

2004: MARYLAND'S REFORM ODYSSEY

BY KARIN CHENOWETH

WHEN STATES first began requiring students to meet minimum course requirements and pass competency tests before graduating from high school, some educators worried that the new standards would cause students—especially minority and disadvantaged students—to fail and drop out at higher rates than was already the case.

Their thinking was that these students were already failing to meet existing standards. Raising standards, they argued, would simply force students further into an educational limbo.

As it turned out, the exact opposite happened. Although initial rates of passing were low, school systems with minimum standards report that more of their students are passing and—perhaps the biggest surprise—dropout rates are stable or declining.

In light of this, some states are now deciding that they should go beyond minimum standards and adopt a more rigorous academic experience, not just for those students thought gifted, but for everyone.

Although several states have begun efforts in this direction, one of the few states to link that kind of reform to higher education is Maryland, which has been slowly putting into place a systemwide reform that will eventually make a high school diploma not only a certificate of mastery, but a ticket to good jobs, higher education, and even scholarship money.

“I want kids to have a diploma they’re proud to

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hang on the wall,” is the way state board of education member Walter Sondheim Jr. puts it.

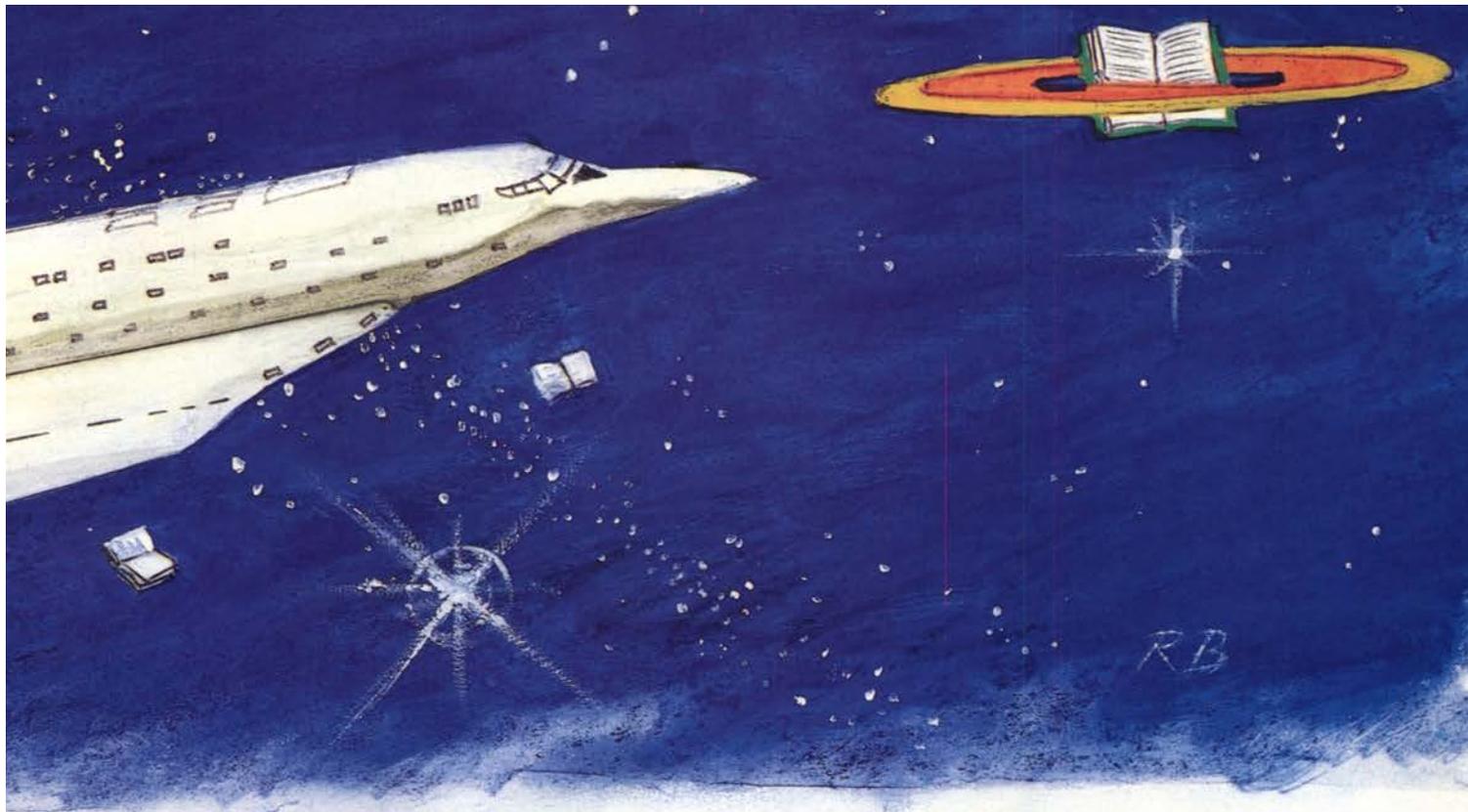
Corporate Support

Late in January, Maryland took a big step toward its plan to require high-level assessments when the state school board asked testing companies for bids to design ten tests, to be taken throughout the high school years.

To make sure the tests are challenging for all students and to guard against pressures to “dumb the tests down,” state educators plan on having multiple levels. For example, achieving a score of 80 on the exams might guarantee high school graduation. A score of 85 or 90 might garner the student a special note on the diploma that he or she had graduated with merit or distinction. Higher scores might guarantee the ultimate reward of automatic entrance to a Maryland college and even scholarship money.

In addition, the Maryland Business Roundtable, which represents seventy of Maryland’s biggest employers, has agreed that if this testing procedure becomes a reality, it will encourage businesses to use the diploma and the scores on the assessments as a way to make hiring decisions. A letter of support for the reforms was signed by the heads of such companies as Potomac Electric Power Company, Bethlehem Steel Corporation, and Bell Atlantic-Maryland.

This approach represents a turnaround of the old worry that teachers will abandon what should be taught in order to “teach to the test.” By putting into place tests they think worthy of being taught to, Maryland officials are basing their reform on the expectation and hope that teachers *will* teach to the test.



Nancy S. Grasmick, state superintendent of schools, tells teachers in a recent newsletter that “teaching to the test is in favor.”

