# Fact Sheet: High School Graduation Testing

### Background on Testing in Maryland

In Maryland, as in other states throughout our country, the emphasis on high stakes testing began with the publication of the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*. The report emphasized the crisis in public education nationwide and its effect on the standing of the United States in the world economy. States moved quickly to adopt recommendations outlined in the report, including improving student achievement, raising standards, testing, a greater reliance on core curriculum, and implementing school choice.

In 1989 President George H. W. Bush convened a Summit on Education for the nation's governors. As a result of the summit, President Bush proposed America 2000, an education proposal for K–12 public schools that called for tougher tests tied to world-class standards. By 1994, the Clinton administration had transformed America 2000 into Goals 2000, incorporating eight national education goals.

Parallel to this national effort, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) implemented the Maryland School Performance Program in 1990. The program, an outgrowth of the recommendations of the Governor's Commission on School Performance (Sondheim Commission), was designed to promote greater accountability and improve the educational performance of students, schools, and school systems. The best known aspect of this program was the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP), which was designed to test critical thinking skills of elementary and middle school students. The scoring measured school performance, not individual student achievement.

In 1990 as part of the Maryland School Performance Program, the MSDE also conducted the first system-wide administration of functional tests in reading, mathematics, writing, and citizenship. These were end-of-course exams, which students take after completing a specific course. Students were given these tests in grade 9 and were required to pass them prior to high school graduation. The class of 2004 was the last class required to pass the Maryland Functional Tests to earn a diploma.

In 1996, the Maryland State Board of Education approved the development of new end-of-course exams that would replace the functional tests. The initial proposal assumed a series of ten end-of-course exams in English, math, science, social studies, and skills for success that would have be passed beginning with the class of 2004. This was modified to include tests in four areas: biology, algebra, English, and government.

The High School Assessments (HSA) are more difficult than the functional tests. While the Maryland State Department of Education has no official state position on why it is implementing high school exit exams, the “unofficial” position is to assure that all Maryland high school graduates have attained a minimum level of achievement (Center on Education Policy, August 2004). According to MSDE, the assumption is that the tests will raise academic standards, restore value to the high school diploma, and alert the public and school systems to educational problems. However, they have not articulated how this might happen. Since the tests are administered primarily in grades 9 and 10 (the Algebra test can be taken as early as grade 7; English I in grade 9; biology and government in grade 10), performance on these tests is not necessarily an indicator of college readiness and the tests cannot be considered to be college preparation tests. By design, the HSA are less rigorous than the SAT since not all graduates will attend college.

As preparation for developing these assessments, teachers, administrators, and instructional supervisors from across the state worked in various committees to develop Core Learning Goals in English, math, science and social studies. By 1996 all local school systems had aligned their high school curricula to these goals. In 1999, sample HSA items in English 1, algebra/data analysis, government, and biology were administered to students, and in 2000 tests were given to all students taking the relevant courses, but no scores were reported. The class of 2002 was required to take the tests to graduate (but not required to pass them), and scores were first reported on student transcripts. The State Board of Education set passing scores in August 2003 and will require students to pass these four tests to graduate beginning in 2009. (*Table 1 summarizes the recent history of testing in Maryland.*)

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| Table 1: Summary of History of Testing in Maryland | | | |
| **TEST** | **YEARS** | **GRADES** | **SUBJECTS** |
| Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) | 1990 to 2003 | 3, 5, & 8 | Reading, writing, mathematics, language usage, science, and social studies |
| Maryland School Assessments (MSP) | Introduced 2002–2003 | 3, 5, 8, & 10 4, 6 to be added by 2005-2006 | Reading and mathematics; Science to be added by 2007-2008 |
| Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS/5) |  | 2, 4, & 6 |  |
| Maryland Functional Tests | 1990-2004 | 9, required for graduation | Mathematics, reading, writing, citizenship |
| High School Assessments | Introduced 2001-02 | High School end-of-course exams, required to graduate by 2009 | Biology, Algebra I, English, Government |
| *Source: Maryland State Department of Education.* | | | |

When Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, Maryland was forced to replace the MSPAP. Under NCLB, states must use tests that produce individual student test scores, something the MSPAP did not do. NCLB also expanded the testing requirements and requires states to administer annual statewide tests in mathematics and reading/language arts to all students in grades 3 through 8 by school year 2005–2006. Science assessments are to be added in 2007–2008. The Maryland School Assessments (MSA), which replaced the MSPAP in 2002–2003, are a combination of norm-reference and criterion-referenced test items and include both multiple choice and open-response (brief-answer) questions, and report test scores by individual students.

### Requirements for the High School Diploma in Maryland

To receive a Maryland High School Diploma, students must earn a minimum of 21 high school credits, which must include four credits in English, three credits each in mathematics, science, and social studies, two credits in a foreign language or advanced technology education or a state approved career and technology program, one credit in fine arts and technology education, and one-half credit in physical education and health. In addition, students must complete 75 hours of service-learning and complete four years of study beyond the eighth grade (unless waived for early admission to college). Students must also complete any local graduation requirements.

Students must also pass the High School Assessments. Currently, all students must take the HSA to obtain a high school diploma. Beginning with the class of 2009, all students must pass the exams. Students have two options.

1. **Passing Score Options**: Students take and pass all four HSA. Students may substitute passing scores on one or more state approved substitute assessments.
2. **Combined Score Option**: Students must take all four HSA, earn a minimum score on each test and earn an overall combined score. The minimum score will be established by the Maryland State Department of Education and will be a score below the passing score. The proposed combined score is equal to the total of the passing score on all four HSA.

High school students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) (i.e., special education students) receive a Certificate of Program Completion. These students take only those assessments outlined in their IEPs. Students not enrolled in high schools may earn a Diploma by Examination either by passing the GED test or by completing the Maryland Adult External Diploma Program. The State Board voted in spring 2004 to convene a task force to explore possible comparable assessment options for students with disabilities and other students with special challenges. Any accommodation provided in daily instruction for special education students must also be provided on the HSA.

The HSA are considered “high-stakes” because they carry serious consequences for individual students; that is, the HSA are used to make decisions about whether or not a student will graduate from high school. To receive a Maryland High School Diploma, a student must meet one of the two scoring options outlined above, even if he/she has met all of the other graduation requirements. Students can retake the exams if they fail (the exams are offered three times a year). Maryland requires students who do not pass the HSA to attend remediation programs if they wish to retake the test. It is the district’s responsibility to provide and pay for remediation services.

To assist districts with implementing the HSA, MSDE provides technical assistance and publicly released test forms, and is developing online instructional courseware that teachers can assess for instructional modules matched to state standards. MSDE is considering developing optional formative assessments that can be used to provide diagnostic help for students having difficulty passing the tests. MSDE reports that the HSA are aligned to content standards for particular courses, but MSDE has not completed an alignment review, which is necessary to establish the validity of the test. A valid test is one that actually measures the knowledge and skills that are taught.

### Student Performance on the High School Assessments

There is considerable variability in the passing rates on the HSA among different racial/ethnic groups in Maryland, as shown in Table 2 and Figure 1.

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| **Table 2: Percent of students in Maryland passing the High School Assessments by Race/Ethnicity, 2004.** |
| |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | Eng. I | Bio. | Gov. | Alg. | | African American | 34.9 | 38.4 | 49.0 | 35.2 | | American Indian | 49.2 | 63.1 | 65.3 | 51.2 | | Asian | 70.8 | 79.7 | 82.7 | 80.7 | | Latino | 40.3 | 47.8 | 56.1 | 65.9 | | White | 64.8 | 75.0 | 76.3 | 73.4 | | All Students | 53.0 | 60.9 | 65.9 | 58.8 | |
| Source: [Maryland's Report Card, 2003 Performance Report](http://msp.msde.state.md.us/" \t "_blank) |

Asian and white students have the highest passing rates, while African American, Latino, and American Indian students have the lowest. African American students score below all other racial/ethnic groups in the state on all four tests (English I, Biology, Government, and Algebra). The disparity between regular education students and students receiving special services is even greater. For example, on the English I exam, the pass rates are 12.3% for special education students, 14.9% for students learning English, and 30.1% for low income students in 2004 (Figure 1).

