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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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STATE BOARD LAUNCHES REGULATORY PROCESS THAT COULD TIE THE HIGH SCHOOL ASSESSMENTS TO GRADUATION

*MEASURE PASSES BY A 9-2 MARGIN;
REQUIREMENT COULD START WITH CLASS OF 2009*

BALTIMORE (December 4, 2003) -- The Maryland State Board of Education yesterday agreed to begin the process of developing regulations that would require high school students to pass the four High School Assessments before receiving a Maryland High School Diploma.

The multi-faceted concept also would provide other pathways to high school completion, including a local high school diploma, a diploma for certain students with learning disabilities who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and a certificate of program completion. Assessment passage would not be the sole criteria for graduation, however, as other high school completion requirements that are currently in place – such as successful completion of coursework and service-learning work – would remain.

The State Board launched the regulatory process on a 9-2 vote, but the concept has a long way to go before final approval.

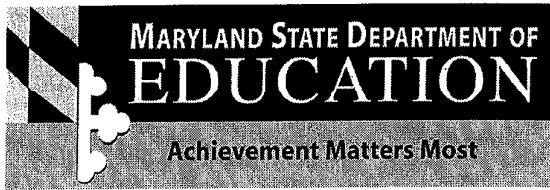
MSDE staff will begin preparing draft regulatory changes for the new high school graduation requirements for the State Board's consideration in February. Once presented with the draft regulations, the State Board would then vote to publish the draft for public comment and a public hearing. A final vote to enact the new regulations would not occur before May of 2004.

“The State Board has sent a clear message that it cares about strengthening standards for Maryland students,” said State Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick. “This is just the first step in a process that will involve all of our stakeholders – educators, parents, students, higher education, and the economic development community.”

Dr. Grasmick and members of the State Board agreed that they would rethink the regulatory proposal if financial support from the Bridge to Excellence Act funding mandates that grew out of the Thornton Commission is not continued.

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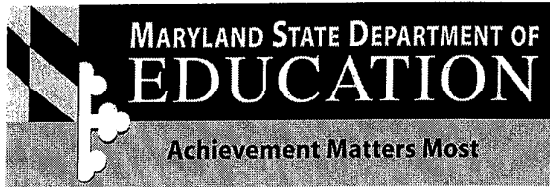
The High School Assessments, introduced in 2002, are tests in algebra/data analysis, biology, English I, and government. These are typically freshman and sophomore-level courses.

Maryland has moved cautiously to strengthen graduation requirements, having studied instituting such a step since 1993. The state's Core Learning Goals, upon which the assessments are based, have been in place since 1996. All local school systems have certified that the Goals are fully integrated into the curriculum and instruction, which means that appropriate courses have been in place in Maryland classrooms for seven years. If the State Board ultimately approves the regulatory change for the class of 2009, 16 years will have passed between initial consideration of a High School Assessment Program and the first graduating class to be affected by it.

The proposed framework for the new graduation regulations is not expected to adversely affect Maryland's graduation rate or dropout rate. Since students begin taking the exams in their freshman year, if not earlier, they would have 10 chances or more to pass each one. Moreover, if a student were to fail an assessment, he or she would receive appropriate academic interventions based on a system of formative assessment tools that will be used to diagnose problem areas.

The proposal discussed by the State Board provides several routes to high school completion. They are:

- **Maryland High School Diploma** – A student must be enrolled in a Maryland high school and pass all four High School Assessments or substitute tests – such as the Advanced Placement or SAT II tests – that are aligned with the High School Assessments and are approved by the state. He or she also would be required to complete the other graduation requirements, such as service learning, and local and state required credits and coursework.
- **Local High School Diploma** – A student must be enrolled in a Maryland high school, pass three of the four assessments, and complete the other requirements.
- **Local High School IEP Diploma** – A student must be enrolled in a Maryland high school and have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The student must take all High School Assessments, although there is no requirement that he or she pass them. In addition, the student must complete all other state and
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local requirements and complete all IEP requirements. The student will receive an exit document that describes his or her skills.

- **Certificate of Program Achievement** – A student must be enrolled in a Maryland high school and have an IEP. The student must take Alt-MSA (Alternative Maryland School Assessments) or High School Assessments, depending upon the IEP determination. The IEP Team will determine a student's eligibility for the certificate. These students also will receive an exit document that describes their skills.

Dr. Grasmick emphasized that the proposal assures that all students would have opportunities for success as standards are being raised to keep Maryland classrooms on pace to meet the requirements of both the workplace and higher education.

“We will set in place a variety of safeguards for students as they move through the academic process,” she explained. “Teachers would continue to be provided with tools and professional development to help them identify struggling students as early as possible. Those students having difficulty would be given the assistance they need and deserve.”

As part of the process, Maryland is developing a series of on-line courses in each of the four subject areas that students will be able to access at no cost.

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