



Nancy Grasmick talks to a kindergarten class during a visit to Pinewood Elementary School in Timonium.

— KRISTINE BULLS/EXAMINER

'Every student matters'

As a builder of lives, schools chief Nancy Grasmick's mission has been clear from the start

By Mike Silvestri
Examiner Staff Writer

Nine months ago, Nancy Grasmick's state career seemed over.

Gov. Martin O'Malley made no secret about his plans to remove the Maryland schools chief from the post she had held for nearly two decades. The state school board hires the superintendent, but O'Malley sought legislation to extend Grasmick's term several months, so a board dominated by his appointees could take over. They could then let her go and recruit a replacement.

The attempt threatened to keep the nation's longest-serving state schools chief from completing a defining goal of her career — one she

had been working toward for about 15 years — a set of exams that students would be required to pass to graduate high school.

With mounting pressure from O'Malley, she could have easily quit, but instead decided to put the children first.

The beginning

When she was 16, Grasmick nearly died.

She contracted strep throat, and a doctor gave her antibiotics to ward off the infection, but he didn't know she was allergic.

She struggled to survive and lost her hearing for about two years.

After an operation helped Grasmick regain her hearing, she found

her life in education.

The Baltimore native had been inspired by Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller's teacher, and attended Towson University to earn her bachelor's degree in elementary education. After that, she enrolled at Gallaudet University, the nation's only liberal arts school for the deaf, in Washington D.C., to earn her master's in deaf education.

"I found that teachers build lives," Grasmick told *The Examiner*, "and I wanted to be a builder of some of those lives."

Grasmick earned her doctorate in communicative sciences from John Hopkins University in 1979, and two years later, she began teaching deaf children at William S. Baer School in Baltimore City.

After moving on to administrative positions in the Baltimore County school system and the state, the Maryland school board hired her as superintendent in 1991, when accountability in education became a national priority.

'The first day I met her I knew she was a keeper'

Grasmick, Maryland's first female state superintendent, is not physically imposing.

But in bright pantsuits, sitting rigidly straight, she appears confident and in control.

Freeman Hrabowski, president of the University of Maryland Baltimore County, called the 69-year-old Grasmick "one of the most effective, authentic leaders in our country."

"The first day I met her, we talked

about all children in Baltimore County, and I knew she was a keeper," he said of their meeting in the late 1980s. "We were in different roles, but I knew: This is somebody I was going to get to know because she cares so deeply about children, and she's so incredibly smart."

In 17 years as state superintendent, Grasmick's fingerprints are all over Maryland's educational system.

Under her guidance, the state has created a program for districts to align their curricula with statewide content, has thrust greater emphasis on early childhood education, has become one of the best performers in Advanced Placement courses and has used data to drive together achievement gaps between minorities and other students.

A tenacious supporter of accountability and high academic standards, Grasmick has let little stand in the way of what she believes is best for students.

Behind closed doors

The quarrel with the governor began, many believe, in 2006, when O'Malley was mayor of Baltimore.

While O'Malley campaigned for governor, Grasmick attempted to take control of 11 of the worst-performing schools in the city. She said she was doing what was best for the children.

O'Malley, however, accused her of trying to make him look bad by conspiring with then-Gov. Robert Ehrlich. Grasmick, a registered Democrat, had been considered a possible running mate for the Repub-

lican Ehrlich, and her husband, lumber tycoon Louis Grasmick, had contributed to Ehrlich's campaign.

The feud quickly escalated after O'Malley narrowly won the election, and the state school board, still full of Ehrlich appointees, awarded Grasmick a new, four-year contract.

The legislation that O'Malley strongly supported would have essentially ousted Grasmick. Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller was to introduce the bill that would have pushed Grasmick's term back from June until December, allowing a board packed with O'Malley appointees to keep the superintendent or reverse her new contract and hire someone else.

With legislative leaders publicly supporting the measure, it seemed likely to succeed.

