



A PARENT'S GUIDE to Achievement Matters Most



Maryland's plan for preK-12 education



Revised October 2004

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ACHIEVEMENT MATTERS MOST

As a parent, you want the best for your children. That includes a first-class education that will prepare them for a successful future. The state of Maryland wants the best for children, too.



To raise the achievement of every student, Maryland designed **Achievement Matters Most**, a plan for public schools that sets goals in the areas of achievement, teaching, testing, safety, and family involvement in schools.

Achievement Matters Most supports Maryland schools' efforts to meet the goals of the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Five Goals of Achievement Matters Most

- Goal 1:** Achievement will improve for each student.
- Goal 2:** Curriculum, instruction, and testing will be better aligned and understandable.
- Goal 3:** All educators will have the skills to improve student achievement.
- Goal 4:** All schools will be safe, drug-free, and conducive to learning.
- Goal 5:** Parents and legal guardians will be involved in education.



HIGH EXPECTATIONS

If all children are to have an equal chance for success, schools must hold high expectations for all students. Here are just a few ways that Maryland encourages high expectations and helps schools to improve for all children:

- **The Maryland Voluntary State Curriculum** makes clear for teachers and parents what students should learn in each subject and grade.
- **Maryland schools have annual goals for improving** students' reading and math performance and for improving the attendance or graduation rate.
- **Schools that do not make Adequate Yearly Progress** for two years will be identified for State School Improvement. See page 21 for more information on accountability and State School Improvement.

- **School performance is reported each year in an annual report card** (the Maryland School Performance Report) so that parents and communities know how well their schools are doing. It is published on the Web at www.mdreportcard.org. Your child's school can provide you with a printed copy of the report.
- **Each school has a school improvement team** that works to improve student learning. These teams are made up of teachers, parents, and community members who study school performance data and determine improvements to instruction.
- **Public recognition** may be given to schools that make strong improvements in performance among all groups of students.
- **A state family involvement policy** encourages school leaders, families, and communities to work together and share responsibility for children's education.

The following pages explain more about how Maryland is helping schools reach the goals of Achievement Matters Most. There are also suggestions for how you can be more involved in your child's education. After reading *A Parent's Guide to Achievement Matters Most*, you are encouraged to talk with your child's teacher or principal about what your school is doing to raise student achievement and what you can do to help.



CURRICULUM

Maryland has developed a Voluntary State Curriculum.

What is a curriculum?

A curriculum is a document that describes what students should learn in each subject and grade. It guides teachers in planning their lessons and is an important part of improving instruction. Traditionally, each of Maryland's 24 local school systems developed its own curriculum based on the state's broad standards for student learning in elementary, middle, and high school.

Why create a state curriculum?

There are differences among school systems in what is taught and when it is taught. To help teachers understand what should be taught, Maryland developed a Voluntary State Curriculum for each grade that is clear and detailed. Local school systems can either adopt the Voluntary State Curriculum or simply make sure that it is included within the local school system curriculum.

What does the state curriculum mean for children?

It means that no matter where your children attend school, they will be held to high expectations and will learn the same challenging skills as other students around the state. The Voluntary State Curriculum also will help reduce the time students spend repeating and reviewing skills each school year, allowing teachers to spend more time on building new skills. Lastly, the Voluntary State Curriculum will help teachers understand the skills that students must master to be successful on state tests. You can feel



confident about the quality of the Voluntary State Curriculum knowing that it was developed by experienced Maryland teachers and other educators using national curriculum standards.

Where can I see a copy of the state curriculum?

Maryland's Voluntary State Curriculum is published on the Web at www.marylandpublicschools.org . Just click on the Curriculum menu at the top of the home page. For a printed copy of the curriculum, contact your child's principal.

MEASURING PROGRESS

Schools give tests so that they know how well students are learning. Test scores help principals and teachers improve instruction and plan school programs. Individual test scores help teachers and parents understand a student's academic strengths and weaknesses. Your child's school will let you know what tests he or she will be taking. Maryland has two statewide testing programs, the Maryland School Assessment and the Maryland High School Assessments.

Maryland School Assessment

What is the Maryland School Assessment?

