

Testimony to House Education Committee
By
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State Board of Education
On
Proposed State High School Graduation Requirements
Chapter 4 – Academic Standards and Assessment

Good morning Chairman Roebuck, Chairman Stairs and distinguished members of the House Education Committee. My name is Karl Girton and I am here representing the State Board of Education.

It is important that we take a moment to first review how the state's high school graduation policy developed as currently established. The State Board of Education first approved a policy in 1964. It required students to successfully complete 13 course credits in grades 10 -12. The courses and course content were prescribed by the Board. Over the next three decades the Board gradually increased the credit requirements raising the credit requirement to 21 in grades 9-12.

The Board first began a statewide testing program in 1970 that was designed to assess statewide academic performance which was eventually expanded to measure achievement in ten subjects including reading, writing, math, citizenship and science and technology based on the state's Standards of Quality Education.

In 1993 in recognition that seat time in class does not equal knowledge of the subject the Board eliminated the state's course credit requirements replacing them with 56 student learning outcomes. The outcomes represented what students were to know and be able to do in order to receive a high school diploma. The Board established the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) which was originally designed to measure how successful schools prepared students to meet the learning outcomes.

In 1999 the Board adopted its current policy. This policy requires school districts to include at least four criteria in their high school graduation policies:

- 1) course completion and grades
- 2) completion of a culminating project
- 3) proficiency in all state standards not assessed by the PSSA, and

4) proficiency in reading, writing and math as determined by the PSSA or local assessments that are aligned with the state standards and level of proficiency set for the PSSA.

Since 2002-03 the Board has continuously reviewed the gap between the number of students issued diplomas and number who are proficient on the PSSA tests administered in reading, writing and math given in the 11th grade and for those who do not pass in 11th grade the 12th grade retest.

The numbers are startling. More than 57,000 students are awarded high school diplomas each year without being able to pass the state test. This indicates to the Board that school district local assessments are not aligned with state standards and level of rigor of the PSSA. This means that far too many students are awarded diplomas without showing they have the fundamental knowledge and skills in reading, writing and math they will need to be successful in life.

Over the past five years the Board has explored ways to address this challenge, culminating with the unanimous vote on January 17 to approve the proposal that is now before you. The Board now believes that it is possible to improve the existing language by making assessment more “student friendly” and at the same time bring some basic uniformity to the high school diplomas issued by the 501 school districts.

The proposal expands and refines the options school districts may use to determine whether students are proficient in reading, writing, math, science and social studies. School districts would have a menu of options:

- The PSSA
- New end of course exams – which could replace final exams and which will be made available at no cost to districts – called graduation competency assessments. Ten would be given, and students would have to pass six. Students who do not pass the first time would receive extra help and could retake the GCAs up to three times per year until they pass.
- Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate tests
- Local assessments that are certified to be at least as rigorous as the state GCAs

We believe it would be beneficial to expand the ways and opportunities for students to demonstrate they have mastered the content necessary to earn a diploma. The new proposal will permit student to take a validated state assessment or a validated local assessment at the conclusion of 10 of their traditional courses such as Algebra I and II, Geometry, English Composition and Literature, Biology, Chemistry, American History, World History and Civics and Government. These tests would be taken as the final exam at the end of the course.

The state's Graduation Competency Assessments would be offered 3 times each year in each content area so students would have multiple opportunities to take or retake the exams. Additionally, the assessments would be constructed in modules so that a student struggling with one major component of a particular course could be tutored in that specific area and then be allowed to retake only the module of the assessment that they were unable to pass on the original administration. This has the distinct advantage of moving the assessment much closer to the instruction so that students would not need to wait until the 11th grade to discover that they have a knowledge gap that is related to content that they studied several years earlier.

Students would still be able to demonstrate that they have earned a diploma by scoring proficient on the relevant 11th grade PSSA content areas and they would also be permitted to use the results of Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) exams to earn a diploma. Tests that many of our most advanced students are already taking.

This plan opens multiple pathways to a diploma for all of our students and because all of the assessment instruments begin used would be assessing the same body of knowledge at the same level high school diplomas in Pennsylvania would uniformly represent that the person whose name appears on the document has a basic set of skills and knowledge regardless of which school district awarded the diploma.

We believe this is important for employers, colleges and universities and most importantly to the young man or woman who earned the diploma.

There are other important parts of this proposal including a requirement that the Department of Education develop and publish a model curriculum for use by any school

district that choose to use it. Also, the Department is required to provide schools with interventions necessary to help struggling students gain proficiency.

There are a couple of important things this proposal is not:

- This is not a single high stakes test. Quite to the contrary, it provides multiple assessment options and opportunities for students to demonstrate they have earned a diploma.
- This is not more testing – Schools would test with the same frequency but would have a greater variety of assessment instruments from which to choose.
- This will not in anyway change how special education students are currently permitted to earn a diploma.
- This will not lower the Standard for high performing students and schools. They will all be encouraged and expected to expand course offerings and enrich their content.
- And, based on what we have learned from other states this will not increase the dropout rate.

The one thing I think most of us agree on is that the status quo is not acceptable. This builds on what we know works, it is fairer to our students and we are convinced will improve academic performance when it is implemented in 2014—6 years from now.

I would be pleased to respond to your questions.

Thank you.