

Cash-Starved Schools but Over \$1B for Testing?

By State Senator Andy Dinniman
Guest Columnist

While school funding is in crisis and property taxes continue to rise, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) since 2008 has signed contracts for more than \$741 million for PSSA and Keystone Exam testing. All of this money went to one company, Data Recognition Corporation (DRC), who received three contracts, two of which had no-bid extensions.

While a testing company is making big bucks, some of our schools do not even have the funds to purchase textbooks that contain the Common Core standards upon which the students are tested. Doesn't PDE understand that it's simply unconscionable to stamp failure on the backs of students who don't even have access to the materials on which they are being tested?

The costs to school districts for testing and supervising the required Project Based Assessment (PBA) for those not passing the Keystone is conservatively estimated to be over 300 million dollars. This means between the state and school districts, Pennsylvania's testing programs in the past eight years have cost the taxpayers almost \$1.1 billion.

For years I worked in the legislature to change this testing obsession. Finally, Act 1 of 2016 was unanimously passed, suspending the use of Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement for two years.

The legislature, realizing a new approach was needed, approved a moratorium on the use of these tests because it became clear that the Keystone Exams were not a fair or reliable vehicle for determining high school graduation. Accountability is important, but these exams fail to provide the right kind of accountability. Instead of following the law, PDE instructed school districts that it's fine for them to continue to use the Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement if they want to.

School districts certainly have local control in determining graduation requirements, but Act 1 made it abundantly clear that a school district could not use the Keystone Exam or PBA as a graduation requirement, despite any PDE directive, during the two-year moratorium.

While the federal government requires testing, it does not require the use of the Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement. One option is for Pennsylvania to cancel its expensive Keystone contract and utilize SAT or ACT tests (as other states have already done) to save millions. Furthermore, PDE just released a report in August 2016, which indicated that the use of the

Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement too narrowly define postsecondary readiness. Yet PDE will, over the next two years, continue to direct their usage contrary to law. Why?

When policy decisions do not make sense, what does make sense is to “follow the money”. Transparency for a legislator or any citizen is only as good as PDE’s willingness to post information. Millions of dollars in contract amendments were not originally put online by PDE, as required. Three contract amendments to the 2009 DRC Keystone contract have still not been posted. Thus the \$741 million figure may be higher. Most of the vouchers dating back to the DRC 2008 contract were posted only after repeated inquiries from my office and as of this date, there are still missing vouchers from all the contracts.

With limited resources for education, \$741 million going to one company for testing, and \$300 million worth of testing costs for school districts, the total cost for testing of over \$1 billion dollars is outrageous. These tests are based on Common Core standards, which many, including myself, have questioned. So, here we are beginning another school year, and once again, we are subject to excessive testing and its costs negatively impacting our students, teachers, and taxpayers.

PDE talks of possible alternatives to the Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement down the road, but the tests remain, including the even more expensive PSSA tests. They will continue to contract for millions more and force school districts to pay additional millions, all of which, will in the end, be paid by the taxpayer in the form of increased property taxes. Yes, accountability is vital, but this type of exorbitant spending has to stop.

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