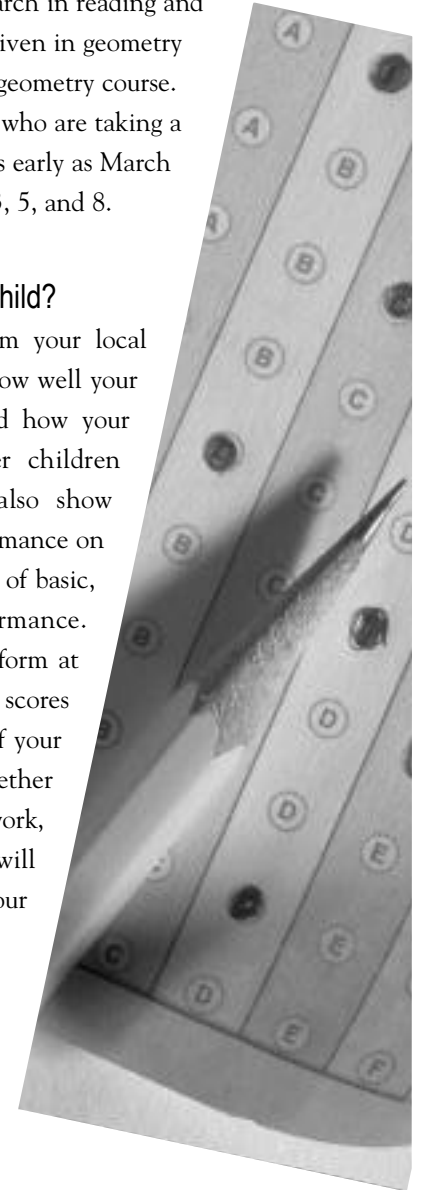
- The Maryland School Assessment (MSA) is a test of reading and math achievement. The MSA will also test science achievement as early as 2008.
- The MSA meets the testing requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act.
- It measures basic as well as higher level skills.
- Students take the tests for approximately 90 minutes each day. There are four days of testing—two days for reading and two days for math.
- The test includes multiple-choice questions and questions requiring written responses.
- Sample test questions are shown on pages 8-11. More questions are available on the Web at www.marylandpublicschools.org. Just click on the Testing menu at the top of the home page.

When do students take the MSA?

The test is given each year in early March in reading and math at grades 3 through 8. It is also given in geometry after students complete a high-school geometry course. (This includes middle-school students who are taking a high-school level geometry course.) As early as March 2008, science will be added in grades 3, 5, and 8.

Will I receive MSA scores for my child?

Yes. You will receive the scores from your local school system. The scores will show how well your child learned the subject matter and how your child performed compared to other children nationally. The score report will also show school, school system, and state performance on the tests. Scores are reported in terms of basic, proficient, and advanced performance. Maryland's goal is for students to perform at the proficient or advanced level. MSA scores alone provide only a partial picture of your child's academic performance. But together with your child's classwork, homework, and other test scores, MSA results will give you a better understanding of your child's performance.



Maryland School Assessment Sample Test Questions

The following are examples of the types of test questions students can expect on the Maryland School Assessment. More sample test questions are posted on the Web at www.marylandpublicschools.org.

Sample Question—3rd Grade Math

Directions: Shade in the circle that matches your answer.

Daria found some coins in her pocket. Look at the coins below.



How much money did Daria find in her pocket?

Student Response:

- A \$.92 C \$.41
 B \$1.02 D \$.42

Sample Question—5th Grade Math

Directions: Look at the fractions below.

$$\frac{5}{4} \qquad 2\frac{1}{2} \qquad \frac{13}{8}$$

Part A

Put the numbers in order from the least to greatest.

Student Response:

$$\frac{5}{4} \qquad \frac{13}{8} \qquad 2\frac{1}{2}$$

Part B

Use what you know about equivalent fractions to explain why your answer is correct. Use words and/or numbers in your explanation.

Student Response:

I first changed $\frac{5}{4}$ into $1\frac{2}{8}$ and then $\frac{13}{8}$ to $1\frac{5}{8}$.

After that I changed $2\frac{1}{2}$ to $2\frac{4}{8}$ and then I put them in

order. $1\frac{2}{8}$ goes first because $\frac{2}{8}$ is less than $\frac{5}{8}$ and

both fractions are less than 2.

Note: Students may arrive at the solution in a variety of ways.

Following are examples of the types of questions found on the reading portion of the Maryland School Assessment. The test at each grade level contains a mix of question types (multiple choice and written response) that cover a wide range of skills.

