

Performance Levels of PSSA:

On May 10, 2001, the PA State Board of Education approved the performance levels that correspond to student scores on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). The four mandated levels are advanced, proficient, basic, and below basic. The PDE website www.pde.state.pa.us explains how these performance level scoring ranges were developed. First, the bookmark method was used, whereby 1000+ educators, parents, community, and business leaders looked at the PSSA test questions and ranked them from below basic to advanced. Then they placed a “bookmark” at the point in the test booklet that best represented each of the four levels.

Next, the Borderline Groups Method was used. “Teachers determined whether or not students were performing advanced, proficient, basic, or below basic work, and if the student’s work fell at the borderline of two levels. These ratings were then related to the student’s actual PSSA scores.

Questions arise: Are these reliable, valid methods for setting scores for a high stakes test? Is the state reinventing the wheel by creating a state test when standardized commercially available tests with long histories of proven reliability and validity already exist?

As set forth in the Chapter 4 regulations, section 4.51 (e) “students not achieving at the proficient level in the administration of state assessments in grade 11 shall be provided one additional opportunity in grade 12 to demonstrate a proficient level on state assessments.” It’s important to note that “that same student” will be taking a different PSSA test than they did in grade 11 and that student’s test results will be compared with a different group of students and with a different state average and cut score. Is this fair? The students taking the test vary every year because the PSSA is a “snapshot” look at a student and not a longitudinal process following a student from one year to the next. There is no way to determine how an individual student, student group, or entire class is going to perform ahead of time on the PSSA or any other assessment for that matter. The number of boys changes yearly, the number of girls, the number of individualized education program students change yearly, causing difficulty to find consistency and correlation with raw data, even when measuring the standards. In essence we have a new group of students with new scoring each and every year. Raw data can be interpreted and then presented in many different ways to suit one’s respective argument. Such accounts as those schools flagged publicly onto various lists, likely will lead individuals to conclude that the majority of the state’s public schools are substandard or failing, which is simply not true. It is simply not good policy to implement or tolerate a system that rewards failure of school districts. Yet, that is exactly what Pennsylvania is doing causing an unequal distribution of funding throughout the commonwealth. This would never be tolerated in the private sector, yet there are some policymakers in Harrisburg which indicate we should tolerate it in the education of our future generations of students.

What Should Education Be For? What’s the Agenda? Is there One?

Various challenges to public schools have been developed by state and federal government which have changed the face of public education and its mission as we know it by placing an emphasis on various forms of privatization of public education. (I first wrote that statement in 1999, not knowing No Child Left Behind would eventually confirm the fact I long suspected with even greater emphasis.) While Pennsylvania has always prided itself on being a “local control” state and local control has always been a significant priority within the school community, local control is gradually being eroded away. The state government, along with powerful bureaucracies, such as the Pennsylvania State Board of Education, which is a body of unelected people, appointed by the sitting Governor at the time of appointment has contradicted its rhetoric by its actions regarding proposed changes and education reforms through statewide regulations and mandates upon the local level. There are several schools of thought as to what the political and philosophical arguments or agenda is here in Pennsylvania, especially while interconnecting to some of the processes involving our state assessment system.

What should Education be for? There is a fundamental difference in opinion as to what education should be doing and providing our students. We need to ask "Should we be limiting or allowing commerce or the economy to dictate the needs of the curriculum in an effort to build a better workforce?" Mainstream media is constantly reporting that American students are trailing their Asian counterparts in math and science and those students cannot measure nor do simple math to count out change as a cashier? "Or should we educate a person to reach their maximum learning potential to become their personal best?" One perspective shared by many is the speculation that the PSSA is really about workforce development and the human resource boards currently being put into place county by county throughout Pennsylvania. What better way for the state to sample the upcoming workforce and certify its components before disbursement of the sample? What better means to determine what a person or a group of people is like than to assess at the age of 17, in mass, their written responses to open-ended questions, such as on the writing portion of the PSSA and NEW SAT 2005) about their attitudes towards choosing our leaders, the work ethic, rewards, punishments, and various other issues pertaining to society? The writing prompt once proposed on a PA state test and I paraphrase "Some people think you should work for an allowance and others think you should receive one. Which one are you?" Though the scorers are supposedly scoring the essays about questions like these according to the rules of quality writing, it is quite possible the "quality" of ideas and attitudes expressed by our young students could be examined through their responses. The State will argue that after the scoring procedures, the assessments are destroyed; however, there are no clear answers as to what is processed with all of the information and data gathered. State and Federal contracts indicate that our systems of government, schools, and businesses are being restructured in a way that will allow our states to manage the economy and dictate needs based upon that economy.

The second political perspective shared by many throughout Pennsylvania is the poorly designed state assessment was designed intentionally to make public education appear bad to worse in PA's schools as a way of allowing privatization of public education to occur. With the advent of No Child Left Behind in 2001 and the PSSA utilized as the mechanism, we will see schools restructured throughout the commonwealth and school choice provided to families within the next five years. Urban area school districts will be impacted initially. These schools will become consolidated, privatized, charter schools, or literally taken over by the State. Neither of these perspectives is unquestionable and perhaps could even be a combined effort, as both agendas are progressively moving forward at the current time.