But suddenly, Grasmick and O'Malley held a closed-door meeting, and when the two emerged, they held a dramatic news conference. They were no longer enemies, they announced. They would work together for the sake of Maryland's students.

So what happened? What was said at that meeting? Neither Grasmick or O'Malley are willing to talk about it.

"It was just the two of them," said Bill Reinhard, spokesman for the State Education Department, "so no one really knows."

But many with knowledge of the ordeal said the governor relented because he did not have enough support to pass the legislation. Grasmick did not contact the governor to lay out her case, but federal and state lawmakers who backed her did, according to sources who declined to be named because of the issue's sensitivity. "I think he realized it was a nonstarter," one source said.

Making the grade

When the school board hired Grasmick as state superintendent, the board president, Robert Embry, asked her if she would carry on a level of accountability.

A state commission released a report two years earlier, in 1989, that laid the foundation for school reform in Maryland and made way for increased accountability and standardized tests, called the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program, in elementary and middle schools.

Embry wanted to make sure Grasmick would continue making accountability a priority. "She said she would," he recalled, and she has.

High school exit exams had been recommended by another state commission in 1992, and over the next nine years, the tests were developed. In 2001, the tests were administered to students, and three years later, the state school board approved making the assessments a graduation requirement. To graduate, all Maryland students must either pass the four ninth-grade-level tests in government, biology, English and algebra I, earn a combined score of 1602 on the tests or complete rigorous projects under the "Bridge Plan to Academic Validation."

Now, more than half of the country — 26 states — requires high school seniors to pass exams to graduate. But as Maryland gets closer to the reality that the High School Assessment could fail some of its 55,000 seniors, the debate has grown more intense.

About 9,000 students in Maryland started school this school year with the possibility of missing out on a diploma because they had not met the graduation requirement.

Grasmick and her aides insist that the tests will not be the sole reason keeping any student from graduating, but others aren't so sure.

On one side of the argument, leaders of higher education and the business community support the requirement; on the other, some state lawmakers, the American Civil Liberties Union and head of the state's largest school district oppose it.

"The business community has been struggling to find qualified workers, and one of the ways that we can begin to close that gap so that more children when they graduate from high school can get into the better-paying jobs in Maryland is to raise the floor as to what all kids need to know when they graduate," said June Streckfus, executive director of the Maryland Business Roundtable for Education.



Robin Bridgman, of Crofton, tells Nancy Grasmick about the data she and fellow summer campers collected in the upper Severn River at the Arlington Echo Environmental Education Center in Millersville.

Up close with Nancy Grasmick

- » **Residence:** Baltimore City
- » **Age:** 69
- » **High school:** Western
- » **Higher education:** Bachelor's degree from Towson University; master's from Gallaudet University; Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University
- » **Previous post:** Special secretary for children, youth and families under Gov. William Donald Schaefer
- » **Philosophy:** "Every student matters."



— ARIANNE TEEPLE/FOR THE EXAMINER

Montgomery County Superintendent Jerry Weast disagreed.

"I think it's fair to say that the HSA does not provide a true measure of what students need to know to succeed in the work force or in college," said Weast, the only superintendent in the state to publicly oppose the requirement. He supported using the ACT, a college-entrance exam measuring students' knowledge, instead of the HSA.

The percentage of students entering college who need remedial courses has consistently risen in recent years, according to reports from the Maryland Higher Education Commission. Nearly half of the students who enter community college, and about 14 percent who enter four-year schools in Maryland, need remedial math courses, according to the commission's most recent Student Outcome and Achievement Report in 2006.

Many critics of the requirement oppose it because, they said, it is unfair to require students with learning disabilities to pass the tests. Only 57 percent of the nearly 3,500 special education seniors in Maryland who

have taken all four assessments have passed.

"We want schools to teach all students to high standards, but we think that the state has to accept the accountability for putting a qualified teacher in front of every classroom and giving students the support they need before putting all the accountability on the students," said Bebe Verdery, education director at the Maryland ACLU.

