

# Students 'arrest' State Superintendent Grasmick

By Henry A. Hurst AFRO Staff Writer

"Today, Nancy Grasmick, I place you under citizen's arrest," roared Lorne Francis, 17, a senior at Baltimore City College and a spokesperson for the Baltimore Algebra Project, as he presented his arguments to the Maryland State Department of Education during a board meeting. "You are charged with two counts of refusal to obey a court order and 85,000 counts of reckless endangerment."

On Oct. 26, students rallied outside the offices of the State Department of Education to pursue a request that State Superintendent Nancy Grasmick be placed under citizen's arrest for her non-compliance with Circuit Court Judge Joseph H.H. Kaplan's June 2000 order and August 20 ruling that an immediate \$30-45 million be given to the Baltimore City Public School System by the state. In his ruling, Judge Kaplan stated: For the fiscal years 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004 alone, the state unlawfully under-funded the Baltimore City Public School System by an amount ranging from \$439.35 million to \$834.68 million. The state cannot avoid its constitutional obligation to provide adequate funding to BCPSS by focusing on management deficiencies. Affirming the constitutional right of children to an adequate education, Judge Kaplan ruled that the education of city school children could not be shortchanged to "pay down" the school system's debt. Kaplan ruled four years ago that the state should provide the school system with about \$2,000 more per student per year. "The ruling is currently on appeal," said William Reinhard, spokesperson for state education department. "It should be emphasized that neither the state board nor the state superintendent appropriates funds. I'm not certain the students or their sponsoring teachers understand this important part of the equation. Funds for Baltimore City are appropriated by the General Assembly and the Baltimore City Council." Inside, however, the rally proceeded. With signs in hand, dozens of students from schools around the city filled the board meeting room, their eyes focused on

Grasmick.

Many were part of the Baltimore Algebra Project, a Baltimore City student-run non-profit organization that tutors middle- and high-school students in math. While students inside confronted the board members, others continued to rally outside, passing out flyers and with a bullhorn, telling the downtown crowd about the inadequacies that persist at their schools.

"It is terrible that these adults are not mature enough to comply with a simple order," said Chelsea Carson, 16, a junior at Baltimore City College and demonstration coordinator, as she forcefully vented her frustrations. "Because of this, the school system is in total disarray. We have unqualified teachers. We have over-crowded classrooms. We have a lack of books, so people have to share books in class. In my math class at City College, we have to use dittos every day because there are not enough books to distribute to the class. This is ridiculous. They have the money, but they just don't want to give it to us." Back in the board room, Lorne Francis, a representative of the Algebra Project, approached the speaker's desk, saying: "Under normal circumstances, my address might begin with good evening, but truth be told, I saw my last good evening eons ago. Where's the money?" Dr. Edward Root, president of the state education board, repeatedly banged his gavel, saying, "You're out of order!" As the standard three-minute time limit expired, Francis continued until he finished his speech. As Root banged the gavel again, one gentleman shouted, "What happened to freedom of speech?" When Francis stepped away from the speaker's table, Root announced, as he sent for police, "We will not tolerate another outburst like that." Another student, also representing the Algebra Project, approached the speaker's table. "The school board will not act until there is a 'Columbine' here in Baltimore," asserted Charnell Colbert, 17, a senior at Baltimore City College. After her three minutes expired, Colbert continued, saying, "We ask that Nancy Grasmick be placed under citizen's arrest." Root banged his gavel, stopping her in mid-sentence. As Colbert continued, the board members walked out of the room, leaving the students, parents and teachers livid.

"I think the board's actions in response to the speech speak for themselves," said Francis. "The board has yet to show it cares for the children of Baltimore City. I think that's a testament to their refusal to obey court orders. And when they walked out, I'm honestly convinced that they don't care." The board was not available for comment, but released a statement concerning their departure from the room: "The state board is eager to hear from students and has done so on an almost monthly basis for decades. To make the process fair for everyone, the state board's rules limit public comment to three minutes. Written testimony of any length is accepted and encouraged. It is unfortunate that the students refused to adhere to the rules they had agreed to before appearing. It also was unfortunate that some of the students resorted to personal attacks rather than speaking directly to the issues they had interest in." "I expected them to walk out and I'm glad that they did, because it proved what we've been saying all along," said Colbert. "When they walked out on us, they showed that children really are being left behind."