‘High-stakes’ Diplomas

If Maryland, in fact, implements these changes, it will in some ways be mirroring what some other nations do. In Germany, for example, admissions to university and to prestigious apprenticeships are determined in large part by how well students do on exams in their equivalent of ninth- and tenth-grade.

But Maryland officials are not consciously patterning the state’s system after any other nation’s. “It’s just a matter of thinking through the incentives,” says Christopher Cross, president of the state’s school board and president of the Council for Basic Education. Cross draws a distinction between what he would like to see in Maryland and, for example, Japan, by saying, “Japan doesn’t have the richness of second chances. We’re not a society that would stand for—or should we—that kind of rigidity.”

Cross wants Maryland’s high school tests to be what he calls “high stakes,” and withholding diplomas from those who fail them is certainly one way to do that. For planning purposes, officials are assuming that 50 percent of the students will fail the first set of exams and will need to be re-tested after being provided with more instruction or other kinds of help.

Dr. Helen Giles-Gee, associate vice-chancellor for academic affairs of the University of Maryland System (UM) and one of the behind-the-scenes theoreticians of the reform effort, contends that by setting clear, achievable standards and then providing students the support they need to meet them, Maryland will be

providing a greater opportunity for all students—but particularly poor and minority students.

“It’s so exciting,” she says. “And it has so much promise.”

The ‘Seamless Web’

Giles-Gee has been part of the “Maryland Partnership for Teaching and Learning K-16,” or “Maryland K-16” for short. Begun in November 1995 by the chancellor of the University of Maryland System, the superintendent of the state department of education, and the state’s secretary of higher education, Maryland K-16 has been charged with making the transition from kindergarten through college a “seamless web.”

Giles-Gee has spent a great deal of time working on one of the many parts of that web: articulation between two- and four-year institutions. Now, after years of work by academics throughout the state, a general education class at Essex Community College is equal to a UM general education class, and students may now easily transfer credits between two- and four-year institutions.

She is hoping that the K-16 initiative will develop that kind of fluidity between high school and college so that, for example, a high school senior who is ready to take college-level calculus may do so by taking the class at a local college or at the high school, where a college faculty member will be assigned to teach the subject. “The ideal alignment would be a meshing of real competencies,” she says.

All this requires that Maryland colleges, high schools, and businesses expect the same things of high school graduates, and representatives from all those communities have spent the past two years developing

ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT BARKIN

Standards: How's Your State Doing?

