



Senate of Pennsylvania

8 Reasons Why We Oppose the Keystone Graduation Exams

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Minority Chair, Senate Education Committee

1. It is fundamentally **wrong** for three standardized tests to determine a student's high school graduation. The implementation of high-stakes graduation exams runs contrary to all of our efforts to reform public education, recognize different learning styles and embrace an individualized approach. **If the Keystone Graduation Exams are approved, high school students starting with current freshmen (Class of 2017) will face the possibility of passing all their classes but failing a Keystone Exam and not getting a diploma.**
2. It is **foolhardy** to spend more than \$65 million a year on testing while more and more of our school districts teeter on the verge of bankruptcy, despite school property taxes being at an all-time high. In Philadelphia, for example, schools face class sizes of nearly 50 students, have been forced to close their libraries and even struggle to afford textbooks and basic instructional materials.
3. It is **unfair** to stamp "failure" on the backs of teachers, schools and communities that lack the fiscal resources to adequately prepare students to pass these exams. Why should we expect students who are set up for failure to stick with the program? And how can we expect to revitalize economically distressed communities when their schools and students are labeled as substandard and second-rate?
4. It is **irresponsible** to implement a program of graduation exams that will result in the largest unfunded mandate in the past 50 years. If a student fails any of the three required Keystone Exams, the school district must provide supplementary instruction and student can take the test two more times. If a student continues to fail the exam, the student is entitled to a project-based assessment with a teacher. The Pennsylvania Department of Education provides no funding whatsoever for remediation costs. **It is conservatively estimated that it will result in an unfunded mandate of \$300 million a year. The buck will no doubt be passed onto taxpayers in the form of massive school property tax increases.**

The enormity of the costs (associated with remediation) to local school districts is illustrated by the results of the recent statewide Keystone Exams, which were taken by all high school juniors on a pilot basis. Results were first issued this summer and oddly enough, a different and improved set of results was released in September. The September results are being questioned by a number of school districts:

<u>Exam</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Fall</u>
Algebra I – Failure Rate	60%	35.6%
Biology – Failure Rate	60%	54.4%
Literature – Failure Rate	45%	24.6%

The Pennsylvania Department of Education has not provided a fiscal note or in-depth analysis of the extensive remediation obligations of the Keystone Exams for local school districts. Unbelievably, the department claims that there is no cost to school districts, which is simply not possible.

5. It is **unscrupulous** for the Pennsylvania Department of Education to continue to withhold data that is necessary for weighing the costs to local school districts. In response, I have been forced to file seven Right to Know requests in an effort to obtain exam results and breakdowns by individual school district, as well as information regarding the potential costs or estimates of such remediation. Keep in mind, such costs will weigh heavier on lower-performing and financially distressed school districts as they face a higher potential for students requiring remediation.
6. It is **preposterous** that a test developed by the state with no input whatsoever from a course teacher or local district should be the main deciding factor on whether a student passes and graduates. The school code leaves the decision as to who graduates to the local school district. **The imposition of state-required, make-or-break graduation exams represents a serious threat to local control.**
7. It is **illogical** for the Pennsylvania Department of Education to continue to expand standardized testing at a time when increasing evidence challenges the notion that it is the best way to gauge student achievement and learning. Already, anywhere from 10 to 20 days (out of a 180-day school year) of instruction time is lost to testing and test preparation. If the Keystone Exams are approved, an eighth-grade student taking Algebra I would face taking a class test for a class grade, the PSSA Math Test and the Keystone Exam, which would be banked for graduation purposes. **The keystones will only further promote “teaching to the test,” while sacrificing more valuable instruction time in the name of standardization.**

8. **It is clear that the Pennsylvania Department of Education is not ready for prime time and neither are the Keystone Exams.** The department is now under its third secretary in less than a year and in my view, lacks the ability to provide the leadership necessary to initiate and supervise the implementation of state-wide required graduation exams. The department has lost the confidence and trust of numerous school district superintendents. The fact that almost all (58 of 62) superintendents and Intermediate Unit Directors in the Philadelphia suburbs have signed onto a position paper in opposition to the Keystone Exams (due to the resulting loss of local control and its massive unfunded mandate) is a strong and clear expression of the loss of confidence in the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the State Board of Education.