

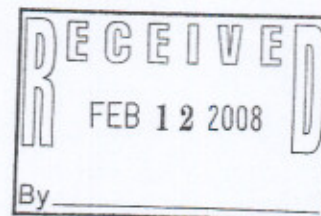


COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
333 MARKET STREET
HARRISBURG, PA 17126-0333

SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

717-787-5820
FAX 717-787-7222
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February 12, 2008



Dear Board Secretary:

Enclosed please find informational materials explaining the graduation requirements regulations being considered by the State Board of Education.

Given the attention this issue has received in recent weeks, I thought these materials would be useful to your board members as the discussion of the State Board's proposed regulations moves forward.

Please share these materials as soon as possible with all of your school board members and **read the enclosed letter from me aloud at your next public board meeting.**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gerald L. Zahorchak".

Gerald L. Zahorchak, D.Ed.

Enclosures



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA

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SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

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Dear School Board Members:

As you may know, the State Board of Education recently took a positive step toward ensuring the readiness of Pennsylvania's high school graduates by giving preliminary approval to regulations that would bolster our graduation standards.

The board's unanimous vote will establish state graduation requirements, starting with the graduating class of 2014, to ensure students demonstrate proficiency in the core academic areas of math, science, English and social studies. This proposal gives districts a menu of ways to ensure their students are academically prepared before receiving a diploma. These options include:

- Passing the new Graduation Competency Assessments.
- Passing the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment.
- Passing an Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate test.
- Passing a local assessment that independent evaluators certify is equivalent to Graduation Competency Assessments.

The goal behind these new graduation requirements is straightforward. We want to ensure that a diploma has meaningful, substantive value. We want to give graduates the assurance they have what they need to succeed.

In an era when Pennsylvanians compete for jobs with graduates from China, Singapore and India we must ensure that each of our students is equipped with the core skills that employers and institutions of higher education find necessary. It is no longer acceptable to award diplomas that do not have meaning to college admissions officers and business HR departments. A diploma handed out in Erie must have the same meaning as one handed out in Philadelphia or anywhere in between.

Clearly, the current patchwork system for setting high school graduation requirements is not serving our young people. Consider:

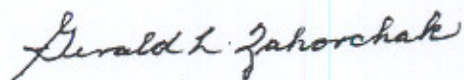
- In 2006, 45% of public high school seniors (nearly 57,000 students) who graduated in Pennsylvania did not score proficient on the 11th grade reading and math PSSAs – yet received high school diplomas based on local school district assessments.
- 93% of Pennsylvania school districts graduated at least 20 percent more students than scored proficient on the 11th grade PSSAs in 2006. This is a statewide problem.
- Only 7% of college instructors at two-year institutions say that most of their students come to college extremely or very well prepared.
- About 30% of all high school graduates entering college require at least some remediation, and 35% of companies provide remedial math instruction to their workers.

You may have been contacted recently by some special interest groups who have asked you to adopt a resolution formally opposing these new graduation requirements. As a lifelong educator – a former teacher, principal and school superintendent – I believe you should do just the opposite: **join me in urging the State Board of Education to adopt these common-sense standards to ensure all of our children are prepared for life beyond high school.**

These graduation standards have the backing of an array of business leaders, education leaders and community stakeholders. The Governor's Commission on College and Career Success – a group of leaders in various fields public and private - unanimously called for more rigorous graduation standards as a way for Pennsylvania to ensure all our students leave high school prepared for higher education or the knowledge-based workforce.

I hope you will find the accompanying fact sheets on the proposed graduation requirements informative, and that they will clear up any misconceptions or misinformation. I thank you for your ongoing service to public education, and your commitment to our children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gerald L. Zahorchak". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Gerald L. Zahorchak, D.Ed.



