

Mandating the PSSA as a High School Graduation Requirement

“Gatekeeper of the Future”

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Reference: Draft for Discussion on PDE’s Website of High School Graduation Requirements by the State Board of Education. www.pde.state.pa.us Pittsburgh Roundtable participation on August 1st at PATTAN

What is the Charge (rationale) for doing this?

The Pennsylvania State Board of Education has indicated verbally and written that there are too many of PA’s 501 school districts in Pennsylvania with a disparity between their local assessment and the PSSA and that too many high schools are graduating students who are not proficient in the academic standards and therefore giving them meaningless diplomas.

The SBOE and the Commission for College and Career Success share the fundamental belief that it is necessary to mandate the PSSA as a graduation requirement (meaning students have to score proficient in all areas of reading, writing, and math portions of the assessment) will lead to a more skilled Pennsylvania workforce which is necessary to be competitive for the 21st century global economy. It is their shared belief that eliminating the local assessment option in its entirety and shifting to a sole test indicator is the solution to their complex and purported problem. The local assessment option will be replaced in its entirety with a series of nine content area based assessments known as the GCA’s or Graduation Competency Assessments. These nine tests will be within each of four major content areas such as math, English/Language Arts, laboratory science, and American History, Economics, and Government.

What do the current Chapter 4 education regulations by the SBOE contain as per dealing with this specific charge?

The current Chapter 4 education regulations outline a process which allows the PDE to intervene in the event there are allegations or indications of deficiencies or disparity within any given district with the local assessment and the PSSA. The question needs to be asked “Has PDE done this?” “Has PDE intervened in districts where it believes discrepancies exist and tried to provide technical assistance to help school districts overcome their deficiencies as the procedural process outlined in Chapter 4?” “If not, then why not?” The commonwealth of Pennsylvania already has a system in place to address this specific situation which is not being utilized by either the SBOE or PDE. Now, these same entities, are proposing to add another layer to this system which is not in the best interest of the Commonwealth’s schools or students.

What is the political background of this initiative or where is the premise of this concept originating?

This specific initiative is a priority of Governor Rendell who sits on the board of the Washington based, national organization of ACHIEVE, Inc., created by the nation's governors and business leaders to help states raise academic standards and achievement so that all students graduate ready for college, work, and citizenship. Achieve, Inc. is promoting the American Diploma Project, an initiative launched by Achieve in partnership with The Education Trust and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington DC. The American Diploma Network (ADP) includes 29 states thus far who are dedicated to making sure that every high school student is prepared for college or work. Achieve is promoting the theory "That all states are doing this", "That states want standardization". Achieve's goal is to help states close the expectations gap so that all students graduate ready for success. There are three Democratic and three Republican governors who sit on the board of the Achieve, Inc. organization and six national business CEO's. Three of the governors have committed or pledged to initiate the American Diploma Initiative in their respective states.

On August 10 of 2005, by executive order, Governor Rendell issued a resolution and established the Commission on College and Career Success (herein referred to as "Commission" to "undertake a comprehensive review of the Commonwealth's laws, regulations, and policies to ascertain whether they set clear and consistent expectations for high school success to ensure that all students graduate ready for college and careers."

The recently appointed Commission on College and Career Success's final December 22nd, 2006 report indicated bold action to establish uniform and comprehensive standards for high school graduation. The Commission has also indicated strong interest in helping the Governor implement the various recommendations within the report statewide.

How does the State Board of Education fit into this process being played out?

The SBOE is compiled of appointed individuals by the various elected governors over the course of various terms of office. The SBOE is a layer of state bureaucracy as per it is an unelected body of people with power to make decisions which are not necessarily accountable to the general public as demonstrated through its long history of mandating statewide regulatory education provisions for all 501 of the commonwealth's schools. Naturally as one would suspect, governors would support and appoint those individuals onto this board who would support and carry out their administration's education initiatives and/or agendas. Over the years, the SBOE has held statewide public hearings and roundtables asking for public and written comment on a wide spectrum of education issues, but, ultimately has the power of decision making all to themselves before drafting and creating language for the regulatory review process.