Sample Question—3rd Grade Reading

Directions: Read this question and choose the best answer. Then mark the space for the answer you have chosen.

In which word does tri mean three?

Student Response:

- A trip B countries C tricycle

Sample Question—5th Grade Reading

Directions: Choose the word or group of words that means the same, or about the same, as the underlined word. Then mark the space for the answer you have chosen.

After lunch the class was drowsy and had trouble paying attention to the movie. Drowsy means—

Student Response:

- A full C patient
 B late D sleepy

Sample Question—8th Grade Reading

Note: Students were asked to read the stories “Arachne” and “Damon and Pythias” and answer the following question.

Directions: Read this question and choose the best answer. Then mark the space for the answer you have chosen.

By allowing Pythias to settle his affairs, Dionysus shows that he can be—

Student Response:

- A brave C indifferent
 B compassionate D indecisive

Some questions on the Maryland School Assessment require a written answer. Teachers refer to these questions as “constructed-response items,” because students must construct their own answers rather than select them from a list of possible answers. The question below is an example of the type of brief constructed-response item that students can expect on the Maryland School Assessment.

Sample Question—8th Grade Reading

Note: Before answering this question, students would read two letters to the editor that represent opposing views on whether Rossie Heights Junior High School should replace its mascot, the “Mighty Mule.” After reading the two letters, students would answer a series of multiple-choice and constructed-response questions. Following is an example of what a constructed-response question and answer might look like.

Directions: Read Margaret Caldwell’s letter to the editor. Then read Anton Lazlo’s letter.

Write a summary of Margaret Caldwell’s letter. Be sure to include the important points in your summary.

Possible Student Response:

Even though some want to get rid of the mascot, Margaret Caldwell hopes you’ll agree with her. Years ago, a student rode his mule to a game, and the team won although they had been losing. That was Margaret’s grandfather, and that mule became the mascot. It’s been the mascot for years, and she hopes it won’t change, because the mule has been a good mascot.

Note: This response shows a thorough understanding of Margaret Caldwell’s letter. However, a variety of answers would be acceptable.



Maryland High School Assessments

What are the Maryland High School Assessments?

The Maryland High School Assessments (HSA) are tests in English 10, algebra/data analysis, government, and biology. Students take each test after they complete each course. (This includes middle-school students taking high-school level courses.) The tests include multiple-choice questions and questions requiring written responses. Scores are reported for individual students, schools, school systems, and the state. Within nine weeks after testing, the scoring company sends students' scores to the school system, which then sends the scores home to parents.

Does my child have to pass the HSA to graduate?

Students graduating from high school before 2009 are not required to pass the HSA in order to earn a Maryland High School Diploma. They are required to take the tests, and their scores will be reported on their high school transcripts.

Students graduating from high school in or after 2009 (those students entering grade 9 in fall 2005) are required to earn a satisfactory score on the HSA in order to earn a Maryland High School Diploma. Your child has several options for fulfilling the HSA requirement:

- Pass all four HSA. The passing scores are: algebra/data analysis (412), government (394), biology (400). The English 10 passing score will be set in fall 2005.

OR

- Earn passing scores on state-approved substitute tests and substitute one or more of those scores for passing scores on the HSA. The state has not yet decided what substitute tests will be acceptable, but possibilities include the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate tests.

OR

- Earn the minimum score on each test **and** earn the minimum combined score. The minimum score for each test will be lower than the passing score. The minimum combined score will be equal to the total of all the HSA passing scores. The Maryland State Department of Education has not yet established the minimum scores. This combined-score option allows your child to offset lower performance on one test with higher performance on another test.

How can my child prepare for the HSA?

