

"Federation Corner" column
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Grasmick repeats history and perpetuates the cruel hoax

by Wayne Goldstein

In last week's column, I described how Maryland State Superintendent of Schools Nancy Grasmick wrote in 2006 about the need to teach rigorous math and science while she also was promoting the value of being able to receive a high school diploma by passing High School Assessments (HSAs) based on 8th and 9th grade course requirements. She has been playing this game of pretending to support universal excellence for much longer than that. In May 2000, Grasmick stated: "It is critical for us to meet our obligation to our students... The [HSAs] speak to what I call, 'The Cruel Hoax,' where someone, somewhere, will tell one of our graduates, 'You don't have the competitive skills.' We can not let this happen... We need both the intervention plan and the assessments, and we must keep aiming toward having the tests become a graduation requirement... We have built momentum in schools across the state over the past several years in working toward administration of the test."

In January 2001, Grasmick wrote in Education Week: "Someone once quipped that everyone who has ever heard George Santayana's famous remark, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,' is destined to repeat it. At the risk of falling into this trap, let me suggest that we are in danger of repeating a huge mistake that school reformers made a quarter-century ago. We must avoid doing so. In the mid-1970s, American employers were complaining that high school diplomas no longer assured that their holders had the knowledge and skills for entry-level jobs. Legislatures in two-thirds of the states responded by establishing exit exams and other hoops through which students would have to jump in order to graduate from high school.

"Within a few years, however, what came to be known as the 'minimum-competency movement' was dead in the water. Little heed had been paid to the educational interventions that would be required to assure that most students made it through the new hoops... When it became clear that substantial numbers of students would not be getting diplomas, legislators backed off. Tests were made easier and passing grades lowered until a political comfort zone... was reached... In recent years, legislatures in 49 states have published standards spelling out what students at various grade levels are expected to know and to be able to do in core academic subjects, and a majority have backed them up with exit exams. In my own state of Maryland, for example, starting with the class of 2005, students will be required to pass exams in English, mathematics, U.S. government, and other subjects in order to receive their diplomas.

"... As in the late 1970s, the predictable backlash has already begun. Educators in Virginia, Massachusetts, California, and other states have started to calculate how many students are likely to fall short of the new academic requirements, and cries are being heard to soften or even scrap the new requirements. Such a scenario would be a national tragedy. Setting high academic standards for our future workers, citizens, and parents is an even more urgent national priority than it was a quarter-century ago. But to stay the course, we must understand what went wrong the last time around.

"... In Maryland, we have assumed from the outset that, if we are to be serious about raising student-achievement levels in our schools, we need more than high academic expectations for students and meaningful consequences if they fail to meet them. We also need adequate interventions to make sure that every student has the opportunity to succeed. Setting the standards and laying out the consequences were the easy parts. There is a growing consensus among educators across the country about what students should know and be able to do in core academic subjects at various grade levels. Political and educational leaders in Maryland also agreed that tests are an appropriate means to enforce the new standards.

";... Twenty-five years ago, we abandoned the push for higher standards because we allowed sanctions to get out ahead of the hard work of intervening to make sure that teachers and students were prepared to meet them. We cannot afford to make the same mistake again."

Let's face it. Grasmick, like all of the other mediocre education leaders created by our nation's inferior school administrator education industry, never really set high standards, and cannot even stay committed to the mediocre standards that were set with so much fanfare because of that backlash she vowed to resist. This latest version of minimum competency will also be abandoned, using a unique new excuse. Last week, Grasmick decided to eliminate written answers "to save time" so that school districts could more quickly get the results and more quickly figure out how to help students improve their scores. This is nonsense, because the solution could have instead been to hire more test processors who could have then provided the results in a more timely fashion. Although writing answers has been part of the HSAs, just as it has been made part of the SATs, Grasmick, with the full support of all local Maryland superintendents, will eliminate this requirement and switch to multiple choice for all questions. This dumbing down of the test, by eliminating any requirement to show an ability to communicate in writing, will ensure that more students will pass, and will do so with higher scores. Her Bridge Plan will further guarantee that those who still cannot pass the tests, even after being given multiple opportunities to do so, will still be able to get a diploma, attend community college, and promptly drop out because of their inability to even handle the remedial classes they will be required to take.

A future state superintendent, like Grasmick and her predecessors, will one day announce a bold new plan to raise standards by requiring rigorous instruction and testing. This superintendent will also eventually bow to political pressure by stupifying the test, and so it will go, a state doomed to repeat its mediocre educational history, never really learning anything from its past. The same is true in Montgomery County, where more students are falling further behind because of the same glitzy promise of standards and rigor that will come to nothing for the students most in need when deadlines loom, whether for HSAs or NCLB. The "Cruel Hoax" will be revealed to those students when they try to get good jobs, unless they decide to become educational administrators.