As personally witnessed by myself at the August 1st Pittsburgh public roundtable and I quote a SBOE member "the status quo is no longer acceptable" referring to the SBOE's

commitment to implement this new initiative. My personal observation is, it is a fact the SBOE is moving forward to technically put into place a process despite lack of sense as per implementation without a broader discussion of sub issues and complex ramifications. There are a wide range of serious implications not being addressed, discussed, or responded to as per certain situations which will play out in the education system of our state involving a wide range of students representing all spectrums and there are no well thought out processes in place to address these situations according to the proposed draft. Again, I reiterate, that regardless of things making sense, the focus appears to be on the technicality portion of implementing the initiative by this entity. Situations involving Pennsylvania's most vulnerable students inclusive of special needs students, minority students, ESL students are not being thoroughly addressed as per accommodations. Serious school-wide implications and ramifications of students, staff, and schools are not even addressed in the proposed draft language of this document.

What are the facts based on the draft document? What do we know?

The State Board of Education is proposing many changes for students and schools in a relatively short time frame as contained in their draft entitled "High School Graduation Requirements and the 21st Century Economy" which is available to the public at www.pde.state.pa.us (Pennsylvania Department of Education website). This draft contains a summary of the findings of the Commission on College and Career Success and collaboratively with the State Board of Education is planning to implement some of its recommendations of the 2006 final report.

The main recommendation is specifically listed on the bottom of page two and reads: "Require all Pennsylvania high school students to demonstrate proficiency on Pennsylvania's academic standards to graduate. Students can demonstrate proficiency by scoring proficient or advanced on the 11th grade PSSA or by passing a series of state-developed Graduation Competency Assessments." Without saying so, this process is mandating a state curriculum and state assessment process and regardless if we realize it or not, our commonwealth will be moving from a local high school diploma to a "state diploma". A complete erosion of local control.

While students would be provided the opportunity to demonstrate proficiency on either the PSSA or GCA's, the Commission's report indicated they felt strongly that all students should be required to take the full complement of both types of exams. For example, if a student scored proficient on the PSSA's math portion, but, not of the science and reading, then that student would be required to retake the science and reading portion on the GCA and score proficiently in order to graduate from high school. The decision of how to test out of school will be left entirely to each student's discretion. Some students will take the PSSA and some will choose the GCA series and some will do both. Then at a later point in time, when scores are returned, schools will be mandated to provide at least three minimum administrations annually to students. It is expected that GCA's will be administered in December, May, and August and in addition to the current PSSA schedule which is offered in October and March annually. The Commission has

suggested that students may take each test up to five times through Grade 12. Interestingly, students will be allowed to request to take a GCA without taking its associated course and school districts will be required to grant course credit to students who pass one of the nine GCA's in which the exams are administered.

Students who remain in school for their 12th grade year and complete grade 12 despite not receiving a diploma to graduate may take the test an unlimited amount of times. Which leads to the curious question, what incentive does a student have for remaining in school once they have failed the series of graduation tests in their 11th and 12th grade year? Or in the event, they've passed the GCA's without taking the courses at all? What does this situation pose for the student's morale when struggling with testing numerous times? What about special education, disabled, and minority students who need accommodations due to a manifestation of their own personal circumstances? What about all students whose reality will not be to reach proficiency despite all their genuine attempts?

What Is The Time Frame?

The draft proposal indicates that full development and phase-in of the GCA's may take up to five years. However, the removal of the local assessment would begin as soon as possible and become effective immediately. Initial GCA's would be implemented as soon as possible, but, the phasing in of graduation requirements would be no later than 2014 to coincide with NCLB's ultimate goal of each child reaching proficiency by 2014.

The first class of Pennsylvania high school students to be affected by these changes will be the freshmen class of 2009-2010. In order for this class of students to graduate from any given high school in Pennsylvania, they must demonstrate proficiency in reading, writing, mathematics, and science on the 11th grade PSSA, 12th grade PSSA retake or on all of the GCA's in each subject in which the student did not score proficient on the PSSA.

Complex Questions Deserving Answers:

The technical questions are just as broad and complex:

- What will the costs be to develop & administer 9 different tests?
- Test preparation and remediation costs?
- How do we really know that local assessments are not rigorous enough?
- What measures does the PDE use to compare?
- Why should college prep and career prep now suddenly have to be the same thing? Do vocational and technical schools concur with college prep schools on this concept?
- Without accommodations for special education students how can we ensure these students do not fail when expected to take tests in subjects such as Algebra II & Chemistry?

