



**Testimony of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs (MCCPTA)
Before the Maryland State Board of Education on
High School Assessments
September 10, 2007**

Good evening, my name is Jane de Winter. I serve as the president of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs (MCCPTA) which has over 52,000 members in Montgomery County and whose purpose is to speak for children. The High School Assessments have been the subject of great concern with our members for several years. Parents in Montgomery County have very high standards and believe in the transformative power of education.

It is a National PTA position that a diploma should not be dependent on one single measure (or four in this case). The use of a single measure is particularly troubling for many students in Montgomery County because there are still no clear provisions for students with special needs or students who are English language learners. The number of Montgomery County students receiving special education services and who are English language learners is larger than entire school systems in some of the counties in Maryland.

Our sense is that you have been careening from one ill conceived idea to another. The proposal unveiled last year in Montgomery County to accept AP exam scores in lieu of HSA exams is nonsensical as you are suggesting that students skip an HSA exam on the chance that they might pass an AP exam years later whose results may not even be available until after the student's graduation. Last fall, another announcement was made that there would be concessions for students with special needs and English language learners, but neither the mod-HSA nor the comp-HSA is available yet and it is not clear whether special needs students and ESL students will be held to the same standards as all other students in order to graduate in 2009 or not. Recently Dr. Grasmick announced that an alternate route to graduation may be developed for students who cannot pass these exams, and in the past few years there have been repeated statements that it's not definite that these tests will be required for a diploma in 2009 even though the published literature states that they will be required.

The release of HSA scores in August and the State's inability to provide complete and accurate results for each county and each cohort because it did not keep track of students' individual demographic data is mind boggling to say the least. How can schools, students, and parents prepare for these exams if the ground keeps shifting beneath them? How can we have confidence in these exams and in MSDE if you repeatedly demonstrate a lack of confidence in and competency with regard to the HSAs?

Schools have been hamstrung by the length of time it takes to get test results. The majority of students take these exams in May. Because the results of the May testing are not available until the end of August for schools, and even later for students, students who fail lose valuable time that they could spend receiving remediation or retaking the test while awaiting their test results. Schools are unable to use the summer months for training or course adjustments that might be suggested by the results of the May tests.

The most significant issue is the fact that the HSAs are a measure of minimum competency and we must conclude that if 10-20% of Montgomery County students cannot pass these exams that something is lacking in the instructional program. It is not a coincidence that low pass rates are highly correlated with poverty* and poverty is correlated with race and ethnicity. We know that even in relatively wealthy schools there is a large achievement gap between poor students and the rest of the student body, We know that public school students in Montgomery County are significantly poorer than the average county resident. The HSAs are a mandate that arrived without foresight or funding for the consequences. Montgomery County has spent huge amounts of money instituting far-reaching changes at the elementary school level and is now undertaking changes at the middle school level. It has shown a willingness to spend its own money and tax its own residents that some other counties have not, even those that could afford to do so, while at the same time facing some of the steepest challenges in terms of the number of ESL students. Change costs money. Where is the money to make the necessary changes in high schools to ensure that all students can and will pass the HSAs? Where is the money to provide remediation for students who do not pass the exam the first time? Where is the money for a fifth year of high school for students who are determined to receive a diploma but who have not passed all four tests by the end of senior year? And where is the money to deal with the thousands of students who will leave school without a diploma and without the necessary education to become productive citizens?

The Montgomery County Council of PTAs wants accountability. We want high expectations for all students. We want the state to make up its mind on these exams and to provide resources to our school system. We want all our students to graduate with a diploma. We want you to ask yourselves the question: Are the resources that the state is providing matching up with its expectations?

* Correlation between 2007 test scores and % students who have ever received free and reduced rate lunch at Montgomery County HS: Biology: -0.55771; Government: -0.87261; Algebra: -0.80993; English: -0.93459.