



**Testimony of the  
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding  
*Graduation Requirements as Tools  
for Assessment and Accountability***

**Presented to the  
Senate Education Committee**

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**By  
Richard Askey  
PSEA Treasurer**

Good morning Chairman Eichelberger, Chairman Dinniman and members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Rich Askey, and I am the treasurer of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). On behalf of PSEA's 180,000 members, thank you for allowing me to testify this morning. The issues of assessments and their interplay with graduation requirements and educator evaluations are critically important to our members, both as advocates for their students but also as practitioners who want accurate information to continue to hone their instructional crafts.

I spent most of my 32 years of classroom experience as an elementary music teacher in the Harrisburg School District. I look at the issues of graduation requirements and educator evaluation not only based on my own personal experience, but also as a leader in my school district and now as a statewide officer representing my fellow educators around the state. I can confidently say that state standardized exams – whether they be Keystone Exams or PSSAs – do not improve student learning. To be clear, as educators we strongly support the need for establishing high standards for student learning commensurate with effective teaching. PSEA and its members also understand that students need to be assessed. As students move through the K-12 system, they rely on a seamless learning progression that builds from year-to-year. Tests are a critical part of that system and part of good instruction. But when standardized tests are connected to high-stakes decision-making, the benefits of those assessments are outweighed by the often unintended negative consequences eliminated.

In addition, instability caused by changes in standards, changes in the state assessments, changes in the uses of results, and changes in the consequences of such assessments have a ripple effect throughout the system. Unfortunately, this is the experience of Pennsylvania's public schools. In the past 10 years we have seen two transitions to new academic standards (Common Core and then PA Core), neither transition was smooth, and no less than three different policy changes to how Keystone Exams should be used. We've seen the tests designed to assess student performance against the standards substantially changed to align with the standard changes, and we have seen test scores recalibrated. We've also seen changes in the way those results are reported and aggregated with other data. The system turns itself upside down in response to snapshot assessments because so much weight is placed on the results. In the process, students get caught in the middle of these changes. As a result, they run the risk of missing important content or having content repeated unnecessarily.

The shared goal among educators, policymakers, students, parents, and taxpayers is to help prepare our students for success in the postsecondary world. Setting clear and stable expectations and requirements at the state level is central to meeting this goal. Assessing how well groups of students and schools are meeting these expectations is an appropriate role for state tests, and the results can identify problems and signal the need for closer examination and intervention. But using standardized state assessments to make decisions about individual students, teachers or schools rather than to inform those decisions is wrong.

PSEA believes that the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) affords Pennsylvania an opportunity to definitively resolve how state standardized tests are used. ESSA requires that states develop an assessment system for *two purposes only* – to identify the lowest performing

schools, and to identify schools with the largest achievement gaps between subgroups. Pennsylvania should take advantage of this opportunity to reduce the high-stakes nature of the exams and provide stability in the public education system.

Combining standardized tests with accountability measures like federal intervention, graduation requirements, or the educator evaluation system, ultimately encourages educators to structure learning around tests. This restricts creativity and narrows the curriculum resulting in less student enthusiasm for learning. The focus on testing as a stand-alone accountability measure has led to mechanized instruction because instruction is being judged mechanically. I've seen it and refer to it as "scripted teaching." It starts with good intentions. Teachers often have a standard-aligned manual to guide their instruction. They ask questions of the students directly from a book, and they need to keep moving through the content on a schedule that aligns with the testing timeline. My fellow teachers in Keystone-tested subjects would constantly tell me they had to be on a certain page number on a certain day in the school year and if their principal were to observe them on a day when they weren't where they were supposed to be content-wise, they would be given a demerit. This approach doesn't allow teachers to spend more time on content that students are struggling with or expand on topics where students demonstrate interest and enthusiasm. This isn't what teaching and learning are supposed to be.

As Pennsylvania develops its state plan for ESSA compliance, PSEA will advocate that state assessments only be used for purposes required by ESSA. This accomplishes several important goals shared by many stakeholders, including an ability to shorten the time spent on prepping and taking the state assessments and allowing more time to teach a broader curriculum to students. A single measure – proficiency – on Keystone Exams in three subject areas does not provide anyone with the full picture of a student's capability, knowledge, or readiness for postsecondary education or a career. It is time for state policy to reflect this knowledge and return instruction and assessment of student readiness to the local educators and school leaders who know the students, parents, and surrounding community best.

PSEA supported SB 880 (Act 1 of 2016) and support the findings from the PDE report pursuant to Act 1 and agrees that there must be multiple pathways for students to demonstrate readiness for graduation, including a local determination of readiness that accounts for the entirety of a student's academic career. In addition, we support Speaker Turzai's legislation (HB 202) which extends these multiple pathways to students in career and technical education programs and we strongly advocate that the pathways be applied to all students and not just those in career and technical education. Another approach that we support is SB 565, sponsored by Sen. Tomlinson, which provides for a local determination of the academic impact of Keystone Exams. As we all know, there are numerous ideas on how to approach graduation requirements, but the common themes that we are looking for in a proposal are: multiple pathways, the elimination of reliance on snapshot tests for important decisions, and a local option that recognizes students have different postsecondary goals. In other words, we shouldn't pigeonhole students toward a pathway geared for postsecondary education if they are seeking to enter the workforce immediately after high school.

But our state standardized assessments don't only impact students – they impact educators through the inclusion of student achievement data in the commonwealth's educator evaluation

system. Both teachers and non-instructional staff struggle with the evaluation system for a number of reasons. Decades of evidence make clear that student test results depend upon multiple factors, some of which are under the control of educators, but many of which are not. This is why using test scores to evaluate educators is controversial and counterproductive. Educators today distrust the evaluation system because it holds them accountable for student performance without any recognition of students' families, homes, and community surroundings. As you know, a substantial portion of their evaluation is based on the proficiency of the students in the building in which they work as measured by state assessments. The teachers in Harrisburg School District were held accountable for student performance the same way as the teachers in Cumberland Valley. Differences in building level scores are due to many factors unrelated to educator effectiveness; in fact, they correlate very strongly with the percent of economically disadvantaged students in a school. An analysis of student achievement data can be an important part of professional supervision. It can be an important signal for close observation and intervention but it should not be an independent measure of professional competence. Factoring student assessments into educator evaluation encourages educators to focus on *test prep* to the detriment of instruction, totally ignores non-tested subjects and discourages educators from collaborating or working with students or in schools that struggle to attain high test scores. We will never break the test-prep cycle if we continue to have evaluation and reward systems substantially based on student snapshot test scores.

I'm consistently told by our members that the evaluation system is not being used to help educators improve. When I oversaw the teacher mentoring program in the Harrisburg School District, I thought the evaluation system could be an opportunity to drive better professional development. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened yet, and numerous other teachers tell me the same thing. Educators receive an incomplete evaluation at the end of the school year, because standardized testing results aren't finalized and distributed until October or maybe even November of the following school year. Not only are educators a quarter of the way into the school year when they receive their final score, but they are by then immersed in their new classrooms working with a whole different set of students and a new set of instructional challenges. District-level professional development plans have already been finalized and activities scheduled. I often found that the summer was a prime opportunity to bring teams of educators together to reflect on their prior year performance, to review their evaluation and discuss their classroom observation and the practice components of their evaluations. Summer was the best time to marshal school district or university resources to support educators and focus on improved practice. If an analysis of test scores demonstrated a drop in a certain content area, teachers had the summer to restructure lesson plans to reflect that feedback. The current evaluation system frustrates this opportunity for reflection.

Another reason the evaluation system is failing is due to the inconsistent application of the rating forms. Currently instructionally certified educators are evaluated in two different systems – one for “classroom teachers” and one for “nonteaching professionals” – depending upon specific elements of their job descriptions. But which system applies is a local determination. This means that two educators working in the same district, for example, could be evaluated differently: one using student achievement data for 50 percent of their summative rating and another using it for only 20 percent. This division among instructionally certified staff is unnecessary, confusing, and inequitable. It contributes to the distrust with the overall system because it results in people

doing the same job being evaluated by different rating forms applying different weights to the same criteria. Plus, it defeats the argument of those who purported that the new educator evaluation system would create a common accountability tool.

PSEA is ready to work with all policymakers to find ways to provide stability for our public education system, fix the teacher evaluation system, and establish an ESSA-compliant accountability system that ensures testing requirements don't overreach what is federally mandated. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.