- What process did the SBOE utilize to determine consensus of the PA business/industry in regards to standards and benchmarks?
- What plan of action does the state have in place to deter students from dropping out of high school as a result of this new mandate? How do you plan to address the economic implications of sustaining poverty?
- What appeals process does the state have in place when a B+ student files litigation against the state for not receiving a high school diploma and being prevented from entering college?
- Why are we removing the ability for teachers and staff to have academic freedom in providing a wide knowledge base of content and maximizing student's learning potentials in lieu of a narrow and similar statewide curriculum? Do all students need the same information and knowledge to succeed?
- How can we as a commonwealth have no concern to the fact that so many students will be denied diplomas even though they have met other graduation requirements set by school districts?
- What are businesses and higher education looking from in high school graduates? Are they in consensus?
- There are many levels of Algebra II, intermediate, basic, and honors...what is the content to be tested?
- The PSSA currently does not measure all the standards, but, just a sampling, how do you plan to choose what will be assessed? By anchors?
- Students with disabilities and English language learners need accommodations....PA could face litigation cases....how do you plan to address that?
- How is this proposed process consistent with IEP's which provide accommodations due to a manifestation of a student's disability?
- How will these new tests affect AYP determinations in schools?
- How can this process help students be successful?
- The GCA's tests don't match the current PSSA. The PSSA science focuses on environmental education and the science GCA's focus on biology and chemistry....how can this be the best way to design tests to be fair to students?
- Has the SBOE considered the consequences of these new standardized tests? A narrower curriculum, less time for courses to be offered, fewer electives for students to take in areas of their interest or future needs?
- The SBOE has indicated that there is a big discrepancy between graduation rates and students who do not score proficient on the 11th grade PSSA and that schools are graduating kids that do not deserve to graduate. Are local assessments the problem? If so, then give districts technical assistance in aligning local tests with academic standards and the PSSA, PDE should help to strengthen local assessments by providing support and resources to districts.
- Is this based on ideology or evidence? Show me the evidence. Is addressing the assessment solution fit the problem? If not, what is the right solution?
- What is PDE's research? How did PDE measure discrepancies? How did PDE really know that student was not proficient when he or she graduated? Perhaps

they passed local assessments, had excellent grades, and just didn't score proficient on the PSSA?

- The content areas in this proposal are not the only state academic standards, these are the only ones tested. What about the other standards not tested? How do they fit in? Not all standards are tested on the PSSA, therefore, what about career and work standards? Are not these standards also about preparing students for success after high school?
- How much will it cost taxpayers of PA in time and resources and schools via manpower to administer the tests multiple times?
- Section 4.81 of Chapter 4 allows PDE to intervene if there are allegations or indications of deficiencies within a district. Has PDE done this? Has the PDE intervened in districts where it believes discrepancies exist and tried to provide technical assistance to help school districts overcome their deficiencies? We have a system already in place to address this specific situation which is not being utilized by the SBOE or the PDE. Now these entities want to add another layer to this system and that is not the right answer for the commonwealth's schools.
- Will there be enough certified teachers statewide if we're going to make everyone take the same courses? How are these mandated courses for everyone going to fit in with the schedule for every student?
- How does the state plan to fund these changes?
- How can you guarantee what is tested is not only the information limited to be taught?
- How does this process engage students and provide relevancy to their curriculum?
- Will it be duly noted on the student transcript of how many times a student retakes the PSSA or GCA's on their transcript?
- Are we moving from a local school diploma to a state diploma?
- Are we creating an education caste system?
- Why are we emulating our commonwealth after the European model of education?
- If this is really about having all students proficient, then why are we passing the students in the younger grade levels that are not proficient and waiting until high school to assess, remediate, and determine if they graduate? Why are we not failing these kids now in 3rd grade and holding them back?
- Why would we utilize this process when our most vulnerable students such as special needs, black and minority students, and ESL will be discriminated upon even further than the process currently in place? What action plan other than giving these students multiple retakes on the GCA's is in place? What will be the incentive for these students to remain in school after so many limited retakes and unlimited retakes after 12th grade? Do we really think we'll be able to keep these students motivated to stay in school?
- What are the implications of standardized tests? Narrower curriculum? More testing time? Less time to offer AP Courses and electives?

Conclusions: The PSSA: “Gatekeeper of the Future”

Based on the draft proposal and discussions with the SBOE, it should be recognized by all involved and not involved that the PSSA will become the Gatekeeper of the future. This process will hinder minority students, increase high school drop outs, and become a GATEKEEPER of all student’s futures by determining who goes to college and succeeds and who goes automatically and directly into the workplace. This process is nothing more than an educational caste system which will weed out students, even ones who have met all the graduation criteria of a district, but, are still unable to pass a state assessment. Is this what will build a better & more improved workforce? What happened to free choice? The American Dream? Should these life changing issues be determined by our government? Or should it be at the choice of “the people”? Who knows what is best for our students and schools? Big business? The people closest to them that help support them in making decisions and providing guidance, such as teachers, principals, administrators, school boards, & communities? Or a commission of national and state government officials and unelected bureaucrats, and unelected special interest groups? Why is business dictating education to educators? These are just some of the “tip of the iceberg” questions that deal with the ideology and philosophy of the process.

