

Clayton M. Wilcox, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

October 22, 2014

Dr. Charlene Dukes, President
Maryland State Board of Education
200 West Baltimore Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Dr. Lillian Lowery, State Superintendent
Maryland State Department of Education
200 West Baltimore Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Dear Dr. Dukes and Dr. Lowery:

On behalf of the Washington County Board of Education and its administrative team, we are writing to express our concern and that of our larger community with the intended Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) plan to operationalize the transition from the Maryland High School Assessments (HSA) to the more rigorous Partnership for Assessment of College and Careers (PARCC) assessments as end-of-course exams for the purposes of fulfilling high school graduation requirements.

While we embrace accountability and the opportunity for our students to demonstrate their knowledge through twenty-first century “styled” assessments, the August 6, 2014, workgroup report did little to relieve our “anxiety.” In fact, it may have compounded our concerns. Learning that students and their teachers will not know the targets they are seeking to meet until after the examination is problematic. That the yet to be established targets may, in fact, be different from the passing scores recommended by the PARCC consortium seems to be a direct contradiction to the stated purpose of the assessments—letting our students, parents, and communities know where we stand relative to others.

Our concern was further heightened at the most recent Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) annual conference when we learned that Maryland intends to offer two cut scores for the

Algebra I and English 10 PARCC assessments, one score being used for graduation requirements and another used to indicate college and career readiness. While this practice might aid MSDE and, indeed, some local jurisdictions initially, it brings into question what should actually constitute successful completion of the high school curriculum. If standards are subject to change year-over-year through statistical analysis, it sends a confused picture to our partners in business and higher education. What message does it send to these communities if a student can graduate yet still not score well enough to earn a potentially more “valuable” PARCC exit ticket? Our communities are already confused that some of our graduates require remediation before succeeding in college-level work. Having two standards for success based on PARCC will only compound this confusion.

MABE recently adopted a resolution calling for a delay in the use of PARCC assessments so that there would be adequate time and data to address the issue of “cut-scores” for graduates. This moratorium on the use of “pilot cut scores” would preserve the integrity of the perceived value of the new assessments and would not arbitrarily create real harm to a student’s educational opportunities as the state works its way through uncharted waters. In addition, the delay proposed by MABE would create greater consistency with the legislature’s intent by providing needed additional time to baseline the use of PARCC results for teacher and principal evaluations. Furthermore, a delay would provide time for students to build the foundational knowledge they need under the more rigorous standards so that they have the background to demonstrate mastery in high stakes courses.

We do not shy away from our obligation for accountability nor are we advocating for the state to do so. Rather we are asking for the State Board of Education and the Department of Education to exercise their judgment in a different manner. Other states are grappling with this same issue. We stand ready to assist in the process of finding acceptable alternative methods to certify our graduates as college and career ready while at the same time evaluating the use and applicability of PARCC for these same purposes. Surely our students deserve nothing less in matters of such high stakes.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, is a series of questions and comments we must address. All of us, practitioners and policy makers at both the state and local levels, must ask ourselves if we have adequately prepared our students for exams that by all accounts are more rigorous. Have we prepared the support structures for students who are not successful on the new examinations? Have we fully developed and implemented the courses necessary to ensure the success of all students who will be subjected to the assessments? Have we adequately defined and explained a myriad of success markers, now potentially more confusing given the proposal of dual scoring mechanisms? Have we achieved consensus with our post-secondary partner institutions on which success markers are definitive of success in college or career? Clearly, if PARCC cannot fairly be used as even a part of evaluating teacher and administrator performance, it would seem inherently unfair to use PARCC as

the sole standard to determine content mastery for those who depend on that same instruction or instructional leadership.

Now is the time to pull back and do the scholarly work necessary to fully implement assessments that when scored deliver with confidence a true measure of one's education and the probability of his or her success. We owe our students nothing less, and our communities demand it.

Respectfully submitted,



Clayton M. Wilcox, Ed.D
Superintendent of Schools



Justin Hartings, Ph.D.
President, Washington County Board of Education

Copy: Washington County Delegation Members
Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE)
Public School Superintendents Association of Maryland (PSSAM)