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|  | |  | | --- | | **Table 2: Percent of students in Maryland passing the High School Assessments by Race/Ethnicity, 2004.** | | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | Eng. I | Bio. | Gov. | Alg. | | African American | 34.9 | 38.4 | 49.0 | 35.2 | | American Indian | 49.2 | 63.1 | 65.3 | 51.2 | | Asian | 70.8 | 79.7 | 82.7 | 80.7 | | Latino | 40.3 | 47.8 | 56.1 | 65.9 | | White | 64.8 | 75.0 | 76.3 | 73.4 | | All Students | 53.0 | 60.9 | 65.9 | 58.8 | | | Source: [Maryland's Report Card, 2003 Performance Report](http://msp.msde.state.md.us/" \t "_blank) | |

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| **Figure 1:** **Percent of Students in Maryland Passing the High School Assessments in English I by Race/Ethnicity and by Special Program**(Special Education, English as a Second Language (ESOL) and Low Income (FARMS) ),**2002–2004**. | |
|  | **Source**:  [Maryland‘s Report Card, 2003 Performance Report](http://msp.msde.state.md.us/" \t "_blank)  SpEd=Special Education;   ESOL=English as a Second Language;   FARMS= Free & Reduced Priced Meals. |

   Scores also vary by County School District (Table 3). Test scores in Howard and Montgomery County are the highest in the state, while those in Baltimore City, Prince George’s, and some of the eastern shore counties (Caroline, Dorchester, and Somerset) are among the lowest. For example, pass rates for 2003 on the English I exam are 61.5% in Howard County and 56.3% in Montgomery County. They are 17.7% in Baltimore City, 23.2% in Prince George’s County, 25.9% in Caroline County, 23.3% in Dorchester County, and 22.1% in Somerset County.

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| **Table 3: Percent of students in each County and in Maryland passing the High School Assessment in English I by Race/Ethnicity and Special Education, 2003.** |
| |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **County** | **American Indian** | **Asian** | **African  American** | **White** | **Latino** | **Special Educ.** | **All  Students** | | STATE | 26.2 | 59.3 | 20.3 | 51.9 | 28.7 | 7.3 | **39.8** | | Allegany | \* | 75.0 | 17.9 | 35.4 | 20.0 | 4.7 | **35.2** | | Anne Arundel | 40.0 | 53.5 | 20.0 | 46.4 | 34.7 | 5.4 | **40.6** | | Baltimore | 9.1 | 31.3 | 15.9 | 35.1 | 12.2 | 0.5 | **17.7** | | Baltimore Co. | 14.8 | 43.7 | 20.2 | 46.8 | 27.5 | 5.8 | **36.8** | | Calvert | \* | 58.6 | 18.1 | 53.6 | 65.0 | 6.7 | **48.5** | | Caroline | — | \* | 6.5 | 31.7 | \* | 2.0 | **25.9** | | Carroll | \* | 53.8 | 23.1 | 53.0 | 41.7 | 5.3 | **51.9** | | Cecil | \* | 33.3 | 17.6 | 36.7 | 23.5 | 3.4 | **34.8** | | Charles | 21.1 | 54.0 | 25.0 | 51.1 | 54.3 | 6.2 | **40.8** | | Dorchester | — | \* | 4.8 | 37.2 | \* | 5.0 | **23.3** | | Frederick | 30.0 | 56.6 | 19.9 | 48.9 | 30.1 | 8.4 | **45.3** | | Garrett | — | — | \* | 32.8 | — | 0.0 | **32.7** | | Harford | 53.8 | 53.7 | 25.1 | 51.2 | 39.7 | 8.4 | **47.0** | | Howard | 60.0 | 67.0 | 36.1 | 68.6 | 44.6 | 15.3 | **61.5** | | Kent | — | \* | 13.7 | 43.9 | \* | 0.0 | **33.6** | | Montgomery | 33.3 | 68.7 | 28.2 | 71.9 | 31.6 | 16.9 | **56.3** | | Pr. George’s | 27.3 | 39.8 | 19.9 | 50.3 | 16.6 | 2.4 | **23.2** | | Queen Anne’s | \* | 80.0 | 20.3 | 48.2 | \* | 16.7 | **45.4** | | St. Mary’s | 36.4 | 70.3 | 12.5 | 41.4 | 31.8 | 5.0 | **36.8** | | Somerset | — | \* | 9.5 | 32.6 | \* | 0.0 | **22.1** | | Talbot | — | 20.0 | 15.5 | 48.7 | 0.0 | 6.3 | **40.1** | | Washington | \* | 55.0 | 23.2 | 43.2 | 18.5 | 6.9 | **41.2** | | Wicomico | \* | 25.0 | 14.7 | 50.2 | 34.8 | 9.0 | **37.8** | | Worcester | — | \* | 13.7 | 51.4 | 33.3 | 5.7 | **41.1** | |
| Source: [Maryland ‘s Report Card, 2003 Performance Report](http://msp.msde.state.md.us/" \t "_blank) \*Fewer than five students              — No students. |