Ensuring a High School Diploma is a Ticket to Success

In 2006, the Governor's Commission on College and Career Success completed an 18-month process to determine what Pennsylvania's high school graduates need to succeed. Upon completion, the commission unanimously called for Pennsylvania to set statewide high school graduation requirements in English, mathematics, science and social studies to ensure all graduating students are prepared for college and career expectations. In 2008, the Pennsylvania State Board of Education acted upon those recommendations and passed proposed regulations to change high school graduation requirements. Starting with the graduating class of 2014, students will need to demonstrate proficiency in the core academic areas of math, science, English and social studies. Most importantly, the State Board of Education's proposed regulations will ensure that diplomas given to Pennsylvania's high school graduates have value and represent preparedness for the future.

What are the new high school graduation requirements?

- The new high school graduation requirements apply to all public schools (school districts, charter schools and vo-tech high schools (AVTSs)) and necessitate students demonstrate proficiency in English, math, science and social studies by the time they graduate. The requirements provide flexibility by offering multiple ways that students can prove that they have the skills to succeed in college and work. School districts will make local choices about how students earn a high school diploma:
 - by passing new Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs) OR
 - passing the PSSA OR
 - passing an Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate test OR
 - passing a local assessment that independent evaluators certify is equivalent to the state Graduation Competency Assessments
- The choices include the newest addition; Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs), which are end-of-course exams that a student can take at any time and that school districts can choose to use instead of final exams. For example, a 9th grader might take Biology and then immediately take and pass the Biology GCA, while another student might take Biology in 10th grade and at the end of that year take and pass the Biology GCA. The timing is up to individual school districts and students.
- Starting with the graduating class of 2014, all Pennsylvania high school students will be required to demonstrate proficiency, or above, at state established levels in four subject areas — English, math, science and social studies. Students will have the opportunity to take 10 end-of-course assessments in the four subject areas over their middle and high school career. Additionally, students will have multiple chances to take each GCA. If a student does not pass the first time, they will receive extra help and then have several additional opportunities to retake the full test or the portion of the test that they did not pass.
- High school graduation requirements will be accompanied by additional support for struggling students and schools from the Department of Education. The state will offer school districts a voluntary model curriculum in the four subjects where students must pass tests, strategies for identifying students who need help and ways to effectively boost their academic skills, accompanied by new financial resources, and improved teacher training.
- When the State Board of Education adopts this requirement, Pennsylvania will join 26 other states (22 implemented, 4 implementing) – which together educate 76% of the nation's students – that already have high school graduation testing requirements in place or are in the process of implementing them. As more states develop these graduation requirements, more states are moving towards end of course exams, like the GCAs.

New High School Requirements: Fact vs. Fiction



pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Edward G. Rendell, Governor • Dr. Gerald L. Zahorchak, Secretary of Education

www.pde.state.pa.us

New High School Requirements: Fact vs. Fiction

FICTION: The proposed graduation requirements mean students have to pass a single, "high stakes" test.

FACT: The proposal gives students lots of ways to show they have the skills in English, math, science and social studies to succeed in college and careers:

- by passing new Graduation Competency Assessments (GCAs) OR
- passing the PSSA OR
- passing an Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate test OR
- passing a local assessment that independent evaluators certify is equivalent to the state Graduation Competency Assessments

The GCAs are a series of pass/fail exams – not one test - administered throughout high school. Students take each exam when they feel ready. If they fail, they can take it again until they pass. It's not "high stakes" if you can take it when you feel prepared and take it again if you fail.

FICTION: There is nothing wrong with the existing system for awarding diplomas. We don't need new high school graduation requirements.

FACT: The existing system allows 501 school districts to have 501 different standards for graduation. A diploma has to have meaning to an employer 5 miles, 50 miles and 500 miles away from a student's school district. Yet in 2006, 57,000 students got a diploma without showing academic proficiency. It cheats our kids and can give them false belief they are prepared when they are not.

FICTION: Pennsylvania is moving too fast. More time should be taken to examine this proposal.

