



MARYLAND COALITION FOR Excellent Schools

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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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The Maryland Coalition for Excellent Schools (MCES) is an alliance of 15 organizations devoted to educational opportunity and excellence for every student in Maryland's public schools.

MCES believes strongly in the establishment of high standards for all students and reasonable steps to ensure accountability. MCES does not oppose the HSAs. MCES believes that the HSAs have an important role to play as one component of the state's efforts to promote accountability and program and instructional improvements for students preparing to enter the workforce and higher education. However, MCES believes that much remains to be done, at the state and local school system levels, before students should be denied diplomas based on the scores they receive on one or more of these HSAs. Maryland has long been in the forefront of standard setting and school improvement to ensure a high quality education for each of the state's more than 860,000 public school students. Nothing can or should deter us from continuing to pursue these objectives.

Maryland's public schools, by virtue of the hard work of our students, teachers, school administrators, parents, and many others, are achieving great things. Maryland students' math and reading scores have risen statewide for the fourth consecutive year. Maryland ranks #1 in the nation in Advanced Placement (AP) results and #2 overall in the percentage of all students taking AP classes and tests. In addition, we rank #4 in SAT participation and in scores compared with other states with high participation rates.

We must not rest on our laurels. MCES believes that all students deserve to be held to high academic expectations and to have the benefit of excellent teachers and other school resources needed to support their pursuit of learning. The members of MCES have been at the forefront of the very successful advocacy campaigns for more adequate and equitable funding for public schools, including the 2002 passage of the "Thornton" Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act, and we have urged the Governor and legislators to support full funding of the Act, including in the upcoming fiscal 2009 budget and beyond.

The central premise of the Bridge to Excellence Act is that all students should benefit from the robust array of educational resources needed to provide the opportunity for success. Success is defined, in large part, as achieving at least a proficient score on the Maryland School Assessments (MSAs) at the elementary and middle school levels. This is the type of measure of success that was envisioned by the Thornton Commission and the Bridge to Excellence Act, as a logical outgrowth of the Act's mandates for universal full-day kindergarten and targeted pre-kindergarten for economically disadvantaged four-year olds. By these standards, which also determine success under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, Maryland is doing very well.

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

In 2004, the State Board of Education adopted regulations to require passage of four High School Assessments (HSAs), in English, Biology, Government, and Algebra, for students to receive a high school diploma beginning with the graduating class of 2009. Hence, the state's measures of success continue to be expanded, and raised, in the hopes of better preparing our students for the educational and occupational opportunities of the 21st century. Concern about the impact of imposing the HSAs as a stand-alone requirement for graduation in 2009 led the General Assembly to direct the State Board of Education to conduct regional hearings so that its members would receive public input regarding the merits of maintaining this position.

Yet, even in the run-up to these hearings, the ground has continued to shift. At the last State Board meeting, Dr. Grasmick proposed a truly substantial change from current Board policy regarding the HSAs. This came on top of her earlier proposal to delay imposition of the HSA requirement for certain groups of students. Even as it considers the information and views presented at these hearings, the Board will need to give close consideration to Dr. Grasmick's proposals. This puts those testifying in a difficult position. At this time, we don't know whether the Board will adopt these proposals, reject them, or amend them, or when those decisions will be made. Meanwhile, we are less than 12 months away from the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year, and prospective seniors, their parents, their teachers, and school administrators have no idea of what ultimately will be required for graduation in 2009, what options are available, or whether the requirements for some groups of students will be delayed.

In addition, current policy requires the Maryland State Department of Education to develop both alternative and comparable HSAs for different groups of students. But only 20 months before the class of 2009 is scheduled to graduate, neither has been fully developed or implemented. Dr. Grasmick has now proposed adding another option to the mix: the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation, which would allow students who fail the HSAs twice to submit projects to demonstrate their mastery of academic subjects. Yet she emphasized that this option is intended for only a small group of students whose numbers should dwindle over the years. Even with its availability, many students undoubtedly would be denied diplomas in 2009. Depending upon its final form, the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation may be a very commendable approach, but at this point we have no idea how it will really work or when it will be implemented.

Each of these options - both those currently required and the new one proposed - will impose additional burdens on school systems, administrators, and teachers, but they amount to unfunded mandates, since no provision has been made to give school systems additional resources to carry them out. In the present fiscal environment, where we will be hard-pressed to maintain state education aid at currently projected levels, it is unlikely that the General Assembly will allocate substantial new dollars to compensate school systems for these additional requirements. In addition, Congress is moving toward reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act. We don't know what its final components will be, but it almost certainly will involve major changes that require schools to adopt new programs and procedures - and likely with little or no increase in federal aid.

MCES urges the State Board of Education to consider the following factors, and engage in public deliberations on them, before imposing the HSAs as a stand-alone requirement for graduation in 2009.

First, we know that certain students and groups of students will be affected disproportionately by enforcing the HSAs as a stand-alone "high stakes" graduation requirement. In 2006, the percentages of students passing the HSAs were as follows: English: 60.1%; Biology: 67.7%; Government: 74.2%; and Algebra: 66.6%. Perhaps most troubling are the disparities in student performance by race and ethnicity. For example, the percentages of African-American students passing the HSAs were: English: 42.3%; Biology: 47.1%; Government: 57.9%; and Algebra: 46%. The results for Hispanic students were: English:

48.4%; Biology: 55.5%; Government: 64.5%; and Algebra: 57.3%. And 2006 results for students receiving free and reduced price meals were: Algebra: 49.3%; Biology: 48.8%; Government: 57.6%; and English: 39.9%.

