



**Testimony to the House Education Committee
House Bill 168 and House Bill 177
Elimination State-Mandated Exams as a Graduation Requirement;
And the Establishment of an Academic Standards Commission**

Presented by

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Good morning. My name is Bill LaCoff and I am the president of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association. With me today is John Callahan, PSBA's director of government affairs. The Pennsylvania School Boards Association is a nonprofit statewide association representing the 4,500 elected officials who govern the commonwealth's public school districts. PSBA is a membership-driven organization that is pledged to the highest ideals of local lay leadership for public schools. We work to support reforms for the betterment of public education and to promote the achievements of public schools, students and local school boards.

My thanks to Chairman Saylor and this committee for giving PSBA the opportunity to testify on two important pieces of legislation supported by the association: House Bill 168, which addresses high school graduation requirements and the implementation of Keystone Exams; and House Bill 177, which creates an Academic Standards Commission to study and offer recommendations concerning the Pennsylvania Core Standards.

House Bill 168: Removes Keystone Exams as graduation requirement and halts development of additional state tests

School boards believe that assessments do not need to have high-stakes consequences to send meaningful signals to students and schools or to provide policy makers with useful information. Testing should inform and enhance instruction, not impede instruction. The implementation of Keystone Exams should be modified to lessen their high-stakes impact and provide additional flexibility. House Bill 168 accomplishes this by removing the state-mandated requirement for Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement. Under the bill, the exams would be administered at the secondary level solely for federal accountability purposes to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, as are the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) tests for grades 3-8. There is nothing in the bill to prohibit a school district from using the Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement, or to determine the weight needed to receive a diploma, if it wished to use them for this purpose.

High-stakes tests do not work

There is no evidence that high stakes tests accomplish the majority of the policy goals they were developed to support. The National Research Council's 2011 Incentives and Tests-Based Accountability in Education Study concludes that there is no scientific basis for the current heavy reliance on high stakes tests for measuring student achievement or school performance. The NRC states that the benefit of high stakes tests have been "small or nonexistent." Many researchers have evaluated testing and have indicated the following:

- **Test-based decisions do not prepare students for college success.** Some students who successfully demonstrate learning through classroom performance do not score well on standardized tests. These often include students with test anxiety and learning disabilities as well as students whose first language is not English. A review of research has found that there is no definitive evidence that college enrolment rates increase with high stakes tests.
- **High-stakes tests reinforce inequity.** Typical students do not appear to benefit greatly by taking exit exams, but those that are already vulnerable, such as low-income and minority students often are worse off. The National Research Council Blue Ribbon

Commission found that high school exit exams decreased graduation rates for vulnerable populations by two percentage points on average.¹

- **High stakes tests increase dropout rates.** A 2013 study by Steve Hemelt and Dave Marcotte looked closely at the relationship between exit exams and high school completion and found that the dropout rate was increased by 11 percent when examining those students in twelfth grade (the year exit exams truly have their ultimate impact).
- **High Stakes testing is not associated with workforce success.** In the study of research on exit exams performed by the National Research Council it was found that high-stakes tests based on standards are likely not associated with higher employment or earning for students overall.
- **High-stakes testing produces teaching to the test.** The higher the stakes, the more schools focus instruction on the tests. As a result, whole subjects are being dropped, including opportunities for music and art. Important skills that cannot be tested with standardized tests, such as writing research papers, public speaking or conducting laboratory experiments, are not taught. This narrowing of curriculum is most severe for low-income students. A study of California, Georgia and Pennsylvania school districts found that teachers narrowed their curriculum and instruction to focus on tested topics and also increased their use of test like problems and formats.²

Financial impact of testing

PSBA supports provisions of House Bill 168 that would reduce the number of Keystone Exams. Last year PSBA was grateful to hear that PDE had no plans to develop additional Keystone Exams, beyond the three tests currently required. The creation and implementation of seven additional Keystone Exams is an expensive and time-consuming process. From a budget perspective, the fact is that state dollars are scarce and scaling back the Keystone Exams program is reasonable and practical. The development and implementation of the three Keystone Exams now being used has cost taxpayers approximately \$70 million over a six-year period. Many more millions are being spent by the state to develop, provide, distribute, collect, analyze and report results of tests that support instruction and accountability for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessments (PSSA), Keystone Exams, Classroom Diagnostic Tools and other assessments.

An additional cost to districts is the extensive recordkeeping systems to match students with the Keystone Exams that have been successfully completed and those for which remediation will be necessary. Additionally, there are many new costs related to the project-based assessments.

Act 82 of 2012, as well as Chapter 4, subjects the availability of Keystone Exams to funding appropriated by the General Assembly. Reducing the number of exams *in no way* diminishes the importance or ability of students to demonstrate proficiency in these core subject areas or coursework. In fact schools are still required to provide instruction in these content areas and for students to demonstrate proficiency. The proposed reduction in Keystone Exams simply means

¹ Jennifer Jellison Holme, Meredith P. Richards, Jo Beth Jimerson and Rebecca W. Cohen "assessing the effect of high school exit examinations," review of educational research December 2010

² Hamilton, L.S., Stecher, B.M., March, J.A., McCombs, J.S., Robyn Russel, J.L. et al. (2007) Standards -based accountability under No Child Left Behind: Experiences of teachers and administrators in three states. Santa Monica, CA: RAND

that there will not be a state-mandated standardized test associated with the content. Schools will continue to provide instruction and will determine at the local level how those assessments will be conducted.