But others, such as Kelli Nelson, whose autistic 18-year-old son, Vincent Pascatori, a senior at Pikesville High School, said the tests have put a spotlight on students who in the past did not receive enough attention.

Her son — known to friends as V.J., for Vincent Junior — no longer earns C's and D's in school; he gets A's and B's. And he's earned a combined score on the assessments that's high enough for him to receive a diploma.

"What we found is it really propelled his learning because it kind of forced teachers to make sure he was learning at the same rate as his non-disabled peers, which is something we haven't had before," Nelson said.

To Embry, now the head of the nonprofit Abell Foundation, using the tests as a graduation requirement takes accountability a step too far. Through elementary and middle school, the No Child Left Behind Act holds the schools responsible for students' performance. The High School Assessment shifts the focus to students.

"The issue to me is not that the test is too tough or too easy," he said. "It's whether a child should have to pass it to graduate."

When the General Assembly considered bills that would have axed the requirement, doves flocked to Annapolis to testify.

The requirement survived, but it had yet to face a state school board stocked with O'Malley appointees.

The showdown

The school board was preparing in October to decide whether it would delay for one year requiring seniors to pass the assessments, but Grasmick remained confident.

"Every student matters," she said one day before the board's meeting. "I'm very optimistic, I'll say that."

Vice President Blair Ewing, an O'Malley appointee, was ready to make a motion at the meeting to delay the requirement because he thought the tests had changed too much and students were being treated unfairly.

The Bridge Plan, for instance, had only begun to be used the summer before the first class of students that had to meet the requirement started their senior year.

"That's a change in the game that hasn't been fully digested by the system," he said.

Passions grew intense at the four-hour meeting at the Nancy S. Grasmick State Education Building in Baltimore. Board member Dunbar Brooks claimed critics of the requirement wanted to get rid of it to keep minorities in Maryland from

succeeding.

And when board member Rosa Garcia called out Baltimore City schools chief Andres Alonso, accusing him of failing to show urgency for minority students who may be learning English or falling behind in school, the Cuban native fired back with a hot rebuke.

"Let's be careful about who speaks for whom," he said, emphasizing that he is a Latino who began his career teaching special education students.

"It's a conversation that's about urgency for all my kids," he said. "And they are all my kids."

In the end, the board voted 7-4 to keep the requirement. The four members who wanted to delay the requirement were appointed by O'Malley, but Grasmick said the governor had nothing to do with the vote.

"This is not a reflection of any problem with the governor," she said.

For his part, O'Malley said he supported the school board's decision.

"Overall, I think the school board has made the right decision, and I stand behind them in that decision," he said. "I did not prejudice that myself. I know that they had a robust discussion."

The two have managed to forge a working relationship. Any problems they had are in the past, Grasmick said, and the two are seen together every few weeks at various news conferences for issues in education.

Still, they hardly seem close. Asked about his relationship with Grasmick at a recent news conference about childhood hunger in Maryland, O'Malley responded: "Glad to have her as an important partner in this endeavor to eradicate childhood hunger."

What's next?

Grasmick stressed that the tests are not "career-ready or college-ready," but she thinks their difficulty can be ramped up to include higher-level algebra courses.

"We can't give out a diploma that represents a fraud," she said.

At the next state school board meeting in December, Grasmick's administration is to outline a waiver process that will detail which students are allowed to get an exemption from the requirement. Board member Kate Walsh is also expected to make a proposal to delay the requirement for some students with learning disabilities.

David Tufaro, a former board member who owns a Baltimore-based real estate and investment company, is confident the commotion will die down after the tests are used for a year or two to determine graduation.

"If you have confidence in people, as I do, and students, most of these kids can pass these tests," Tufaro said. "They're capable of it."

As for Grasmick, she is not looking past her current work. "I still have three years remaining on this contract," she said. "I really never think about the next step."

Staff Writer Len Lazarick contributed to this report.
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— KRISTINE BULLS/EXAMINER

Pinewood Elementary School fifth-grader Ben Hogan looks on as Nancy Grasmick focuses a microscope during a visit to the Timonium school.

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