The 2007 HSA test results indicate the persistence of a significant achievement gap for African-American and Hispanic students, students from low-income families, and students with disabilities, across all systems. Thousands of students from systems with high proportions of these children have failed one or more tests. These results show that far too many students are on track to fail to graduate in 2009. A very focused effort, unprecedented in scale, needs to be directed to students who have not and, without such an intervention, likely will not meet the standards. The need for highly qualified teachers, appropriate interventions and remediation, and stronger middle school preparation is evident if the state hopes to educate all of its children adequately. Should the State Board, teachers, parents, students and others engage in a genuine dialogue about the fact that imposing the “high stakes” HSA graduation requirement in 2009 will forever bar thousands of Maryland’s twelfth graders from receiving a high school diploma? And should the State Board engage in discussions with local systems, teachers, parents, and elected officials to devise a full plan to address the needs of these young people and devote additional resources to them? We believe so.

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 – most by dropping out. This is an immeasurable loss to these students, their families, and the state of Maryland, and should not merely be accepted as inevitable. We are concerned that the imposition of the HSAs as a stand-alone requirement for graduation, even with the various options being proposed, will encourage additional students who fail the assessments several times to drop out of school. Certainly this was not the Board’s intent in adopting the HSA requirement, but it almost certainly will be a consequence. We endorse and support high standards for graduation. But should the Board place equal emphasis on the need to help at-risk students and prevent them from dropping out, and work with school systems to achieve that goal? We believe so.

Third, the adequacy gap is perhaps most pronounced, with the most direct impact on students’ learning, when we confront the teacher shortage and the ongoing challenge of recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers for all public school classrooms. Too many classrooms without highly qualified teachers are in low performing schools in economically distressed communities. Again, Maryland has made strides toward increasing teacher salaries and benefits, including improvements to teacher pension benefits. Yet, despite these efforts, a large percentage of our teachers are eligible to retire and many new teachers soon leave the profession. Teacher shortages continue to plague all school systems, though some more than others. Does this dilemma raise serious questions about how many students have, or have not, benefited from highly qualified teachers, or not consistently enough throughout their school years, and yet will be held to the same “high stakes” HSA graduation requirement in 2009? We believe so.

Fourth, the NCLB era of standardized state assessments is requiring much closer scrutiny of the alignment of instruction, professional development, data management, and assessments. Principals, teachers, students, and parents need the state to be clear and consistent regarding the state’s learning goals and objectives if they are to prepare all students for success on the state’s tests. Teachers and principals must be able to analyze and respond to test results on a daily and weekly basis, and must be trained to do so. Again, Maryland has made great strides through the development and adoption of the voluntary state curriculum (VSC), improvements in professional development for teachers and principals, and the use of data management systems to track student results to inform instruction. However, as with funding levels and the provision of highly qualified teachers, not all school systems are at the same place at the same time. Does the uneven provision of teaching aligned with the voluntary state curriculum, on

which the HSAs are based, raise questions about tying all students' eligibility for graduation to the same "high stakes" HSA graduation requirement in 2009? We believe so.

Finally, our students – our children – are but passengers on the ships of learning we have built. Maryland's educators and legislators take this responsibility very seriously, and have labored mightily in recent years to improve the quality of public schools throughout the State. In 2002, the General Assembly passed the landmark "Thornton" Bridge to Excellence Act to define adequate per pupil funding as mandated by the Maryland Constitution and to provide adequate state aid to meet this mandate. In addition, the Act required detailed annual master plans describing the investment of this funding in programs designed to achieve improved student performance. However, the adequacy gap was so wide that the General Assembly decided phase in the added funding in increments over five years. This year, fiscal 2008 and the 2007-2008 school year, is the final year of the phased-in increases, and therefore is the first year in which, with some exceptions, the full complement of Thornton funding is being provided. This is the culmination of a funding commitment of which all Marylanders should be proud. By providing additional support to students and teachers, it is contributing markedly to the success cited above. And yet, large adequacy gaps remain in several school systems due to state and local funding decisions and other factors. Does this funding timeline raise serious questions about the number of years students – especially those approaching graduation – have benefited from an adequately funded school system, and the fairness of holding all students to the same "high stakes" HSA graduation standard in 2009? We believe so.

In conclusion, to truly "leave no child behind" means to ensure that all students have the opportunities and supports needed to meet high standards for achievement, and implores us to encourage all students to pursue a lifetime of learning. This pursuit should not be impeded by the results of any one test. We have said consistently that we do not believe that our concerns preclude the adoption of an HSA program that will increase accountability for what students are expected to know and be able to do before leaving high school. However, we would propose that the State Board focus on using the HSAs to inform local school system measurements of, and responses to improve, student, school, and school system performance in accordance with the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act and Maryland's accountability program.

For these reasons, MCES urges the State Board to strike a balance between the reasonable demand for accountability from school systems, schools, teachers, and students and the consequences of imposing a "high stakes" graduation requirement on all students beginning in 2009. Students are not and should not be accountable for the inequities and inadequacies that we, as policymakers, teachers, and parents, are striving on a daily basis to resolve. In light of these serious concerns, would it be premature to disenfranchise students from receiving a high school diploma in 2009 based solely on the HSAs? We believe so.

The Maryland Coalition for Excellent Schools (MCES) thanks the State Board of Education for providing this opportunity to share insights and raise awareness regarding several, but certainly not all, of the serious concerns raised by the current "high stakes" HSA graduation requirement beginning in 2009. MCES and its constituent member organizations look forward to working with the State Board in the coming months and years toward the common goal of providing an excellent education for every Maryland public school student.