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### Research on High School Graduation Testing

Research on high school exit exams has examined both the intended and unintended consequences of test use since the intended benefits of test use must be weighed against the unintended negative consequences for individual students and different kinds of students. Many of the assumptions that proponents claim will come with graduation testing are unsubstantiated in the literature or the evidence is mixed (Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001; Kornhaber, 2004). The research on high school exit exams is examined next.

<>   There is general agreement that high school graduation testing impacts instruction and curriculum, but there are differences on whether this impact is beneficial or detrimental to student learning. There is some evidence to suggest that exit exams encourage schools districts to cover more of the content in state standards, better align curriculum with state standards, and add remedial and other special courses for students at risk of failing (Center on Education Policy, 2003). On the other hand, the negative effects of exit exams include an overemphasis on basic skills, focusing instruction on the skills and questions used on the tests, an overemphasis on certain topics at the expense of others, and promoting a curriculum sequence and pace that are not appropriate for some students (Linn, 2000).

Policymakers adopt high school exit exams in hopes that they will inspire greater effort on the part of students, teachers, and administrators, and that they will improve student achievement. When looking at the effect of high school exit tests on achievement, there is a pattern of test score gains in the first few years after they are introduced, followed by a leveling off of test scores. The gains in the first few years are usually much larger than those achieved after the program has been in place for a few years (Linn, 2000). However, there is no unambiguous evidence that high school exit exams improve student performance, in part, because it is difficult to isolate the effects of other policies and practices. There is also the potential for measurement errors and bias in the statistical modeling used that contributes to the inconclusive evidence on high school exit tests (Lee, 2004). For example, two groups of researchers, Amrein and Berliner (2002) and Raymond and Hanushek (2003), reach different conclusions in part because of the methods they use.

If student performance were improving, there should also be gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).  However, gains in student achievement have either declined or shown no further improvement during the period when the effects of high stakes testing were greatest. Over the past 30 years, the NAEP shows national trends in reading, mathematics, and science increased during the 1970s and 1980s, but no further improvements in the 1990s when achievement leveled off or declined in some areas (Campbell, Hombo, and Mazzeo, 2000). Moreover, gains in achievement for minority students during the 1970s and 1980s were relatively greater than those made by other students, although more recent data indicates that this gap is again widening for black and Latino students (Grissmer, Flanagan, & Williamson, 1998; Hedges & Nowell, 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Lee, 2002). The largest gains for minority students were in the period 1971 to 1988, with the gap beginning to widen in the 1990s, just as the effects of high stakes testing were greatest.