Requirements for project-based assessments should also be eliminated

The state has created a highly prescriptive, time consuming and expensive mandated process that school districts must follow to implement a project-based assessment (PBA) for students who do score proficient on a Keystone Exam, or who were opted-out of taking the exams for religious reasons. The PBA is a mandate under section 4.51c of the Chapter 4 regulation, and PDE has created extensive processes and rules for implementation. The online testing system created by PDE does not allow for teachers to consider other measures of student performance and the needs of diverse learners in determining proficiency; rather, it places that decision in the hands of state-selected review panels.

If the requirement for Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement is eliminated, there is no need to continue the requirement for completion of project-based assessments. Concerns with the PBA include:

1. Cost, time and staffing to implement the online PBA, as well as the necessary technology. These online assessments could take 10 hours or more for a student to complete and must be done at school in the presence of a test administrator. Further, each student must have a tutor who is a teacher certified in the subject area that the student is testing in. The teacher is expected to act as a tutor to monitor the work, offer feedback and provide remediation to guide the student to success. If done before or after school, or during the summer, cost and time issues must be considered.
2. School districts must implement the infrastructure to support students working on projects. This includes district assessment coordinators, school building assessment coordinators, test administrators, and teacher tutors. Training is required for staff in each of these roles, and a great amount of recordkeeping is required to determine timelines for completion, provide notifications, schedule sessions and monitor students to ensure they have participated in the PBA and completed their goals.
3. Time necessary for each PBA to be evaluated by a statewide review panel. Once a student completes a PBA, it must be reviewed by the district tutor and then submitted to an evaluation panel assembled by PDE. If the panel decides the project work is unsatisfactory, the student must re-do and re-submit the project.

House Bill 177: Review of the PA Core Standards

House Bill 177 creates an Academic Standards Commission to study and offer recommendations concerning the Pennsylvania Core Standards. PSBA supports this bill because it provides an avenue for further public review and an opportunity to suggest adjustments if necessary.

Academic standards are not new to Pennsylvania. Our State Board of Education adopted its first standards in Mathematics and Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening that became effective in January, 1999. Additional standards in other content areas were later adopted in subsequent years between 2002 and 2006. In 2008, the State Board began a review of the standards for language arts, math, science and social studies that existed at that time, with the intention of

refining those existing standards rather than create a major overhaul. However, during the summer of 2009, the draft revisions were withdrawn from further consideration and all work to review the standards was postponed because Pennsylvania wanted to apply for Race to the Top funds and had already agreed to participate in the Common Core State Standards initiative.

Much has been said by various stakeholders, both for and against, about the creation of the national Common Core Standards that were initially adopted by the Pennsylvania State Board of Education in 2010. Since 2010, however, the State Board amended the national standards to tailor them more closely to Pennsylvania's specific educational needs. The Department of Education has worked to integrate and align the standards to various grade levels and develop curriculum frameworks, materials and resources for school teachers and administrators.

Under the Chapter 4 regulations that became final and effective in March 2014, the standards are known as the PA Core Standards. The state and school districts have invested much time and money in efforts to implement these standards. While PSBA has raised questions and concerns regarding curriculum development and testing based on feedback from school directors and expressed through our platform, the association notes that it would be difficult, time-consuming and expensive for districts to reverse directions after all of this work has happened.

As these discussions continue, it is important to understand that standards and curriculum are not the same thing. Standards are statements of what students are expected to know at specific grade levels. Standards are a "goal line" set to be achieved in specific subject areas. Schools accomplish educating their students to reach the goal lines set by standards through curriculum, lesson plans and other tools. In Pennsylvania, that has always been up to local school officials.

PSBA supports the creation of a commission as established under House Bill 177 that would contain school directors as well as public school administrators, teachers and others. The association would call upon the commission to conduct thoughtful research and meaningful deliberations as it considers recommendations. PSBA is concerned that changes to the standards, will require further adjustments by school districts, creating the need for additional time and increased funding.

In closing, PSBA would like to emphasize our belief that public schools serve to provide meaningful academic instruction and assessment that engages students to be critical and creative thinkers. The association supports efforts to appropriately measure student attainment of state and local academic standards using measures of accountability and performance that employ multiple, ongoing methods of assessment for knowledge, skills and abilities. The state needs to provide local school districts with maximum flexibility to make educationally sound decisions that expand opportunities for students, without an overreliance on standardized test scores, high-stakes tests, a narrowing of the curriculum, or prescriptive mandates.

We thank you again for this opportunity to speak with you today and are pleased to answer your questions.