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Thursday, Oct. 8, 2009

## Parents, officials strategizing high school testing improvements

College prep discussed during education summit

by Megan McKeever | Staff Writer

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After High School Assessment scores released last week showed a 15 percentage point increase in passing rates for Prince George's County seniors, parents and school officials looking to make continued improvement zeroed in Sept. 30 on high school education at Accokeek's second annual Education Summit.

More than 30 people attended the summit at the Accokeek Volunteer Fire Department, which was sponsored by the Greater Accokeek Civic Association in an effort to start a communitywide education discussion, association president Bill Richardson said.

Accokeek resident Denise Foskey asked a panel made up of area school officials how schools, particularly Gwynn Park High School in Brandywine, are working to prepare students for college.

The panel of school officials included Prince George's County Board of Education member Linda Thomas (Dist. 4), High School Consortium Director William Barnes and President of Planning Paul Taylor, among others. Gwynn Park Principal Carletta Marrow was the only administrator in attendance and was able to give parents specific examples of college preparatory plans.

Nearly 80 percent of all current Prince George's County public high school seniors passed the HSAs, which the state now requires for graduation. The passing rate rose from 65 percent in 2008.

Along with 15 other public high schools in the county, Gwynn Park made Adequate Yearly Progress, a state education department benchmark that uses HSA passing rates to measure proficiency in reading, math and science.

Gwynn Park High School currently offers 11 Advanced Placement courses, which are open to all students who wish to enroll, Marrow said, adding that she is currently reviewing course enrollment requirements after many students scored poorly last year on AP tests, costing them the opportunity for college credit.

"Not all students can or should be able to handle five AP courses and if they do, we're not doing our jobs," Marrow said, emphasizing that the curriculum is designed to be difficult.

While Foskey agreed that advanced placement courses are important, she told the panel college preparation efforts must be targeted at students before senior year.

"We need to prepare them not just in senior year, but in ninth, 10th and 11th grade," Foskey said.

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Helen Coley, executive director of schools in Area 4, which includes Clinton, Fort Washington and Accokeek, sat on the panel and agreed that while advanced courses are important in high school, similar classes should be offered at the elementary and middle school level.

"We don't just want to prepare our students for the [Maryland School Assessments], we want to prepare them for the workforce and a career," Coley said.

Upper Marlboro resident Mel Franklin, who sits on the board of Prince George's Community College in Largo, echoed residents' statements that college preparation needs to begin earlier, telling the crowd that many students at PGCC are not ready for the rigor of college coursework and need to take remedial classes.

This year at Gwynn Park, students get a free 35 minutes a day, known as "buzz time," to check in with teachers and advisors or receive tutoring, Marrow said, adding that students tend to take advantage of this time for help with their coursework, as opposed to setting aside time after school.

Coley encouraged parents to take advantage of SchoolMAX, which provides parents with up-to-date information on their children's grades.

"You need to stay on top of [your children]," she said. "Don't let them slip."

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