



a **closer** LOOK

A better approach to high school graduation

Pennsylvania is at an important crossroad in creating new state-level graduation requirements that are both rigorous and accountable, while giving students flexibility to demonstrate readiness for success beyond high school.

Senate Bill 1095 revises Pennsylvania's one-size-fits-all mandate to pass three Keystone Exams to receive a high school diploma by establishing multiple pathways to determine student readiness. With the current requirement now on hold, the General Assembly has an opportunity to establish a better approach to high school graduation. Legislators are urged to take swift action to send Senate Bill 1095 to the governor this fall.

Concerns with Keystone Exams

Current state regulations adopted by the State Board of Education in 2014 under Title 22, Chapter 4, require students to pass three Keystone Exams in Literature, Algebra I and Biology in order to graduate. In addition, the regulations require students who are not proficient on any Keystone Exam to be provided supplemental instruction and re-take the exam(s) or complete one or more project-based assessments.

Although the requirement was intended to begin with the Class of 2017, the General Assembly has rightly delayed the effective date three times amid concerns that this approach should not be the only appropriate measure of student proficiency or become a barrier in being eligible to graduate. Act 1 of 2016 established a moratorium until 2019, Act 55 of 2017 extended the moratorium until 2020, and Act 39 of 2018 further extended the delay until 2021.

Using the Keystone Exams for graduation purposes adds a high-stakes element to these standardized tests and does not recognize students who can demonstrate educational ability and postsecondary/career readiness





in other valid ways. Policymakers have an opportunity to change this rigid system and establish alternate pathways for students to graduate. The need for action is immediate. Students entering their sophomore year of high school in the fall of 2018 are impacted by the current requirement. They, and their school districts, need to be able to adequately prepare for change.

(Note: Because Keystone Exams are also used as the statewide assessment for federal accountability, students continue to take these tests, but the results are not currently counted as a graduation requirement.)

Pennsylvania's search for options

The delay under Act 1 of 2016 served two purposes – it pushed the first pause button on the Keystones for graduation and called for the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to research the issue and recommend valid options for graduation.

The Act 1 report issued by PDE in August 2016 acknowledged that the current graduation requirement fails to provide students with a sufficient number of measures to demonstrate mastery of content and readiness for postsecondary success. The Act 1 report recommended four alternative options for students to demonstrate readiness. They include: Option 1) achieve a composite score based on performance of all three Keystone Exams; Option 2) achieve equivalent scores on alternate assessments approved by PDE; Option 3) for students who are career and technical education (CTE) concentrators, demonstrate competency through course grades and related assessments as well as industry-based tests consistent with their career plan; and Option 4) demonstrate competency through course grades and related assessments as well as evidence related to postsecondary plans.¹

First pathway enacted for CTE students

Legislators first focused on the need to provide flexibility for students in career and technical education (CTE) programs. Act 6 of 2017 established alternative pathways aligned with Option 3 by allowing CTE concentrators to demonstrate proficiency by completing locally established grade requirements for academic content areas associated with the Keystone Exams and one other following: 1) attaining an industry-based competency certification on tests such as the National Occupation Competency Testing Institute (NOCTI) or the NIMS (National Institute of Metalworkers Skills); or 2) demonstrating readiness through performance on benchmark assessments and other factors consistent with the student's goals and

career plan. With elements of Option 3 enacted into law, the General Assembly and the governor showed their understanding of the need for change and the willingness to take appropriate action.

More states ending exit exams

A rising discontent with the use of graduation tests is happening nationwide. Research shows that many states are eliminating or scaling back high school exit exams. From a high of 27 states that had or planned to have graduation tests, just 13 required them for the 2016-17 school year. In the past few years, 11 states ended their tests or imposed a moratorium, including Pennsylvania which adopted a moratorium before its tests went into effect. Six states retroactively granted diplomas to students who had been denied them based on test scores. A few states still plan to impose new tests, and a few others have or will require state exams that count as part of course grades.²

PSBA, stakeholders draft legislative proposal

PSBA and education stakeholder groups including the PA Association for School Administrators (PASA), PA Principals Association and the PA State Education Association (PSEA) listened to the concerns and recommendations from the field regarding graduation requirements. Among the top issues that need to be broadly addressed are to provide fair and valid options for students that reflect different strengths and goals, and to address time, resource and cost concerns associated with supplemental instruction and project-based assessments that proved to be unwieldy and unworkable.

Using the PDE Act 1 Report recommendations as a basis for a new plan, the stakeholder groups worked with legislators to draft a proposal. Sen. Thomas McGarrigle introduced Senate Bill 1095 in April and it was unanimously passed by the Senate in June. Additional work on the bill is being done in the House of Representatives with the goal of getting the measure to the governor this fall.

Since the bill's introduction, other key stakeholders have joined in support of Senate Bill 1095 including PDE, the PA Association of Intermediate Units (PAIU) and the PA Association of Career & Technical Administrators (PACTA). The addition of these stakeholders gives the legislation even more widespread support from the education community.



Senate Bill 1095, as amended in the House, includes these commonsense pathways to graduation beginning with the Class of 2022:

Option 1: Composite score on Keystone Exams

A student attains a satisfactory composite score on the three Keystone Exams, with a proficient score on at least one exam and no less than basic on the remaining two exams. The composite score will be recommended by the secretary of education and approved by the State Board of Education by July 30, 2019. Every five years, the State Board will review the operation of the satisfactory composite score and issue a report of its findings to the Senate and House Education committees. The score will remain in effect unless it is changed by the General Assembly.

Option 2: Local grade requirements + alternative assessments or apprenticeships

A student completes locally established minimum grades in the associated academic content areas of the Keystone Exams and one of the following:

- Attainment of an established score on the SAT, PSAT, ACT or the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery Test (ASVAB)
- Attainment of at least the Gold Level on the ACT WorkKeys® Assessment
- Attainment of an established score on an AP or IB exam in the associated Keystone Exam content area
- Successful completion of a concurrent enrollment course or any postsecondary course in the associated Keystone Exam content area
- Successful completion of a pre-apprenticeship program
- Acceptance to an accredited four-year nonprofit institution of higher education and evidence of the ability to enroll in college-level, credit-bearing coursework

Option 3: Local grade requirements + additional CTE evidence of readiness

Senate Bill 1095 incorporates the flexibility already provided for career and technical education concentrators under Act 6 of 2017. The bill also includes new language to clarify the law about who determines a student's likelihood of success and when that determination is made so that CTE concentrators have sufficient time to explore alternate pathways when needed.

Option 4: Local grade requirements + additional evidence of readiness

A student completes locally established minimum grades in the associated academic content areas of the Keystone Exams and three pieces of evidence that reflect readiness for meaningful postsecondary engagement consistent with the student's goals and career plan.

One piece of evidence must be from Tier 1:

- Attainment of an established score on the ACT WorkKeys® Assessment (may be below the Gold Level)
- Attainment of an established score on an SAT subject-specific test
- Acceptance to an accredited nonprofit institution of higher education other than an accredited four-year nonprofit institution and evidence of the ability to enroll in college-level, credit-bearing coursework
- Attainment of an industry-recognized credential
- Attainment of an established score on an AP or IB exam
- Successful completion of a concurrent enrollment course or any postsecondary course

Two pieces of evidence may be from Tier 2:

- Any additional item from Tier 1
- Satisfactory completion of service learning project pre-approved for use by a chief school administrator
- Attainment of a proficient or advanced score on a Keystone Exam
- A letter guaranteeing full-time employment
- A certificate of successful completion of an internship, externship or cooperative education program
- Satisfactory compliance with the NCAA core courses for college-bound athletes with a minimum 2.0 GPA or equivalence

Other key provisions under Senate Bill 1095

- The established scores for the alternate exams will be recommended by the secretary of education and approved by the State Board of Education.
- Successful completion of any science & technology and environment & ecology course satisfies the required associated academic content area of the Keystone Exam in biology.