There is considerable evidence that exit exams are associated with higher dropout rates, lower graduation rates, and increased enrollments in GED programs (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Haney, 2003). For example, recent data from Massachusetts shows dropout rates increased for the 2002–2003 school year, the first year that students had to pass the state test to graduate (Center on Education Policy, August 2004). Dropout rates are highest among African-American and Latino students, and the proportion of students dropping out with less than a 9th grade education has increased (Haney, 2003). There is no evidence that exit exams help prevent students from dropping out (Center on Education Policy, August 2003). The effect of exit exams on student motivation suggests that high-stakes testing can actually undermine motivation, especially for students who are not doing well (Kellaghan, Madaus, & Raczek, 1996; Madaus & Clarke, 2001).

The direct costs of high school exit exams include the administration of the tests, scoring, and reporting the results. Maryland reports that these direct costs are about $15 per student (personal communication from N. Grasmick, 7–29–04). These costs are only a small percentage of the total costs associated with exit exams. The bulk of the costs are for “hidden” expenses, including remediation, professional development for teachers, and programs to prevent student failure (Center on Education Policy, May 2004). Estimates of these additional costs range from $171 per student per year in Minnesota, $385 per student per year in Massachusetts, to $557 per student per year in Indiana (Center on Education Policy, 2004). These costs are borne mostly by local districts.

When there is opposition to exit tests, state policymakers often find ways to soften public resistance to exit exams and minimize harm to students. The most commonly adopted strategies include creating waivers, special exemptions, or alternative routes to a diploma for students who have failed exit exams after repeated tries; delaying the requirements to withhold diplomas; lowering cut off scores; voiding the test results; or suspending the implementation of exit exams (Center on Education Policy, August 2003).

### Response from Survey of Local School Officials

League members interviewed local school district officials from Allegany County, Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Calvert County, Garrett County, Howard County, Kent County, Montgomery County, Prince George’s County, St. Mary’s County, and Washington County. Most often, one person in each district was interviewed or was asked to respond to five questions about High School Assessments in their district. Interviews were conducted between June and August 2004.

To comply with the high school graduation testing requirements, district officials reported that they are aligning their course curricula with the state’s Core Learning Goals, adopting the Voluntary State Curriculum, increasing the amount of time they spend on grade 9 English and Algebra, stressing reading and writing across the curriculum, and giving extra attention to identifying problems early.

To prepare teachers for the tests, most schools systems reported increasing staff development aimed at understanding the new curriculum and content emphasized on the tests, learning how to write and score benchmark exams which mirror the HSA, and learning how to align instruction to the Voluntary State Curriculum. There were some differences between districts, with Kent County reporting that resources for staff development have been greatly reduced over the past three years because of declining state and national grants for staff development and budget cuts.

To help students who are not passing the tests, district officials reported re-teaching the classroom curriculum, remediation mini periods during the school day, tutoring before and during school, after-school tutoring in libraries by trained volunteers, after-school and Saturday school programs, and summer school. Some districts have adopted block scheduling for the tested subjects. (St. Mary's County has double-length periods for English and math in some grades.) Also mentioned by many respondents was the State On-line website which will provide remedial help for individual study. Districts reported that students would be given multiple opportunities to retake the tests. Kent County reported that resources for acceleration and intervention have been cut, which reduces the opportunities for students to receive focused, individual assistance.