This initiative is not about creating a better workforce. NAEP testing results indicate no increased test scores by those states who utilize implementing a state assessment as a mandate for high school graduation which reinforces the concept that perhaps the standards, curriculum, and/or in-classroom interventions need to be reexamined and refined in lieu of the assessment system, if employers are saying students do not possess the employable skills needed to have a competitive workforce. This initiative is not about disparity between the PSSA and the local assessment. If it was, they would utilize the process currently in place and referenced in Section 4.81 of the current Chapter 4 regulations. This is a total power grab by the state bureaucrats (meaning unelected bodies with power to make decisions). There is “no option” and these are “not tools” as purported by bureaucrats to school districts.

This initiative is not about having all students “proficient” in all academic standards. If it was, we would be and should be holding back every student in 3rd grade that scores below proficiency in any given academic content area of the PSSA. We should not be passing these students and waiting until they are in high school and then allow them to drop out of school due to frustration, lack of support, poor morale, and due to embarrassment because of multiple retakes of a single sole testing measure decided upon by the state.

Rather this is a federal and state systematic and managed approach in the government’s attempt to manage the state economy by separating the wheat from the chafe known as the Federal School To Work system. Relatively few people even know of this comprehensive government system that seeks to unilaterally restructure our educational, workforce, and health care systems. Whether you are a parent, a business person, an employer or an employee, a student or educator, this comprehensive system affects you!

Most of this system has been implemented in Pennsylvania since the mid-nineties and across the nation primarily by gubernatorial executive order. Having completely bypassed the elected General Assembly, this bureaucratically imposed system has and will continue to use millions of taxpayer dollars to quietly and discreetly market and advertise the benefits of the new system to carefully selected special-interest groups and businesses, as well, in an effort to woo their support for this government system.

Unbeknown to even many of these “stakeholders” is the true nature and ultimate impact of this system on literally every facet of our society. Therefore, it is my belief that it is critical and essential that every Pennsylvanian be presented with more information so they can determine for themselves whether or not they want this new government program thrust upon them.

What are “you” advocating?

I am advocating multiple measures of assessment as a way to best ensure that all students are proficient in reading, writing, math, and science. I am advocating that we can achieve without this plan to envision all our students in Pennsylvania to be equipped with the tools necessary for the 21st century based on their personal goals and abilities and to implement and refine differently than what is being proposed. I am advocating not to mandate remediation but to allow differentiated instruction of all students based on personal abilities and learning spectrums. I am advocating financial incentives for attracting high quality teachers for rural and urban school districts where no one wants to go or be. I am advocating that IEP’s be utilized as the process for determining individualized accommodations for special education and disabled students. I am advocating that we focus and reward struggling students on the continuation of good progress on a longitudinal scale in lieu of a one sole testing measure providing one test score. I am advocating appropriate state funding to support the initiatives being proposed in lieu of the local taxpayer. I am advocating professional development be renamed to professional learning, as learning opportunities for teachers and all are life long processes. I am advocating that we look to other states and successful models throughout the world which emulate successful education systems and tap into those resources. I am advocating that we allow each community to retain local control and oversight of their school system by being permitted to envision their vision and instill core community values within their respective school district which fly in the face of what is being proposed. I am advocating there should be a variety of assessment tools utilized by schools to demonstrate competency such as performance, portfolios, and local assessments in lieu of a single measure. I am advocating for the future of all students, what are “you” advocating? I believe there are alternative issues which can be addressed and refined in all school districts to address this problem leading to an improved and skilled workforce without compromising and dictating student’s futures based on a single sole test.

I sincerely encourage you in whatever capacity you work at, whether you are a parent, student, teacher, administrator, grandparent, legislator, or school board member to make

some contact as soon as possible with the State Board of Education and share your thoughts and insights into this matter based on what you have read today in this article.

The State Board of Education is currently drafting regulatory language to impose these recommendations and processes and this matter will require your immediate attention. Their address is:

The State Board of Education
333 Market Street, 1st Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

I encourage you as well to contact your state representatives and senators as well, as they do not know of this information as of this date and are not aware of what is currently in progression in regards to this matter.

Thank you,
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I will place this article for reference on my website listed above. Click on the PSSA Page.