FACT: Twenty-two other states already have high school graduation requirements and four more states are in the process of implementing them. Pennsylvania convened a blue-ribbon panel to study these issues in 2005 and the Commission on College and Career Success released its final report in 2006. Over the last six months, the State Board of Education has held six regional public roundtable meetings, a public hearing and five public committee meetings on this idea. Now we are at the formal beginning of the regulatory process – which still includes a public comment period and review by two legislative committees and the Independent Regulatory Review Commission.

FICTION: GCAs put students who don't "test well" at a disadvantage.

FACT: GCAs are a series of pass/fail exams that can be taken throughout the high school years, as many times as needed, and when the student being tested is ready. Much of the stress and pressure many students feel when taking a major test is mitigated.

FICTION: GCAs are another unfunded state mandate.

FACT: The state – not school districts – will pay the full cost of developing GCAs, providing them to school districts, and scoring them. The state will also pay for additional supports to help students succeed when they take the tests.

Additionally, the state will offer school districts:

- a voluntary curriculum in the four subjects where students must pass tests,
- strategies for identifying students who need help and ways to effectively boost their academic skills, accompanied by new financial resources, and
- improved teacher training.

<p>FICTION: The graduation requirements undermine local control by preventing local school districts from using their current local assessments.</p>	<p>FACT: School districts can keep using their own local assessments, provided those assessments are at least as rigorous as GCAs. We are not dictating what districts can do; we are giving them yet another tool for assessing graduate readiness. And we are making sure that every high school graduate is ready for college and careers – because the real world does not care what high school our students attended, it cares that they have the skills to succeed.</p>
<p>FICTION: GCAs represent more tests that compete with classroom instruction time.</p>	<p>FACT: Schools will be able to replace the current final exams with the GCAs. GCAs are not additional tests, they are better tests.</p>
<p>FICTION: The proposed high school graduation requirements ignore the needs of English Language Learners and special education students.</p>	<p>FACT: Sensible accommodations would be made for students with disabilities and English Language Learners. The draft regulations direct the Department of Education to give schools guidance on accommodating students with disabilities and English Language Learners. The nation as a whole is grappling with the issue of accommodating and integrating non-English speaking people into our schools, our culture and our economy. That needs to be part of that dialogue.</p>
<p>FICTION: Instead of pushing for high school graduation requirements The state should focus on the funding adequacy problem in Pennsylvania's schools and address the needs outlined in the recent costing-out study.</p>	<p>FACT: The Legislature should not delay in addressing the funding adequacy issues raised by the costing out study they commissioned. At the same time, we should not delay in acting to ensure high school diplomas really mean students are ready for college and work.</p>
<p>FICTION: High school graduation requirements will lead to more dropouts.</p>	<p>FACT: Meaningful graduation requirements will lead school districts to provide more assistance than ever to struggling students. Schools will have more information about the specific areas where struggling students need help and more technical assistance in getting these students the academic aid they need. The state will also continue to help school districts make high school a better fit for students at risk of dropping out – through more personalized school environments, Dual Enrollment programs that link at-risk students to colleges, state-of-the-art career and technical education, and other innovative strategies that recognize that students have a wide range of interests. By rethinking our approach to these students, we can help them not only earn a diploma – but also make it a diploma that has real meaning to employers and higher education.</p>
<p>FICTION: There is a lack of sample curriculum. Schools will be giving no direction or guidance in using GCAs.</p>	<p>FACT: The Pennsylvania Department of Education is already creating voluntary model curriculum for schools to use, and is committed to offering a model curriculum in the four core academic subjects: English, math, science and social studies. Having voluntary model curriculum is a requirement in the regulations the state Board is considering. They will be in place by the time the Class of 2014 is required to meet these new graduation requirements.</p>



Pennsylvania Editorials Praising State Board of Education's Proposed High School Graduation Requirements January 2008 Editorials

"Secretary Zahorchak is on the right track in trying to bolster graduation requirements. Too many students are failing, and a diploma should be worth more than the paper it's printed on."

Philadelphia Inquirer

"It's hard to understand why those opposed to the idea don't want to make sure high school students are proficient in reading, writing and math before they receive a diploma."