Keeping up with classwork and homework, participating in class, and studying hard will prepare students for the HSA. It will also improve their grades and performance on class and school system tests. Here are a few more ways that your child can prepare:

Maryland High School Diploma

What are the requirements for the Maryland High School Diploma

A student must be enrolled in a Maryland public school system, have earned 12 state-specified credits (see the chart below), have met the state's attendance and service-learning requirements, and have met all local school system requirements which may include additional credit requirements.

| Subject Area | Specific Credit Requirements | High School Assessment | No Child Left Behind Tests |
|----------------------|--|--|---|
| English | 4 credits | Students graduating before 2009 are required to take the assessments but passing is not required. Beginning with the graduating class of 2009, students must take and pass the Maryland High School Assessments. See page 12 for a description of the different ways in which this requirement can be fulfilled. | Students must take the Maryland School Assessment in geometry. Passing is not required. |
| Mathematics | 3 credits • 1 in algebra/data analysis • 1 in geometry | | |
| Science | 3 credits • 1 in biology • 2 that must include laboratory experience in any or all of the following areas: earth science, life science, physical science | | |
| Social Studies | 3 credits • 1 in U.S. history • 1 in world history • 1 in local, state, national government | | |
| Other Requirements | | | |
| Fine Arts | 1 credit | | |
| Physical Education | 1/2 credit | | |
| Health | 1/2 credit | | |
| Technology Education | 1 credit | | |
| Other | 2 credits of foreign language or 2 credits of advanced technology education and 3 credits in electives or 4 credits by successfully completing a state-approved career & technology program and 1 credit in an elective | | |

Directions: Complete the following problem in the Answer Book.

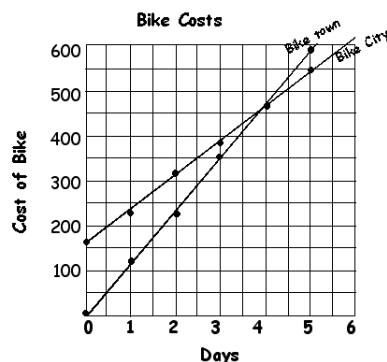
Two bicycle shops build custom-made bicycles. Bicycle City charges \$160, plus \$80 for each day that it takes to build the bicycle. Bike Town charges \$120 for each day that it takes to build the bicycle.

- Write an equation for each store that describes the charge (C) to build a custom-made bicycle in x days.
- For what number of days will the charge be the same at each store? What will be the charge for that number of days? Use mathematics to justify your answer. (If you solve the problem graphically, use the grid provided in the Answer Book to add to your written response.)
- When is it less expensive to use Bicycle City to build a custom-made bicycle than Bike Town? When is it more expensive? Use mathematics to justify your answer.

Student Response:

Bike City
 $160 + 80x = C$
 $160 + 80(4) = 480$

Bike Town
 $120x = C$
 $120(4) = 480$



At 4 days the charge will be the same at each store \$480

Less expensive
Bike City
 $x > 4$

the line is lower after 4 days

More expensive
Bike City
 $x < 4$

Note: Students may arrive at the solution in a variety of ways.



TESTING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND/OR LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Some of Maryland's students have special needs. For example, a student with a disability might have special instructional and testing needs, as might a student who has just begun to learn the English language. Since Maryland is committed to improving achievement for each student, measuring the progress of students with disabilities and limited English proficiency is very important. All students have a legal right to be included to the fullest extent possible in all statewide tests and to have their test results be a part of Maryland's accountability system. Students also have a legal right to instructional and testing accommodations that will help them learn and demonstrate what they have learned.

Students who receive special education services will take state tests. Students with significant cognitive disabilities may participate in the

Alternate MSA (ALT-MSA) if their Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team determines that this is appropriate. To learn more about the ALT-MSA, visit www.marylandpublicschools.org and click on the Testing menu.

At this time, there are no alternative assessments for the High School Assessments available for students with disabilities. A state task force is exploring testing options that Maryland could make available for students having difficulty with traditional tests. The task force is expected to produce recommendations by 2007. This work may result in alternative assessments that would be comparable to the current High School Assessments and particularly helpful for students with disabilities.

All students who receive instruction in English for Speakers of Other Languages programs must participate in state tests. Each school's Limited English Proficient (LEP) committee makes decisions about appropriate accommodations for limited English proficient students' participation in state tests.

Accommodations for state tests will be the same as those provided during instruction and specified in the IEPs for students with disabilities. Accommodations are also specified in plans for eligible 504 students or limited English proficient students.

If your child has special needs or limited English proficiency, contact your school to learn more about instruction and testing plans for him or her.

for more information, visit
www.marylandpublicschools.org

ACCOUNTABILITY

Maryland holds schools and school systems accountable for improvement by reporting achievement data, recognizing progress, and taking action when schools are not improving.

How do I know if my child's school is making academic progress?

