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Lagging Freshmen Reassigned Before Test

Pr. George's Creates 2-Year Algebra Class

By Nick Anderson
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At least 2,500 ninth-graders in Prince George's County will abruptly move this week from a standard one-year algebra course into a two-year program, shielding the struggling students from a state graduation test this spring that officials said they were likely to fail.

The highly unusual shift comes midway through the school year in one of Washington's largest suburban school systems and in some respects runs counter to a regional trend of pushing students to take higher-level mathematics as early as possible.

One-fifth of the county's students who began high school in August in the bench-mark course Algebra 1 will be affected by the changes. The students had missed several classes in the first half of the year and received low grades.

Starting Tuesday, those students will move into a retooled class called Algebraic Concepts. That will give them a one-year reprieve before facing the state test and a fresh shot at learning what they need to know about computations, graphs and word problems with variables X and Y.

The county's action shows how Maryland's decision to impose high-stakes graduation tests at the end of core academic classes is beginning to reverberate through public high schools. The requirement kicks in for the Class of 2009, this year's ninth-graders.

Prince George's County, with about 133,300 students, is the state's second-largest school system after Montgomery County, which has about 139,400.

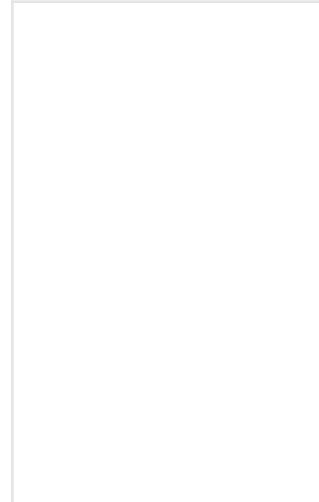
Virginia also has an algebra graduation test; D.C. public schools do not. Many area school systems are pushing students to finish Algebra 1 in middle school -- in eighth or even seventh grade. Experts say early algebra proficiency lays the foundation for further math courses in high school: geometry, advanced algebra, trigonometry and calculus.

Prince George's has also promoted an early-algebra track in recent years. Now, however, the county is expanding its late-algebra track.

"We have to be honest with ourselves about this issue," said the county's interim schools chief, Howard A. Burnett. "Ninth-graders across the country and across this county are failing and have been failing. It hasn't worked, the way we've been doing things. And so we have to start doing things differently." Burnett sent letters this month to parents of affected students.

At several Prince George's high schools, the percentage of students shifted into the two-year algebra track appears substantial. Donald Horrigan, principal of Parkdale High School in Riverdale, said 223 of the school's 481 Algebra 1 students are moving into Algebraic Concepts this week. That's 46 percent.

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Horrigan lauded the decision to pull students back from an academic precipice. But he said the onus remains on schools to raise student achievement. "It's our obligation to teach them," he said, "not to document their inadequacy."

For months, educators in Prince George's and elsewhere have worried about Maryland's algebra/data analysis test, one of four in a sequence called the High School Assessments. That test will begin to have consequences this spring for ninth-grade algebra students. The other assessments come after English, biology and government courses that typically are taken in 10th grade or later. By 2009, the state will require students to pass all four examinations or get at least a minimum score on each and a combined passing score for all four to receive a diploma.

Last spring, about 35,000 students statewide failed the algebra/data analysis test -- 46 percent of those who took it. The failure rate was 69 percent in Prince George's and even higher among the county's ninth-graders.

Seeking to improve, Prince George's schools began linking some algebra classes through interactive television this year to help inexperienced teachers work with veterans at other campuses. The county also has intensified its use of quarterly tests to identify lagging students. And Burnett's staff closely tracked algebra grades given after the first quarter in October and the second quarter in December.

There were far too many D's and failing grades (E's), Burnett found. He called an emergency meeting of principals and other senior staff Dec. 22. They decided to act immediately, reorganizing algebra classes at 21 high schools. Students who missed 10 or more days of instruction and failed both quarters or had a D in one and failed the other were designated for reassignment. The result: 110 new Algebraic Concepts classes countywide -- 90 minutes a day at a pace meant to help students catch up. Burnett estimated that at least 2,500 students would be shifted into the classes.

Many teachers and parents cheered the move.

Joseph Sutton, a ninth-grade algebra teacher at Charles H. Flowers High School in Springdale, said too many students arrive at high school with poor fundamentals. "These are kids that got pushed through or socially promoted, and now they're really hurting," Sutton said. "They're just not ready for a course like this."

Ed Hendel, president of the Parent-Teacher-Student Association at High Point High School in Beltsville, said: "This is at least a step. Somebody said, 'Oh, these kids are going to fail. What else are we going to do?' So this is something, instead of just writing them off."

But school board member Abby L.W. Crowley (Greenbelt) cautioned that the action will only postpone an academic reckoning. "I imagine that there will be students who do what the school system recommends and still fail the course or the test in grade 10," Crowley said. "What about them?"

How did the students react? "Some were relieved because it was too difficult in algebra," said Carey Pico, a High Point math teacher. "Others were clasping their algebra books as I have never seen, in hopes of having one more chance to prove their ability to succeed."

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