When asked what resources the state provided to help defer the costs associated with the high school assessments, districts reported that they used the Thornton funding to cover costs associated with the HSA. Allegany County reported that the state has not provided additional financial resources targeted to implementing the High School Assessments. Other resources provided by the state included testing protocols, information on its website, and technical assistance. Most districts voiced appreciation of the technical assistance they received from MSDE. Baltimore City has a technical team from the Maryland State Department of Education (part of the city-state partnership forged in 1998) that has provided assistance. Baltimore County reported that the state technical advisor provided excellent resources and was always accessible. Officials in Prince George’s County reported that resources to defer the costs of the HSA were scarce and that the state had not done much to insure students will have a fair opportunity to learn the tested material.

Districts also reported that they had re-allocated resources to accommodate the HSA. This included re-allocating the amount of time spent on reading and math, re-allocating professional development time to cover the HSA, re-assigning master teachers to the courses covered by the tests, and re-allocating money for new materials, textbooks, and curriculum aligned with the tests. Montgomery County reported that they did not re-allocate resources to accommodate the tests.

Finally, districts reported that the HSA have affected teachers by increasing pressure for accountability, creating a greater sense of urgency and a tighter schedule to cover the content, and requiring them to teach a more structured course of study aligned with state standards. According to Kent County, teachers have less ability to adjust the pace of the class to the needs of students because of the time needed to cover the tested content. Other officials noted that teachers are talking more about their practices and sharing lesson plans. Some felt that students and parents were aware of the increased expectations and graduation requirements; others believed it was too early to know what difference the graduation requirements would make for students and parents.

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QUESTIONS

**In addition to the current requirements for a high school diploma in Maryland (attendance requirements, high school course credits and service-learning requirement), what additional requirements should be used to determine if a public school student is eligible to graduate from high school?**

1. Minimum Competency Tests (such as the Maryland Functional Tests)
2. High Stakes Exams (such as the High School Assessments)
3. Portfolio Assessments
4. State mandated tests should not be required to graduate
5. Other

**As long as passage of academic tests (High School Assessments) is required for graduation, what conditions should be in place to insure students have a fair opportunity to pass?**

1. Access to curriculum and instructional materials aligned with state standards
2. Access to a high quality educational program, including advanced placement courses
3. Access to well qualified teachers
4. Timely and specific results
5. Multiple opportunities to pass the test
6. In-school and after-school tutoring and remediation
7. Opportunities to retake a course or take a mini-course
8. Alternate ways to demonstrate mastery of the subject
9. Opportunity to transfer to a better performing public school
10. Other

**What measures should the state fund to ensure every student the opportunity and resources to pass tests? Consider the following:**

1. Pre-school education (for 4 year olds, 3 year olds, low-income?)
2. Professional staff development (curriculum, learning styles, cultural differences, expectation of students)
3. Curriculum development and textbooks aligned with core curriculum
4. Smaller class size
5. Technical assistance to identify locus of problem
6. Other

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**RESPONSES TO**  
**HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION TESTING STUDY**

**March 2005**

Local Leagues did not agree as to whether any additional requirements, such as testing, should be used to determine eligibility for high school graduation.

**LWVMD Position on HS Graduation Testing**

*Please add to your copy of STUDY AND ACTION 2003-2005, page 31.*

**EDUCATION--HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION TESTING: Action to insure students have an opportunity to pass high school graduation tests. (2005) As long as passage of academic tests (High School Assessments) is required for graduation, the following conditions should be in place to ensure students have a fair opportunity to pass:**

1. Access to curriculum and instructional materials aligned with state standards
2. Access to curriculum and instructional materials aligned with state standards
3. Access to a high quality educational program, including advanced placement courses
4. Access to well qualified teachers Timely and specific results
5. Multiple opportunities to pass the test
6. In-school and after-school tutoring and remediation
7. Opportunities to retake a course or take a mini-course
8. Alternate ways to demonstrate mastery of the subject

**To ensure every student the opportunity and resources to pass tests, the state should fund:**

1. Professional staff development (curriculum, learning styles, cultural differences, expectations of students)
2. Curriculum development and textbooks aligned with core curriculum
3. Smaller class size
4. Technical assistance to identify reasons for low academic achievement