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Testimony of Elliott Wolf
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My name is Elliott Wolf; I am currently a senior at Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring, Maryland. I am here partly in my capacity as a writer for Blair's newspaper, Silver Chips, which has conducted significant research into the effects of the HSA on students and on teachers at Blair.¹

Blair is in a unique position, one that demonstrates the effects of the HSA on a wide range of students. On one end, we house the Math, Science and Computer Science Magnet Program – one of the highest regarded public secondary school programs in the country.² On the other end, approximately one third of all students at Blair are recent immigrants to the United States, and cannot read, write or speak English fluently.

Our research has shown that the implementation of these tests has had negative effects on students at all points on this continuum. In the Magnet, we have new freshmen coming out of HSA-aligned Algebra I classes who are severely lacking in even the most basic Algebra skills. They are able to pass the HSA with flying colors, yet many are not prepared for the advanced math classes that their predecessors who completed non-HSA-aligned algebra courses were.

However, teachers of recently-immigrated and very poor students are bracing for far worse possibilities than what the Magnet is facing. Many teachers are predicting that some of their students, when they recognize the futility of their efforts to pass the HSAs, will immediately drop out of high school to work or enter a GED program. Not one single ESOL³ student in the entire school passed the 2003 English 9 HSA.⁴ These students who have only been in the United States for a few years cannot be expected to perform at the same level as native English speakers, regardless of their preparation.

Students who drop out don't tarnish the state or county's test scores, but they do cause a tragic drain on society and put themselves at a serious disadvantage, both of which are preventable and unnecessary. We haven't seen the massive dropouts yet because the tests

¹ See attached story: *State and County Math Standards Hurt Student Performance*, by Elliott Wolf. Published in the December, 2003 issue of *Silver Chips*.

² The Blair Magnet is a nationally-recognized program whose students consistently excel in math, science and technology. For example, Blair placed most of Maryland's Intel Science Talent Search semifinalists and half of the finalists. For more information see www.mbhs.edu/departments/magnet.

³ English for Speakers of Other Languages (recently immigrated students who are still learning English).

⁴ See *HSA Scores Among the Worst*, by Renee Park. Published in the February, 2003 issue of *Silver Chips*. Available online at <http://silverchips.mbhs.edu/inside.php?sid=2947>.

are not currently required for graduation, but rest assured, they will happen and the State of Maryland will have a far bigger problem on its hands than simple education reform.

For the students who do elect to stay, they are likely to be significantly disadvantaged as well. The relatively small group of students who do fall into the narrow range of abilities where the goals of the HSA are both attainable and representative of their full potential are the only ones who are likely to benefit. Everyone else will be put at some disadvantage; they will either be left behind or they will be kept behind.

And while holding every single student in the state to a single set of educational objectives may be a worthwhile goal, this is not the way to go about it. There are numerous problems endemic to the HSAs and standardized tests in general. Teachers and students constantly complain that the exams do not accurately reflect students' knowledge of the subject matter.⁵

Furthermore, beyond students, the HSAs are having a devastating effect on the morale of teachers as well. Teachers are being forced to teach a curriculum that is precisely defined, leaving them almost no room to improvise and make judgments of their own, bringing about both resentment and outright boredom. Some teachers also face the daunting task of trying to teach state objectives to certain students who, no matter what the teacher does, will not master them. Numerous teachers have left Blair, citing the HSAs as the main factor in their decision to move on to another state or another profession.⁶

The message from the biggest school in the biggest district of the state of Maryland is that these tests are badly motivated and badly implemented, and that students are suffering as a result. Until MSDE realizes that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for education, and that no matter what schools do, not every student will be able to pass all of these tests, the HSA will continue to have the destructive effects on education that are being seen at Blair today, and those effects will only be amplified when they become graduation requirements.

Thank you.

⁵ One example that a social studies teacher gave was that the NSL HSA asked about the political implications of "smog." His students spoke enough English to explain the effects of pollution, and knew about the EPA and the Clean Air Act, yet when faced with the term "smog," they had no idea how to proceed. While they knew the material, the test did not reflect that knowledge.

⁶ For more information, see *Tired of Teaching*, by Sherri Geng. Published in the April, 2004 issue of *Silver Chips*. Available online at <http://silverchips.mbhs.edu/inside.php?sid=3416>.