

public citizens for children + youth

Testimony

Pennsylvania House of Representatives

Graduation Requirements and High Stakes Testing Submitted by

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My testimony is intended to offer the members of the House of Representatives a short analysis of the context and issues that led to the adoption of the Keystone Exams, as well as my recommendations for how to ensure every Pennsylvania student and parent understands the academic benchmarks necessary for receiving a high school diploma that has real meaning in this day and age.

In 2005 in response to a gubernatorial executive order, the Pennsylvania Department of Education created the Commission on College and Career Success. Members of that Commission included representatives from the private sector, organized labor, education leaders from both the secondary and higher education sectors, private citizens, and lawmakers. A full list of Commission members is attached at the end of my testimony and I urge you to review the membership to see both its breadth and expertise.

The Commission met over 13 months and among its tasks was the identification of strategies to boost the share of students prepared to enter college and graduate. In 2005 only 47% of the state's high school graduates reported enrolling in college the year after high school graduation and of those students only 28% completed college within four years.



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In response to this challenge and the data, the Commission agreed on 12 policy recommendations designed to move Pennsylvania towards increasing the educational achievement of all of its students to meet the challenges of a 21st century economy and the requirements for productive citizenship.

Among those recommendations, I want to describe one that I think is most relevant to your hearing today:

- Create clear and consistent signals and policies for Pennsylvania's expectations for high school success.

The Commission's work was going on while the State Board regulation requiring students to be proficient on the Pennsylvania standards prior to graduation was in place. That regulation allowed two methods of showing proficiency: performing proficient or better on the PSSA; or demonstrating proficiency on an equivalent local assessment.

The Commission asserted that the local determination of "equivalency" did not ensure a common, statewide graduation standard. For this reason, the Commission recommended replacing the local assessment option with a series of state created Graduation Competency Assessments.

This recommendation also included two pathways for every student to reach graduation-proficiency: pass the 11th grade PSSA or the Graduation Competency Assessments.

Not surprisingly, some lawmakers and education stakeholders requested validation of the Commission's assertion that the local equivalent assessments were not consistent or that they failed to ensure students were competent to the level of state standards.

In response to these reasonable questions, in 2008 the Department of Education commissioned Penn State University to perform a study of local assessment systems used by school districts for graduation.

The results of that study were more alarming than any Commission member could have imagined. It found that more than 80 percent of our students were in districts that could not demonstrate students were prepared for post-high school success. The study found that only 18 school districts were able to demonstrate that their local equivalent assessments were of the same rigor and of content consistent with state standards.

Further, it found that in 2007, approximately 56,000 students received a diploma even though they could not pass the PSSA in 11th grade or the retest given in 12th grade.

It is important to understand that the methodology employed for this study ensured the integrity of its findings. Penn State recruited education leaders from across the state and collected the local graduation requirements and assessments used by 418 school districts.

Nearly 1,000 assessments were reviewed and rated by eight panels made up of experienced public educators from across Pennsylvania. These panels determined whether a district had quality tools to measure student performance and, just as importantly, whether those tools were properly employed.

In reading, 99 districts used an assessment, but only 19 districts used them in a manner that protected the integrity of the exam and were actually using them as the basis for making graduation decisions.

In math, 314 districts assessed for graduation, but only 31 of those districts used the assessments appropriately in deciding whether to award diplomas.

In addition, some districts indicated that they did not have local assessments, while others acknowledged that they used criteria such as student attendance or citizenship as a measure of proficiency. Many school districts only relied on course grades to award diplomas.

Again, I stress that, only 18 districts had appropriate assessments in reading and math and used those assessments consistently in the awarding of high school diplomas. Those districts had a collective enrollment in the 2007-08 school year of approximately 45,800 of the more than 1.8 million students in the commonwealth.

Beyond the results of this study, it's useful to know that as of 2006, twenty-six other states, which together educate more than 75 percent of the nation's students, already, have in place or were in the process of implementing clear expectations for graduation requirements.

In response to these findings, after nearly a year of negotiations among State Board members including intense debates and ultimately agreement between the State Board Chair Joe Torsella and the Senate Education Committee Chairman Jeff Picolla, the Pennsylvania State Board of Education adopted a statewide high school graduation

requirement. The regulation provided a menu of ways for students to demonstrate the academic skill level necessary to graduate, starting with the Class of 2015.

Included were a series of standard final exams in math, science, English and social studies that would be created and paid for by the state or Districts could rely on the results of the 11th grade PSSA, the SAT, the International Baccalaureate Degree or a locally developed equally rigorous assessment. Further, the board agreed that the state mandated academic benchmark would account for about a third of a student's graduation requirement. Districts were free to determine the balance of the requirements for students. This approach ensured that failure to meet one of these academic benchmarks could not be the sole determinant for withholding a student's diploma. Thus, it was agreed that the academic assessment for graduation would not be a high stakes mandate.

Fast forward to 2012, the Secretary of Education Ron Tomalis upended that three-year process of learning and consensus building and steamrolled through a requirement that made the Keystone Exams a high stakes graduation requirement.

I think that decision was gravely wrong for students and has caused the reasonable public outcry that's ensued against the assessments. I want to focus on why we need assessments to ensure the fidelity and integrity of public education.

In the real world of college and work, where a student went to high school is less meaningful than what a student can do. Can he or she do algebra at the second level, does he or she know the basics of physics or biology, can she/he write a reasonably

cogent essay, does she/he recognize widely known literary references, or explain our history; and on and on.

The Penn State research and other studies have concluded that even in what seem to be black and white courses such as algebra, teachers and districts are not covering the same content. A common assessment approach across all high schools, helps teachers, administrators and students all get on the same page. The assessments give students a rubric to know what they are expected to learn and they give teachers a yardstick by which they can measure if they are in fact delivering the content needed for their students to pass the class. Keep in mind that all Keystone Assessments were developed by teachers in this state who worked to set the framework, the rubric, the content and the cut-scores.

It is through this lens that I offer my reaction to the revised high school graduation requirements proposed by the Department of Education. I think they move us in the right direction, offering more options for students to demonstrate proficiency and ensuring consistency among schools and school teachers. However, the measure still maintains the high stakes framework – pass and graduate, fail and no diploma. I suggest we adopt the menu of alternatives and apply them as the original regulation intended where the results assessments account for a substantial portion of the graduation requirement, rather than its entirety. Such an approach preserves local control, allows for needed flexibility and sends the right signals that our students and schools must know more than book knowledge to be good parents, good employees and good citizens.

Appendix B.

Commission Members

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**The Honorable Bernard O'Neill
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