

## **The Excellence Gap**

Good afternoon, my name is Dr. Jeanne Paynter and I am faculty in curriculum and instruction at McDaniel College and the Executive Director of Talent Program Solutions.

I am here today to talk about the **gravity of Excellence Gaps** and suggest some simple but **powerful solutions** which Maryland policy-makers can implement.

“Excellence gap” is the term coined by Dr. Jonathan Plucker and fellow researchers to describe the achievement gaps at the advanced level. After more than a decade of well-intentioned reforms to reduce proficiency gaps, data show that Excellence Gaps persist, and have widened.

We need unique solutions to develop talent at advanced levels.

Dr. Plucker recently spoke at the State Conference on Gifted and Talented Education.

He reports that Excellence Gap data can be used with certainty to predict that a poor or minority student will not, by high school, perform at advanced levels. We have a “persistent talent underclass.” It is rare that students can move up.

**Without appropriate intervention, that is.**

There is good news and bad news for Maryland Public Schools. The good news is, as you are aware, that Maryland leads the pack in the percentage of students that score at the Advanced Levels on state and national achievement tests.

**The bad news is that we have very large excellence gaps.**

According to the Fordham Foundation’s research, the adoption of the Common Core State Standards is not going to be the educational solution for high ability, high potential students. The standards are more rigorous, but self-admittedly, they were not developed for advanced students. Differentiation of the standards is difficult for teachers and is not widespread.

**Then, what *are* the solutions?**

**First, there is more good news:** Maryland has research-based standards, COMAR for gifted and talented student identification, programming and teacher professional development. There are many creative and fiscally responsible ways that the Board can support the COMAR implementation with resources and accountability.

**Number Two:** The Board can publish Excellence Gap data and track results with as much urgency as it does with the minimum competency gaps. [Knowledge is power.]

**Third:** A no-cost solution. Ask these questions in the discussion of all policy decisions:

- **Ask:** How will this decision impact high ability, high potential students?
- Will it help them, or are there unintentional consequences?

Well-intentioned policies can create barriers to acceleration and differentiation for advanced students.

**For example:** COMAR requires that school systems have an early entrance policy [well-intentioned], but it allows them to craft rigid policies with stringent cut-offs which present barriers to advanced students [unintended consequences].

**Today we have a compelling challenge and opportunity:**

Even small improvements in the Excellence Gap represent thousands of students emerging from the talent underclass; *Talent that will create their own unique solutions to change our world for the better.*

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Great Public Schools  
for **EVERY** Child

RE: Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)

Dear Dr. Smith and Mr. Smith:

Ten days ago, MSEA's annual representative assembly—the association's highest policymaking body, made up of 650 educators from across the state—voted overwhelmingly to call on MSDE and the State Board to use Maryland's position as a member of the PARCC consortium governing board to:

- further shorten the assessment;
- improve accommodations for all students;
- reduce the impact on the school program (i.e. the normal instructional schedule, availability of technology for learning, and personnel being pulled from the normal duties to administer tests);
- deliver test results more quickly to educators, parents, and students; and
- extend the moratorium on PARCC as a graduation requirement for students and as any portion of a teacher or principal evaluation.

While the changes made by the PARCC consortium to shorten the assessment and reduce the testing window are steps in the right direction, more needs to be done to improve PARCC, reduce the disruptions to the instructional program, and lower the stakes associated with it.

PARCC is one data point—and one whose validity and accuracy as a measure of student, teacher, and school achievement remains unproven. It is also one test on top of many, many others that have been mandated at the state, local, and school building levels. The overwhelming emphasis on



testing has, for too many students, taken away from a well-rounded education and the love of school and learning that we want for all of our children.

We urge MSDE and the State Board to partner with the thousands of educators and parents across the state who are simply saying: enough. Enough with tests that don't help teachers improve instruction for their students. Enough with media centers and computer labs that are closed for months due to testing. Enough with the creative lessons, field trips, and class project shunted aside to make way for another mandated test. Enough with tests whose results don't come until months after the student has moved on to another grade, let alone taken the test. Enough with budgets that send far too much money to testing companies and far too little to lowering class sizes and implementing proven programs to close opportunity gaps. It is time for less testing and more learning.