Pittsburgh Post Gazette

"An ardent advocate of the standards put it: the standards are a 'systemic change in how schools treat the awarding of diplomas to make sure they're worth something before students are held accountable by the economy'."

Towanda Daily and Sunday Review

"TESTING: Aiming for student proficiency in education gets high marks"

Harrisburg Patriot News

"This step is worth taking, with the long-term goal of making sure Pennsylvania diplomas are worth more than the paper they're printed on."

Pittsburgh Post Gazette

"Make diplomas more valuable"

Scranton Times Review

"State proficiency tests a smart idea"

Easton Express Times

"Adding value to high school diplomas"

Evening Sun Times

"State graduation tests would be worthwhile if they prevent meaningless high school diplomas."

York Daily Record

"It will be worth the effort if it means districts are not graduating students who simply have not mastered some minimal level of competency."

Lebanon Daily News

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Editorial: State High Schools Graduating failure

February 3, 2008

The numbers are staggering.

More than 56,000 Pennsylvania high school seniors graduated with "empty diplomas" in 2006 because they failed state math and reading tests. They were given diplomas, in some cases, for just showing up. They left high school without mastering the basic skills to get a job or enter college.

That has prompted state Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak to push for tougher new regulations requiring students to pass at least six tests in English, math, science and social studies. This is a smart step.

Instead of a comprehensive test on everything learned over several years, students would be tested at the end of a course, similar to a final exam. For example, a student could take the Algebra I test as a freshman.

The plan would give teachers an annual snapshot of a student's progress. Those who fail could get tutoring and a second chance.

That approach makes sense and would put Pennsylvania in the vanguard with a number of states that have seen improvement after making the switch. However, the new regulations wouldn't take effect until 2014, after this year's sixth graders finish high school.

If this is worth doing, why take so long? Lucky these education leaders weren't in charge of landing the first man on the moon.

Once in place, the plan would close the loophole that allows students who fail the state tests to graduate by passing a local test not sanctioned by the state.

Statewide, 45 percent of 127,000 seniors flunked at least one of the state tests in 2006. That's an alarming figure.

The failures are not just in urban districts, though the rates are the highest there. In Philadelphia, 76 percent of the seniors flunked at least one of the tests. But even in Lower Merion and Unionville-Chadds Ford - two top school districts - about 20 percent of the seniors failed.

This points to a bigger problem that testing alone won't fix. But the testing plan may improve how students are assessed, and ease the pressure of teaching toward one final "make or break" test.

However, the state should reconsider some provisions during the expected yearlong review phase. For example, the current proposal allows districts to select four different testing options for students to demonstrate proficiency. That's too many alternatives and too many tests.

What's wrong with a single option and uniform standards so that students in Great Valley are taught the same basics as students in Garnet Valley? Isn't that the point of the plan?

Critics say the new regulations would hurt students in underfunded districts and could actually increase the dropout rate. That's a legitimate concern. But that's a funding and support issue, not a testing issue.

Despite some shortcomings, Secretary Zahorchak is on the right track in trying to bolster graduation requirements. Too many students are failing, and a diploma should be worth more than the paper it's printed on.

THE EXPRESS-TIMES

State proficiency tests a smart idea

Friday, January 18, 2008

A higher bar for students

Students don't like it. Teachers don't like it. Nonetheless, the Pennsylvania State Board of Education's plan to institute high school competency exams in four subject areas is a welcome change, as demonstrated proof of the learning required for a diploma.

Who likes the idea? Employers. College teachers and admissions officers. Gov. Ed Rendell. People who gauge the changes in the world economy and the skills needed to land jobs. And probably plenty of teachers, students and parents, once they get past the misperception that this would be another bureaucratic layer of testing piled atop all the No Child Left Behind requirements.

The plan approved Thursday by the state school board faces reviews and approval by the Legislature. It would create 10 standardized competency tests -- two in English, three in math, two in science, three in social studies. Students would have to pass six to graduate; students who fail would get remedial help and retake them. Schools could also use other tests, such as the PSSAs in reading and math, Advanced Placement tests or local exams that districts use, if they are approved by the state as rigorous enough.

