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Report card on Maryland schools

Our view: The state's top ranking shouldn't lead to complacency on education reform

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The respected journal Education Week has ranked Maryland first in the nation in terms of high school graduation rates, student achievement, academic standards and accountability in 2008. That's up from third place a year ago and an encouraging sign that efforts to improve Maryland's schools are beginning to pay off.

Though Maryland clearly is doing some things right, state schools Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick was wise to caution that school reform doesn't happen overnight: It's a process that requires years of sustained commitment, which also means this is no time to rest on our laurels.

Overall, the state got only a B rather than an A from the magazine this week, which is probably more in keeping with the reality of school performance in Maryland than the No. 1 ranking might suggest. The recent uproar over whether the state should grant waivers to students who fail to pass the statewide High School Assessment test shows that serious questions remain about how much progress has been made.

And yet Maryland is better off than many states in that instead of being divided among hundreds of autonomous local school districts, schools here are funded and administered by just 24 county and city governments. That makes it easier to set uniform standards for student achievement and school accountability and to equalize state education spending across city and county lines under the Thornton funding formula. Likewise, standardized achievement tests and the HSA exams, in theory at least, have helped solidify progress statewide.

But Maryland still scores less well in dealing with its most troubled school systems. The state's lack of support for beginning teachers and for professional development - two areas cited by the magazine - makes it harder for urban jurisdictions such as Baltimore and Prince George's County to attract and retain gifted instructors, and the state also gets low grades for teacher salaries and incentives. So while the best-performing schools are exceedingly good at turning out college-bound graduates, struggling ones still see far too many of their students drop out; last year, about 10,000 Maryland youngsters left school without getting a diploma.

State officials can give themselves a pat on the back for the progress Maryland has made as reflected in its top ranking, even if that doesn't represent the highest possible score. They might also take it as a reminder that this is no time for complacency. In an increasingly knowledge-based economy, the state still has a long way to go to become truly competitive in the 21st century's global marketplace.



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