide to drop out. This is an outrageous and unacceptable assumption. The Board needs to place much more emphasis on ways to help at-risk students and prevent them from dropping out, and work with school systems to achieve that goal.
- Third, the continuing teacher shortage and the ongoing challenge of recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers for all public school classrooms, especially those in low performing schools in economically distressed communities, mean that many students will be held to the same requirements despite the inadequacy of instruction they may have received throughout their schooling.
- Fourth, progress is uneven across the state in aligning instruction, professional development, data management, and assessments. Until teaching is fully aligned with the voluntary state curriculum on which the HSAs are based, tying all students' eligibility for graduation to the same requirement is simply inequitable.
- Finally, given that this is the first year of full Thornton funding and that many students approaching graduation have benefited from it only minimally, it is unfair to hold all of them to the same "high stakes" HSA graduation standard in 2009.

In conclusion, we urge the Board to strike a balance between the reasonable demand for accountability from school systems, schools, teachers, and students and the consequences of imposing a stand-alone graduation requirement on all students beginning next year. Test scores should continue to be used to diagnose schools and students that need attention to ensure that they meet high standards, but it would be premature to disenfranchise students from receiving a high school diploma in 2009 based solely on the HSAs.