



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

**Public Hearing Regarding
Graduation Requirements and High Stakes Testing**

**Presented to the
House Democratic Policy Committee
at Northley Middle School
Penn-Delco School District
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**By
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Good morning, Chairman Sturla, Rep. Leanne Krueger-Braneky and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee. My name is Jerry Oleksiak and for more than 30 years I was a special education teacher, primarily working in neighboring Montgomery County in the Upper Merion Area School District and the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit. Currently, I'm the president of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). On behalf of PSEA's 180,000 members, thank you for inviting me to share our thoughts regarding graduation requirements - an issue that has a profound impact on both students and educators.

As educators, we strongly believe in establishing high standards for student learning and effective teaching – we always have. We do not, however, support the use of high-stakes testing such as requiring students to score proficient on each of the Keystone Exams in order to graduate.

I'm sure you have heard this statement many times before, but I believe it warrants repeating until it is a reality reflected in our federal and state policies: **“Students are more than a test score”**.

For years, PSEA has maintained it is inappropriate to base high school graduation decisions on the results of a state test rather than a comprehensive review of student knowledge and skills as reflected in the complete academic record over the course of a student's academic career. Research backs up our assertion that attaching high stakes to a state test has negative consequences for students. High-stakes exit exams are associated with increased dropout rates;ⁱ narrowed curricula;ⁱⁱ decreases in student motivation to learn;ⁱⁱⁱ and disproportionate harm to some of our most vulnerable students – those living in poverty, minority students, English language learners, and special needs students.^{iv} Maybe that bears repeating as well.

The fact is that high-stakes graduation exams divert scarce resources away from standards-based instruction and a full, rich curriculum and brings the focus to test prep and remediation. High-stakes tests can trap students in remediation even if the students pass all required courses and earn all credits for graduation that have been established by the local school district. Remediation during the school day means that some students need to drop electives in music and art, which

sometimes are the content areas that keep students most engaged in school. Teachers' time is diverted from standards-based instruction to test remediation. Districts spend significant resources on exit exam interventions and remediation. Teachers report lack of depth in the curriculum, a decrease in teaching higher-level thinking skills, and a decrease in flexibility in the core curriculum, often a result of loss of electives.^v

To be clear, PSEA is not arguing that PA's high academic standards be revised nor that the current Keystone Exams go away. Consistent implementation of high quality standards is critical. As students move through the K-12 system, they rely on a seamless learning progression that builds from year to year. Instability or constant changes in academic standards have a ripple effect throughout the system. As standards change and key components move across the curriculum to different grades, students who are caught in the middle of the change run the risk of missing important content or having content repeated unnecessarily. Stability, on the other hand allows school districts to develop curriculum, design and deliver instruction and assess students with some confidence that they will all be aligned to the standards. And Pennsylvania has already made significant investments at both the local and state level for implementing PA's Core Standards - including purchasing new instructional materials, allocating staff time to align curriculum to the new standards, developing new common assessments, providing professional development to educators on how to deliver standards-aligned instruction, investments in standards-aligned instructional support materials like voluntary curriculum and curriculum-based assessments, and aligning state assessments with the PA Core Standards. We should continue to build on these investments.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), like No Child Left Behind before it, requires that students be tested in mathematics, English language arts, and science in high school. The Keystone Exams perform this function. And as end of course exams, they are a better and more fair measure of student achievement than the former 11th grade PSSAs. **What *should* go away, however, is using the Keystone Exams as a high stakes test to bar otherwise successful students from earning a high school diploma.**

Tying graduation to Keystone Exams hurts students. Students who pass a course but don't pass the state test must schedule remediation – often requiring that the students give up electives and other courses that benefit them. The current process surrounding the implementation of the Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement – including the retaking of the exam, project-based assessments, and remediation - has taken an inordinate amount of time away from instruction and learning. It has also greatly elevated the already existing levels of test anxiety in our school, among students, staff, and administrators.

PSEA strongly believes that as Pennsylvania moves into full compliance with ESSA, that the Keystone Exams – as well as the PSSAs – should be used *only* for that purpose. 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 sub-groups. As Pennsylvania continues to develop its state plan for ESSA compliance, PSEA will advocate that state assessments no longer be used for high-stakes purposes such as graduation requirements for which they are not valid, but rather only for the purpose 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.**

The recent report issued by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) pursuant to Act 1 of 2016 also recognizes the importance of moving away from a high-stakes testing model to one that provides multiple pathways for students to demonstrate their readiness for graduation.

Maintaining high standards at the state level while returning graduation decisions to the local level is an important step to help all students achieve. PDE's report does just that. It establishes state guidance for the baseline of what should be required for graduation, but provides flexibility to local districts to determine which options work best for their students – including having the opportunity to expand upon those requirements as they see appropriate.

Educators know their students well. They know students' strength and weaknesses. They know which students freeze on a standardized test, but can give content-rich presentations in class. They know which students have innate leadership skills, which students struggle to do their best

work in the morning, but shine by afternoon, and which students collaborate exceptionally well in groups. Teachers also know whether or not students are proficient in biology, algebra, or literature. Local school leaders know what the local community expects of their schools. It is time for state policy to reflect that knowledge and return balance to instruction and assessment of student readiness for the future – either in higher education, career training, or in the workforce – to the local educators and school leaders who know students best.

PSEA fully supports this report and thanks you and your colleagues for unanimously supporting Senate Bill 880 which prompted this important study in addition to placing a “pause” in using Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement for students.

Thank you again for providing me the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

ⁱ See, for example, Dee, T.S. and Jacob, B.A. 2006. Do High School Exit Exams Influence Educational Attainment or Labor Market Performance? NBER Working Paper 12199. Washington, DC: National Bureau of Economic Research; Jacob, 2001

ⁱⁱ Hamilton, L. S., Stecher, B. M., Marsh, J. A., McCombs, J. S., Robyn, A., Russell, 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; Marchant, 2004; Hong, W.-P., & Youngs, P. (2008). Does high-stakes testing increase cultural capital among low-income and racial minority students?. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 16(6). Retrieved [date] from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v16n6/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Amrein, A. and Berliner, D. 2003. The Effects of High Stakes Testing on Student Motivation and Learning. Educational Leadership, February; Cimbricz, 2002

^{iv} See, for example, : http://www.wou.edu/~girodm/611/testing_and_motivation.pdf;
<http://www.fairtest.org/researchers-document-highstakes-testing-damage>

^v Center on Education Policy. 2007. State High School Exit Exams: Working to Raise Test Scores. Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy.