

February 20, 2009

Dear Honorable Senator's Piccola, Dinniman, Browne, Orié, and Yew,

While I respect the long term relationships which exist between legislators and some individuals who testified yesterday at the Senate Education Hearing on the GCA process, what needs to be focused on right now are the facts, the documentation, research, and evidence related to this proposal. As with all things, the facts should speak for themselves. Subjectivity should not be a part of the deliberations. For example, to suggest as it was "that some superintendents like this proposal and if you got rid of the PSSA, and did the GCA's they'd embrace it" is subjective. It's someone's personal and professional opinion. The fact is, PASA's position does not support the GCA process, in addition to PSBA, PSEA, AFT, The Gifted Education Association (PAGE), and numerous others.

In another example, to suggest that if our state eliminates the PSSA in lieu of doing the GCA ten-series of new tests, "would be a good idea", is again subjective. It's someone's personal and professional opinion. The fact is, that's not an option of the proposal itself by the Pennsylvania Department of Education which states that the new graduation requirements would have multiple ways about high school students earn a high school diploma by the following:

- By passing six of the ten series of Graduation Competency Assessments **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 GCA's.

Another fact, the PSSA cannot be simply eliminated because it is our state's assessment requirement to fulfilling the federal mandate for all schools to meet Adequate Yearly Progress through The No Child Left Behind Act. Testing data takes at least three years of longitudinal data to accumulate, before the Pennsylvania Value Added System can be utilized and districts can begin to formulate and make district wide decisions pertaining to refining their respective systems.

Fact Two: The PSSA works in cooperation of both the Pennsylvania Value Added Assessment and the Growth Model recently approved by the United States Department of Education. There is no guarantee a new testing series can provide the same efficiency without extensive investigation and validation of the results. These are two highly developed and extensive models that our Commonwealth previously invested in to have approved by the Federal Government to enable this tool be made available for our Commonwealth and our schools. The notion that one can simply eliminate one testing mechanism (PSSA) to afford another, is inaccurate. There are extraordinary implications, factors, and variables to consider, many of which were offered by various entities at

yesterday's hearing. These factors would have great impact on our education programs and services provided by our school system.

Fact Three: Too much money, manpower, energy, and effort has been invested in the development, administration, and implementation of the PSSA since its 1991 inception for our state to give it up now. That's not an opinion. Look at the past line items of budget appropriations dedicated to the PSSA since just 1997. The outstanding numbers are documented and speak for themselves.

Fact Four: The last requirement to the proposal as noted above will eliminate the ability of the school district's to provide this as a viable option to their students. That's a fact. Without, the PDE or the Secretary of Education suggesting so, the process and Penn State Study which will come out this Spring who is studying the disparity between local assessments and the PSSA or the GCA process, will be so costly for schools to do on a five year cyclic basis as required under the Chapter 4 regulations, that schools will not be able to be compliant as the costs associated with the affordability of a district having their assessment evaluated by an independent contractor every five years to meet the specifications will not enable them to. Compound that issue with today's economic factors and one will be led to believe that in lieu of having a local assessment, schools will just provide and make available the other three options. The PDE and the SBOE already knew this ahead of time when they devised these new requirements. It will force the local assessment to be eliminated once and for all. This was done by design.

Fact Five: It was alluded to at yesterday's hearing that this matter is not about one state exit exam. The fact is, this matter is about a process involving "one assessment" option chosen from the proposed requirements listed above and no matter which one you choose, it comes down to a testing mechanism being utilized to determine whether or not a student graduates when and with a diploma from high school. Semantics aside, this matter is about our state having an exit exam and our student's passing by one of the above options.

Fact Six: There's nothing in the NCLB Act, that requires states to have graduation exit exams. While the federal government may provide carrots and sticks to states who implement testing, the law as of this date has not been amended to reflect any new changes. Therefore, states should abide by the law.

Fact Seven: Oregon, Washington State, and Texas have reversed their positions on graduation exit exam requirements and processes which support those requirements. July 10, 2007, the Texas legislature voted to end their high school exit exam process and this change in policy will take effect in 2011. Oregon approved a plan beforehand to allow students to choose from three options: a national test, a state assessment, or a local version such as a student portfolio assessment. Texas adopted the same model as Oregon but made their rubrics for student portfolio's more objective than those of Oregon's. Texas and Oregon also devised new state standards, that are knowledge based and research based, they then modified their state assessment to then measure each student's ability to master those standards. Washington state is moving to the same model as

Oregon and Texas in 2013. There are many states, such as New Jersey who not only offer alternative diplomas but options for students based on differentiated learners and student achievement. The bottom line is that these states previously had options similar to those being proposed to us now, and they have now chosen a different route, moving past the one size fits all high stakes testing of the 1990's to make their students competitively more college ready and career ready.

There is an entire conversation about education not taking place in this Commonwealth. This broad-based conversation needs to include reevaluation of our state academic standards not just for high school, but, K-12 grade level by grade level, course by course. **Before any new assessment system can be developed or invested in,** our Commonwealth's due diligence in ensuring that our state standards are knowledge based and research based is crucial. Otherwise, we'll be just layering another layer of soil covering the roots and foundation of our education system which are our standards. Our commonwealth needs to determine if the academic standards we have are the right ones and provide the continuity into the college and work place with a K-16 mindset approach articulated at all levels. Our standards drive our curriculum our textbooks and materials, and classroom instruction. This has not been accomplished. To overlook and ignore this course of action by investing in the development of a new testing mechanism based on the same status quo standards will not yield the results Pennsylvania colleges and employers are looking for and defines the very definition of insanity by Albert Einstein" which is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results".

I appreciate the opportunity to share my research and experiences through my testimony yesterday for the good of the Commonwealth's students and schools. It was a pleasure and a privilege. Thank you again.

Sincerely,

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