- The existing requirement for project-based assessments is eliminated.
- Schools may choose to offer supplemental instruction and students may choose to participate.
- Students with disabilities who satisfactorily complete their Individualized Education Program will be granted high school diplomas.
- Schools will determine if the coursework and assessments of students who transfer from out-of-state schools satisfy graduation requirements.
- Schools will submit an annual report to PDE regarding the options and waivers used by their graduates.

Waivers

Senate Bill 1095 allows a chief school administrator to waive the requirements under Options 1-4 on a case-by-case basis for a 12th-grade student or to accommodate a student who experiences extenuating circumstances. Students who receive waivers must still meet local grade requirements. If waivers are granted for more than 5% of the students in the graduating class, the district must submit a one-year action plan to PDE for approval. If the district exceeds the 5% threshold in two consecutive years, the district must submit a three-year action plan, undergo a diagnostic audit and receive technical assistance from PDE. However, if PDE determines that the students who are experiencing extenuating circumstances as defined in the bill caused the district to exceed the 5% threshold, no action plan is necessary.

Accountable, rigorous, valid

Public school leaders agree that the assessment strategies used to determine readiness for high school graduation must be rigorous, valid and meaningful. However, the Keystone Exams should not be considered as the only conclusive measure of readiness to graduate. A better, more balanced, system for evaluating students' readiness must be used. Above all, the new system must be accountable, valid and relevant to each student's unique goals for the future.

Senate Bill 1095 provides a rich array of rigorous strategies without eroding the intent to ensure oversight and accountability to our public education system. In

fact, it more clearly enables students to demonstrate their readiness for college and career by requiring successful completion of both locally selected indicators and objective pieces of evidence from outside sources, including alternative tests.

Providing these options does not diminish the importance or ability of students to demonstrate proficiency in key academic content areas. Rather, it establishes a system that allows schools and teachers obtain a more complete picture of a student's knowledge, skills and talents in various academic areas as a basis for awarding a diploma. Reducing the reliance on Keystone Exams simply means that these tests will not necessarily be given the greatest weight in determining student readiness for graduation. No student would be barred from graduation based solely on Keystone Exam scores.

Conclusion

Pennsylvania's current graduation requirements fail to provide students with flexibility to demonstrate mastery of content and readiness for postsecondary success. Measuring readiness to graduate should not be narrowly limited to scoring proficient on Keystone Exams. As success looks different for different students, better measures should be used as valid and appropriate graduation requirements. That approach is found in Senate Bill 1095.

Based on the recommendations in PDE's Act 1 report, Senate Bill 1095 expands opportunities for students by providing multiple, rigorous pathways to demonstrate readiness for high school graduation. Measures of success are aligned to a student's career goals and reflect the expectations, coursework, activities and achievements earned.

The General Assembly has already acknowledged the urgent need to reform this system by delaying the effective date of the Keystone Exam graduation mandate. Senate Bill 1095 represents a historic, positive shift in Pennsylvania's education policy. It has the widespread support of the education community. The opportunity is here right now – before the legislative session ends in November – for the General Assembly to send Senate Bill 1095 to the governor, enabling the state to implement a more holistic, performance-based approach to award a diploma.

Endnotes

¹ Pennsylvania Department of Education. (Aug. 2016) Findings and Recommendations Pursuant to Act 1 of 2016. <http://www.education.pa.gov/documents/k-12/pde%20act%201%20report.pdf>

² The National Center for Fair and Open Testing. (June 2017) Graduation Test Update: States That Recently Eliminated or Scaled Back High School Exit Exams. <http://fairtest.org/graduation-test-update-states-recently-eliminated>