Maryland’s ten years of experience with standards-based reform shows that testing and accountability alone will go only so far toward raising academic achievement, according to a report by the state’s Visionary Panel for Better Schools. To deliver on the promise of a high-quality education for all children, Maryland must take concrete steps to improve classroom instruction and ensure greater equity, the report recommends. Jack Jennings, director of the Center on Education Policy, co-chaired the 40-member panel, which included Maryland business people, teachers, school superintendents, school principals, parents, and local citizens.

Maryland was one of the early state leaders in standards-based reform, an approach that seeks to increase student learning through the tripod of academic standards, assessments, and accountability requirements. Over the past decade, these reforms have helped to improve achievement for all major groups of students in the state. But in the last two years, progress has stalled, and test scores have gone down in some school districts. In 2001, Maryland state superintendent Nancy Grasmick established the Visionary Panel to review past reforms and develop a vision for improvement for the next ten years. The panel presented its final report to the State Board of Education in January 2002.

The Next Phase of Education Reform

“Issuing standards alone will not yield students who can meet them, just as administering tests alone will not produce students who can pass them,” the report cautions. For the next phase of reform, the panel recommends that Maryland focus every part of its public school system on improving classroom instruction. This can be accomplished through such means as providing teachers with more explicit assistance in effective ways to teach the state curriculum; strengthening teacher preparation and certification, mentoring for novices, and professional development; and reorganizing administrative roles to allow principals to become better instructional leaders. The panel also proposes greater attention to equity, through such strategies as holding teachers and school leaders accountable for eliminating achievement gaps and placing the most qualified teachers and administrators in the lowest performing schools. Other recommendations address issues of curriculum, alignment, shared accountability, and funding.

These findings have implications for other states. Currently, all states are implementing standards, assessments, and accountability systems, but few are as far along as Maryland. Soon all states will have to speed up their reforms to meet the timetables in the No Child Left Behind Act, the new federal law that requires states to administer annual tests in reading and math in grades 3 through 8, take actions to improve failing schools, and bring all racial, ethnic, income and other groups up to proficient levels of performance within 12 years.
Here are the *Eight Major Recommendations* of the Visionary Panel

1. **The state should create a voluntary curriculum for every grade and every subject area**, so that teachers will know what will be tested by the state. School districts should make available to teachers model lessons and best practices translating curriculum into instruction.

2. Curriculum, instruction and assessment must be closely aligned. The state needs to re-examine existing instruction and tests to ensure they help students to learn sequentially so that they will succeed on the High School Assessments, which students must pass in order to graduate from high school. The objective of the assessment system must be improved student learning, with standards and tests used to help teachers make decisions. Multiple sources of information, in addition to tests, should be used to make instructional decisions about children.

3. **Accountability systems should be expanded** to apply to all schools, not just low-performing schools as currently required. Principals, teachers, and parents should be involved in a system of shared accountability. A graduated series of rewards and interventions is essential to help all schools make progress.

4. Every school should be accountable for the performance of every student. Assessments should provide data on each student, and schools should be guided by plans to eliminate achievement gaps between various groups of students.

5. **Only those teachers who can demonstrate high-level knowledge and teaching skills should be certified.** To enhance this performance-based preparation and certification system, the on-the-job performance of first and second year teachers should be reported back to the higher education institutions from which they came. Mentoring should be provided to teachers in their first 3-4 years.

6. More highly-qualified teachers and principals should be placed in the lowest performing schools. Collective bargaining agreements and local school district policies should support assignment of the most qualified teachers and principals to low-performing schools.

7. School principals should focus on instruction rather than administration. Creating a position of building manager could facilitate this change.

8. **Existing reform plans must be fully funded**, especially the plan adopted in 1999 to help prepare all students for the new high school exit examinations.

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In September 2002, Maryland will begin implementing the major changes called for by the Visionary Panel. The report calls on the state’s political leaders, business community, higher education institutions, and citizens to work with the K-12 education system to carry out these reforms.

The full report, entitled *Achievement Matters Most*, is available at the websites of both the Center on Education Policy (www.cep-dc.org) and the Maryland state department of education (www.msde.state.md.us).