The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires Maryland to monitor school progress, report the results to parents, and take action when schools are not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Each year, schools must meet performance goals in the category of All Students and in each student subgroup category in order to make AYP. There are eight subgroups total: five racial groups, students receiving special education services, students with limited English proficiency, and students receiving Free and Reduced-Price Meals. Schools' performance goals will increase each year until 2014, when the goal will be for 100% of students to be proficient in reading and math.

Achievement information for schools, school systems, and the state is printed in an annual "report card" (the Maryland School Performance Report). This report is available on the Web at www.mdreportcard.org. The report provides AYP charts for each school and school system that show whether or not the school or school system made all of its performance goals.

Here is what an AYP chart on one school might look like. The "Percent Proficient" heading is broken into two columns: reading and math. The school must meet its performance goals for reading and math in the category of All Students as well as in each of the subgroup categories. The school is also required to make progress in its overall attendance rate.

Example School 2004 AYP: Not Met

| | Percent Proficient | | Attendance |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|------------|
| | Reading | Mathematics | |
| All Students | Met | Met | Met |
| American Indian/Alaskan Native | Met | Met | Met |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | Met | Met | Met |
| African American | Met | Met | Met |
| White (not of Hispanic origin) | Met | Met | Met |
| Hispanic | Met | Met | Met |
| Free/Reduced-Price Meals | Not Met | Met | Met |
| Special Education | Met | Met | Met |
| Limited English Proficiency | Met | Met | Met |

Note: Because this example is for an elementary school, there is a column for attendance. Middle schools are also required to meet an attendance goal. High schools are required to meet a graduation rate goal rather than an attendance goal.

Suppose the goal is for 46.3% of students to be proficient in reading. In order to meet this goal, at least 46.3% of all students in the school, as well 46.3% of students in each subgroup, must perform at the proficient or advanced level in reading on the Maryland School Assessment. (If a subgroup contains less than five students, the school is not responsible for meeting the goal in that category, because in very small groups, one student's score can have too much effect on the overall score.)

If a school has met its goals, it will receive a "met" in each area of the chart. Schools must meet all goals in order to make AYP. In this example, the school met its goals in all areas except in reading for the subgroup of students receiving Free and Reduced-Price Meals. Therefore, this school did not make AYP. The school would need to take action to provide extra support to these students to improve their achievement.

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Are schools recognized for making progress?

If schools improve, they may receive public recognition.

What happens if a school does not make progress?

- **A school that does not make AYP for two consecutive years will be identified for State School Improvement Year 1.** The school must write a detailed plan to solve problems in student achievement. If the school participates in the federal Title I program for high-poverty schools, it must offer parents the option of transferring their child to a higher achieving school in the school system.
- **If the school does not make AYP for a third year, the school will move into State School Improvement Year 2.** The school must continue to follow its improvement plan. If the school is a Title

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO ACHIEVEMENT MATTERS MOST

I school, it must continue offering parents the option to transfer their child. It must also provide extra services, such as tutoring, to students who are economically disadvantaged. Title I schools must offer the transfer option and extra services until they exit State School Improvement.

- **If the school does not make AYP for a fourth year, it moves into Corrective Action,** and the school system must take specific actions to improve the school. These actions could include replacing school staff, adopting a new curriculum, or extending the school year.
- **If the school does not make AYP for a fifth year, it moves into Restructuring.** Restructuring might include local school system takeover of school operations or other actions.

If a school is required to take the actions listed above, parents will be notified. Schools will exit State School Improvement after making AYP for two consecutive years.

It is important to remember that State School Improvement is an opportunity for improvement. If a school is identified for State School Improvement, it does not mean that the school is not a good school. In fact, the school could be high-performing on the average but could need to work on improving the performance of one or more subgroups of students. For a list of schools in State School Improvement, visit www.mdreportcard.org.



FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Recognizing that family involvement is a powerful influence on student achievement, Maryland has adopted a family involvement policy. In fall 2003, State Superintendent of Schools Nancy S. Grasmick established Maryland's Parent Advisory Council (M-PAC) to help the state meet its goal of increasing parents' involvement in education (see page 5). M-PAC is a group of 140 parents and advocates that will serve in an advisory role to the State Superintendent and the State Board of Education on parent involvement issues. More information about M-PAC can be found at www.marylandpublicschools.org.

