

Pennsylvania Graduation Competency Assessments
Meeting with Secretary Dr. Gerald Zahorchak, Secretary of Education
At Midwestern Intermediate Unit 4, Monday, November 26, 2007

Despite all states moving to exit exams doesn't equate to American Colleges seeing better prepared freshmen, because most high school state exit exams do not appear to be aligned with the knowledge and skills that are necessary for college readiness. Of the 65% of public high school students that must pass an exit exam in order to graduate, the 23 states with exit exams (many done with the help of ACHIEVE, Inc. the same group proposed by Governor Rendell and PPC) only six states indicated their test was designed to measure the knowledge and skills needed for college. Only nine of the 23 states said their tests were intended to measure readiness for the workplace.....this is according to the Center on Education Policy's national survey and white paper on "High School Exit Exams" released on September 6th, 2007.

A majority of states instead use the high school exit exams to measure mastery of state designed curriculum and standards, a pattern suggesting that the states lack a clear idea of the purpose of the exit exams or the need of tough standards. The Governor's Commission on College and Career Success's first recommendation is "Require all Pennsylvania high school school students to demonstrate proficient on Pennsylvania's academic standards to graduate....." defines the "purpose" in which Pennsylvania plans to utilize the exit exam test....for the purpose of measuring mastery of the standards. But, does this necessarily equate to college or career readiness? There is an obvious disconnect in education between the high school and college level and the college level and workplace.....lack of communication as well as lack of consensus. Many state officials said their high schools and colleges have not discussed tying the exit exams to what students need to know in college. The states of Maryland and Washington were exceptions, and many states have moved toward more challenging tests.

What does the data say from Various State Officials? All 24 states with exit exams participated in this portion of the CEP, September 2007 survey and could provide more than one response to the following purposes listed below:

- **18 of the 24 participating states reported that the purpose of the state high school exit exam is to determine prospective high school graduate's mastery of the state curriculum, academic standards, and curriculum frameworks.**
- **18 of 24 states believe the purpose is to provide data to state policymakers on student attainment of state education goals to inform educational policy decisions.**
- **17 of 24 states encourage districts and schools to identify and serve students at risk of academic failure.**
- **16 of 24 states increase alignment of local curriculum and programs with instruction with state education standards.**
- **15 of 24 states say the purpose of high school exit exams is to serve to promote equity of opportunity across all student groups.**
- **13 of 24 states say the exit exams serve to provide high schools with student academic diagnostic information.**
- **9 of 24 states say the purpose of the exit exams is to determine high school graduate's knowledge and skill levels relative to those needed for entry-level employment.**

- 6 of 24 states say the purpose of the exit exam is to determine prospective high school graduate's knowledge and skill levels relative to those needed for postsecondary education.

Conclusion of the above data provided by State officials of state education departments?

***The above state survey responses identified the purpose of the exit exam of preparing students for life after high school was among the "least identified purposes" for implementing high school exit exams. In fact, less than 38% of the participating states reported that determining prospective high school graduate's knowledge and skill levels relative to those needed for entry-level employment was a purpose for implementing high school exams, while only 25% of the states reported the purpose was to prepare for college readiness.**

So, in other words, we have graduates from states with state exit exams who have scored proficient or advanced in mastery of their respective state standards, which are inconsistent on a state by state basis, yet, our nation is still yielding increasing remedial results of students in colleges and there is no outstanding or noteworthy state with the distinction of proving themselves through this reform effort based on data, research, and evidence which reinforce either college readiness or career readiness of graduating students. There is no history of data to ensure to the rest of the nation, that this reform is effective and there is no history of a specific state with noteworthy results of specific students having success post high school as a result of the exit exam reform. In other words, schools and students are just going through the motions and jumping through the state hoops they need to jump through in order to graduate with no guarantee of readiness or success.

What else does this data say?

The data responses of state officials (listed above) are suggesting that there are a different skill set and a set of standards needed for each as pertaining to college readiness and entry-level employment and career success.

Why does this inconsistency matter?

Proponents advocating this reform are suggesting these standards for college readiness and career readiness are one and the same. The Governor's Commission has stated "Every Pennsylvania student must graduate from high school college and career ready if our commonwealth's economy is to fulfill its promise".

Conflict Not Addressed:

How can students be effectively prepared for either or both simultaneously for college readiness and career success when the assessment mechanism determining that outcome is being utilized for other purposes and furthermore not tied specifically to either college readiness and career readiness, regardless if they are synonymous with one and other, or not?

So, what happens as a result of not addressing this conflict? Real Policy Reform Producing Real Results? or More Conformity Producing More of the Same?

When the SBOE comes out in January 2008 with their new regulations addressing this matter, this aspect will not be mentioned, as its not been considered.....and the reason I know that, is this is being done for political purposes and not based on ideology. This is the piece not only missing, but, not being addressed, therefore, PA will invest millions of dollars through administrative and staff manpower and resources in making this happen only to become one of the 24 states with an exam that do not appear to be aligned with the knowledge and skills necessary for college readiness. The assumption that mastery of the standards guarantees the critical thinking skills necessary for college readiness is not one and the same. In other words, we will have done this all for nothing. Remediation efforts will increase and continue despite students meeting proficiency on standards and the energy and effort will result in much more the same.

Recommendation:

Therefore, I will be requesting that this Commonwealth do what is necessary to ensure accountability that the "purpose" of this proposed process pertaining to making the PSSA and nine graduation competency assessments be clearly defined and understood by all parties involved, before advancing this agenda statewide.

In other words, if it's to measure mastery of standards, then that's what needs to be conveyed. Pennsylvania schools and students already know from the PSSA which students have mastered the standards with proficiency and those who have not. The only difference now is that graduation is being with held to the bottom percentage of students not scoring proficient or advanced on the PSSA or passage of the required GCA portions.

Second, if it is tied to and to provide college readiness, then that's what all colleges and universities, students, schools, and stakeholders need to be informed of. If the purpose is to serve employment readiness, then, employers need to be informed ahead of time so we can all be prepared to meet the expectations and glean the results accordingly. But the assumption that all three factors can be achieved through one assessment is complete absurdity.

Is it acceptable for all our students, schools, staffs, and stakeholders, inclusive of colleges and places of employment, not to know ahead of implementation what the purpose of the exit exam is? Is it acceptable to have these stakeholders misled in the state's attempt to implement this reform without their full knowledge of the results expected to be gleaned as a result of the reform? Is it appropriate to be dubious in our attempts as a commonwealth to rush through a process without examining the full repercussions and implications of not defining the purpose to which the exam is to initially serve? Is it appropriate for colleges and places of employment to see results contrary to their expectations only to learn at a later point in time that the purpose of the test was to meet mastery of the standards and curriculum when both are expecting college readiness and career readiness? The stakeholders in this high stakes process deserve no less than to know the truth in lieu of an illusion of accountability.

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