SINCE THE first National Education Summit in 1989, educators and policymakers in most states have been working conscientiously to develop and strengthen academic standards for students. These efforts received a terrific boost at the second Education Summit earlier this year, when governors and business leaders reaffirmed their commitment to raising the academic bar for all students (see *American Educator*; Spring 1996). The forty-four governors in attendance made a commitment to have a system of internationally competitive standards in place within the next two years. A tall order? Perhaps, but most states have taken this challenge seriously and have begun the difficult process of reviewing and improving their academic standards. Now the question many are asking is: "How do our standards compare with the standards in other states and other countries?"

This summer, the AFT released a report designed to help answer this question. *Making Standards Matter 1996* is the second annual AFT review of standards-based reform in the fifty states. The report provides a subject-by-subject analysis of the standards in every state, and it answers some important questions about the impact those standards will have on student learning. Here are some of the major findings:

■ **States are committed to improving academic standards and basing them in core academic subjects.** Forty-eight states (down from forty-nine last year) are developing common academic standards for students (Iowa and Wyoming are not doing so). All but one (Rhode Island) of the forty-eight will have separate standards in the four core academic subjects—English, math, social studies, and science—something the AFT thinks is crucial to preserving the integrity of the traditional disciplines.

■ **Most state standards are still not clear and specific enough or adequately grounded in subject-matter content to form the basis for a core curriculum.** Only fifteen states (up from thirteen last year) have standards in all four core subjects that are specific enough to lead to the development of a common core curriculum. Why is this a problem? By opening the door to widely varying interpretations, vague standards threaten educational equity, reducing the chance that all students across the state will get an equally rigorous curriculum. Vague standards also cannot help teachers and schools deal with the problem of student mobility. One-fifth of students nationwide change schools each year, and one-third change each year in urban areas. In the absence of clear, common standards, students arrive in their new

classrooms ahead of or behind the rest of the class, placing a significant burden on the teacher.

■ **Most states realize that high-quality standards should compare with the best in the world, but only a few have looked at student standards in other countries, and none has done a thorough job of international benchmarking.** Only twelve states (up from seven last year) have examined curricula, exams, or other materials from foreign countries while developing their standards.

■ **Some standards are exemplary and can serve as models for other states to follow.** Nine states (Calif., D.C., Del., Fla., Ind., Mass., Ohio, Va., W. Va.) have standards in one or more subjects that AFT considers exemplary for their clarity, specificity, and grounding in academic content.

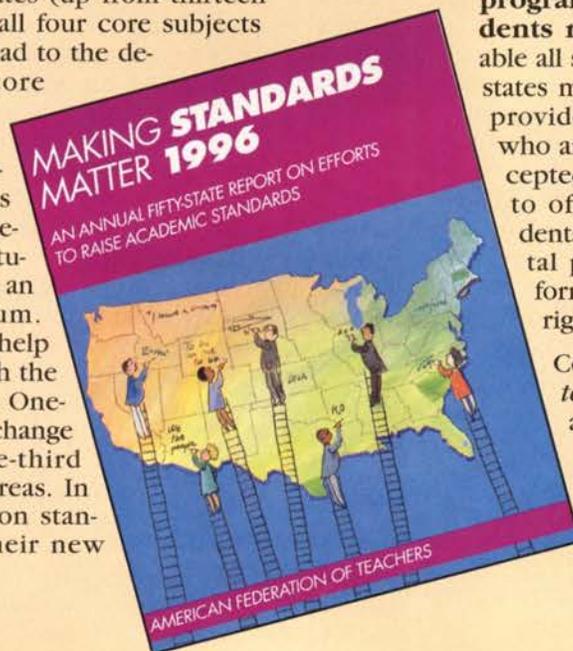
■ **Forty-two states are developing student assessments linked to standards, but the insufficient attention to academic content means that these assessments will rest on a weak foundation.** Assessments based on vague standards are problematic for one of two reasons. Either the assessments will follow the lead of the standards, and they will not require students to demonstrate mastery of specific, rigorous content. Or the assessments will require specific content knowledge, but teachers, students, and others will have to guess what that content is.

■ **Fewer than half the states plan to make their standards "count" for students by linking them to promotion or graduation.** Only three states will hold students accountable for meeting standards in elementary and middle school, and only twenty states have or are planning high school exit exams linked to the standards that students must pass to graduate.

■ **Only ten states require and fund programs to help low-achieving students reach state standards.** To enable all students to reach high standards, states must be prepared to identify and provide extra help to those students who are struggling. Few states have accepted this obligation, and the failure to offer help to low-achieving students will undermine the fundamental promise of standards-based reform: to provide *all* students with a rigorous quality education.

Copies of *Making Standards Matter 1996* (item no. 265) are available for \$10 each (prepaid) from the AFT Order Department, 555 New Jersey Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20001-2079.

—MATT GANDAL, AFT



a list of what exactly every high school graduate should be assumed to know and be able to do.

"The question asked of them was, 'What will it take for you to stop saying that our graduates are unprepared?'" says Dr. Robert Gabrys, assistant state superintendent of research and development, another of the key architects of the reform.

Common Complaint

This basic question gets to one of the underlying causes for school reform in the state: Higher education institutions have complained that too many Maryland undergraduates are unprepared for college-level work, and Maryland businesses have complained that high school graduates cannot be expected to know or be able to do much of anything.

"Right now a diploma pretty much means you've attended school," is the way Maryland Business Roundtable associate director Kathy Seay puts it.

A low opinion of high school graduates' capabilities is not peculiar to Maryland—educators and employers around the country have been voicing similar concerns.

But this complaint of long standing crystallized as an issue in Maryland when the state began, three years ago, to compile an annual report of local jurisdictions and individual high schools on how their graduates do in college. The state's Higher Education Commission and Education Coordinating Committee now send an annual report each year detailing whether college freshmen need remediation in math and English, whether they stay in college, and what their first grades in math and English are.

That information galvanized the education world in the state as it realized that a large number—as high as 70 percent on some college campuses—of freshmen require remedial courses.

Even upper-income Montgomery County, just north of Washington, D.C., which has long prided itself on what it calls its "national reputation," does not look too good—with 49 percent of the students it sends to its county community college requiring remediation in math and 24 percent requiring remediation in English.

Every Student an Academician

By the year 2004, as envisioned by educators, remediation classes for recent high school graduates should be a thing of the past in Maryland. By then, if these reforms succeed, all diploma holders will have demonstrated their ability to handle postsecondary work by demonstrating proficiency in math, science, English, social studies and what Maryland is calling "skills for success," which involves being able to write, speak, solve problems, and use up-to-date technology.

Some of this is similar to the Regents' system in New York, where the top students earn academic Regents' diplomas on the basis of tests. But unlike New York—which could be considered a tracking system in which some are on an academic track and others a business or vocational track—in Maryland, every student will be expected to meet rigorous academic standards.

Gabrys says the emphasis put on the word "every" is important because it eliminates the source of excuses common among school systems that, when their stu-

dents fail, it is because they come from what are often called "diverse backgrounds" or "unsupportive" families. "If a student comes to school with disadvantages," Gabrys says, "it is the job of the school system to compensate, not accept that as a reason for failure."

For example, says Gabrys, disadvantaged students often have little access to books, and few adults to read to them. "We might ask what schools have done to make sure students have books and people to read to them."

Gabrys is drawing a bead on one of the big worries associated with raising academic standards—that the rising tide will not raise all boats, but raise some and sink others.

Giles-Gee agrees that this is an issue that bears watching. "How do you make sure the standards don't become a barrier?" she asks. Part of the answer, she says, lies in making sure that all the resources in the state are pulling toward the same goals.

That means, for example, that colleges and universities will have to be involved in the professional development of teachers already teaching and in changing the teachers education program. One change already in the works is requiring future teachers to have two majors—one in education and the other in the subject they are planning to teach. Another change, launched in January 1996, is to require future teachers to spend a year in the classroom working with veteran teachers.

Mastery at Bowie

Dr. Vernon Clark, provost of the historically black Bowie State University and a member of the state K-16 task force, has begun implementing some of these changes on his campus, which began as a normal school and still has a substantial education program.

"Every student who gets an education degree from Bowie State has to take and pass the National Teachers Exam," says Clark. This is a higher requirement than is required by the state, which allows teachers several years before they have to pass the NTE.

All Bowie students will also have to pass exams measuring competency in the core curriculum, which most students take in the first two years. "We've made a decision to say that every student who receives a diploma has demonstrated mastery of the core curriculum."

Clark says that implementing Maryland's reforms will require what he calls a "no-holds-barred approach to quality education," which will include providing alternative settings, ending social promotion and restructuring the way schools are organized. "If a kid doesn't perform at the level we expect, we will provide support, time [and] intensive interaction."

In a December 1995 *Atlantic Monthly* article, Paul Gagnon of the School of Education at Boston University wrote, "Starting school reform by first deciding what every child should learn strikes most people as only common sense. But to many American educators, it spells revolutionary change. This strategy would give subject-matter teachers, and the educated public, unprecedented power to spur genuine change—change far deeper than questions of school choice, methods, or management."

By 2004, Maryland should know if that is true. □