If that sounds like a lot of tests, it is. But the standardized competency exams could replace final exams now used by districts, and that's the general idea. More important, though, is that the state tests would set a bar of achievement to get a diploma and to prepare grads to get a job or go to college. Many students in Pennsylvania aren't meeting basic goals now and graduating anyway. That's not in dispute. Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak calls those promotions "empty diplomas," noting that about 45 percent of the 126,000 high school students who graduated last year did so without demonstrating proficiency in PSSA math and reading exams.

Pennsylvania isn't going out on a ledge. In New Jersey, statewide proficiency tests have been administered since the early 1990s. Those who don't pass the tests in 11th grade are placed in remedial classes and take an alternative test later on. Pennsylvania would have similar programs for those who fail, along with accommodations for special education kids and those struggling with English.

One valid objection is that some students learn and perform well in school, but do poorly in tests. That's the major failing of all such tests. But it is outweighed by the vast number of graduates who move on -- to entry level jobs or college -- without basic skills, and without the ability to quickly pick up basic employment or study skills needed for the next step.

The Patriot-News

TESTING

Aiming for student proficiency in education gets high marks

Monday, January 14, 2008

When local high school graduates seek to further their education at Harrisburg Area Community College, more than half are not ready to perform at the college level.

Testifying before the State Board of Education last week, HACC President Edna V. Baehre said 55.4 percent of entering freshman require remedial instruction in reading. More than half of the new HACC students also need remedial help in math and a third require assistance with their writing skills.

Despite an Education Week report last week that ranked Pennsylvania 10th in quality of education, this dismal picture is repeated around the state. Joan L. Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, noted at the hearing that 20 percent more children graduated in 2006 in 461 of the state's 501 school districts than scored "proficient" in statewide tests.

What more evidence is required to make the case that educational fraud is being perpetrated on a huge number of students, parents and taxpayers in the commonwealth?

And this is not a new phenomenon. Overcrowded prisons and companies increasingly seeking better educated employees from abroad are the stark real-world consequences of educational failure. That Pennsylvania is perceived to be in the top 10 states in education only suggests an even more abysmal state of affairs in 40 other states.

The federal No Child Left Behind program, which has been both widely praised and criticized, represented a recognition of the problem, and sought to bring accountability to the classroom. But a more effective program would make students accountable for their educational effort and accomplishments, or lack thereof.

Toward that end, the state board is expected to adopt recommendations from the Governor's Commission on College and Career Success that would require high school students, in order to receive a diploma, to achieve proficiency on at least six of nine end-of-course examinations. These Graduation Competency Assessments would be given in English, math, science and social studies.

Schools would have the option of administering the GCAs, require passage of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test in 11th grade or the 12th grade re-test, or administer a locally determined test comparable to the GCAs, subject to state approval.

This approach offers a critical difference from proposals for a single, all-encompassing graduation test that we have criticized. Under GCAs, students would have to prove proficiency in material they've just been taught. Remedial instruction for students who failed would be mandated. And there would be ample opportunities to retake the test. Students who passed each GCA would be awarded Certificates of Proficiency in that subject, recognition that is important in conveying to students the significance of learning the material and doing well.

There is a danger of too much testing. But the GCAs can be used to replace teacher-composed final exams, and one hopes that they would eventually supplant the PSSA tests required by No Child Left Behind. The experience in other states suggests that GCAs, which are similar to New York's long-standing Regents exams, could prove to be a turning point in education in Pennsylvania. Yet at least one vital piece of the education puzzle remains to be addressed.

Pennsylvania needs to swallow hard and put up the dollars necessary to ensure that every school district has the resources necessary to achieve educational success. Ultimately, that translates into greater economic success for Pennsylvania and its citizens.

And far fewer people crowding our prisons.

EVENING SUN.COM

Adding value to high school diplomas

01/16/2008

What will those meddlers at the Pennsylvania Department of Education come up with next?

