



MSDE BULLETIN

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STATE BOARD REAFFIRMS HSAs AS GRAD REQUIREMENT; ADDS BRIDGE PLAN

The Maryland State Board of Education this week voted to maintain the High School Assessment program as a graduation requirement for the class of 2009. The Board also approved the additional measure of a senior project for those students for whom passing the HSAs has proven difficult even after remediation.

The HSA program was reaffirmed by an 8-4 vote. Today's action followed many months of Board debate, public hearings, and detailed presentations.

“The State Board today, after deliberating for an extended period of time, made the difficult and important decision to continue Maryland's educational progress,” said State Board President Dunbar Brooks. “The HSA program begins to put us on the path toward where we need to be. It is not a panacea.”

State Superintendent of Schools Nancy S. Grasmick, who has championed improved educational standards since taking office in 1991, said that the State Board has taken a strong stand for Maryland children.

“It is never easy to raise standards, but the State Board has made a courageous decision,” Dr. Grasmick said. “Our students will rise to the occasion.”

Maryland's High School Assessments are four end-of-course exams—one each in algebra/data analysis, biology, government, and English—that all students must take and pass in order to graduate, beginning with the class of 2009 (this year's juniors).

The HSA exams are based on the Maryland High School Core Learning Goals, incorporated into the state's public school curricula in the 1990s. The freshman and sophomore-level tests were developed by Maryland teachers.

Students take each assessment as they complete the related course. Passing the tests is one of several high school graduation requirements, which also include passing each course, earning state-specific credits, completing service-learning requirements, and fulfilling attendance requirements.



With a large media contingent looking on, State Board members this week voted on the High School Assessment plan, adding the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation to the original program.

Maryland students will have as many as five times per year to take the exam. Students having difficulty will be provided with online tools and other targeted assistance to strengthen their ability to pass each exam.

The State Board today amended the original HSA regulation to include the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation for those students who have been unable to pass the test despite remediation. Dr. Grasmick proposed the Bridge Plan in August, noting that test data had indicated some students were having difficulty passing the exams despite an understanding of the material.

The Bridge Plan grew out of the work of two panels—the Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessment and the Task Force for Review of High School Assessment Options. The plan also reflects research into similar alternatives to passing State assessments currently in place in numerous states across the country.

Under the Bridge Plan, students who have passed all of their other requirements could pass the HSA by completing a rigorous Academic Validation project. State-developed project modules would address the tested content areas where a student has demonstrated a deficiency. For example, a student unable to pass the biology assessment might develop a project delving into the structure and function of molecules, or the inheritance of traits. Projects would be administered locally, but state managed and assessed to assure consistency and difficulty level.

(more)



Dr. William Hite, (above, left) a top administrator with the Prince George’s County Public Schools, joined Cecil County Superintendent Carl Roberts and Baltimore County Superintendent Joe Hairston speaking in favor of the HSAs during this week’s meeting. Several outside experts, including Ronald Peterson, president of the Johns Hopkins Hospital and Health System (below, left) and University of Maryland-Baltimore County President Freeman Hrabowski also threw their support behind the HSA program.



STATE BOARD REAFFIRMS HSAs AS GRAD REQUIREMENT; ADDS BRIDGE PLAN (Cont.)

The two-day State Board meeting featured a detailed examination of the HSAs, particularly the Bridge Plan. It also featured testimony from local superintendents and education advocates, who praised the exam program and Maryland’s plans to strengthen standards across-the-board.

“We have always looked at these assessments as a foundation,” noted Dr. Grasmick. “But unless students satisfy the foundation, we can’t expect them to do higher level work.”

Baltimore City Public School CEO Andres Alonso, Baltimore County Superintendent Joe Hairston, Cecil County Superintendent Carl Roberts, and Prince George’s County Chief of Staff William Hite gave high marks to both the HSA and the Bridge Plan.

“Test scores aren’t everything, but test scores are very important,” Dr. Hairston noted. “We have to have some way to measure the improvement of our students.”

He noted that the Bridge Plan will not be “an easier ticket” to graduation, but an alternative measure supported by educational research.

Dr. Alonso agreed that the HSAs focus attention where it needs to be focused. “I think standards are extraordinarily important,” he added. “Urban schools have not been successful in the past because it has been easy for them to avoid standards.”

The HSAs are “a challenge for us, but we cannot hesitate to embrace the challenge,” he added.

University of Maryland-Baltimore County President Freeman Hrabowski said requiring the HSAs for graduation goes another step toward preparing students for life beyond high school. “I believe in our children,” he told State Board members. “I would like you to do the same.”

Ronald Peterson, head of the Johns Hopkins Hospital and Health System, noted that too many high school graduates apply for jobs without the ability to read or compute. “Our young people really do need to be able to operate in the world,” he told the Board. “We applaud your efforts.”

For further information about the HSA Program, please go to MSDE’s dedicated HSA site (www.HSAexam.org). ■

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