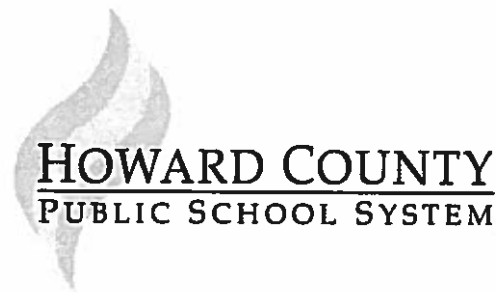
We urge you, as PARCC scores are being released, to expand your focus to consider how instructional time for all students has dropped due to the sheer amount of tests in our public schools and to support local boards of education in efforts to evaluate and reduce the number of assessments. Together, we must take action to increase the usefulness of mandated state tests for educators and limit its negative instructional impact for students. We stand ready to partner with you in these efforts.

Thank you for your consideration of this very important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Betty Weller".

Betty Weller  
President



Tuesday, October 27, 2015  
Meeting Of The Maryland State Board Of Education  
Public Comment

Mary Weller  
Coordinator Of Secondary Science  
Howard County Public School System

Providing comment on assessment of student learning under the next generation science standards in Maryland.

Good afternoon. My name is Mary Weller, and I coordinate the Secondary Science program in the Howard County Public School System. Science literacy for *all* is critical, and Maryland has shown its commitment to this goal through its leadership in Next Generation Science Standard development, adoption, and implementation. Recently, Maryland has begun moving forward in defining assessments for these new science standards, and we are again presented with a unique opportunity to lead the nation.

NGSS implementation is a watershed moment for us where the traditional dichotomy between science as collection of knowledge or science as process can finally achieve balance. Students who learn in a next generation science classroom will graduate as scientifically literate adults ready to make reasoned and informed decisions grounded in science knowledge to benefit the individual and society.

The NGSS and its supporting documents stress that assessment is a critical element in educational improvement. Assessment, when done well, provides accurate and actionable measures of students' learning and supports educators in creating learning environments that are genuinely rigorous. If done poorly, assessment can result in misleading data that skew the instructional process. Thus, design and implementation of an exemplary assessment system for the next generation science classroom is essential, and that opportunity is within our grasp.

Since adoption of NGSS in June 2013, districts throughout Maryland have worked collaboratively with MSDE to craft a vision and to begin the significant instructional shifts required for full implementation. Professional learning and curriculum development have been top priorities. As we move forward to craft an assessment system, let us continue to partner strategically and deliberately so we successfully achieve the vision of NGSS. The National Research Council's "Committee on Developing Assessments of Proficiency in K12 Science" advises states to implement assessment for NGSS gradually so that the goals of NGSS are not lost. Failure to heed this advice may result in unintended consequences that actually hinder actualization of our laudable intentions.

Learning in science builds along a continuum for individuals. The NGSS assessment system ought to measure this progress rather than measuring what content a student does or does not know at a particular grade. This stands in contrast to traditional measures of student learning. Thus, it is recommended that the new science assessment system be carefully designed to measure students' increasingly sophisticated understanding over time across all school levels and in all three dimensions of NGSS. At the high school, this means administration should occur upon successful completion of the COMAR-required, three credits of NGSS aligned coursework if assessment results are intended to measure a student's readiness for college and career in science—the goal of NGSS. In most systems this means administration at the end of grade 11. Understandably, this brings concerns over remediation and

test overload. However, if a decision were made to administer the high school test earlier, say at grade 10, the impact on school systems and on achievement of NGSS goals would be profound. A test administered prior to completion of the high school learning sequence would require artificial elevation of a subset of performance expectations that would potentially define the courses leading to it and have significant implications related to teacher certification, course sequence, and facility use. Retooling schools to align to the assessment would simply place significant stress on human and material resources.

Assessment is critical to measuring efficacy of instruction, and its influence on instructional choice cannot be overstated. We are at a crossroads in science. Let's design an assessment that emphasizes the learning that is really important and that provides data upon which students, parents, and schools can make informed decisions. The Howard County Public School System looks forward to supporting this work in all ways possible.