Now, they want to make sure students who are given a high-school diploma have actually earned it. Imagine. The state board of education is expected to vote Thursday on a proposal to develop a set of statewide graduation exams in 10 subject areas. Just as we would expect, the proposal is meeting some resistance. And just as we would expect, that resistance is coming mainly from the people who are charged with educating our children - the Pennsylvania School Boards Association and the Pennsylvania State Education Association. We must admit that, at first glance, we were skeptical. Aren't there enough standardized tests out there? Aren't our teachers already bending over backwards, with their hands tied, to "teach to the tests"?

But as details of the state proposal emerged, it turns out the proposal is not as sweeping nor as rigid as it sounds. The state proposes to develop tests in 10 specific subject areas. In order to graduate, a student would have to pass six of them.

But - and this is a big "but" - most students would never have to take these new exams if they're approved. That's because students would have several other avenues by which to prove they know their stuff. And one of those avenues would be the statewide assessment test, the PSSA, given to every student in his or her junior year of high school.

In recent years, about 30 percent of 11thgraders fail to score "proficient" or "advanced" in the PSSA and, therefore, could be required to take the graduation exams. But the state is not out to keep students from graduating. The purpose, rather, is to send a message about Pennsylvania high school diplomas. And certainly that's not too much to ask - that a high-school diploma be a guarantee that the bearer can do basic math and be able to write a coherent sentence.

We could hardly believe it when we heard school officials last week offering the same tired old objection that always comes up in discussions about education in Pennsylvania - these tests would mean a loss of local control.

Oh, come on.

What's so local about being able to read and write and multiply and divide and know what continent one lives on? If there's one area of education that maybe shouldn't be local, it is in setting graduation standards. After all, with 501 school boards each setting their own graduation standards, how is the world to know what a Pennsylvania high-school diploma signifies? How are potential employers or college-admissions officers to know what they're getting when a diploma from ABC School District was earned with criteria very different than a diploma from XYZ School District? Let's face it, none of these exams - not the PSSA, not any new graduation exams that might be developed - are terribly arduous.

They are not exactly of the level that might be required for, say, Mensa membership. But there are some skills that are so very basic, so very necessary to functioning in today's world, that every graduate in the state should be expected to have mastered them. That's what standards - and standard knowledge - are all about. Guaranteeing those skills and standards can only make a diploma more valuable for every graduate.

Pittsburgh Post Gazette

Ultimate test: A good plan for certifying high school graduates

Monday, January 07, 2008

What does a high school graduate know? State Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak wants to be able to answer that question but he can't, not with Pennsylvania's current diploma standards. He says they're uneven and that as many as 45 percent of 2006 graduates did not demonstrate proficiency in reading or math on standardized tests. The state cannot afford to leave students unprepared, and it doesn't matter whether they're headed for college or looking for work.

Pennsylvania has a three-part requirement for graduation: course completion, a senior project and demonstration of proficiency in reading, writing and math, either on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment test or by "local assessment." That last one is too fuzzy for Mr. Zahorchak, and he is proposing a series of tests for use by 2014. Pennsylvania would be following 22 states that already have graduation exams and four more that will by 2012.

As an alternative to local assessments, the state would develop 10 exams -- three in math, two in language arts, three in social studies and two in science. In most cases, a student would have to pass at least five. The exams would be offered at the end of each semester, as a student completed the course work, and students could take them multiple times if necessary.

This model is far preferable to the one winner-take-all graduation exam offered by some states. Those tests put too much pressure on students and can generate results too late to help those who fail. Pennsylvania's tests would cover smaller amounts of material at a time and, if students don't pass, they would have time for remediation.

This would increase responsibilities for local districts, but Mr. Zahorchak said the new exams need not mean more testing since the state tests could supplant finals already being given. But that's not the only concern. Introducing any new state exam will bring legitimate questions about accuracy and fairness. Just keeping track of who took what test could get tricky.