Maryland schools welcome parents and legal guardians into schools, encourage them to ask questions, and include them in making decisions. Look for the following signs that families and educators are communicating and working together in your child's school.

Schools and families communicate regularly.

- Schools publish newsletters with tips for families on helping children learn.

- Schools communicate with families about programs available at the school.
- Parents understand how and when to contact their child's teachers.

Parents play a role in helping students learn.

- Teachers help parents understand how to help children with homework.
- Parents are involved in setting goals for their child.

Parents are welcome in the school, and their help is appreciated.

- Schools encourage parents and family members to become involved in school activities.
- Parents are aware of opportunities to volunteer at the school.

Parents are included in making decisions that affect their children.

- The school has a clear process for making decisions and solving problems.
- Parents have access to up-to-date information on school policies and on student and school performance.
- Teachers and administrators encourage parents' involvement in decisions affecting their child (e.g., course selection, career planning).
- Parent representatives are included on the School Improvement Team.

These are just some of the ways in which families and schools can work together to improve schools. You may want to ask your child's teacher or principal how you can become more involved. When families and schools work together, everybody wins.



ENCOURAGING ACHIEVEMENT

You want your child to succeed in school and in life. There are many ways to encourage him or her to achieve. Following are some of the different ways you can help your child get the most out of school:

- Set high expectations for your child. Make it clear that school should be his or her first priority.
- Talk with your child's teachers regularly about your child's progress and what you can do to help him or her improve.
- Meet with your child's guidance counselor early in middle school to plan high school course selection.
- Dedicate at least 15 minutes each day to talking with your child and reading with him or her. (For a list of suggested family activities and

daily tips for parents, visit *Take 15 for the Family* on the Web at www.marylandpublicschools.org.

- Provide a quiet place for your child to study.
- Help your child with his or her homework.
- Show interest in what your child is doing in school.
- Limit the amount of television your child watches and discuss what he or she sees on TV.
- Monitor the time your child spends playing video games or is on the Internet.
- Volunteer to help with school activities and try to get other parents involved as well.
- Encourage your child to take challenging courses.
- If your child is in middle or high school, make an appointment with his or her guidance counselor to discuss post-high school opportunities.

**Dedicate at least
15 minutes each day to
reading and talking
with your child.**

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you have questions about student or school performance, the best place to start is with your child's teacher, principal, or guidance counselor. Your local school system is another good source of information. And don't forget your public library! You can use library computers to connect to the Web, and library staff can help with your research. The following organizations can help you learn more about student achievement and school improvement.

MARYLAND STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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www.marylandpublicschools.org

The Maryland State Department of Education home page is your gateway to public schools in Maryland. Here you will find information on state programs, policies, tests, curriculum, and more. You can also learn about recent decisions of the Maryland State Board of Education, download publications, and link to your school system's Web site. For up-to-the-minute news, check the News Room section of the site.

www.mdk12.org

The School Improvement in Maryland Web site is designed to help school improvement teams examine student performance data and identify instructional strategies to help students improve. Although the site was designed for educators, many parents will find this information valuable. The site contains information on the Maryland School Assessment, High School Assessments, Voluntary State Curriculum, and more.

www.mdreportcard.org

This Web site is the online version of the Maryland School Performance Report. It contains detailed information on academic achievement, including scores on state tests, Adequate Yearly Progress, attendance and graduation rates, and schools identified for State School Improvement.

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www.ed.gov
for general information
www.nochildleftbehind.org
for information on the No Child Left Behind Act

MARYLAND HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION

for information on colleges, financial aid, and
scholarships
839 Bestgate Road, Suite 400
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
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for general inquiries
PHONE 410-260-4565 or 1-800-974-1024
for financial assistance inquiries
FAX 410-260-3200
TTY 800-735-2258
www.mhec.state.md.us

How Are We Doing?

We'd like to hear from you on how well this publication helped you understand Maryland's goals for public education, school improvement efforts, and what parents can do to encourage achievement in their children and schools. You can email your thoughts on this publication to aparentsguide@marylandpublicschools.org, FAX them to 410-333-2275, or mail them to the Maryland State Department of Education, Communications and Strategic Planning Office, 200 West Baltimore Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21201-2595. Please direct all correspondence to the attention of "A Parent's Guide Feedback." Due to the volume of responses received, individual replies are not possible.

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on the Web

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