



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

**Public Hearing Regarding
HB 1858**

**Presented to the
Joint Hearing of the House Education and House Veterans
Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees**

September 26, 2016

**By
W. Gerard Oleksiak
PSEA President**

Good morning, Chairman Saylor, Chairman Roebuck, Chairman Barrar, Chairman Sainato and members of the House Education Committee and House Veterans Affairs Committee. My name is Jerry Oleksiak and I am the president of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). Thank you for inviting me to testify today on behalf of PSEA to share our perspective on House Bill 1858, civic education, and the impact of high stakes testing on students, educators, and schools.

Prior to serving as a statewide officer with PSEA, I was a special education teacher for over three decades working primarily in the Upper Merion Area School District and the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit. Those years of experience – combined with my leadership and involvement in statewide policy on behalf of PSEA – has further strengthened my belief that Pennsylvania’s students are among the best and brightest in the nation and truly are our future. As our future, it is critical that they are fully prepared to be engaged citizens in our democracy.

When done correctly, civic learning not only helps our democracy flourish, but also builds critical skills that our students need to succeed in their professional and personal life - skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, and the importance of initiative and innovation. Good civic education begins with clear academic standards, a knowledgeable, well prepared teacher and engaging activities, which not only convey knowledge but ignite enthusiasm. Good education cannot be reduced to an exit test—and as we have seen in the context of federal policy—testing can sometimes stifle good instruction.

PSEA agrees with Representative Kortz and the other sponsors of House Bill 1858 that Pennsylvania can and should do more to meet the goal of increasing our students’ understanding of how government works and better prepare them to be engaged citizens in our democracy. We disagree that another test is the answer, and we therefore oppose House Bill 1858.

Adding another high-stakes test that could serve as a barrier for a student to graduate – regardless of their performance and achievements throughout their academic career – does a disservice to the very students we are trying to engage. Despite the best efforts of educators, a test with graduation stakes will drive their instruction, and, unfortunately, will limit the sort of creativity, engagement, and enthusiasm that is so important to student learning. HB 1858 needs to be considered as part of a comprehensive conversation around graduation requirements reflected in the report that PDE just released and required by SB 880. For that discussion, we would defer to the report, which PSEA supports. Additionally, we applaud Chairman Saylor for his leadership and advancing the amendment to require PDE to conduct a study on graduation requirements.

It appeared after the unanimous passage of Senate Bill 880 that there was a growing consensus among policymakers, parents, and educators that we want less of an emphasis on testing and more time spent on learning in our classrooms. Frankly, I am surprised that policymakers are now interested in debating the wisdom of a fourth graduation exit exam, particularly when no federal law requires the additional test. In fact, this legislation would force Pennsylvania’s students to exceed testing requirements under the new Every Student Succeeds Act.

I want to reiterate what I consistently hear from the thousands of educators PSEA represents: It's time to move beyond toxic testing. The research is clear - attaching high stakes to a test has negative consequences for students. High-stakes exit exams are associated with increased dropout rates, narrowed curricula,² decreases in student motivation to learn, and disproportionate harm to some of our most vulnerable students – those living in poverty, minority students, English language learners, and special needs students. Sadly, the research also shows that these are the same students who are at a greater disadvantage than other young people to receive a high quality social studies education (NSSC).

The narrowing of instruction and loss of instructional time in response to multiple-choice, high-stakes testing has had a significant impact on the ability of schools to invest time, resources and other supports for social studies – specifically civic learning. Adding another high-stakes test is not the way to accomplish the shared goal of increasing civic knowledge, skills, and values among our students. Instead, we must focus on how to help our schools expand student learning in such a way that does not further erode the other subject areas that have been marginalized by high-stakes testing. Not only do we want students who are civic-minded, but we also want well-rounded students that have been taught a rich, diverse, and full curriculum.

To that end, PSEA offers the following recommendations for your committees' consideration as you continue deliberations about helping prepare students for civic participation:

1. Review Pennsylvania's academic standards for Social Studies to determine if there is a need for updates or revisions.
2. Call for education stakeholders and those directly involved in civic engagement efforts to identify if there are gaps in Pennsylvania's K-12 civic learning programming and, if so, develop a plan focused on supporting schools with efforts to integrate civic literacy into instructional practice and school life.
 - a. The National Council of Social Studies has developed a *C3 Framework – College, Career, and Civic Life* – to help states upgrade their standards and for schools to strengthen their social studies programs. We would encourage policymakers such as yourselves to use this Framework as a resource during its review and deliberation.
3. Identify ways to support schools in offering quality civic learning opportunities such as those identified by the *Six Proven Practices in Civic Learning*. Research has shown these practices to directly improve the quality and effectiveness of civic learning in schools because they not only include classroom instruction in government and history, but also extend learning for students to actual engagement and experiences in their communities.
4. Consider developing an articulated sequence of instruction for K-12 instruction aligned to Pennsylvania's academic standards for social studies and, specifically, civic learning. It is important to include action-oriented and project-based work that also helps develop digital literacy.
5. Ensure that schools – and particularly social studies teachers - have the tools and resources they need to teach students according to the academic standards for civic learning. Lesson plans, instructional materials, and curriculum aligned to the standards;

providing professional development to educators on how to deliver standards-aligned instruction; and support for developing new common formative assessments to get a “snapshot” of student learning and progress.

6. Identify the appropriate mechanism for including civic learning in the state assessment and accountability systems. PSEA is not opposed to the development of a civics and government Keystone Exam as is authorized by state law if that is what this body determines to be best for assessing the civic literacy of our students. We do, however, strongly oppose using that exam – or any exam (including the US Citizens/immigration exam referenced in HB 1858) – as a graduation requirement for students. In addition, we would express caution about investing limited resources into developing another state test – which we understand to be an ongoing and shared concern by many of you and your colleagues.
7. Given that ESSA requires continued state testing in English language arts, math and science for the purpose of identifying lowest performing schools, PA should work to identify options to integrate civic learning opportunities more directly with those subjects.

PSEA stands ready to work with you on efforts to ensure high quality civic learning in our schools. We all benefit when our students – and each of us – has a better grounding in our nation’s history, government, and politics. It is important for our students to understand the origins of this country and our founding documents. But perhaps even more important than knowing these facts, is their ability to apply the civic values and skills espoused by our founding fathers and mothers in their personal and professional life. We want more for our students than repeating words – we want them to live by those words and values. But another test is not going to ensure that occurs. Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments this morning and I will be happy to answer any of your questions.