If the state Board of Education approves this plan -- as early as Jan. 17 -- it must not create an unfunded mandate for districts. The state should put its money where its mouth is. Clearly, appropriate testing alone will not ensure uniformity across 501 school districts or that students have learned what they need for future success. Still, this step is worth taking, with the long-term goal of making sure Pennsylvania diplomas are worth more than the paper they're printed on.

State should invoke graduation exams

October 29, 2007

The Issue: A resident asks the Daniel Boone School Board to oppose the establishment of high school graduation tests in Pennsylvania.

Our Opinion: Unlike tests designed to evaluate teachers' performances, tests to determine student proficiency would be appropriate.

There seems to be two groups of people in the education community. Both groups are advocating the importance of tests, but their tests are designed for strikingly different purposes. One group, which includes President Bush and all those who support his No Child Left Behind Act, advocate tests to evaluate the performance of teachers in the classroom. The other group, which includes members of the Commission on College and Career Success, a panel of educators, business representatives and advocates appointed by Gov. Ed Rendell, advocate tests to evaluate student proficiency in certain subjects.

In February the commission recommended urging Pennsylvania to require all state high school students to pass a test before they could graduate. Such a test would be similar to the Regents Examinations in New York. As we have said on more than one occasion, testing students to evaluate the proficiency of teachers is a bad idea. Even the best teachers can struggle to meet standards when faced with large class sizes, disinterested students and uninvolved parents.

Testing students before they graduate for proficiency in English, math, writing and perhaps one or two other subjects is a completely different issue. Last week Thomas K. Schadt, a retired teacher, asked the Daniel Boone School Board to oppose the idea of a state proficiency exam.

"I'm worried," Schadt said, "That a high school student with perfect attendance and grades, and never a discipline problem, may not pass a state-required graduation test. Then what about summer, work and college plans." If there were such a student — with perfect attendance and perfect grades but unable to pass a graduation test — that would speak volumes about the state of education in our country today. It would indicate that students — or at least this student — are given inflated grades and passed on to the next grade without having learned the skills they need to enter college or the workforce. Indeed a student who couldn't pass a graduation test would struggle mightily in college, provided he could get admitted.

District Superintendent David H. Robbins expressed frustration with state and federal mandates such as testing, and it is easy to understand his frustration. But also frustrated are business leaders throughout the commonwealth who say they have to teach too many young employees basic skills that they should have learned in high school, if not sooner.

As things stand now in Pennsylvania, students must show they meet state proficiency standards, but they can do so by either scoring proficient or advanced on the 11th grade Pennsylvania System of School Assessment exam or by showing proficiency on an equivalent local assessment.

Members of the state commission said the local provision doesn't assure a statewide graduation standard. The commission members recommended instead that graduation hinge either on scoring proficient or advanced on the 11th-grade test or on passing a collection of state-created tests that would cover math, English, American history, economics and government.

Harrisburg Patriot News

State proficiency tests a smart idea

Friday, January 18, 2008

A higher bar for students

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Who likes the idea? Employers. College teachers and admissions officers. Gov. Ed Rendell. People who gauge the changes in the world economy and the skills needed to land jobs. And probably plenty of teachers, students and parents, once they get past the misperception that this would be another bureaucratic layer of testing piled atop all the No Child Left Behind requirements.

The plan approved Thursday by the state school board faces reviews and approval by the Legislature. It would create 10 standardized competency tests -- two in English, three in math, two in science, three in social studies. Students would have to pass six to graduate; students who fail would get remedial help and retake them. Schools could also use other tests, such as the PSSAs in reading and math, Advanced Placement tests or local exams that districts use, if they are approved by the state as rigorous enough.

If that sounds like a lot of tests, it is. But the standardized competency exams could replace final exams now used by districts, and that's the general idea. More important, though, is that the state tests would set a bar of achievement to get a diploma and to prepare grads to get a job or go to college. Many students in Pennsylvania aren't meeting basic goals now and graduating anyway. That's not in dispute. Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak calls those promotions "empty diplomas," noting that about 45 percent of the 126,000 high school students who graduated last year did so without demonstrating proficiency in PSSA math and reading exams.

Pennsylvania isn't going out on a ledge. In New Jersey, statewide proficiency tests have been administered since the early 1990s. Those who don't pass the tests in 11th grade are placed in remedial classes and take an alternative test later on. Pennsylvania would have similar programs for those who fail, along with accommodations for special education kids and those struggling with English.

One valid objection is that some students learn and perform well in school, but do poorly in tests. That's the major failing of all such tests. But it is outweighed by the vast number of graduates who move on -- to entry-level jobs or college -- without basic skills, and without the ability to quickly pick up basic employment or study skills needed for the next step.

Graduation



Pa. high school diplomas should mean something

01/13/2008

College admissions officers and many employers learned long ago that a Pennsylvania high school diploma is a credential that guarantees very little in terms of a graduate's preparedness for higher education or work. Its value varies widely from district to district, and it doesn't say much about what a student knows.

Making that diploma a reliable credential of basic academic competence is the goal of the state Education Department in establishing a new system of graduation competency assessments. Students will take nine major tests in four subject areas — English, math, science and social studies — over the four-year course of a high school career, and will have to pass six of them in order to graduate.

Pennsylvania will join 22 states that have such standards verified by tests, and four others that are in the process of implementing them. Students now in sixth grade would be the first in Pennsylvania to take the tests, other than in Pittsburgh, where a pilot project will be implemented sooner.

The standards and testing are a matter of accountability for school districts and students. Students who fail a particular test will be able to retake it, and districts will be required to focus on bringing those students up to competency in the subject area.

According to Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak, 57,000 of Pennsylvania's 127,000 public school graduates last year lacked proficiency in reading or math, or both — 44 percent.

The key is the establishment of standards. All districts must comply, although they will have the option of whether to administer the tests as final exams or additional exams, subject by subject.

Going into the process, administrators, teachers and students will know the standards and what the students will have to know in order to pass. Meeting the standard is simple accountability, what the schools should be doing in the first place. As Pittsburgh Superintendent Mark Roosevelt, an ardent advocate of the standards, put it: the standards are a "systemic change in how schools treat the awarding of diplomas to make sure they're worth something before students are held accountable by the economy."

Scranton Times Tribune

Make diplomas more valuable

01/10/2008

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State should require tests for graduation

January 14, 2008

State Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak wants Pennsylvania high school students to pass tests to graduate. Our reaction is, why not?

It's hard to understand why those opposed to the idea don't want to make sure high school students are proficient in reading, writing and math before they receive a diploma.

Zahorchak has proposed a good alternative to local assessments. The state would offer 10 exams on math, language arts and social studies during a student's high school career. These tests would be given at the end of each semester. Students would need to pass five tests to graduate, and they could repeat the tests if necessary.

In the current process, the state demands a three-part requirement for graduating students: course completion, a senior project, and a display of proficiency in reading, writing and math on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment or by local school district assessment.

Zahorchak doesn't believe relying on local districts to assess proficiency is good enough. We don't, either. And neither does Erie schools Superintendent Jim Barker.

"What we're trying to do is give students one more option to demonstrate their proficiency," Barker said. "This will allow us to have many paths (to graduation) ... for students who need it."

Barker also made another important point. The proposed tests would clarify the value of a high school diploma in Pennsylvania. Each of the state's 501 public school districts have different graduation requirements and ways to assess proficiency in reading, writing and math. The state's new testing would bring uniformity.

Testing opponents, including Millcreek schools Superintendent Dean Maynard, complain that a new state assessment would mean one more testing burden for districts and students already overwhelmed by tests and testing. Other critics say the testing would be time-consuming, expensive, and unfair to districts and students.

They're right about the expense. If approved by the State Board of Education when it addresses it Thursday, the state should make sure it also pays for the tests.

Provided districts don't make the mistake of teaching the tests, the key question remains: Why not do this?