

Good morning. On behalf of the Montgomery County Board of Education, I am Shirley Brandman, urging you to delay linking the Maryland High School Assessments (HSA) program to high school diplomas for at least one year until all the concerns by stakeholders have been resolved.

First of all, I want to thank this Board for its willingness to hear our perspective before discussion. As a sitting Board member myself, I appreciate the enormous responsibility that you have assumed and understand that your decisions and actions today will have far reaching consequences. Perhaps all the more critical to pause and reflect.

Here's what we know:

- 1) The federal No Child Left Behind law does not require that students pass any particular test in order to graduate.
- 2) The Class of 2009 is being required to pass a test that is substantially different in format from that for students graduating in 2010 and beyond.
- 3) Our special education students eligible for the first Mod-HSAs were given a test last spring that was longer than their peers because test questions were being field tested in this first exam.
- 4) Hundreds of our high school seniors are still waiting to re-take their HSAs for the second time, and this far into their senior year they still do not know if they need to complete projects for the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation.

Here's what we don't know:

- 1) What we would learn from a careful and thorough analysis of the results of last spring's statewide HSA data because there has not been adequate opportunity;
- 2) Whether students – particularly poor and minority students, special education students, and limited English speakers—who are facing the daunting prospect of tens of hours of independent projects under the Bridge Plan are weighing the costs and benefits of simply dropping out.
- 3) Whether spring HSA results and Bridge Plan projects will be graded in sufficient time to notify seniors before their graduation dates.

4) What the cost of the Bridge Plan unfunded mandate will be on local districts though Montgomery County estimates that 1 million dollars have already been required in staff time to address the demands of the Bridge Plan.

In short, we ask you to delay for one year so that these critical questions can be addressed. A one year delay would eliminate the unfairness of asking members of the Class of 2009 to pass tests that are different in format from those of later graduating classes. It would allow you one year's worth of experience to evaluate the efficacy of the Bridge Plan which has been a work in progress this year. It would also allow you to ensure that we do not jeopardize the ability of thousands of students to graduate while questions still linger.

Please understand that the Montgomery County Board of Education supports accountability standards that assess student mastery of curriculum in a fair and equitable manner. We do not shy away from our responsibility to educate all students. The Board has closely monitored progress being made at each local school. But due to barriers of language or disability some students who have learned, who have mastered, cannot demonstrate it on these exams. Other students using the Bridge Plan are not filling gaps in their learning but simply earning points through projects in areas of strength. So while we share the core belief that every diploma must mean that our students are prepared for the rigors of college or the world of work; we do not agree that the current HSA program gets us there. We do not yet have the assurance that the measurements we are using are producing the results we all seek. It is unfair to ask students to bear the brunt of a flawed system when the consequences to them will be real.

We agree that Maryland needs a strong accountability system and we support a culminating subject matter exam to measure a student's progress. Yet, here we are at the 11th hour because we continue to have serious concerns about the HSA graduation requirement for the Class of 2009. Attached for your review is a resolution passed by the Montgomery County Board of Education on October 14, 2008 urging you to delay linking the Maryland High School Assessment program to high school diplomas for at least one year. Fairness, reason, and prudence all weigh in favor of proceeding with caution when our children's future opportunities are at stake.

Attachments