Unanswered questions

By THOMAS S. DEE

SUPREME COURT Justice Louis D. Brandeis observed that a compelling virtue of our federal system is that states can act as "laboratories for democracy." Individual states can experiment with new policies and other states can learn from their successes as well as their failures.

Maryland's State Board of Education initiated such an experiment June 15 when it ruled that by 2009 high school students would be required to earn passing scores on the High School Assessments (HSA) in order to graduate. Several states (including Maryland) began introducing similar test-based graduation requirements 30 years ago.

Unfortunately, the experiences with these earlier experiments are not encouraging. They suggest that Maryland's newest exit exams are more likely to promote deeper cynicism about reforming public schools than genuine increases in student achievement.

The attraction of exit exams is understandable. Virtually everyone agrees that schools should have high expectations for all of their students as well as the capacity that makes it possible for students to meet those expectations. In light of those shared goals, the demands created by exit exams actually seem quite modest.

For example, Maryland's new regulations only require that students demonstrate the knowledge typically associated with a ninth- or 10th-grade curriculum. To many, these requirements appear to be a straightforward way to ensure that high school graduates have the basic skills necessary for an increasingly demanding labor market or a successful transition to college.

But critics point out that this approach to enforcing standards generates a broad array of unintended and negative consequences.

For example, there is evidence that introducing these exams may actually harm the intellectual engagement and academic effort of high-achieving students. This particular criticism was anticipated over 20 years ago by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. In their influential report, *A Nation at Risk*, they wrote that the modest standards on such tests tend to be perceived as the maximum, "thus lowering educational standards for all."

But the main criticism of exit exams is that they will lead to a dramatic increase in the number of high school dropouts, particularly among minority students.

For example, in 2003 only 52 percent of white students passed the English component of Maryland's HSA. And among black and Hispanic students, the pass rates were only 20 and 29 percent, respectively. In fairness, these abysmally low pass rates are likely to increase when the tests are required for graduation and students are allowed to retake them.

Nonetheless, as currently designed, it is quite likely that these testing requirements will substantially increase the number of high school dropouts, especially among the disadvantaged students for whom schools should be a critical source of economic opportunity.

Principled advocates of exit exams believe that these high failure rates will prompt frank and productive discussions about why some schools persistently fail to educate their students. But if the experience in other states is any guide, that sort of honest dialogue about improving dysfunctional schools simply will not occur.

Instead, intense political pressure from parents and educators concerned about the fairness of this regulation will lead to delays, waivers or lower cutoff scores. The conventional wisdom among researchers has long been that state exit exams are legislated as a lion but implemented as a lamb.

State schools Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick has signaled that Maryland may be no exception. A recent memo assures parents and educators that the state board will examine the testing results before the class of 2009 enters its senior year and that "adjustments to the requirements may be necessary."

Instead of indulging in this sort of lamentably predictable political theater, Maryland's students would be better served if parents, educators and policy-makers directly engaged some difficult questions now.

In particular, why do some schools persistently fail to meet the high aspirations we all have for our students? Is it that these schools are underfunded? Do they misallocate the resources they have? Do union work rules protect incompetent teachers? And do bureaucratic regulations inhibit the productive efforts (and retention) of dedicated teachers and principals?

The answers to these questions are likely to differ considerably across communities. But asking them now is a better way to design targeted and effective reforms that place high-stakes accountability where it belongs — with the adults we elect and hire to manage these vitally important public institutions.

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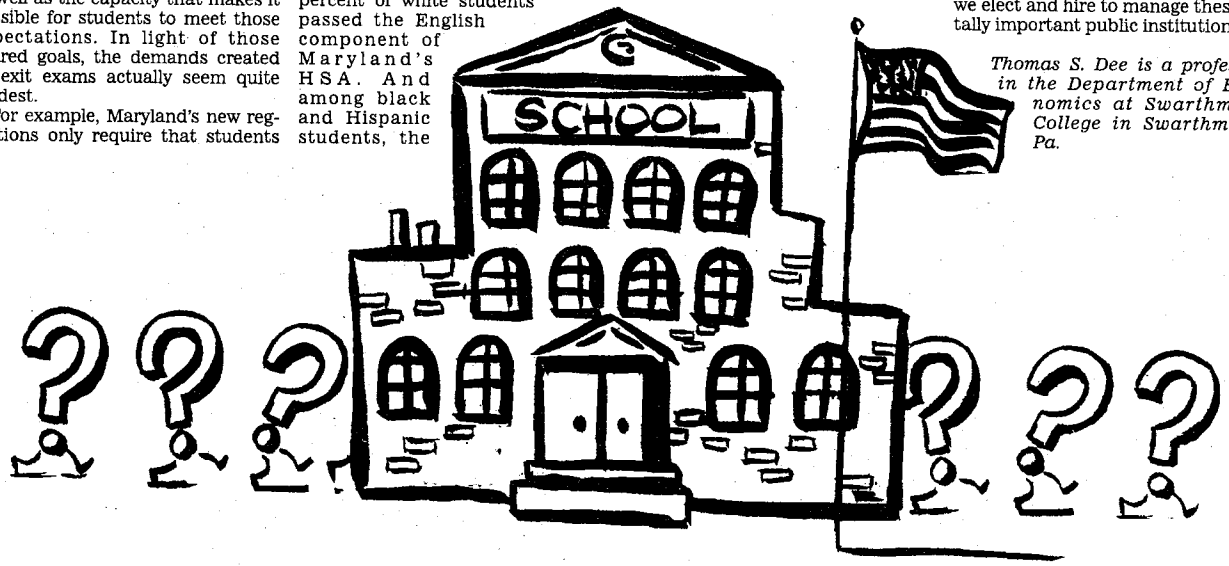

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